The wealth of Africa
The kingdom of Mali

Teachers’ notes

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THE WEALTH OF AFRICA: USING THESE RESOURCES

This educational resource consists of 16 sets of resources on African civilisations, countries and themes.

Each set of resources includes:

- Teachers’ notes
- Students’ worksheets
- A presentation

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Teachers’ notes

These are intended to provide background material for teachers, but can also be referred to by students who want more contextual information.

Students’ worksheets

These are stand-alone worksheets which can be downloaded as classroom resources or viewed on the interactive whiteboard. They are self-contained, with tasks and questions and a limited number of sources in which the language has been slightly amended to make them more accessible to the likely reading ages of the students. They are also designed to be used independently of the teacher, e.g. for homework.

If teachers do not wish to spend more than one or two lessons on the kingdom of Mali, then the sheets will prove ideal for small project work, with groups of students taking one sheet, finding interesting and relevant information, and reporting back to the rest of the class. A specimen lesson plan along these lines is given below.

Presentation

This provides a simpler and more visual introduction to the civilisation. It contains some of the images and sources found in the other sections, and can be shown on the whiteboard or used at home to give an overview of the main topics covered.

Your feedback

Please help the British Museum improve its educational resources for schools and teachers by giving your feedback. The first 250 teachers or tutors to complete the online survey before 12.00 on 1 September 2011 will receive a printed set of illustrations of African civilisations by artist Tayo Fatunla. Visit www.surveymonkey.com/s/wealthofafrica to complete the survey and for terms and conditions.
LESSON SCHEME: MALI IN AN HOUR

Aim
To decide how advanced the kingdom of Mali was.

Starter: Impressions of the kingdom of Mali
Scroll quickly through the images in the presentation, and get feedback from students on their first impressions, especially on how advanced they consider Mali to have been. (10 minutes)

Research
Divide the class into groups with one group per resource sheet. Each group has to look at the question at the top of the sheet, and decide on the answer by studying the sources. The group should note 5–10 relevant facts that it can feed back to the rest of the class as evidence of its answer. (20 minutes)

Feedback
Each group feeds back its findings, opinion and evidence to the rest of the class, who could take notes. (15 minutes)

Discussion
The central question of ‘advanced’ can be debated; i.e. which aspects reveal the kingdom of Mali to have been a developed civilisation; etc. (15 minutes)

Homework
e.g. The ambassador for the kingdoms of Mali defends his country – pick and explain five details that show how advanced Mali was at this time, or look at the presentation if not already done in class, or do further research into one of the topics to find more information.
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THE KINGDOM OF MALI c. 1230–1600: TEACHERS’ NOTES

Introduction

This great sub-Saharan kingdom was one of several states which built their power and wealth on control of the trade routes. Others included the kingdoms of Kanem-Bornu, Takur, Ghana and Songhai. The kingdom of Mali succeeded the kingdom of Ghana, and was, in turn, replaced by the kingdom of Songhai after little more than two centuries, but during its period of pre-eminence it came to dominate over a million square kilometres of territory, and the fame and wealth of its ruler became known in Europe.

Why study the kingdom of Mali?

The kingdom of Mali and the other kingdoms are examples of sophisticated African societies that flourished before Europeans began trading in Africa. They are of interest in their own right, but can be used by teachers as examples of how developed some African societies were during the Middle Ages. This will fill in gaps in knowledge of African and world history that some students might have, and serve to counter the impression (shared by those who took part in the slave trade) that African societies were backward and almost devoid of history.

This resource also shows the influence of Islam in the religion and culture of African societies, demonstrating the power and reach of this belief. It also highlights the reputation and importance of religious and commercial centres such as Djenné and Timbuktu.

In terms of the wealth of Africa, Mali and the other Savannah Kingdoms are good examples of civilisations that grew and thrived on the opportunities provided by trade, and the exploitation of raw materials. They demonstrate the link between the Arab and Berber states to the north, and the sub-Saharan societies to the south.

