

## **The Kingdom of Mali**

Prior to the emergence of the Kingdom of Mali, under the leadership of Sundiata of the Keita clan, after the decline of its predecessor Ghana, Mali had had a succession of strong leaders. It also had established strong regional trade links. The ancient Malian kingdom of Jenne-Jeno was reputed by archaeologists to have its roots in and around 200 Years BC. Mali only began to lose its power and influence in the 16<sup>th</sup> Century. Prior to its eventual collapse it was the second largest state in the world after the Asiatic Mongol Empire. Jenne's strategic position made it an important crossroads for both north and south trade. Highly crafted fragments of pottery, iron work and jewelry have been discovered in the region. This makes it highly likely that there were imports of iron ore, stone grinders and beads into Mali. Also the origins of Mali lie in the Mandinka people who originally lived in the upper reaches of the Niger and Senegal rivers. They lived in small villages which were called *Dugu*. The chiefs of each village called themselves *Dugutigi*. These villages by the end of the 12<sup>th</sup> Century had formed themselves into the state of Kangaba.

With the breakup of the Ancient Kingdom of Ghana, partly caused by raids led by the Almoravid Berbars from the north coupled with dwindling gold supplies at around the start of the 12<sup>th</sup> Century, smaller states such as Tekrur and Sosso competed to fill the power basin left in regions west of the Upper Niger.

One of the main reasons that Mali became an important kingdom in the Sahel region of Africa was because of its strategic position for conducting and controlling trade across the entire North African region. The Kingdom of Mali was reputed to have been founded by a magician called Sundjata. The formation of Mali came about as a direct result of the defeat of the Kingdom of Sosso by the small state of Kangaba by an army led by Sundiata Keita. He defeated the army of King Sunangura Kante in 1235. He then reigned Mali from 1235 for twenty years till 1255. During his rule Mali was in actuality three allied but independent states, Mali, Mena and Wagadou plus twelve garrisoned provinces. During this period Mali's frontiers extended west to the Atlantic Ocean, and south, deep into the forest regions beyond the Niger River and north to the copper and salt mines of the Sahara Desert.

Some oral story traditions say that Sundiata began life as a slave in a royal palace where he gained a reputation as a skilled magician. It is said that he lived amongst the Sosso people who had taken over the old Ghana Empire. Griots who still tell the history of Africa through oral story telling traditions say that Sundjata control of the gold trading and producing region and it was this regional wealth that eventually underpinned the basic economic foundations of Mali. Sundjata is also said to have introduced new agricultural practices in to Mali as well as cotton weaving. Sundjata forged a sense of Malian national and cultural identity. Another story about his early life describes how he was born lame but was cured by a miracle. Eventually he grew to become a skilled hunter and warrior. His magical powers and prowess, it is said, enabled him to be successful in battle.

A more detailed story of his life says that he was the youngest of eleven brothers. Another version says that he was the second son of a Mandingo king called Nare Fa Maghan. He was born crippled and weak. His mother was Sogolon Conde, the second wife of Nare. At first she laughed and jeered at her son's disabilities but after much effort he overcame his physical difficulties and became the leader amongst his peer group. Because some people viewed Sundjata as being the next in line to the throne, because of the deep affection that the king displayed towards his mother, they were forced to flee for their lives after the death of the king. No Malinke chief offered the couple protection or shelter and they lived in fear of the wrath and anger of Dankaran Tuman, the new king. Sundjata eventually fled to Mema, where Mansa Tunkara, the region's ruler gave them protection. Sundjata also occupied an important position in the king's court.

Another story relating to the life of Sundjata was told by *Djeli Manadou Kouyate*, a griot who originated from the village of Koro in Guinea. It has to be stressed that oral histories over a period of time are subject to change. Oral story telling represent a form of history which has different rules to that of Western concepts and a Western approach to history. Also oral histories can change partly due to the fact that memory is selective and fallible. Stories also become altered for political or other social pressures.

