“Have To” History: Mansa Musa {Extended Version}

Stuff You Don’t Really Want To Know (But For Some Reason Have To)

Three Big Things:

1. By most accounts the single richest individual ever in all of world history. The Mali Empire over which he ruled produced lots of gold. Immeasurable amounts of gold. *All* the gold. Oh, and salt. But also lots of gold.

2. His hajj (a pilgrimage to Mecca which every able Muslim is expected to undertake) in the early fourteenth century literally put him and his kingdom on a number of maps. It took over a year and included thousands of escorts – servants, soldiers, slaves, and more.

3. He distributed so much gold along the way that he literally threw off the economies of several major cities, most notably Cairo (Egypt) and possibly parts of the Saudi Arabian peninsula as well.

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Background

The Ghana Empire was one of the earliest civilizations in Africa – 1600 square kilometers overlapping the headwaters of the Senegal and Niger rivers and a sizeable southwestern chunk of the Sahara Desert; overlaid on a modern map it would be roughly split between Mauritania and Mali. (Or, for the less geographically astute, it’s a chunk centered in that lumpy, wider part of Africa up near the top left.) While like most early civilizations it was anchored by rivers, Ghana was best-known for its extensive trade in gold and salt.

Gold is, of course, *gold*… historically in great demand for being shiny and rare. Its value is based on scarcity and collective irrational desire. Salt, on the other hand, is less glorious but far more useful. Yes, it tastes good, but it also acts as a preservative for meaty things. Its value is based on it being *salt*. Since Africa and its neighbors tend to be a bit on the warm side, salt was a pretty big deal.

Around 400 AD or shortly thereafter, locals started loading up camels with goods and conducting business across otherwise unfriendly territory to the north and east. Their built-in sippy cup humps (which are actually fat reservoirs) made tempting seats and enabled these relatively cooperative dromedaries to transverse the Sahara without, you know… *dying*. This allowed a dramatic expansion of trade to geographically challenging regions of Africa and into the Middle East. More trade meant more wealth and a greater variety of resources, which in turn meant the development of cities and the expansion of Ghana as it sought to protect (or absorb) increasingly valuable stretches of key trade routes.

Mali Wins, Islam Grows

By the eleventh or twelfth century, a new empire was on the rise. A small Mandinka kingdom along the Niger River gradually transformed into the burgeoning empire of Mali. Mali eventually absorbed Ghana, taking over and expanding its extensive trade routes in the process.
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The first recognized ruler of this new Mali Empire was Sundiata Keita, a warrior-prince of the early thirteenth century credited with freeing his people from the neighboring Sosso – fellow contenders in the long-term struggle to run the region. Much of what's recorded about Sundiata is cluttered with mythology, casting uncertainty over even the more mundane details of his life and rule as recorded. While it's certainly *possible* that he was born lame, then miraculously healed, or that his mother was a buffalo-headed woman, and that he fulfilled ancient prophecies about setting his people free, such things are difficult to document – at least in this case.

His son and successor Mana Uli took a well-documented hajj to Mecca in the mid-thirteenth century, as did Sakoura, a former slave who usurped the throne several years later, and who expanded Mali substantially during his reign. Neither is as glorious as having a buffalo-mom, but historians are certainly more comfortable with those sorts of legacies.

Those journeys mattered because while traditional animism and polytheistic religions retained influence over the masses, the more educated and ambitious (including royalty and businessmen) were drawn to a faith far more in keeping with modern thinking and sophistication, and more conducive to the sort of status across Eurasia to which the efficacious individual might hope to aspire. That faith, of course, was Islam.

Like Christianity, Islam had its non-negotiable core doctrines – a monotheistic god, eventual eternal judgment, and a short list of hard-and-fast rules (the Five Pillars). Unlike Christianity, though, it lacked a hierarchy to monitor or enforce specific behaviors or beliefs. The caliphs who succeeded Muhammad served as both secular and religious authorities, but there were no Muslim equivalents to "priests" or "bishops." Thus, strong, independent rulers like those scattered across Africa could adhere to a major Eurasian faith without the sort of church-state power struggles periodically troubling western Europe. They could humble themselves before Allah without subservience (even symbolically) to his earthly representatives.

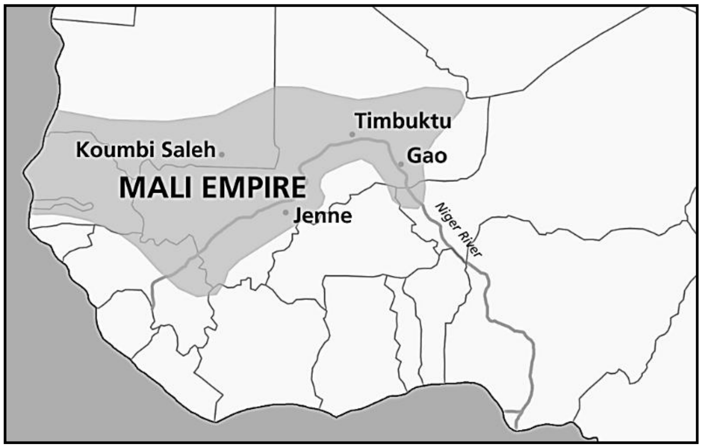
Besides, Islam was good for trade. Muhammad had been a trader, working for and eventually married to a merchant. A common faith made for common norms, stronger relationships, and general trust across the region. Allah was good for business, and business was always good.