Geography and topography

Mansa Musa, one of the strongest kings, used to boast that it would take a year to traverse the kingdom from north to south, and another year east to west though the writer al-Umari reckoned that 4 months was a more accurate estimate for the north to south journey.

The kingdom of Mali spanned three main topographical zones, each of which played an important part in its makeup. In the northern part of the kingdom lay the Sahara Desert which acted like a barrier against invasion from that direction, and over which caravans of traders brought goods to and from the kingdom.

Beneath it ran a broad strip, 200–700 miles wide, known as the Sahel, or shore (because it lies on the edge of the Sahara). The Sahel is arid with little rainfall and its vegetation consists mainly of scrub, bush, thorn, sandy soils and solitary trees. This belt was the home of herdsmen, with the occasional farmer.

Further south lay the savannah, mainly grasslands with occasional patches of woodland, home to more intensive cattle and arable farming.
The other significant geographic feature is the slow-moving River Niger, which curves like a bow through the kingdom. It has a large inland delta around Djenné, and this provided fertile land for agriculture which played a vital role in regional trade. The river was important for a number of other reasons. It was a highway that connected the cities of Timbuktu, Gao and Djenné (via the Bani River). It was a source of fish, which was the main livelihood of several communities along its banks, not least the Sorko who were to form the Songhai kingdom. It was also a strategic route for the passage of armies which determined the political history of the area.

The local economy revolved around the seasonal cycles of this river, as it did with other waterways such as the River Senegal, River Benue, and Lake Chad to the east.

Economy

The kingdom was able to maintain its power for so long because of its access to important raw materials. Chief among these were gold and salt, with copper coming a close third. The Mansa (king) had a monopolistic control over strategically significant imports such as horses and metals. Duties were levied on copper and salt, but not on gold.

Most of the population were engaged in agriculture, growing millet, sorghum and rice, as well as fishing and breeding cattle. Farmers in the savannah region produced a surplus, some of which became part of the trading process, and some going to the army and administration. There seems to have been some deliberate organisation of agriculture, since slaves were settled in new villages to put more of the land under cultivation.

Exchanges were made for small purchases, with salt, copper and cloth as valid currencies. Gold was used for large transactions, either in the form of bags of gold dust measured according to weight, or golden dinar coins. In the forest areas, iron hoes had the status of currency, and the particular medium of exchange depended on the demand in each locality. As the need for a market economy grew, cowrie shells were introduced, and these were used in the same way as coins today.

Trade

The kingdom of Mali and the other savannah kingdoms owed their prosperity to their position at the centre of a network of trade routes which criss-crossed the region. This trade was formerly depicted in terms of Berber caravans from the north bringing books, cereals, dried fruit, horses, cotton and woollen clothing, pottery and jewels, and loading up with salt at Teghaza on the border of the kingdom. They then continued southwards and exchanged these commodities for gold, copper and slaves, much of which came from countries further to the south of the kingdom of Mali.

More recently, historians have viewed this picture as too simplistic, and now describe the trade as an eco-zonal system in which products from one eco-zone (e.g. Sahara, Sahel, savannah, forest) were traded with another in a web of regional networks. The trans-Saharan route was vital in linking this regional trade with the Mediterranean. Cities like Timbuktu and Gao were like ports on the shore of the Sahara receiving and dispensing goods through their markets, becoming very prosperous in the process.

Regional trade, for example between the savannah and the south, was often in the hands of established groups such as the Wangara or Hausa, who used caravans of donkeys to transport cargoes. Merchants involved in the trans-Saharan trade tended to stick to the northern market cities of Gao and Timbuktu.