*Djeli* recounts how Nare Fa Magham, the Mandingo King and father of Sundjata, was the son of a long line of renowned hunters who were known for their skill and bravery as well as their innate ability to communicate with the spirit world. Nare Fa Magham reigned over Mali at the beginning of the 13<sup>th</sup> Century. Though he was a devout Muslim he still believed in the

powers of the spirit world. Legend has it that a hunter came from the north with a prophecy that stated that two hunters would come from the north with a woman that the king must marry. The hunter said that the woman would give birth to the greatest king that Mali would ever know. *Djeli* also said that Maghan's totem was a lion. Later on two hunters arrived at the court of the king with a hunchback woman. They explained to the king that the woman was Sogolon Kedju, who was the human double of a buffalo, which until recently had been causing havoc in the land of Do. The hunters had managed to slay the rampaging buffalo. They also explained to the king that although Sogolon was deformed she possessed amazing powers. In order to fulfill the earlier prophecy Maghan married Sogolon and in time she gave birth to a son. He was first named Man Diata but people in the community called him Sogolon Diata which in the end was shortened to Sundiata or Sundjata. Sassouma who was the king's first wife became extremely jealous of Sogolon and the relationship that she had with the king. She wanted her son, Dankaran Touman to become king. Sogolon's magical powers prevented attempts by Sassouma to kill her.

Sassouma believed that Sundiata presented no threat to the throne because she perceived him as being fat and lazy and he also rarely spoke. As the king lay dying he gave Sundiata a gift. This present was a story teller or griot called Balla Fasseke. The king still believed in the original prophecy that Sundiata would eventually rise to become the king of Mali. On his death his first born son, Dankaran took control of the throne and was proclaimed king. After the king's death Sogolon and Sundiata were continually insulted because of the frailty of Sundiata but one morning he calmly announced to his mother that he was going to walk that day. A local blacksmith made him a rod and Sundiata was able to lift himself off the ground. The rod was at the same time shaped like a bow. His griot wrote a song that day in praise of the event called *'The Hymn of the Bow'*. Eight hundred years later the song is still sung in Mali.

Because of the change in Sundiata's health he was now perceived as a potential threat by other members of his immediate family. As a result he and his mother were forced to flee into exile. During this formative period, it is said that Sundiata transformed himself into a skilled hunter and warrior. While living in exile in Mema he came across a market trader selling leaves from a baobab tree, which he instinctively knew must have originated from Mali. Talking to the stall holder, he learnt that Mali had been conquered by Sumaoro, the King of Sosso and that Dankaran had been forced into exile

like himself. Sundiata's mother died as he was preparing to leave Mema and to return to Mali.

Sundiata's griot had been forced into the service of Soumaoro. As Sundiata travelled home towards Mali, he gathered an army of warriors, archers and skilled horsemen. Soumaoro's army was forced to retreat at their first battle but the result was still inconclusive. At the next battle, the magical powers that Sundiata was said to possess dominated the battlefield but Soumaoro managed to escape. During this pause in the conflict Sundiata continued to expand his ever growing army. A special meeting of soothsayers was convened. Sundiata was told to sacrifice one hundred white oxen, one hundred white rams and one hundred white cocks. During these sacrifices, Sundiata's griot along with his half sister arrived at these ceremonial proceedings, after managing to escape from the clutches of Soumaoro. His half sister told the gathering of soothsayers that she had been forced to marry the king but was able to reveal all the secrets that lay behind his magical powers. Soumaoro was completely defeated in the final battle. This battle of Kirina was said to have taken place in 1235 AD. Legend has it that the eventual outcome of the battle was determined by each king's powers of sorcery. Sundiata is said to have roared like a lion and that caused the armies of Sumanguru to run for cover. Sumanguru then released the heads of eight spirits which hovered above him but Sundiata's magical powers proved too much for these spirits. He then grazed Sumanguru's shoulder with an arrow, causing all of his magical powers to ebb away.

It is retold by a griot that,

*'The vanquished Sumanguru looked up towards the sun. A great black bird flew above the fray..... "The bird of Kinna" the king muttered. Sumanguru let out a great cry and turning his horses head he took to flight.'*

The outcome of this battle was important for a number of reasons. It sealed the alliances that Sundiata had created and also made Sundiata the most powerful ruler in the whole of West Africa. Also he continued to expand the territory under his control, eventually ruling over the whole of what was the Ancient Kingdom of Ghana. Selected chiefs governed in each region but only the rulers of Mema and Wagadu were given the title of king. Niani on the Upper Niger became the capital city and Sundiata channeled resources into improving the agricultural base of the kingdom. Soldiers were

employed in the clearing of land. Crops such as rice, beans, yams, onion, grain and cotton were cultivated and harvested.

