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A History of Mali

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Introduction

The history of Mali stands as one of the richest and most compelling narratives in West Africa, shaped over millennia by powerful empires, vibrant cultural exchanges, and enduring resilience in the face of adversity. Nestled in the heart of the Sahel, Mali's geography has always placed it at crossroads—connecting North and sub-Saharan Africa, East and West, desert and savannah. Through centuries, this strategic location fostered the rise of diverse civilizations, brought trade routes bustling with gold, salt, and knowledge, and set the stage for encounters that would forever alter the course of the region.

In ancient times, the land now known as Mali witnessed the flourishing of early kingdoms, most notably the renowned Ghana Empire, which laid the foundations for subsequent societal transformations. The emergence and expansion of the Mali Empire in the 13th and 14th centuries under legendary leaders such as Sundiata Keita and Mansa Musa marked a golden age. During this period, cities like Timbuktu and Djenné became celebrated centers of commerce, learning, and Islamic scholarship, contributing not just to Mali's growth but also influencing intellectual currents far beyond West Africa.

Yet, Mali's greatness was often contested. The decline of the Mali Empire ushered in new powers, most prominently the Songhai Empire, which built upon and surpassed the achievements of its predecessors. The eventual fall of these empires, precipitated by internal strife and North African invasions, signaled the end of an era but by no means a halt in Mali's historical journey. Throughout the turbulent years of the post-imperial period, new kingdoms and religious states arose, ultimately confronting the onset of European colonial ambitions.

The imposition of French colonial rule in the late nineteenth century drastically transformed Mali's social, economic, and political landscapes. Resistance, adaptation, and collaboration characterized local responses to foreign domination, while the struggle for autonomy continued to simmer beneath the surface. The 20th century brought a powerful wave of decolonization, culminating in independence and the forging of a new national identity. The optimism of the early postcolonial period, however, soon met the challenges of political instability, economic experiments, and military interventions.

In more recent decades, Mali has faced an intricate web of challenges: recurrent Tuareg rebellions, the rise of violent extremism, environmental crises, and a troubled journey toward democracy. Political transitions, from military juntas to multiparty democratic experiments and back again, have tested the country's institutions and

resilience. Despite ongoing insecurity and humanitarian difficulties, Malians continue to draw strength from their vibrant history, communal values, and the legacy of their ancestors.

This book explores Mali's multifaceted past with the aim of illuminating the forces, events, and personalities that have shaped the nation from ancient times to the present day. Through understanding the complex interplay of local and global influences, triumphs and hardships, readers can better appreciate the enduring significance of Mali—yesterday, today, and into the future.

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CHAPTER ONE: Ancient Beginnings: Mali's Prehistoric Roots

Long before the golden age of empires, the land that would become Mali was a dynamic stage for early human activity, shaped by dramatic shifts in climate and environment. The Sahara, which today forms a vast, arid barrier, was once a much wetter, more hospitable place. During periods of increased rainfall, sometimes referred to as "Green Sahara" phases, the landscape transformed into a savannah, crisscrossed by rivers and dotted with lakes. These periods allowed for the flourishing of life, including early human populations.

Archaeological investigations, particularly in places like the Ounjougou complex on the Dogon Plateau near Bandiagara, have unveiled evidence of human presence dating back an astonishing 150,000 years. This means that humans were interacting with this landscape long before the emergence of complex societies. The Ounjougou site provides a rare and valuable look into the deep past of West Africa, offering a chronocultural framework for the Paleolithic era in the region. Evidence of continuous habitation at Ounjougou is firmly established for the period between 70,000 and 25,000 years ago.

The Paleolithic, or Old Stone Age, in this region saw early hunter-gatherer groups adapting to their surroundings. The tools they left behind, such as those found at Ounjougou, provide clues about their lives. Some of the oldest implements discovered there include sandstone polyhedrons. While handaxes, common in other parts of Africa, are less prevalent in these specific Malian sites, the presence of various stone tools indicates a developing mastery of their environment. The Middle Paleolithic period, roughly between 300,000 and 30,000 years ago, is better documented at Ounjougou, with over 20 distinct archaeological occurrences. This suggests a significant level of activity and perhaps a repopulation of the area following climatic shifts. The end of the Paleolithic in Mali seems to have been linked to the onset of another extremely arid phase, known as the Ogolian, which occurred between 25,000 and 20,000 years ago. This period of intense dryness would have drastically altered the landscape, making it less suitable for the existing ways of life.