A diverse range of products was traded, including kola nuts, gold, agricultural products, livestock, dried fish, shea butter, iron, slaves, beads, cotton and woollen cloths, copper, ivory, leatherwork, manufactured cloths from the Mediterranean, hides, etc. Trade also allowed the dissemination of crafts, skills and knowledge, as well as the spread of Islam.
Gold

Large gold mines to the south of the kingdom produced almost half the gold of Africa, Europe and Asia combined, and were the richest deposits in the world in the 14th century. Gold entering the kingdom became the property of the king, and nuggets had to be handed to him, but pre-weighed bags of gold dust became exchangeable currency. The mithqal, or dinar, was a 4.5g bag of gold. Initially the kingdom of Mali had ruled directly over the goldfields at Bure, but, noting that production was declining, Mansa Musa decided to revert to a system of autonomy for the gold region in return for the payment of a hefty tribute. Since he also controlled the trade routes northwards, and claimed sole rights to any nuggets found, this generosity was calculated.

Salt

Due to its rarity in the south of the kingdom, salt was often regarded by people there as more valuable than gold. It was cut from the mines in slabs and transported across the desert on camels. It was then cut into smaller pieces which could be used as currency or in food. It is possible that it was the need for salt, rather than gold, which sparked the trans-Saharan trade. The salt was mined at Teghaza, to the north of the kingdom, and Ibn Battuta, who stayed there on his overland journey, described its significance: ‘In spite of the insignificance of the village of Teghaza, the trading in it comes to the equivalent of many quintars of gold dust.’ (Hamdun & King 1998: 30)

Copper

Copper was mined in the north of the country at Takkada, and traded in the south for gold or goods. Ibn Battuta described how it was smelted in people’s houses and made into thin or thick rods that could then be used as a medium of exchange. It was also imported from outside the kingdom, and a letter of 1447 from the Genoese merchant Malfante claimed that copper from Romania was ‘always in great demand throughout the land of the Blacks.’ (Crone, 1937: 89–90)

Slaves

Slaves were another source of wealth that was traded across the Sahara. Ibn Battuta mentions that in the caravan he joined from Mali to the north there were 600 enslaved women destined (presumably) for domestic service in Arab and Berber states such as Egypt or Morocco.

Kola

Found in the forests of the Akan (modern Ghana) to the south, these nuts were prized throughout the region for their narcotic qualities. The stimulating powers of this caffeine-rich fruit served as refreshment and as a means of easing hunger pangs and tiredness. They were also widely used in social and religious ceremonies, such as marriage, name-giving, etc. They became a highly important trade good, one of the backbones of the north-south trade between the forest and the savannah, with possibly thousands of tonnes being exported every year, bringing great wealth to the traders.
**History**

The kingdom of Mali’s empire has had a huge effect on the development of West Africa right up to the present day. The spread of Mande-speaking people over an area that extended from Gao in the east as far as the west coast, together with trade, conquest and the diffusion of Islam, has determined the historical, economic, ethnic and linguistic picture of most of this part of the continent.

Sunjata (r. 1235–1255) was the first king to unify the Mandinka kingdoms and is as much a figure of legend as of fact. Epic songs of Mandinka griots (storyteller/poets) tell of the ‘magician’ Sunjata who, when the Mandinka could no longer bear the burden of paying taxes to their Sosso leader Sumanguru, led them into battle. Sunjata killed Sumanguru at the Battle of Krina in 1235, and seized the major territories through which gold was traded.

Sunjata declared himself Mansa (King of Kings) of the twelve kingdoms of the Mandinka. The 12 kings swore to obey Sunjata in return for being named governors of their territories. To help him rule, Sunjata set up a Gbara, or Great Assembly, of clan elders who would discuss and make decisions. Over the next two centuries the kingdom would expand through war, until it covered 1.3 million km². Sunjata’s successor Ali is credited with conquering the great trading centres of Timbuktu and Djenné.

Musa I (r. 1312–1337) was possibly the best known of the kings outside Mali, mainly because of his famous pilgrimage to Mecca via Cairo, which took place between 1324 and 1326. His generosity and apparent wealth became legendary, even though he spent so much he had to take out a loan to enable him to return home.