Niani was transformed into a major trade centre in Mali. It was built on a fertile flood plain on the Upper Niger River. In the north of Mali there was excellent animal grazing land. Sundiata Keita bought together all the Mandinke clans, gained control of Timbuktu from the Tueregs and it became a city renowned as a place of learning and trade. A museum has just been established in Timbuktu to protect all of the surviving ancient manuscripts which for centuries have been handed down from generation to generation. These books also prove the importance of the city as a place of learning and education. The universities in Timbuktu were established when only the most rudimentary education system existed in Britain and very few books were written in English. The salt and gold trade were re-established in Mali. Sundiata realized the importance of trade in the development of a nation's wealth. Through his actions at the time and the rulers of Mali who followed him the kingdom became the strongest one in Africa at the time. The copper mine at Takedda came under the control of Mali and new gold mines were opened up at Bure. By the late 14<sup>th</sup> century Mali was three times the size of the previous kingdom of Ghana. Gold from Mali was exported to countries as far away as France and England and for many centuries was the source of much of Europe's supply of gold. Mali at its zenith was over 2,000 kilometers wide. Large quantities of gold dust and agricultural produce was exported north. A prosperous merchant class emerged from the Maninka clan. By the 14<sup>th</sup> Century cowry shells had become established as the primary means of exchange and for tax purposes. Sundiata died around 1255AD

Sundiata's success in battle was linked to his belief in Islam as well as his disciplined ranks of infantry and cavalry divisions. It is said that he converted to Islam in 1200 Year AD. With the help of his cavalry divisions Sundiata was able to create a massive empire which stretched from the Atlantic Ocean inland to the distant shores of Lake Chad.

Robin Law, Professor of African history at Stirling University has found evidence that cavalry divisions operated in the ancient empire of Mali and in other west African states which later came under the influence of Mali. The

use of the horse in Malian militias continued into the 15<sup>th</sup> century. Some people say that Sundiata started off life as a horse breeder.

Mansa Musa, (1312 – 1337) expanded the power of Mali to extend to the city states to extend to the city states of Timbuktu, Gao and Djenne. Mansa Musa was also a devout Muslim and made an infamous pilgrimage to Mecca. He began this pilgrimage with a retinue of 60,000 people together with 80 camels loaded down with two tons of gold. This gold was to be distributed en-route to the poor and needy. Five hundred out of his twelve hundred servants carried staffs made out of solid gold. Historians say that this pilgrimage caused a collapse of the gold market in places such as Egypt and that the price of gold took many years to recover. Mansa Musa's fame spread to Europe as evidenced in a Catalan map of Charles V titled '*Mansa Musa – Lord of the Negroes in Guinea*'. While staying in Cairo, Mansa Musa's trip attracted the attention of European merchants and this caused parts of Africa to be seen as an African El Dolorado. This pilgrimage could have been one of the catalysts which led to English involvement in the invasion of the Kingdom of Songhai and to the trans-Atlantic slave trade. Gold from this region is thought to have kick started the Italian Renaissance. The journey to Mecca was also canonized by Arabic writers. Cairo born historian Al – Maqurizi wrote,

*'It is said that he bought with him 14,000 slave girls for his personal service. The members of his entourage proceeded to buy Turkish and Ethiopian girls, singing girls and garments so that the rate of the gold dinar fell by six dirham's. Having presented this gift he set off with his caravan.'*

The historian Tarik es Sudan wrote that Mansa Musa's entourage of 60,000 people who left for Mecca on horse back, returned on camels. Up until the 20<sup>th</sup> century it was believed that the African horse originated in Arabia and that horses were introduced into Africa by Islamists but,

*'No agricultural system could change around so quickly when horses would have to be imported.'*

If this had been the case, the Arab horse would have had to have been adapted to survive in semi desert and arid regions and they would have required extra feeding. Linguistically no English or Arabic word are used by Africans to describe horses except in Sierre Leone. This indicates that the horse was embedded in African culture before the emergence of

