

7.17 Mansa Musa Reading

The empire of Mali was at its peak from about 1200 CE through the end of the 1400s. This kingdom had a great start under the wise direction of Sundiata, the Lion King. His son, Wali, also ruled wisely. Mansa Musa, Sundiata's grandson, continued the family tradition of wise rulers. Under Mansa Musa, the Mali Empire doubled in size! But Mansa Musa accomplished much more than simple expansion. He put Mali on the map.

Under Mansa Musa, the empire was broken into provinces, each ruled by a governor. Each village had a mayor. Most villages followed the traditional religions of Africa. The people believed in many gods, in witch doctors, and in magic charms. Most village people could not read or write. They received education and training by word of mouth, or orally. They were very bright and creative people. They worked hard. They were not poor. The common people were given some luxury goods. Goods were given to the elders and distributed as they saw fit. Mansa Musa was a great believer in spreading wealth around.

The Kingdom of Mali was very rich. The army guarded the gold mines. It also guarded the section of the Trans-Saharan Trade Route that passed by Mali. Legend says there were usually 90,000 warriors on foot, 10,000 warriors on camels, and a few on Arabian horses that worked together to keep the trade route safe for travel. Traders always stopped at Mali. They knew they would find safety, culture, and richly rewarding trade.

Like his grandfather Sundiata, Mansa Musa ruled for 25 years. He continued the tradition of religious freedom in Mali, meaning anyone could practice any religion they wanted to. Mansa Musa himself was a devout Muslim. He worshiped one god, Allah. It was Mansa Musa who actually ordered an impressive university to be built at Timbuktu. He wanted scholars to come to Mali which they eventually did.

The Muslim scholars who came to Mali were somewhat startled at the appearance of the people who called themselves Muslims. The climate was very hot. Rather than being heavily veiled in black garments, the women were unveiled and wore cool, colorful clothing. This was not the look to which they were accustomed. But Mansa Musa was such a good host and such a devout Muslim, that the scholars who came to the kingdom brought with them not only learning but also understanding. Having never left Mali, Mansa Musa really did not know that the appearance of his people was anything out of the ordinary in the Muslim world.

Mansa Musa did things you would expect a very rich king to do. When he left his palace, 300

guards and his special musicians who played music wherever they went always accompanied him. His people would gather along the road and chant, “Hail Mansa Musa, King of Mali!”

Since things were going so well at home, Mansa Musa decided now was the time to see the holy city of Mecca. Muslim law requires that all the faithful visit Mecca at least once. With a huge number of guards and attendants—along with camels carrying comforts, luxury, and bagsful of gold nuggets—Mansa Musa set out across the desert toward Mecca. Along the way, everywhere he went, he freely gave away gold. You can imagine the excitement he generated as he traveled from one oasis to the next.

His caravan stopped in Cairo, Egypt. Word of his incredible wealth spread quickly throughout the city. Mansa Musa was amazed at how expensive things were. They were expensive because merchants increased their normal prices. Mansa Musa did not care. Even though he had given away so much gold on the trip to Cairo, he had bagsful left to spend. And spend he did. Mansa Musa left so much gold behind him in Cairo that it was rumored it took 12 years for prices in Egypt to get back to normal. (This is probably an urban legend, but certainly it took a little time for things to get back to normal.)

He distributed so much gold on his way to Mecca that he had to borrow money for his return trip home. Everyone with money was eager to be of service to such a wealthy man. True to his nature, Mansa Musa repaid the loans most generously.

His journey took about a year. He traveled around 3,000 miles by camel. No one attempted to take over his kingdom while he was gone. Mansa Musa was a very smart man. To reduce the likelihood of a takeover, he had brought with him on his trip most of the powerful people in his kingdom. He left the army in charge. They did a great job.

His people were impressed. They thought it was amazing that he was willing to make such a long trip with so many dangers, just to see a faraway holy place. However, his trip had other results. Scholars poured into Timbuktu, making it the most prestigious university in the land. Trade became even more brisk, making Mali even richer.

Mansa Musa literally put Mali on the map—both European and Muslim maps.