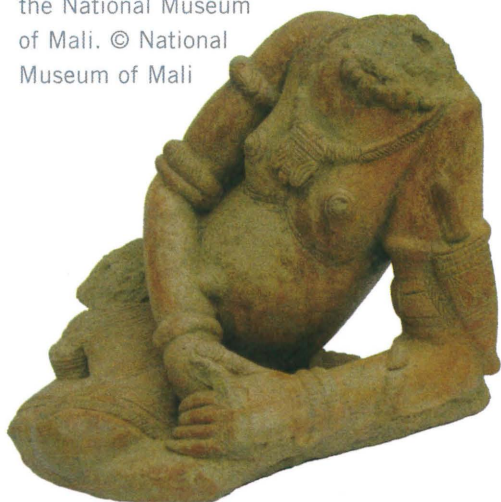




The mosque and tomb of Askia Mohammed, the 15th-century Songhai emperor. The mosque was built in 1495 in Gao after the emperor's return from his pilgrimage to Mecca. Photo © Baba Alpha Cissé

A terra cotta figure found at Jenné-Jeno (ancient Djenné) is on permanent display at the National Museum of Mali. © National Museum of Mali



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From Golden Age Empires to Independence

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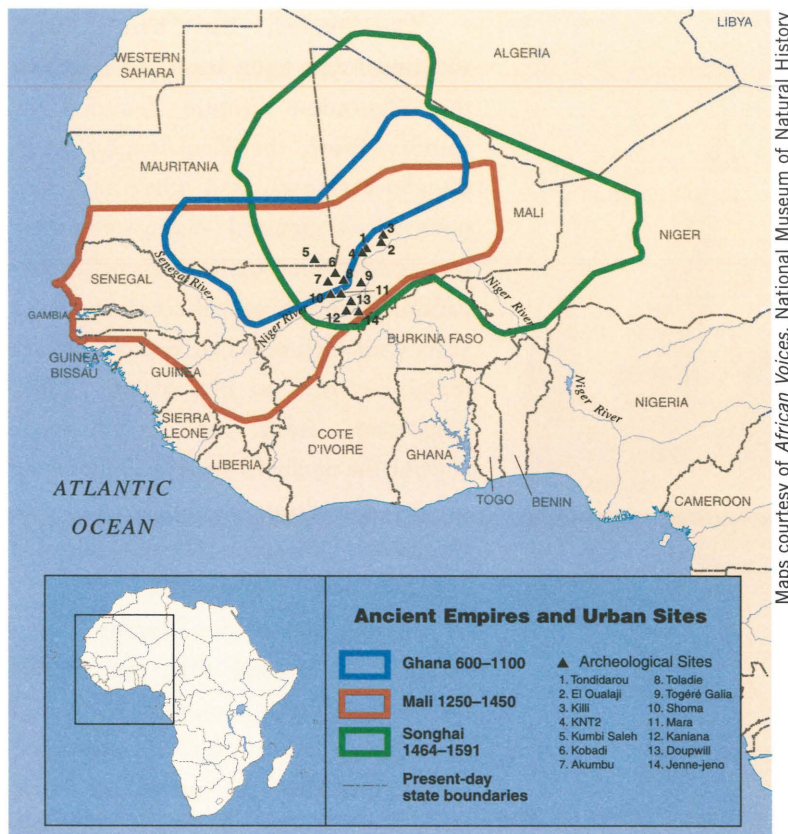
Mali occupies a special place in African history. The very name Mali evokes in the African consciousness a period known as the Golden Age, when three great empires, whose fame spread far beyond their borders, ruled over the whole of West Africa. These empires—Ghana (8th to 11th century), Mali (13th to 15th century), and Songhai (15th to 16th century)—were among the first states in sub-Saharan Africa. Much of what we know about them comes from oral tradition, Arabic manuscripts, and archaeological evidence.

Trans-Saharan trade made these empires prosperous, and, in turn, the political dominance of these states provided the stability and security necessary for the trade to thrive. Gold, the commodity most sought in North Africa, was found in abundance in West Africa and formed the basis of the commerce. Also important was salt, mined in the Sahara, and a number of cities arose on the southern edge of the desert to serve as centers for trade between the Arab-Berber world and black Africa—among them Timbuktu (Tombouctou) and Djenn .

Ruled by kings with relatively centralized authority, these empires also boasted a rich culture. During the Songhai Empire in particular, Timbuktu and Djenn  became centers of scholarship as well as trade. Ancient chronicles heap praise on the depth of scholars' knowledge in these cities, in law, poetry, astrology, and other fields. Universities developed around the mosques and drew students from around the Islamic world. First introduced during the Ghana Empire, Islam became more influential during the Mali Empire, founded by Soundiata Keita. Kankan Moussa, also known as Mansa Musa (*mansa* is a title meaning "king of kings"), expanded the empire's territory significantly but is perhaps best known for his pilgrimage to Mecca in 1324. He carried so much gold with him and gave such a quantity away when he stopped en route in Cairo that the gold market collapsed. It would take years to recover.

In 1591 the sultan of Morocco attacked a Songhai Empire that had been weakened by internal warfare and a series of natural disasters and famines. The opening of sea trade by the Portuguese also favored coastal regions over the overland trade routes that had supported the empire. These factors, in combination with the Moroccans' superior firepower, brought a halt to the economic and intellectual achievements that had characterized the Golden Age.