African/Islamist cultures in Africa. Ibn Sa'id, a 13<sup>th</sup> Century traveler wrote about the abundance of horses in Africa, saying,

*'Keeping horses throughout the middle belt of West Africa represents an ancient tradition.'*

Mansa Musa is also known for building a number of mosques at Gao and Djenne as well as the construction of the Cupola in Timbuktu which had strong links with Fez in Morocco. He returned from his pilgrimage to Mecca with a group of Islamic scholars, clerics and an architect called Ishak as-Sahili who built mosques on the banks of the River Niger in a Sudanic architectural style. Mansa Musa's way of ruling could be compared to that of a medieval monarch such as King Louis IXth of France, (1226-1270). North African writer Ibn Battuta described the court of Mansa Musa's brother Sulayman, (1336 – 1358) as a fusion of Islamic and traditional African customs. During this historical period, Islam spread as far as Hausaland, in today's Nigeria, which lay beyond the banks of the River Niger. Prior to the collapse of Mali in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, Timbuktu had established good trading links with Portugal and other countries along the Mediterranean basin. Timbuktu as previously mentioned, had a bustling academic life with libraries of North African texts as well as a vibrant and profitable book trade.

There is a myth surrounding Mansa Abubkan, who it is said dispatched a fleet of 200 ships to explore the Atlantic Ocean. Only one ship is said to have returned and the surviving sailors said that half way across the ocean the rest of the flotilla was sucked into and swept away by a strong current. The king organized another expedition, this time with 2,000 ships, half of which were loaded down with supplies. The king sailed out with this fleet but no one ever returned from this voyage. There is a possibility that the king could have arrived on the American continent in 1311, a century before Christopher Columbus. Maps of Ancient Mexico seem to indicate that some areas of the coastline had Malian names. For instance, Sierre de Mali and Mandinga Bay. Two negro skeletons have been found in Hull bay, an area close to the Danish virgin Islands which date from the year 1250 AD. Close to this grave some African writing in Tifnagh says,

*'Plunge into cleanse yourself. This water is for purification and prayer.'*

To conclude this section Ibn Battuta, a Berber academic and theologian spent a year living in Mali, arriving in the kingdom on 28<sup>th</sup> June 1352. He was critical of the quality of the cuisine but said that it was a safe country to travel in. He said that foreign travelers were treated fairly and with respect. His description of the king creates a picture of absolute splendour,

*'The king(or as Ibn Battuta called him, the sultan) entered the palace yard wearing a skull cap and a velvety red tunic and carrying a bow in his hand and a quiver on his back. The sultan is preceded by his musicians who carry gold and silver gumbris, (two stringed guitars) and behind him 300 armed slaves.....He walked slowly to the platform carpeted with silk and covered with cushions: it was shaded from the blazing sun by a large umbrella....A sort of pavilion made of silk surrounded by a bird fashioned in gold about the size of a falcon. On reaching the platform the sultan stops and looks around the assembly, then ascends in a sedate manner. As he takes his seat the drums, trumpets and bugles are sounded.'*



## **Classroom Activities – The Kingdom of Mali**

- 1.** Working in pairs create a tale based upon oral story traditions which one will then act out and tell to the rest of the group. Get into role and the feeling of a Griot or Story Teller. Compare and contrast story telling traditions with those that are written down.
- 2.** In small groups write and create a 5 – 10 minute play script about the early life of Sundjata the founder of the Kingdom of Mali, and how he overcame his disabilities. Act out the script in front of the class. The production could also be videoed. Later have a discussion about contemporary issues surrounding disability in the world of today. Discuss individual reaction to disability.
- 3.** Create a board game that maps out the rise and fall of the Kingdom of Ghana and Mali. Discuss the nature of power and why governments and nations change.
- 4.** Compare and contrast life in the Kingdom of Mali to life in your home town at around the same period. Also compare Mali today and your home town.
- 5.** Create a series of graphic illustrations depicting what life might have been like in the Kingdom of Mali. This could include aspects such as architecture, what life was like in the royal court, in the military and in towns and villages. This could be turned into a comic strip or even made into an animated film.