Musa Kieta (Mansa Musa)

Musa Kieta, better known to the western world as Mansa Musa, was the great-nephew of Sundiata (his grandfather was Sundiata's brother). Or maybe he was Sundiata's grandson. History can be ridiculously uncertain, and anytime bloodlines and thrones are involved, records and terminology often prove even more bewildering than usual.

He was in any case a descendant of Sundiata. For realsies.

Mansa Musa became Emperor of Mali in 1312 and began expanding his empire considerably, eventually stretching around 2,000 miles across western Africa. He established a sophisticated bureaucracy which allowed him to maintain relatively tight control over extensive territory by placing trusted advisors in positions of local authority.



Trade expanded in all directions and involved a wide variety of goods, but the core of Mali's wealth was still gold and salt. Lots of gold and salt. *All* the gold and salt. Still, this was the fourteenth century and he was in western Africa. Most of Europe had no idea where Mali was, let alone who Mansa Musa might be. That changed in 1324.

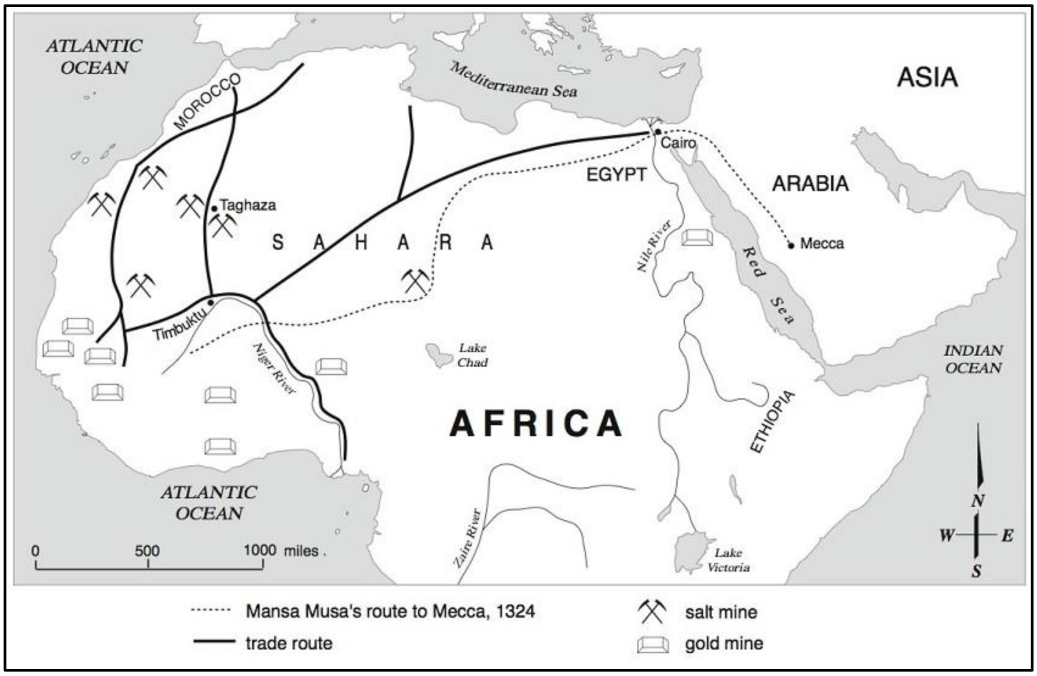
The Hajj

Musa Mali's journey to Mecca and back is the primary reason he's remembered today. It's also relatively well-documented – for the times, at least.

Africa's rulers maintained the services of *griots* (the 't' is silent), who operated as the keepers of collective knowledge for wealthy individuals, villages, or even entire peoples. In a strictly oral culture, they used music, drama, dance, and poetry to recall and revisit events and people in great detail or answer complicated questions for those they served. There would have been dozens on a journey like this.

A related but distinctly different role was that of scholar. These men were formally educated in a wide range of fields. It was their job to be smart and available, as they were often summoned for advice and insight about any variety of things. Numerous of these scholars participated in this hajj as well.

Finally, and perhaps most reliably, we have accounts and reactions from those he encountered along the way. Turns out he created quite a stir.



Like any sensible tourist, Mansa Musa spent some time camped around the pyramids in Egypt before heading to Cairo where he stayed for several months. He sent a substantial gift of gold to the Sultan, who in turn loaned him his palace and made sure his entourage was treated well.

