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The Mali Empire: Foundations of Formation and Aspects of Civilizational Enrichment in the Western Sudan (7-9 AH / 13-15 AD)

مملكة مالي: أسس التكوين ومظاهر الإثراء الحضاري في السودان الغربي (7 – 9 هـ / 13 – 15 م).

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Abstract:

This research aims to study the Mali Empire by analyzing the foundations of its historical formation and revealing its civilizational contributions to the Western Sudan region during the period between the 7th and 9th centuries AH (13th and 15th centuries CE). The research employs an analytical historical approach to interpret the political, economic, and social conditions that contributed to the empire's rise and prosperity, highlighting its role in stimulating scientific, commercial, and architectural activity. The study concludes that the Mali Empire was not a transient political entity, but rather a dynamic cultural center that enriched African civilization and strengthened cultural ties with the Islamic world. Furthermore, the research concludes that the empire's decline was primarily political in nature, without leading to a functional collapse of its cultural presence, as its cultural and scientific influence continued in subsequent kingdoms of the Western Sudan.

Keywords: Mali Empire, Western Sudan, Civilizational Contribution, African History, Islamic Civilization.

المخلص:

يهدف هذا البحث إلى دراسة مملكة مالي من خلال تحليل أسس تكوينها التاريخي، والكشف عن مظاهر إسهامها الحضاري في فضاء السودان الغربي خلال الفترة الممتدة بين القرنين السابع والتاسع الهجريين (الثالث عشر والخامس عشر الميلاديين). ويعتمد البحث المنهج التاريخي التحليلي لتفسير الظروف السياسية والاقتصادية والاجتماعية التي أسهمت في نشأة المملكة وازدهارها، مع إبراز دورها في تنشيط الحركة العلمية والتجارية والعمرانية. وقد توصلت الدراسة إلى أن مملكة مالي لم تكن كياناً سياسياً عابراً، بل شكّلت مركزاً حضارياً فاعلاً أسهم في إثراء الحضارة الإفريقية وتعزيز التواصل الحضاري مع العالم الإسلامي. كما خلص البحث إلى أن تراجع المملكة كان ذا طابع سياسي بالأساس، دون أن يؤدي إلى انهيار وظيفي لحضورها الحضاري، إذ استمر تأثيرها الثقافي والعلمي في الممالك اللاحقة بالسودان الغربي.

الكلمات المفتاحية: مملكة مالي، السودان الغربي، الإسهام الحضاري، التاريخ الإفريقي، الحضارة الإسلامية.

1. INTRODUCTION

The history of medieval African kingdoms is receiving increasing attention in contemporary historical studies due to its revelations of the civilizational dimensions that contributed to shaping sub-Saharan Africa. The Mali Empire is considered one of the most prominent political entities in the Western Sudan region during the 7th and 9th centuries AH (13th and 15th centuries CE). Its role was not limited to establishing a strong political authority, but extended to enriching economic, scientific, and cultural life, and fostering cultural interaction with the Islamic world.

The central question of this research stems from the extent to which the prosperity of the Mali Empire was linked to its political, economic, and social foundations, and the nature of its

civilizational contribution to the Western Sudan. It also explores the reality of its decline and whether it represented a comprehensive civilizational collapse or a limited political setback. Based on this central question, the research posits that the Mali Empire's civilizational strength was the product of a confluence of multiple factors, and that its decline did not lead to a functional rupture of its civilizational legacy, but rather that its influence continued in subsequent kingdoms.

This research aims to analyze the foundations of the Mali Empire and highlight its contributions to the cultural enrichment of West Africa, while attempting to reinterpret its decline from a historical and analytical perspective that transcends traditional explanations of its collapse. To achieve these objectives, the research

employs a historical-analytical approach, utilizing descriptive methods to present data and connect it to its political, economic, and social contexts.

The nature of the subject matter necessitated dividing the research into several sections. The first section addresses the historical origins of the Mali Empire and the significance of its name in historical sources. The second section examines the political organization, social structure, and economic foundations of the empire. The fourth section explores its cultural contributions, while the final section discusses the challenges of political decline and the continuity of its cultural contributions, culminating in a conclusion summarizing the most important findings.

