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PROLOGUE

MALI'S *MANSĀ* SULAYMĀN could hardly have anticipated the consequences. The mid-eighth/fourteenth-century Muslim ruler of what may have been the most extensive realm Africa has ever known had deposed and imprisoned his chief wife Qāsā, but developments following her release offer critical vistas into the unfolding of Malian society. Supported by a faction of royal women, Qāsā openly defied Sulaymān, daily riding before an entourage of servants to the very gates of the Malian council. Inquiry would uncover intrigue and the early stages of insurgency, with Qāsā mobilizing disaffected royals while guaranteeing the army's support. Found in neither oral traditions nor external records, the episode is known only because Ibn Baṭṭūṭa happened to be in Mali at the time. A direct threat to Sulaymān's authority, Qāsā's rebellion was apparently put down, her ultimate fate unknown. Tantalizingly, Ibn Khaldūn records that with Sulaymān's death in 761/1360, he was succeeded by a son . . . one Qāsā.

More than tangential, Qāsā's rebellion is central to the history of early and medieval West Africa. The rise of Islam, the relationship of women to political power, the growth and influence of the domestically enslaved, and the invention and evolution of empire were all unfolding. In contrast to notions of an early Africa timeless and unchanging in its social and cultural categories and conventions, here was a western Savannah and Sahel that from the third/ninth through the tenth/sixteenth centuries witnessed *political innovation* as well as the evolution of such mutually constitutive categories as *race, slavery, ethnicity, caste, and gendered notions of power*. By the period's end, these categories assume significations not unlike their more contemporary connotations.

As indigenous responses to Islam and the trans-Saharan slave trade, these developments serve not only as a corrective to a popularized African past, but also as commentary on interpretations of modernity concerned with the transformation of global markets. Specifically, arguments that the transatlantic slave trade resulted in novel productive capacities (including industrialization) and labor relations, in turn generating new hierarchies of class, race, and gender, are of particular relevance. Here is an opportunity to observe the impact of parallel, anterior processes.

In pursuit of this anterior history, the present study mirrors as it uncovers its unfolding, providing substantive analyses where the evidence

is sustaining. As such, successive chapters feature an approach to *race* informed by multiple rather than singular registers, with local, cultural signification in dialogue with translocal, discursive ideas. *Caste*—those endogamous groups with differentiated social and productive roles—is treated as processual and unsettled well into the medieval period, at which point begins a discussion of *empire* as well as *gendered notions of power*, threading throughout until *empire* forms the focus. *Ethnicity* also takes concrete shape, assuming juridical status in the effort to determine enslavement eligibility, and is commensurate with *slavery's* expansion under imperial Songhay, for which an equation of reciprocating slaveholder-enslaved interests substitutes for theorizations of proprietary, kinship, and social death.

All of these transformations were engaged with the apparatus of the state and its progression from the city-state to the empire. The transition consistently featured minimalist notions of governance replicated by successive dynasties, providing a continuity of structure as a mechanism of legitimization. Replication had its limits, however, and would ultimately prove inadequate in addressing unforeseen challenges.

To be sure, many aspects of the West African past have little to do with empire, as the region is diverse and complex, with histories often escaping unifying narratives. But as variability is not the focus here, no apology is offered. The small state and the village each have a place at the table, as does empire.

The history of the early and medieval Savannah and Sahel was of a piece with kings and queens and rulers of the earth consolidating lands and resources. Empires expanded and contracted in response to the vagaries of location, in tandem with combinations of creed and greed. The Chinese had long been in imperial formation, transitioning from the Yuan to the Ming dynasties in the eighth/fourteenth century, while Europe was nearing the end of internal transformations that would have global consequences. Bridging the polarities of “Old” and “New” Worlds were the Mongols of the sixth/twelfth and seventh/thirteenth centuries (with the Golden Horde continuing to the tenth/sixteenth), part of whose vast expansion (and fracturing) included integration into states and societies all responding, one way or another, to the call of Islam. Ethnically, racially, and culturally myriad, a Muslim world whose political unity had long ended stretched from Iberia to China to Indonesia. Muslim innovation, largely responsible for linking European and Asian lands and all points in between, served as the conduit through which European medieval thought reconnected with that of ancient predecessors, and as the technological

basis for Europe's "discovery" of Mesoamerican Aztecs and Andean Incas. The eighth/fourteenth century was therefore on the cusp of developments so far-reaching that within a few hundred years the collective human condition would be dramatically (and perchance irrevocably) altered.