He developed Timbuktu into a major cultural centre, and built a new Great Mosque with space for 2,000 worshippers, designed by an Andalusian architect he brought back with him from his pilgrimage.

Tunisian historian Ibn Khaldun described him as a great monarch, whose victories strengthened Mali and made him a force to be feared. Musa Suleiman (r. 1341–1360) had mixed reviews from Ibn Battuta, mainly because of the reluctance of the king to give him generous gifts, but he did acknowledge his sense of justice and power. Al-Umari considered Suleiman more favourably.

**Later Mansas**

After Suleiman’s death in 1360 there were problems over the succession which led to on-off civil strife for the next 70 years. The root of the difficulty was the lack of fixed rules over who should succeed. Since Sunjata had been followed by his brother, who claimed the throne as the eldest male relative, there were now effectively two principal lines of succession (from Sunjata and his brother), and as time went on these became more complex.
Army
Part of the success of Malian expansion must have been down to the size of the armies – over 100,000 strong, according to al-Umari, of which 10,000 were cavalry. Horses were expensive to buy, and even harder to keep healthy, especially in the south where tropical vegetation harboured diseases, but these troops seem to have been a major factor in the mobility and success of the Malian armies.

The cavalry tended to be the preserve of the noble classes, while foot soldiers were mainly slaves, although there may have been conscription among the peasantry to help fill the ranks. Malian generals were quite happy to incorporate defeated soldiers into their armies.

Government
The kingdom of Mali was not governed by strong interference from the king, but through the regional governors who were trusted to remain loyal and allowed to govern according to local traditions. According to the Arab chronicler al-Umari, Mali was divided into 14 large provinces, 24 towns and numerous villages. Towns and villages were allowed to continue their traditional organisation, and this flexibility probably accounted for the lack of revolts against the king.

Within the empire, conquered states that were under Malian control were governed by their own rulers under the supervision of governors, while states on the borders which paid tribute to the Mansa remained under the authority of their own kings.

Urban living
Apart from the capital Niani, and the main cities of Timbuktu, Gao and Jenne, the kingdom of Mali had numerous other towns. The growth and prosperity of these were stimulated by the trade routes across the Sahara, and also by the stops on the pilgrimage trail to Mecca (hajj). A later Sudanese historian refers to many towns with a population of over 15,000. Timbuktu became, and remains, an almost legendary place – exotic and distant – famed for its gold and its learning.

Society
Mali was a hierarchical society, with the customs and behaviour surrounding the Mansa indicating a considerable respect for the ruler. There were also obvious class distinctions between provincial rulers, nobles, judges and administrators, artisans, farmers, and slaves. Yet in practice there were contradictions. The in-fighting over the succession, which plagued the kingdom for much of its later history, suggested that respect ran only as deep as the personal authority of the particular ruler. Mansas, evidently not trusting the ambitions of the nobles, chose to surround themselves with an alternative court of slaves, many of whom assumed the running of the country in moments of strife, and one of whom, Sakura, even became a highly respected Mansa.
Religion

Sunjata was the first king of Mali to convert to Islam, though it was said he was not particularly rigorous in his observance of its rules. Mansa Musa, on the other hand, was extremely devout, and his pilgrimage to Mecca (hajj) has become famous, at least for more material reasons. The rulers and many of the people of Mali thereafter took Islam seriously, and even Ibn Battuta, usually quick to criticise the Malians, had to acknowledge their devotion. It is not known why there was such a desire to convert to Islam, but it has been suggested that the new rulers wanted to place themselves above their fellow Mandinke by being seen to ally more closely with the outsiders from the north, which gave them added prestige.