2. Historical Background

During the Middle Ages, the region of West Africa witnessed profound political and economic transformations that contributed to the emergence of several major political entities with a significant impact on the history of sub-Saharan Africa. These transformations interacted with complex geographical, demographic, and economic factors, particularly the growth of trans-Saharan trade and the decline of some traditional political powers, which paved the way for the rise of new forces better equipped to meet the demands of the era. Within this broader historical context, the Mali Empire emerged as a cultural and political continuation of earlier experiences in West Africa, leveraging its historical legacy and strategic location to establish one of the most prominent African kingdoms of the Middle Ages.

After the collapse of the pagan Ghana Empire in 460 AH/1076 CE due to the Almoravid jihad and their subsequent withdrawal from the region, a political vacuum emerged. This led to the secession of several Ghanaian territories, which formed independent states. The ensuing power struggle ultimately resulted in the Muslim Mandingo tribes, residing in the Kanjab region, gaining control. These tribes are credited with establishing the Islamic

Mali Empire¹ under the leadership of King Sundiata Keita (636-653 AH/1238-1255 CE). He triumphed over the rival Sosso kingdom, led by Sumankoro, and this victory allowed him and his allies to control most of the former Ghana Empire and establish their new state, known in history as the Islamic Mali Empire, in 638 AH/1240 CE.²

It is worth noting that the Keita family was not the first family to rule Mali. Rather, it was preceded by families that were not very famous, including the Bakaboko family, the Traore family, the Koufati family, the Konatin family, and the Camaroine family³. However, it cannot be considered the true founder of the kingdom, but these families are considered initial precursors to its establishment. As for its true founder, it is Sindiatakarta.

Regarding the name "Mali" or "Mal," several historians have discussed it, including al-Bakri, Abu Hamid al-Gharnati, al-Idrisi, al-Umari, Ibn Battuta, Ibn Khaldun, al-Qalqashandi, al-Hasan al-Wazzan, al-Sa'di, and the author of al-Fattash. Al-Bakri refers to it as "Malal,"⁴ while Ibn Battuta calls it Mali, as he states: "Then we traveled from Karsakhu until we reached the Sansara River, which is about ten miles from Mali."⁵ Al-Sa'di identifies it as "Mali,"⁶ while Ka'at refer to it as "Mal"⁷ and al-Hasan al-Wazzan calls it "Mali"⁸. The Mali Empire was known as the land of Takrur, and its king was known as the King of Takrur. However, it is more accurate to say that Takrur was one of the regions that fell under the autonomy of the Mali Empire.⁹

This multiplicity of forms of the name of the Mali Empire reflects the different ways in which the name was translated from local languages into Arabic, as well as the varying sources of historians, ranging from direct observation to indirect accounts. Furthermore, the confusion between the names Mali and the land of Takrur reveals a common terminological problem in medieval Arabic sources, where the name Takrur was sometimes used to refer

generally to the lands of West Africa or to its rulers, despite it being a specific region under the sovereignty of the Mali Empire.

The Islamic kingdom of Mali covered a vast area of land, extending north to the borders of Morocco, west to the Atlantic Ocean, and east to the borders of Bornu. Al-Qalqashandi quoted Sa'id al-Dukali as saying: "This kingdom is square, its length is four months' journey or more, and its width is the same. It is almost entirely inhabited, and this kingdom is the greatest of the Muslim kingdoms of Sudan." He added that it was bordered to the west by the ocean, to the east by Bornu, to the north by the Berber Mountains, and to the south by the Hamaj..¹⁰

Zabadia believes that Mali includes present-day Mali, the eastern highlands of Senegal, the northern parts of Upper Volta and Dahomey, and the far south of the Republic of Mauritania¹¹.

Through the various opinions that dealt with the borders of the Mali Empire, it becomes clear that it formed a large political entity, which provided it with diverse human and economic capabilities, and contributed to supporting its ability to organize and stabilize, which paved the way for the emergence of manifestations of progress in various fields.

3. Civilizational Features of the Mali Empire

The Mali Empire served as a model for an African state that successfully reconciled political structure, economic organization, and social cohesion, enabling it to achieve a prominent cultural presence in the Western Sudan during the Middle Ages. The nature of its political system, characterized by a degree of stability and organization, provided a framework for the flourishing of economic activities, particularly trans-Saharan trade, which in turn influenced the social structure of Malian society. In this context, studying the political, economic, and social aspects of the Mali Empire is essential for understanding the foundations of its cultural prosperity and the mechanisms of its continued success, moving beyond a

mere narrative of events.