A succession of smaller kingdoms, among them the Bambara (Bamanan) kingdoms of S gou and Kaarta, attempted to fill the vacuum. S gou was founded at the beginning of the 18th century. Its first king, Biton Coulibaly, was an autocrat supported by an extremely loyal army, the Tonjon. A Tonjon leader founded the second S gou dynasty, the Diarra. Kaarta consisted of rival Bambara clans and was often at war with S gou. In 1818 a Fulani (Peul) state called the Dina began to sap power from S gou. A force for Islamic renewal and for a Fulani renaissance in the interior Niger Delta, the Dina established a remarkable socio-



Maps courtesy of African Voices, National Museum of Natural History

economic organization that reconciled the interests of Fulani herders, Boso (Bozo) fishermen, and Bambara farmers. But both empires were taken over in the mid-1800s by El Hadj Omar Tall, a Tukulor Muslim cleric who had launched a holy war to conquer and convert the people of the western Sudan to his Islamic brotherhood. The theocratic state that resulted from this holy war extended across an extremely vast territory that was difficult to control; it also faced resistance from the Bambara and Fulani, and was threatened by French colonial troops bent on continuing their advance into the interior of the Sudan.

Although the first European contact with West Africa dates to the 15th century, explorers' expeditions of the 18th and 19th centuries provided (intentionally or not) the geographic information that led to the development of strategies for colonial conquest. The instability and conflicts between the various states and groups during the same period played into the hands of France, which already was influential in the region. The French governor of Senegal in the 1850s–1860s, Faidherbe, wanted to extend French commercial and political influence in Africa from the Atlantic to the Red Sea. The 1887 Treaty of Gouri made the Ségou Tukulor Empire a French protectorate. Annexation of other West African lands followed, and by the turn of the century all of what is now Mali was part of French West Africa. (French West Africa itself comprised eight colonies; in 1919 the colony that included Mali was named French Sudan.) West Africa was dismembered time and again at the whim of colonial interests, and capitals were moved as the borders of the new divisions changed.

Archeological research shows that Mali has been inhabited since Paleolithic times. Humans occupied the Malian Sahara between 30,000 and 20,000 B.C.E. Evidence of this ancient population can be seen in the south and center of the country as well, notably at the site at Oundjougou in Dogon country.

Human presence in Mali in the Neolithic age fluctuated depending on the periods of rain and aridity. This age is represented especially by cliff dwellings with engravings and wall paintings in different parts of the country, as well as a stonecutting workshop at Magnambougou, near Bamako, and at the Neolithic site at Kobadi in the Méma, near the Niger bend.

During the millennium before the Common Era, metals appeared in Mali, and metallurgy led to a spectacular increase in the establishment of cities, with the oldest yet discovered being Dia and Jenné-Jeno. The wealth of cities and the rise of craft trades led to the development of commerce, in turn making it necessary to control the cities and surrounding areas to protect this commerce: this marked the birth of states. The first state, the Ghana Empire, was founded in the cities of Kumbi Saleh and Tegdaoust at the beginning of the 8th century. The introduction of Islam at about the same time is most clearly evidenced in the archaeological record by the inscriptions on tombs in the ancient city of Gao (Gao-Sané). Islamization, which spanned several centuries, has left the largest number of archaeological remains in all areas of the country, including inhabited sites, funerary monuments (burial caves, funeral urns, crypts, and burial mounds), shops for smelting and ironwork, ceramics, metal and terra cotta figurines (including the famous Djenné figurines), and evidence of warfare.

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Mosques often serve as centers for daily life in communities throughout Mali. Photo © Baba Alpha Cissé

Many *jeliw* (*griots*) are highly skilled musicians and are the repositories of political and family histories. Here a *griot* plays the *kora*, a 21-stringed lute. Photo © National Museum of Mali



The French had hardly been welcomed with open arms. The Tukulors, the Wassoulou Empire founded by Samory Touré, the KénéDougou kingdom in the south, and others mounted powerful and sustained—though ultimately unsuccessful—resistance to French occupation. Samory fought the French for 18 years with such skill that French military leaders referred to him as the “Black Napoleon.” After the French took control, the northern Tuareg, the Bambara of the Bélédougou region, and the Hamallists (a Muslim sect from the west) openly opposed them as well.

During almost three-quarters of a century of colonial rule, the French seized natural resources, imposed forced labor, levied heavy taxes, and implanted Christianity. They also introduced a new education system, and this had the unintended consequence of producing

an intellectual elite that aspired to political freedom. By the late 1930s the elite had formed a number of “voluntary associations,” and in these years trade unions were also established, one of the first of them the teachers’ union founded by Mamadou Konaté. These groups were not yet political parties, but they provided forums at which social, economic, and political concerns could be discussed.

Political parties did emerge in 1945, in elections for the First Constituent Assembly of the Fourth (French) Republic. One party led by Mamadou Konaté, the Union Soudanaise, was affiliated with the Pan-African Rassemblement Démocratique Africain (RDA), created in 1946. The Union Soudanaise gained increasing popularity in subsequent elections, and Konaté became the country’s leading political figure. After his death in 1956, Modibo Keita, the co-founder of the Union Soudanaise, assumed leadership of the party.

In 1958 French West Africa was dissolved; the colonies held referenda to choose between political autonomy and complete independence from France. Mali at the time voted for autonomy. In an effort to promote the idea of African unity—largely stymied, despite the postwar efforts of African political leaders, by the number of separate political entities the French had carved out of West Africa—Keita joined with Léopold Sédar Senghor of Senegal in June 1960 to form the Mali Federation. But the federation foundered over basic policy differences between the partners and collapsed in August. Finally, the former colony of French Sudan declared its independence on September 22, 1960, and reclaimed for its own the historic and glorious name of Mali. ■