Following the last glacial maximum and the subsequent retreat of ice sheets in the Northern Hemisphere, the climate in the Sahara region underwent a significant transformation, becoming much more humid than it is today. This ushered in the Neolithic period, or New Stone Age, a time of profound change marked by the shift from foraging to food production. In northern Mali, this wetter era saw the formation of large inland lakes, including a vast body of water near Timbuktu and Araouane. The

landscape in this period, beginning around 9500 BCE, would have resembled the savannah that is currently found in southern Mali.

The Neolithic transition in this region developed during this more favorable climatic phase and is typically divided into three distinct phases, punctuated by drier intervals. This was a time of remarkable innovation. Evidence from sites like Ounjougou indicates the precocious emergence of pottery as early as 9400 BCE, making it one of the earliest known examples in West Africa. This development suggests that people were beginning to process and store food in new ways, a key step towards settled life.

Early Neolithic cultures in the region were not immediately full-fledged farmers but rather practiced a productive way of life that involved selective and intensive foraging for grains. The domestication of plants was a gradual process. Sorghum and millet were among the earliest crops to be cultivated along the banks of the Niger River, becoming staple foods in the region. Cattle were likely first domesticated within Africa, and by 8000 BCE, large herds grazed across the area that is now the Sahara. Sheep and goats, however, were introduced much later from West Asia.

The Middle Neolithic period, roughly between the 6th and 4th millennia BCE, is notable for the specialized production of bifacial points made from quartzitic sandstone. These finely crafted stone tools speak to a growing level of technical skill and adaptation to the local environment. The Later Stone Age, or recent Neolithic, around 2500 BCE, saw further cultural and economic changes, including the influence of populations migrating from the increasingly arid Sahara. This period also marked the arrival of the first millet cultivators in the region after 1800 BCE.

As the climate continued to fluctuate, increasing aridity around 5000 BCE began to transform the landscape once more. This trend peaked about a millennium later, prompting a southward migration of cattle-herding populations as northern lakes and pastures dried up. By 2500 BCE, the region was transitioning into an increasingly arid desert, leading to further movements of people from the Sahara into what is now Mali.

Despite the challenging environment, communities along the Niger River were developing complex societies. Archaeological evidence from sites like Jenné-jeno, located in the inland delta of the Niger, reveals the emergence of an important trading center around 250 BCE. This urban center flourished until the 11th century CE, demonstrating a long history of settled life and organized activity in the region. The presence of terra-cotta statues dating back as early as 800 CE at Jenné-jeno and other sites in Mali further highlights the artistic and cultural achievements of these early societies. These discoveries, often of burial goods, including textiles, ceramic vessels, tools, and weapons, offer glimpses into the beliefs and practices of the people who lived along the Niger River millennia ago.

The development of agriculture along the fertile banks of the Niger River was crucial

to the rise of early West African civilizations. As the Sahara dried, people were drawn to this more temperate region with its predictable rainy seasons and fertile soil left behind by receding floods. Early farmers here domesticated indigenous crops like sorghum and millet. The development of irrigation practices allowed communities to settle further from the riverbanks, expanding agricultural production.

Another significant development was the emergence of ironworking technology. By the first century CE, the use of iron tools had begun to transform agricultural practices, enabling farmers to cultivate the hard soils more efficiently. This technological leap, which appears to have developed independently in the region, revolutionized farming and contributed to population growth and the development of more complex societies. The archaeological evidence of iron production and terracotta pottery in the Niger Valley region, with some iron smelting furnaces dated to 2000 BC in areas like Nigeria, points to the advanced technological capabilities of these early inhabitants.

Trade also played a vital role in the development of these early societies. As agricultural production increased, trade networks were established, connecting communities along the Niger River. These networks would lay the groundwork for the later trans-Saharan trade that would become so central to the history of the great empires. Even in these early periods, there is evidence of long-distance trade, with copper from Saharan sources found at Inland Niger Delta sites by around 400 CE, and gold from mines further south appearing by 600-800 CE. Salt, a crucial commodity, also traveled along these burgeoning trade routes.

The period leading up to the emergence of the great empires, often referred to as the pre-imperial period, saw the rise of early towns and cities along the middle Niger River, established by Mande-speaking peoples related to the Soninke. Sites like Dia, which peaked around 600 BC, and Jenné-jeno demonstrate a trajectory towards urbanization in the region. While Jenné-jeno eventually declined, it was later eclipsed by the trading center of Jenné, founded around the 13th century CE. Archaeological work at Niani, a potential later capital of Mali, has revealed the remains of a substantial town dating back as far as the 6th century. These early urban centers and trading networks were crucial stepping stones towards the larger political formations that would come to dominate the region.

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