3.1. The Political Aspect

The Mali Empire emerged on the political scene of Western Sudan as a rising power that established a well-organized political entity, enabling it to extend its influence over a vast geographical area. This rise was linked to a reorganization of power and the establishment of a new capital, Niani, also known as Mali, which symbolized the unity of the state and its growing political strength, replacing its previous capital, Garab, associated with its initial formative period. This shift reflects the empire's move towards consolidating its centralized rule and strengthening political stability, which contributed to bolstering its position among the kingdoms of Western Sudan.

Historical sources, particularly those of al-Umari and Ibn Khaldun, indicate the vastness of the Mali Empire, which was estimated to encompass around fifteen regions. These included strategic areas in West Africa such as Ghana, Takrur, Kuku, and the Mali region itself.¹² This geographical expansion was not solely the result of military conquest, but also relied on a shrewd policy of governance. This policy involved annexing northern regions like Gao and Tuat, as well as cultivating alliances and intermarriages with local tribal leaders. This helped to minimize unrest and promote political stability.

This approach to expansion reveals an early political awareness of the importance of combining strength and flexibility in managing a large state. This contributed to establishing a central authority capable of controlling the various regions.

The Mali Empire was predominantly a hereditary monarchy. However, succession was not limited to the king's sons, it sometimes included brothers or nephews, as was the case with Mansa Sulayman.¹³ This succession pattern reflects the influence of Mandinka social customs and indicates a political flexibility aimed at ensuring harmony within the ruling family and preventing conflicts.

The Mali Empire was also influenced by the governance structures of contemporary Islamic kingdoms. Its political system was characterized by a clear centralization of power, with authority vested in the king, assisted by a council of ministers and officials. Although the issuance of orders remained largely oral, their written form in Arabic script, in the Maghrebi style, indicates the intermingling of local traditions with Islamic influences¹⁴.

The administrative organization was based on a hierarchical structure, beginning with the village (Dju), then the city (Kafu), and finally the province (Diamana). This organization reflects the influence of the Mandinka tribal structure on the state, which was repurposed within a centralized framework.¹⁵ This hierarchical structure facilitated administration across a vast empire.

This organization highlights the Mali Empire's ability to integrate traditional social structures and transform them into effective instruments of governance, rather than clashing with them. The kingdom boasted important political and judicial institutions, foremost among them the judiciary. Judges enjoyed high status and broad powers, including oversight of provincial governors, reflecting the advanced understanding of justice and the respect accorded to scholars in Malian society.¹⁶ The kingdom also strengthened its political standing by consolidating its foreign relations, particularly with Morocco, exchanging delegations and messages, especially during the reign of the Marinid Sultan Abu al-Hasan al-Marinid¹⁷.

In the military sphere, from the reign of Sindiata to Mansa Sulayman, the Malian kingdom was committed to building a strong and organized army, which reached its zenith under Mansa Musa.¹⁸ This army was characterized by its division into a northern, Muslim army with an organization influenced by Islamic military traditions, and a southern, tribal army that maintained its local customs.¹⁹ This again demonstrates the state's ability to manage diversity within

its political and military structure.

It is clear from the foregoing that the Mali Empire succeeded in establishing a cohesive political system that combined centralized governance with flexible regional administration, relying on a blend of local customs and imported Islamic influences. This political organization, with its vast geographical expanse, adaptable hereditary system, hierarchical administrative structure, and effective judicial institutions, contributed to a significant degree of political stability, enabling the empire to play a prominent civilizational role in the West African region. This system also demonstrated the state's capacity to accommodate social and cultural diversity within its political structure, which was a key foundation for its prosperity and enduring influence.

3.2.The Economic Aspect

The economic aspect formed one of the fundamental pillars of the Mali Empire's power in the western Sudan region, as its prosperity was closely linked to the political stability it enjoyed at the height of its power. This stability allowed for the efficient utilization of natural and human resources, contributing to the development of a diversified economy based on mineral wealth, agriculture, and trade, and making the Mali Empire a significant economic center in sub-Saharan Africa.

The political stability enjoyed by the Mali Empire contributed to a favorable economic environment, encouraging the flourishing of productive and commercial activities and making the kingdom a destination for traders from North Africa. The kings of Mali recognized the importance of natural resources in bolstering their political influence, and they worked to exploit the country's abundant mineral wealth, most notably gold in the regions of Wongara and Bambouk, salt in Taghaza, and copper in Tekda. These resources provided substantial economic returns and helped solidify the kingdom's position as a major economic center in West Africa²⁰. The fame of Malian gold even reached Europe, where

it was considered one of the richest regions in Africa in this regard.