Complicating this mutual respect-fest was the issue of deference – Mansa Musa was a good Muslim, but he was also very much a King. He demanded reverence from all who entered his presence, whatever their status. On the other hand, he was a guest in this land, and it would be unforgiveable not to visit the Sultan and bow before *him* in *his* throne room.

So… wrinkle.

Mansa Musa appeared before the Sultan and prostrated himself… before Allah, and Allah only. The Sultan just happened to be in the room observing and approving respectfully. Pragmatic politics isn't for everyone, but it does have its moments.

Mansa Musa spent and gave away so much gold while in Cairo that he single-handedly destabilized the economy for months – some accounts say years – afterwards. He was grossly overcharged by merchants, which may reflect the naiveté of someone who never had to ask the price of anything or may simply indicate an intentional refusal to bargain as an act of either pride or graciousness. On his return journey through Cairo months later, he reportedly borrowed from local merchants at inflated interest rates. Again, motive is difficult to discern – he may have simply run out of money, or this may have been his way of "making up" for throwing their economy out of whack. (Borrowing would reduce the amount of gold in circulation, thus helping to restore its value.)

Fewer details are recorded about his time actually in Mecca – this was a holy pilgrimage, after all, and the presumed rituals in Mecca were both predictable and sacrosanct. For him, that was the *goal*; for history, it was merely the trigger for the *important* part – the journey there and back.

Coming Home

The return trip was in some ways even more impressive, and arguably more productive. Mansa Musa brought back with him architects and scholars – professions whose value is hopefully obvious. He also brought back bureaucrats, a profession whose desirably is perhaps less self-evident, but who were essential for large-scale coordination and management of an empire. In China, in Rome, in the Arabic world, emperors and caliphs made the big decisions, but bureaucrats made those big decisions *actually happen*. Monarchs lead, but bureaucrats translate that leadership into practical governing.

The architects on the journey were primarily employed in the building of mosques along the way. Popular versions of the return trip suggest Mansa Musa had a mosque erected somewhere weekly – every Friday, most accounts say. While this may have been an exaggeration, it certainly suggests that Mansa Musa was targeting his wealth rather specifically on the trip home. Like western European churches, mosques served an artistic as well as a religious function. While Islam hadn't yet banned representations of Muhammad, it was never a faith overly comfortable with images of people or animals, preferring complex geometrical patters and surprising uses of color and flow.

Upon his return to Mali, Mansa Musa had the grandest mosques of them all erected across his empire, including a rather famous one still standing in Timbuktu. His new scholars were put to work as well, founding libraries and universities, again with some of the most impressive headquartered in Timbuktu. There's a reason this particular city became a byword for "the furthest reaches of the earth." Under Mansa Musa it became a focal point for learning and discussion and faith – the heart of Islamic sub-Saharan Africa at a time when the pursuit of knowledge (especially the sorts which would later be subdivided into the sciences, mathematics, astronomy, etc.) meant embedding oneself in the Islamic world, the only place such knowledge was being preserved and pursued in any meaningful way.

It's also upon the return of Mansa Musa that Mali first began making a regular appearance on European maps, most famously in 1339 when an Italian cartographer included a picture of Mansa Musa holding a large gold coin. More recently, *Time Magazine* in 2015 and *Business Insider* in 2016 both acknowledged Mansa Musa as the richest individual in the history of the world.

Conclusion

It's tempting to over-glorify Mansa Musa. He's a fascinating historical figure and seems to have been genuinely devout. But as ruler over an extensive empire, he did ruler things.

He demanded that those appearing before him grovel and throw dirt on their heads to show humility. He rarely spoke to inferiors directly, but through a spokesman appointed for the job. He orchestrated wars and enforced harsh justice and prior to his hajj was a big fan of the "right of the first night" – that's when monarchs take virgin brides to their bed before new husbands could have the honor. (Mansa Musa was reportedly shocked to discover at some point that this was a very un-Islamic thing to do; he stopped immediately.) While he was very generous with his wealth abroad and seems to have genuinely cared deeply for his subjects religious and intellectual growth, he didn't exactly take a vow of poverty and redistribute royal lands to the poor. Most rulers don't.

Perhaps, in retrospect, there's an 'idealized Bill Gates' vibe about him which too easily appeals to modern audiences. It's possible his excessive generosity was about status or ritual as much as genuine charity, but did that really matter to those impacted? Does it lessen the value he left behind, not only for Islam but for learning and modernization in general? His wealth was immeasurable, but it's his *use* of that wealth that most moves us.

In a day and age in which money and power are too often perceived as validation of whatever it's taken to acquire them, we easily find ourselves longing for a time, real or projected, in which far *more* wealth and power was used to try to make one's world *better* – more devout, more beautiful, and more enlightened. While we must always strive to remain true to history, letting facts lead where they might, it's still somehow reassuring to think that maybe Mansa Musa led his world into one of those times.