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Mali In Depth: A Peace Corps Publication

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Synopsis

In 1235, the Malinke people of the small state of Kangaba became involved in a struggle for independence. Their leader, a young man named Sundiata Keita, fielded an impressive army to meet the intruding Tekrur forces. The decisive battle was fought on a plain just north of present-day Bamako, and Sundiata emerged victorious. Building on this success, Sundiata established the Mali Empire, one of the great empires of that era. After his death, his successors continued the expansion of the empire in both wealth and territory. The zenith of Mali's power and prestige occurred during the reign of Mansa Kankan Musa from 1307 to 1332. Covering more than 3 million square kilometers, the empire centered around the great bend of the Niger River and dominated the profitable trade between North and sub-Saharan Africa. The rulers of Mali and their followers were converts to Islam, and Mansa Musa became one of the legendary leaders of that faith. Timbuktu, the empire's capital, became a center of Muslim scholarship, with a university containing libraries unequaled anywhere in Africa or Europe at that time. The Mali Empire began a slow decline after Mansa Musa's reign but remained powerful into the middle of the 16th century. The Songhai Empire, with its capital in Gao, predominated throughout the 16th century. Its great builders, Sunni Ali and Askia Mohamed, were equal in historical importance to Sundiata and Mansa Musa. At its peak, under Askia Mohamed, the Songhai Empire encompassed the Hausa States as far as Kano (in modern-day Nigeria) and northern Cameroon. Timbuktu remained a center of commerce and Islamic faith throughout the period. The Songhai Empire was destroyed in 1591 by a Moroccan invasion directed by Djoudder. French intrusions into present-day Mali began in about 1854. It took approximately 50 years of battles and broken treaties for the French to finally subjugate the Malian people. The campaign ended with the capture of the Malinke leader Samory in 1898. Colonialism broke up traditional African patterns, replacing egalitarian relationships with those of dependence on European powers. It also set in motion some negative forces, such as one-crop economics, and established unrealistic political boundaries that have created significant challenges for today's independent African governments. Following Mali's independence from France in 1960, the new government, under the leadership of Modibo Keita, moved quickly to place Malians in charge of all public institutions. In November 1968, a military coup put Lieutenant Moussa Traoré in power, a position he held until 1991. At that point, a democratic revolution led to the creation of a new Constitution, and the first democratically-elected president (Alpha Oumar Konaré), in 1992 and again in 1997.

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