It was precisely at this moment that a handsome, precocious, ambitious young ruler pondered the night sky in search of answers. *Mansā Mūsā*, Sulaymān's predecessor, had decisions to make. At the head of Mali's sprawling empire, he was aware of developments elsewhere. He knew of Berber success in engineering a kingdom that, beginning with the late fifth/eleventh century's religious militancy of the Almoravids, reached from the fringes of West Africa through North Africa into Europe. He may have understood that feats alleged to have been accomplished by the seventh/thirteenth-century founder of the Malian empire, Sunjata, were partially informed by political upheaval to the northwest (al-Maghrib), reconfiguring commerce and travel through the Sahara. As trade with the northeast was also of considerable vintage, Mūsā would have known that the formerly servile Mamluks, just decades following Sunjata's ascension, had wrested control of Egypt (Miṣr) from the Ayyubids (who ascended under Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn, or Saladin, in 569/1174), occupying the center of the Muslim world with the fall of Baghdad to the Mongols in 655/1258.

Whether in response to these developments, or as an expression of aspirations largely internal, Mali attempted to connect with the outside world, to touch that world directly, without the mediation of Saharan middlemen. Mali was itself in an expansive, transcontinental frame of mind.

The very claim that toward the beginning of the eighth/fourteenth century *Mansā Muḥammad b. Qū*, grandson or great-grandson of Sunjata, prepared the launch of hundreds of vessels into the Atlantic world, inaugurating West Africa's own large-scale seafaring venture into the deep, is indicative of the prevailing mood. The labor, material, and organization for the expedition, if it indeed took place, would have been enormous, suggesting a level of ambition on a breathtaking scale, an attempt to reverse patterns of transregional engagement dominant since the Garamantes of Graeco-Roman antiquity, reinforced and intensified by their descendants, the Berber and Tuareg. Organized and financed for the most part in North Africa, such trans-Saharan commerce resulted in accruing transregional expertise and advantage. Even if entirely mythical, the account of Muḥammad b. Qū's gambit reflects recognition of Mali's landlocked status, the unknown western sea beckoning resolution. Rather than accounts of new treasure and trading prospects, however, there returned reports of failure at sea and massive loss of life, followed by the disappearance

of Muḥammad b. Qū himself who, commanding a second fleet, is never heard from again.

The source attesting to Muḥammad b. Qū 's Atlantic project was none other than *Mansā Mūsā*, underscoring that its very "imagining" is far more critical to the question of the *mansā*'s state of mind than its verifiability; that he would tell such a story more than suggests a desire to transfigure his relationship to the wider world. Whatever his actual ambition, he would settle upon a course that had no parallel elsewhere, though in scope and scale hardly less ambitious than his predecessor's purported western watery trajectory (and indeed quite consistent with it). For within twelve years of his coming to power, *Mansā Mūsā* would bring together the considerable resources of the realm to make an unprecedented Pilgrimage to Egypt and Arabia, the known fonts of political and spiritual power, where he would make his case for the recognition of Mali as a peer. Traveling with a retinue of thousands across some 2,700 miles, its effect was nothing less than scintillating, leaving an impression in Europe as well as Egypt. If only brilliant theater, the voyage nonetheless became iconic, emblematic of West Africa's wealth and potential. In bringing Mali to the world, the *mansā* succeeded in elevating its global stature while attracting both greater commercial attention and cultural investment. It is Mali's and, by extension, West Africa's most illustrious moment.

In undertaking such an extraordinary venture, neither *Mansā Mūsā*'s precise objectives nor his plans to achieve them are transparent. Maybe he simply wanted to elevate Mali's profile on the world stage, leveraging influence relative to North Africa by effecting closer relations with the central Islamic lands. Or, he may have been in search of foreign assistance to maximize Mali's potential, his over-the-top display of wealth designed to persuade needed expertise to relocate to West Africa. It is even conceivable that, reaching the limits of the desert to the north and the forest and savannah to the south, he envisioned a transregional empire by which he could project power into North Africa itself.

For all of the splendor and sizzle of one of the world's most famous pilgrimages, the fundamental dynamics of transregional commercial relations would not change: financing and routes outside of West Africa remained under the control of trading partners, and this would only intensify over the next several centuries, at the end of which West Africa (and the rest of the continent) would be subject to nations steeped in the knowledge of seafaring.

Furthermore, *Mansā Mūsā*'s Pilgrimage, in relation to subsequent events, may have taken place from twenty-five to 125 years too soon. He

would selectively borrow what he observed, initiating a series of cultural projects in Mali modeled after central Islamic features. However, as weaponry would later prove rather decisive in West Africa's history, in that moment there were no profound differences between the Mamluks and the Malians, as both relied on archery, cavalry, and lances (though tactics differed). Gunpowder weapons, a technological revolution, had yet to fully develop. As *Mansā* Mūsā possessed the resources to pay for such technology, their adoption might have better prepared the region for the challenges to come.