In addition to mineral wealth, agriculture flourished thanks to fertile soil, abundant water, and a large population. The inhabitants cultivated vegetables and fruits, such as onions and melons, as well as certain crops for which specific regions were known. Ibn Battuta noted the high quality of agricultural products from the city of Koukou.²¹ The kingdom's economy also benefited from a diverse livestock population, including domesticated animals like cattle and camels, as well as wild animals, which contributed to meeting food needs and supporting economic activities²².

This diversity in the production base of the Mali Empire reveals an economy not reliant on a single resource, but rather on the integration of agricultural and pastoral activities with commercial activities. Agriculture and livestock provided the foundations for a stable livelihood and ensured food security, which in turn allowed for the channeling of economic surplus towards stimulating trade. This balance also contributed to strengthening the state's ability to secure trade routes and maintain the regularity of caravan movements, making commercial activity a natural extension of the internal economic structure, rather than a separate activity.

However, the backbone of the economy lay in trans-Saharan trade, which connected the kingdom to a vast network of trade routes leading to cities in Morocco and Libya, passing through major trading centers such as Sijilmasa, Tuat, Timbuktu, and the Taghaza mine²³. This network facilitated the exchange of various goods, including textiles, silk, spices, leather, and kola nuts, thus strengthening the integration of the Mali Empire into the regional and international economy of the time²⁴.

The Mali Empire's ability to mint its own gold currency, alongside the use of currencies imported from the Islamic West, reveals a degree of economic maturity and financial organization, and is evidence of the dynamism of trade and the breadth of

exchanges both within and outside the empire²⁵.

It is clear from the foregoing that the economy of the Mali Empire was based on a balance between exploiting natural resources and stimulating trade, within a political framework that provided the security and stability necessary for economic growth. This balance enabled the empire to achieve relatively sustainable economic prosperity, which positively impacted its political and cultural standing in West Africa and contributed to making it one of the most prominent economic powers in Africa during the Middle Ages.

3.3. The Social Aspect

The social structure of the Mali Empire was tribal in nature, with society comprised of families, clans, and tribes settled in various villages and regions. Its organization was governed by a clear class system, in which members of each class adhered to specific social customs and rituals. While some historians have divided Malian society into three classes, this division remains incomplete if the slave class is overlooked. Therefore, Malian society should be viewed as composed of four main classes.

These classes consisted of the king and his family, who enjoyed a distinguished social status, reflected in their lifestyle and distinctive dress. Next came the horsemen, the military elite, renowned for their horsemanship skills, who formed a crucial element of the state's defense structure. The common people, representing the broadest segment of society, included farmers, artisans, and merchants, and were characterized by a lifestyle and dress distinct from the upper classes²⁶. While the slave class constituted the lowest rung of the social ladder, relegated to arduous labor and serving their masters, their status was characterized by subjugation and dependence²⁷.

On the religious level, Islam played a prominent role in shaping Malian society. Its spread in the region began before the kingdom's political structure was fully

established in the twelfth century, through peaceful channels such as the activities of merchants, scholars, and preachers, as well as through intermarriage and gradual integration into African society without coercion. This approach contributed to the local population's acceptance of Islam and its subsequent dissemination within the community. The spread of Islam in Mali and other parts of Africa was linked to its flexibility and ability to adapt to local environments. It did not seek to abolish existing social systems but rather to refine and guide them according to its tolerant principles²⁸.

It can be concluded from the above that society in the Mali Empire was based on a hierarchical social structure, which maintained its balance through tribal customs and class divisions, under the clear influence of Islam, which refined this structure without abolishing it. This interaction between local social traditions and imported religious values fostered a degree of social cohesion, which supported the stability of the empire and contributed to consolidating its civilizational role in the western Sudan region.

4. The contribution of the Kingdom of Mali to building the African civilization

The Mali Empire made a significant contribution to the development of African civilization during the Middle Ages, benefiting from its political and economic prosperity and its strategic location, which made it a link between sub-Saharan Africa and the Islamic and Mediterranean worlds. The empire's reputation spread throughout the East and West, attracting merchants, scholars, and jurists from various centers of learning, thus stimulating cultural and intellectual activity within its borders.

