


Mansa Musa

Reigned 1312 - 1337 AD (?)

Golden Age King of the Mali Empire

by [Rit Nosotro](#) First Published:: 2003 (edited)

 From the fourth to the sixteenth century, three empires controlled much of West Africa and several key cities of the Saharan trade route. Between the empires of Ghana and Songhai, Mansa Musa reigned over the empire of Mali during its golden years. His control of gold mines and key cities in the Saharan trade route gave him the wealth he needed to attract the attention of the world. This attention was directed towards Mali because of his devotion to Islam and his generous giving while on a hajj to Mecca. During his hajj, Mansa Musa came in contact with important architects that would establish a construction tradition that would last for centuries.

About seventy years before Mansa Musa took the throne, his grandfather, Sundiata, conquered the great Ghana empire in 1240 AD. It is unclear exactly when Mansa Musa was born or when he became king. Two spans of time have been suggested for his reign, 1307 to 1332 AD or 1312 to 1337, either way spanning a total of twenty-five years. Furthermore, very few facts have survived concerning his childhood, and the first important mention of his life was his famous hajj.

Mansa Musa's famous hajj (pilgrimage) placed him in history and in the attention of the entire European and Islamic world. About the time that the Aztecs began building Tenochtitlan, and the Ottoman Turks began the creation of their empire, Mansa Musa began his obligatory hajj to Mecca in 1324 with an impressive company. In his caravan he brought sixty-thousand people dressed in fine silk and eighty camels carrying two tons of gold. Among this throng Mansa Musa had twelve-thousand servants, five hundred of which carried staffs of gold. If this entourage had not caught the attention of the countries he crossed through, his generous giving would. Wherever he went he gave gold to the needy as given is required by a pillar of Islam. One writer even suggests that on every Friday during his travel he erected a mosque in the city that he found himself in. In Cairo he gave so much gold that in Egypt its value did not recover for twelve years. Before he returned to Mali, he had given away or spent so much that he was forced to borrow money from a merchant in Cairo for his return trip.

While most of the inhabitants of Mali were not Muslim, and although he allowed them to maintain their religious diversity, Mansa Musa remained distinctly Muslim. His pilgrimage to Mecca was a clear illustration of his devotion, but he showed his religious beliefs in several other ways. His grandfather before him had converted to Islam, and Mansa Musa established Islam as the national religion. He also built mosques and important Islamic centers of learning. Under his rule Timbuktu rose to become not only an important city in the trans-Saharan trade route but also the center of Islamic scholarship. Muslims came from distant countries to receive an education at the Sankore University that he built in Timbuktu. And it was because of his fulfillment of the hajj and his wealth of gold that these important sites were constructed.

Al-Omari, an ancient Muslim historian, described Mansa Musa as "the most powerful, the richest, the most fortunate, the most feared by his enemies and the most able to do good for those around him" in all of West Africa. Some of this wealth and power directly relates to the unique position of his empire along the Niger River basin and the crossroads of many major trans-Saharan trade routes. Two of these traded commodities were salt and gold; they were so important that in the fourteenth century they were used as currency. The salt trade originated from the North of Mali in the mines of Taghaza. The gold mines of Bambuk, on the other hand, laid within Mali territory. This gold was the source of

half of the world's supply and greatly contributed to Mansa Musa's wealth. During his life, Mansa Musa also gained control of Timbuktu which stood at the crossroads of the Niger, an important means of transport, and the Saharan desert trade routes. This was the city where the Saharan salt merchants and the gold laden caravans converged. This provided Mansa Musa control of these two major commodities, and with this control his wealth increased. Interestingly, some of the construction of Timbuktu and other important cities can be directly linked to Mansa Musa's famous hajj.

While returning from Mecca, Mansa Musa brought back many Arab scholars and architects. Abu-Ishaq Ibrahim-es-Saheli, one of these architects, introduced new ideas into Mali architecture. With his help Mansa Musa constructed a royal palace, libraries, and mosques, and brought his trade city into international acclaim. This architect introduced to Mali a new mud construction technique that would establish a building tradition for centuries. With this technique he built the great Djingareyber Mosque at Timbuktu that stands to this day. He also built the great mosque at Jenne and a mosque in Gao that remained important for four centuries.

When Mansa Musa went on his hajj, he paraded his great wealth before the world. His generosity was quickly noted by European and Islamic nations alike. One contemporary, a Spanish mapmaker depicted Mansa Musa seated on his throne, gazing at a gold nugget in his right hand, holding a golden scepter in his left, and wearing a golden crown on his head. The Islamic world took notice because of his encouragement of Islam and his construction of Islamic centers of learning. These centers attracted Muslims from all over the world, including some of the greatest poets, scholars, and artists of Africa and the Middle east. This greatly increased the fame of Mali.

In the long run, partly due to Musa's conspicuous flaunting of wealth, [Portugal's prince] Henry sent his explorers down the African coast to find a route across sub-Saharan Africa in order to contain Islam...

Mansa Musa died around 1337, leaving the throne to his son Maghan I. About this time the empire began to unravel; Songhai, a province in the east, left the empire. Mansa Maghan spent excessive amounts of Mali's wealth, leaving a weakened empire at his death around 1341 to his uncle Mansa Sulayman. While several of Mansa Musa's famous mosques remain to this day, the empire of Mali lasted no longer than two centuries following his death. By 1400 Timbuktu had been conquered by the Tuaregs, and war had broken out between the emerging Songhai empire and Mali. Following the reign of several weak kings and civil wars, the empire of Mali fell to the Songhai empire. By the 18th century Mali had completely disappeared.