Songhay's *Askia* al-ḥājj Muḥammad of Songhay would subsequently appropriate Mūsā's vision of West Africa as an international peer among other great powers. But if he and his successors were aware of gunpowder weapons, there is no evidence they sought to acquire them. This is a puzzle, as firearms had been adopted by Sahelian neighbors farther east in Kanem-Bornu, their advantage over conventional implements perhaps far from apparent in the west.

The ninth/fifteenth-century shift in the political center of gravity from Mali to Songhay would usher in a new era of international relations, its dynamics characterized by intellectual vibrancy as well as social transformation. Imperial Songhay represents a height of West African cultural efflorescence and political imagination, its success characterized by novel policies of political integration. Its pursuit of erudition is unprecedented in West Africa's history, underscoring much that is distinctive about the realm. With its elite's avid embrace of Islam, Songhay became better integrated into the Muslim world, but it would not be afforded sufficient time to realize further advances.

What follows is both an account and a critique of West African empire and attendant social and cultural transformations, a tale of immense potential undermined by regrettable decisions and the inflexibility of critical conventions. It is an analysis for which the aperture is widened to include multiple social registers, representing a history from both above and below, exploiting sources that ostensibly reflect the interests of the former, but which actually expose intimacies between polarities of advantage and disadvantage, revealing interdependencies of power and debility.

If Songhay represents the height of medieval West African statecraft, it was preceded by experimentation in imperial Mali, from which it borrowed heavily. Polity in the early West African Savannah and Sahel often rested in the city-state, in the singular urban collection of communities usually connected to inter/intraregional commerce. This was certainly true of early Gao and Ghana (though the latter may have extended power over

satellite settlements and outposts). In contrast, the seventh/thirteenth-century establishment of Mali in the full Savannah saw a projection of authority from the center to outlying areas, in many but not all instances culturally aligned with that center, having previously boasted a political independence of *longue durée*. A critical threshold was crossed when such states no longer simply paid tribute to the center, but assumed its political identity and embraced a subordinate position within an emerging superstructure. The evolving center would regulate not only relations with external powers, but also relations between what were now provinces, so that the rise of imperialism was an ordered process of horizontal linkages between distinct communities and vertical alignments among elites. Songhay would go beyond its predecessor in incorporating disparate and culturally dissimilar ethnic groups not only into the polity, but into the very fabric of the ruling family itself, knitting the empire together in a conscious strategy of political pluralism.

Directly connected to empire's formulation in West Africa was the emergence of both Islam and domestic slavery, and it is impossible to understand imperial Mali and Songhay without appreciating the close if not inextricable relationship between these two forces. As Islam and empire became tightly intertwined, slavery became increasingly insinuated within both. In turn, religion and labor were highly gendered, and in ways deeply woven into the fabric of society and its collective consciousness.

Songhay's rise and ensuing control of the middle Niger valley help to explain Mali's decline, while epidemics and civil war precipitated exigency in Songhay, contributing to its ultimate demise. But if Songhay, with all of its achievements, yet fell short of its full potential, domestic slavery's expansion may have been an important factor, as it destabilized subject societies and redirected their potential. Widespread *latifundia* and large armies are impressive, but their dependency on servile labor helped establish a pattern of exploitation that would only metastasize over time.

Journeying into such a storied and multifaceted past is necessarily undertaken through thoroughfares of human memory, now recorded on parchment, then orally stylized. Rather than their consideration in discrete and disaggregated form, the current study argues they are best understood when placed in mutual conversation, together with archaeological and epigraphic evidence where possible—in effect, a new archive. Such an approach best yields results when immersed in the dynamics of context, in which circumstances of production are extensively engaged. Great attention is therefore given to the personal, familial, cultural, and political dimensions of recalling the past.

What can be stated at this early juncture is that critical components of collective testimony—the written and oral documentation—were conceptually innovative and wholly unprecedented for period and place, representing either the creation or adoption of memorative technologies in response to novel developments. Oral and written tableaux center very different principals to tell stories for entirely different audiences, and for radically different purposes. Their conjunctive examination reveals a process as integral to the accounts as the characters and plots they feature. The result is a wholly new interpretation of West Africa’s early and medieval history, facilitating its relocation from the periphery to the center of world history.



Map 1: West and North Africa, Tenth to the Sixteenth Centuries

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