Several major cities emerged as centers of cultural influence, most notably Djenné, which, from the 13th century CE onward, became a major scientific and commercial center. It was renowned for its flourishing religious studies and its role as a hub for scholars, as well as its status as a major market for gold and salt²⁹. However,

Timbuktu represented the cultural zenith of the Mali Empire, becoming the heart of intellectual and scientific activity in West Africa, and a unique cultural center that knew no other religion than Islam, whose influence extended to vast regions of Africa.

Timbuktu's geographical location at the crossroads of caravan routes contributed to its economic and scientific importance, as merchants and scholars flocked to it from Morocco, Andalusia, Egypt, and Libya. This created a fertile cultural environment where trade and scholarship intertwined, contributing to its cultural flourishing during the period between the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries CE³⁰. The city also witnessed remarkable urban development, evident in the architecture of its mosques and buildings, which featured a Moroccan-Andalusian style, particularly after the arrival of the Andalusian architect Abu Ishaq al-Sahili during the reign of Sultan Mansa Musa³¹.

The University of Sankore was a prominent example of the Mali Empire's scientific contributions. It evolved from a mosque into a major educational institution, similar to universities throughout the Islamic world, attracting students from across West Africa and adopting curricula comparable to those taught in Fez and Cairo³². The university enjoyed special support from Sultan Mansa Musa, who accorded knowledge and its practitioners a distinguished status. He generously funded the acquisition of books and the recruitment of scholars, and established decrees guaranteeing their protection. This contributed to the consolidation of Timbuktu and Sankari as beacons of science and knowledge in West Africa.

This scientific and architectural flourishing reveals that the Mali Empire was not merely a political or economic power, but a vibrant cultural center that enriched African civilization and strengthened cultural and scientific exchange between Africa and the Islamic world. This cultural role was evident in the flourishing scientific and architectural centers the empire fostered, and in its

encouragement of scholars and intellectuals, which contributed to consolidating its cultural influence and making its cities, particularly Timbuktu and Sankari, beacons of science and knowledge in West Africa. Despite this cultural momentum, the Mali Empire entered a period of gradual decline due to escalating internal conflicts and pressure from rising regional powers, leading to its political and military retreat. However, this decline was not enough to erase its cultural legacy, as its cultural and scientific influence continued to extend through the centers it helped build. This legacy was passed on to subsequent kingdoms, most notably the Songhai Empire, confirming that what the Mali Empire experienced was a decline in its political structure, not a complete cultural collapse.

5. CONCLUSION

This research examines the Mali Empire by analyzing its historical foundations and highlighting its contributions to the cultural development of West Africa during the period between the 7th and 9th centuries AH (13th and 15th centuries CE). This analysis yielded several key findings, which can be summarized as follows:

- The Mali Empire established a strong political entity. Its vast geographical expanse and cohesive administrative structure enabled it to become one of the major powers of West Africa during the Middle Ages.

- The policies implemented by Mali's rulers contributed significantly to security and stability, fostering a conducive environment for economic and cultural prosperity.

- Fertile agriculture and diverse mineral resources, particularly gold and salt, formed the backbone of the Mali economy and contributed to the flourishing of trans-Saharan trade.

- The cultural and civilizational history of the Mali Empire was closely linked to the flourishing of the cities of Djenné and Timbuktu, which became prominent scientific and cultural centers in West Africa.

- The Mali Empire reached the zenith of its political and cultural power during the reign of Sultan Mansa Musa in the first half of the 14th century CE.

- The empire witnessed a remarkable flourishing of intellectual activity, manifested in the influx of scholars and jurists from various centers of the Islamic world and the proliferation of scholarly circles and educational institutions.

- The subsequent decline of the Mali Empire did not lead to a complete cultural collapse, but rather was limited to the political and military spheres. Its cultural and intellectual influence continued in subsequent empires, most notably the Songhai Empire.

Based on the findings of this study, several research avenues related to the Mali Empire can be proposed, including:

- Encouraging comparative studies between the kingdoms of West Africa, particularly Mali and Songhai, to highlight aspects of cultural continuity.

- Expanding research into African manuscripts and local sources, alongside Arabic sources, to reinterpret the history of medieval Africa in a more balanced way.

- Attention should be given to archaeological and urban studies of cities such as Timbuktu and Jenne to uncover cultural dimensions that still need further research.

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