It was Arab traders who first brought the new religion to the kingdom. Many of them were educated and religious men who through speech and the books of learned writers managed to spread the word. Malians who became traders, and who moved further from their roots, began abandoning their old religion and adopting Islam which proved a passport for entry into northern markets. Traders were followed by Arab immigrants who came as judges, imams and teachers and who settled in the country. They were treated with respect and one Mansa even married his daughters to two of them.

Mosques were built, and Islamic influences were felt in architecture, poetry, cooking and even dress. Men were sent to Fes to study in Moroccan madrasas (religious schools). Timbuktu became a major centre of Islamic culture and learning. Even so, in the villages much of the old religion remained, and Ibn Battuta was shocked to discover, even at court, old ceremonial dances being performed during an Islamic religious festival.

Relations with other states

The kingdom, especially under Mansa Musa, was anxious to maintain good relations with the Arab lands to the north, particularly with the kingdom of Morocco. This may have been partly down to a desire to keep on good terms with an important trading partner, and to ensure that any invasion could be forestalled, though the chances of being able to move an army across the Sahara were negligible. More likely Mansa Musa’s desire was to impress both his neighbours and the powerful countries to the north, and also to grow closer to a fellow Islamic nation. An exchange of embassies with Morocco took place under Mansa Musa, and a later king sent the gift of a giraffe which caused great excitement. Unfortunately, the visit of the Malian delegation to the Sultan in Morocco coincided with a coup against him with near fatal consequences for the African ambassadors.

Links with Egypt mainly revolved around the pilgrimage of Mansa Musa to Cairo which, in diplomatic terms, was a mixed success. Musa initially refused even to see the Sultan, and once in his presence refused to kneel before him. Fortunately he was persuaded to do so, and an unpleasant diplomatic incident was averted. The effect of Musa’s visit on the Cairo gold market is unlikely to have helped relations, but the lavish gift of gold bestowed by the Mansa on his return to Mali doubtless did.

Even so, Mali was undone by invaders from the north –the Tuareg – who probed at its borders, especially Timbuktu. In this it shared a common fate with Ghana and Songhai which were both victims to Moroccan armies. As late as 1455, when the Malian empire had already begun to be eclipsed by Songhai, the kingdom entered into a diplomatic agreement with the Portuguese for military help to shore up its empire. This, however, came to nothing.
Decline of the kingdom of Mali
The process of decline was a slow one, and this was due to several factors. The northern Tuareg desert tribes who had been thrown out of Timbuktu in the 13th century returned in 1433 to reclaim it. Already, in 1391, the Mossi had sacked the city, causing considerable loss of life, but they had left and Malian kings had been able to regain control. Nevertheless, this reverse showed their weakness, as did the continuing battles for power at court. Parts of the kingdom took the opportunity to free themselves, most notably Gao in the late 14th century. The Fulani infiltrated from the west, and other western provinces broke away. The capital Niani was sacked between 1545 and 1546 by the rising Songhai empire and this effectively marked the end of Mali’s power. Yet, while the northern and eastern parts were lost to Songhai, in the west and south the kingdom continued for almost two more centuries.

Sources
There are a few contemporary written sources which deal with this period, but the tradition of oral history being passed down by griots (professional storytellers) meant that there was little perceived need for written history. The evidence comes mainly from the modern continuation of this oral tradition, archaeological research, the extant remains of cities, and the accounts of a few writers.

Chief among the latter are the two tarikhs, or chronicles, particularly the Tarikh al-Sudan, which is a history of the Songhai kingdom written in the 17th century.

Mali was visited during its period of greatness by the travel writer Ibn Battuta, who recorded the customs of the country at some length. While his evidence is first hand, it contains many of the prejudices that are later to be found in the consular reports of Europeans writing about African countries, most notably a sense of racial, religious and moral superiority.

Three other writers who mentioned Mali – Ibn Khaldun, al-Umari and Leo Africanus (and al-Bakri who wrote about Ghana) – seem to have received their information second hand, though they do provide interesting details.
REFERENCES


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