

## Mali's Historic Universities

By the 12<sup>th</sup> century, Timbuktu, in modern-day Mali, West Africa, became a celebrated center of Islamic learning and a commercial establishment. The thriving city had three universities – Sankore University, Jingaray Ber University and Sidi Yahya University – and an estimated 180 Quranic schools. The leading center of learning in West Africa at that time, Sankore University was first built by the Mandinkas around the 12<sup>th</sup> century and is located in the northeast district of Timbuktu. The Moors and Tuareg Sanhaja who settled in the Sankore district around the 13<sup>th</sup> century also contributed significantly to the intellectual life of the city. Sidi Yahya University was built by Mohammed Naddi, one of the governors of the city appointed by the Mandinka Dynasty.

But it was under Mansa Musa's leadership that Mali truly evolved into a bastion of learning in Africa and the world. He built the 700-year old Jingaray Ber University in Timbuktu in 1325, which became a famous center of learning, attracting Muslim and non-Muslim students and intellectuals from Africa, Europe and the Middle East. Like other Islamic universities in Timbuktu, scholars at Jingaray studied Arabic, surgical procedures, science and math. Mansa Musa went on to direct the construction of more immense libraries and the endowment of more Islamic universities and centers of learning (*madradas*). These universities and their avant-garde libraries carried a vast variety of unparalleled scholarly books, some of which were written in Timbuktu while others were imported from Europe and the Arab world and copied there. The process was facilitated by the fact that an advanced local book copying industry existed in the city. Even after the Mali Empire lost control over the region in the 15<sup>th</sup> century, Timbuktu remained the major Islamic center of sub-Saharan Africa.

Mansa Musa, also known as "*Kan Kan Musa*," was Emperor of Mali from 1312-1337 A.D. Mansa means "sultan," "emperor" or chief" while Musa means "Moses." Mansa Musa thus became known as Mali's "Black Moses." He ruled for 25 years and through the conquest of neighboring cities and nationalities doubled the size of Mali. He was attracted to the booming economy of Timbuktu and captured the city in 1325. A lover of knowledge and poetry, Mansa Musa was impressed with Timbuktu's great culture of learning and Islamic legacy. He

subsequently invited Arab scholars to the city to further advance this culture, but would soon discover that these scholars had little to add to the huge reservoir of scholarship already established by the Black scholars.

Mansa Musa's fascination with knowledge and the construction of scholarly facilities was heavily inspired by his famous pilgrimage to Mecca in 1324, during which he travelled with an impressive entourage comprising a huge number of officials, servants, camels and over two tons of gold. The caravan comprised an estimated 60,000 men, including 12,000 slaves, 500 servants – each said to carry a six-pound golden staff; in addition to approximately 100 camels – each hauling a load of gold estimated at up to 300 pounds. Historians and economic experts claim that 12 years after Mansa Musa's stay in Cairo, the price of gold had still not recovered as the metal was devalued due to its sudden influx. This was also partly due to Mansa Musa's decision to distribute the bulk of his fortune in charity in Mecca and Medina.

After visiting the holy cities of Mecca and Medina on this pilgrimage, Musa set out to build great, magnificent mosques (or *masjids*), vast libraries and *madradas* throughout his kingdom. Many Arab scholars returned with the emperor to Mali, including the poet and architect, Abu-Ishaq Ibrahim-es-Saheli, who helped turn Timbuktu into a famous city of Islamic scholarship by introducing new architectural innovations, especially in the building of mosques and palaces. He introduced burnt bricks, the flat roofs of North Africa and the pyramidal minaret to Malian construction, all of which were to become the vogue throughout the empire. After this famed pilgrimage by Musa; Mali reached the peak of its prosperity and prominence.

Under Musa's rule, Timbuktu rose to become not only a thriving city and commercial center in the trans-Saharan trade route, but also the center of Islamic scholarship. It also emerged as one of the major cultural centers of Africa and the entire Islamic world, and a meeting-place for the finest poets, scholars and artists of Africa, the Middle East and Europe.

-- Philip U. Effiong

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