

“Have To” History: Mansa Musa

Stuff You Don't Really Want To Know (But For Some Reason Have To) about Mansa Musa

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.



Background

By the fifth century or so, western Africa was becoming a center for trade – across the region, to the coasts, and even across the Sahara. (Thanks, camels!) The empire of Ghana emerged, taking full advantage of its natural resources of gold and salt to expand its reach and bring modernity to its leaders. Despite its relative anonymity to the brand-name kingdoms of Eurasia, Ghana flourished quietly for centuries.

But by the eleventh or twelfth century, a new empire was on the rise. Mali eventually absorbed Ghana, taking over and expanding its extensive trade routes in the process. The first recognized ruler of this new Mali Empire was Sundiata Keita, a warrior-prince of the early thirteenth century. 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.

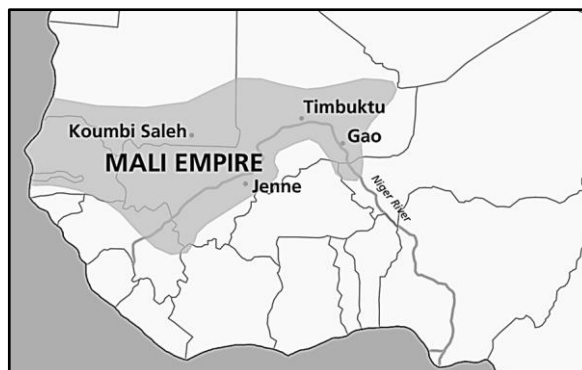
This mattered because while traditional animism and polytheistic religions retained influence over the masses, the more educated and ambitious (including royalty and businessmen) were drawn to a faith far more in keeping with modern thinking and sophistication, and more conducive to the sort of status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

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 normal.

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

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

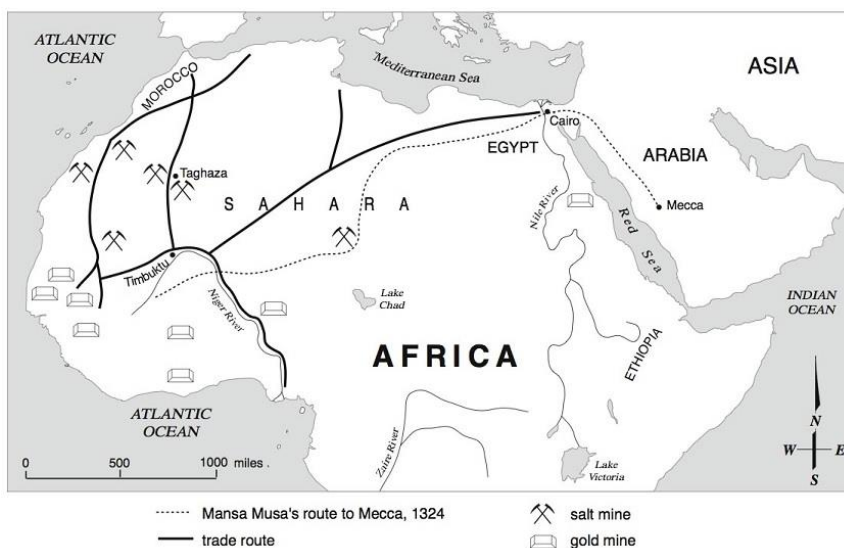
Musa Mali's journey to Mecca and back is the primary reason he's remembered today. It's also relatively well-documented for its time. Africa's rulers maintained the services of *griots* (the 't' is silent), who operated as the keepers of collective knowledge for wealthy individuals, villages, or even 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. Dozens accompanied Mansa Musa on his hajj.

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.

Egypt

Like any sensible tourist, Mansa Musa spent some time in Egypt before continuing to Mecca. 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. Whatever the reasons, he spent and gave away so much gold while in Cairo that he single-handedly destabilized the economy for months – some accounts say years – afterwards.



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 desirability is perhaps less self-evident, but who were essential for large-scale coordination and management of an empire.

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 patterns 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 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. 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.

On the other hand, there's an "idealized Bill Gates" vibe about him which 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.

