FACULTY OF BUSINESS ADMINISTRATION
DEPARTMENT OF ECONOMICS

THE ECONOMY OF MALI EMPIRE
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Abstract
The main aim of this study is to investigate the sources of the wealth of the Mali Empire which existed in the 13th and 15th century. The empire is known for its abundance of gold and its famous ruler Mansa Musa. It investigates the main economic activities, sectors and famous cities.

Most of the empire’s wealth came from its location. The location gave its ability to controls the trade within its territory and from taxes. The Niger River which was in the territory also contributed to the wealth of the empire because of its numerous uses.

1. Introduction
Following the decline of the Ghana Empire, the Mali Empire aroused and existed for about two and half centuries. Niani was its capital and later moved to Kangaba. The most famous ruler of the Mali Empire was Mansa Musa the grandnephew of Mansa Sundiata Keita (the founder of the Mali Empire) (Khaldun). During Mansa Musa’s pilgrimage to Mecca in the year 1324, his stop in Egypt drew the attention of the Islamic and European worlds because of his generosity with gold. As Timbuktu became the focus of the gold-salt trade and a major, cultural, intellectual and spiritual capital for the spread of Islam, Mansa Musa built a tower for the Great Mosque (Djingereyber) and a royal residence in Timbuktu for himself.

The power of the Malian Empire began to decline following the death of Mansa Musa (1307-1327) (Ojibwa, 2010). In 1430, Tuareg Berbers in the north seized much of Mali’s territory, including Timbuktu. Ten years later, the Mossi kingdom seized much of Mali’s southern regions and then the kingdom of Gao gave rise to the Songhai Empire. There were some kind of specialization in the Mali empire for example, while the ideology such as Mande superiority was spread by the oral historians and praise singers by singing and performing, blacksmiths and others provided the military and agriculture tools of the empire such as iron weapons and leather and iron trappings for horses, without which military success was not possible. The military tools aided in the protection of the territory and also conquering new lands. After conquering new land the chiefs of these new lands paid tributes to the empire and also its people paid taxes to the empire in return for protection. Another source income for the empire was through trade. The empire collected the taxes on all trade activities within it territories and also from trader entering and leaving its territory.

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2 Niani: part of present-day Guinea
3 Kangaba: south-western of present day Mali
1. What are the sources of wealth of the ancient Mali Empire?

In an article, The 10 Richest People of All Time (Davidson, 2015) Mansa Musa is said to be the richest person in human history. The Mali Empire’s strategic location gave it the advantage to benefit the most from trade. “The empire taxed every ounce of gold or salt that entered its borders” (Civilization Overview: African Kingdoms, 2016). It collected taxes from all traders entering and leaving the territory of the empire. The empire protected the traders in return. The kings who ruled the Mali Empire were rich and powerful because almost all gold nuggets were as declared as the sole property of the king. This was to help them become more powerful to expand the Empire. As the empire became powerful, it included a large area of land, which had their chiefs. All these lands paid tributes to the king. This made the kings very wealthy.

2. What were the main sectors of the economy?

The Mali Empire was a peasant one, which had a Mansa (king) as the master planner who controlled everything. The Mansa had around him a group of scholars from whom he seeks advice about what to do in case of difficulty.

Everyone could not just do any work that, they wished because each tribe had their own occupation and it was not easily for people to change occupation. The Mansa (kings) made the people feel that their own occupation was the best and would not even dream of changing it. The people worked for the betterment of the society. (Traore, 2016)

For instance, in a family that farms, the males of the family clear the farmland and the women are responsible for planting and other works on the farm. The women are also responsible for some household chores such as cooking, cleaning the house and taking care of the children. However, if the family rear animals, then the man is responsible for herding the animals.

The Empire was made up of different tribes with different languages. Each family had their own special occupation and they were satisfied with it. People had to do the jobs that they found their ancestors and fathers doing. There was a general belief that a family will become an expert in doing a job if they do it for three consecutive generations. For example, a man who works as a blacksmith will teach it to his son and his will also teach it to the son (grandson of the first blacksmith) and also to his son and it continues. Normally people got their surnames from their occupations.

2.1. Agriculture

One feature of the ancient Mali Empire’s economy was agriculture. During the time of the Mali Empire and even today, an empire’s expansion depends on its ability to provide its basic
needs such as food shelter and security needs (protection from enemy). It is this reason that made the expansion of the Mali Empire possible. The empire was able to provide its armies with food and other things such as gold, ivory and copper for trade.

The Niger River considered as most important aspect of the Mali Empire even though there were other rivers such as the Gambia River (formerly River Gambia), and Senegal River.

The Niger River had many uses.

2.1.1. Importance of the Niger River
a. Centre of civilization: Most of the people settled along the banks of the Niger River because lands along this river were fertile and suitable for farming all year round and there was little chance of drought around this area. Just like in ancient Egypt where most people settled around the Nile River.
b. Farming: The land around the river Nile was fertile and suitable for farming. Crop growers among the farmers who settled near the river could grow their crops and have a fruitful harvest. From among the many farm produce, the most common cereals crops that were cultivate were rice, sorghum and millet. Beans and peanuts were the main legumes and the most popular fruit and vegetable were papaya and gourds. (Department of Education Louisiana Believes)
c. Pastoralist: Herders also preferred to live along the riverbank because they could get greeneries to feed their animals. Animals commonly reared were cattle, sheep, goats and poultry
d. Fishing: Fish farmers also fished from the river.
e. Transportation: The River serves as the means of transportation. It was much easier for farmers to transport their product using the river than on the land.
f. Domestic use: The most important uses of the river were that it was the source of drinking water for some people especially of lower rank in the cast system. The rivers served as the main source of drinking water for people. People fetched it for other domestic use such as washing, cleaning.

2.2. Artisans

Another important feature of the Mali Empire’s economy was Artisans. It included Blacksmithing, leatherworking and weaving.
Blacksmithing: There was a cast system in the Mali Empire and the blacksmith occupied a higher position in the hierarchy. This sector deals with irons. It involves changing irons and other metals into powerful weapons and good agriculture farm tools. This was a strategic prudential occupation because it was responsible for developing the weapons that the military will use. These powerful weapons are used to protect the territory. (Civilization Overview: African Kingdoms, 2016).

(Candice Lee Goucher, 2008) The metallurgical skills of the empire’s blacksmiths were a key factor for effective spread of the Mande cultural system and indirectly controlled it power associations. The success of the military and agriculture primary depended on the level of skills of this industry just as a country’s success is depending on its level of technological knowledge today. The cast system of the Mali Empire included the king at the topmost, followed by the court members, followed by the soldiers, then the griots, then the merchants, to artisans, to teachers, then farmers, and servants or slaves at the bottom of the social order. The Metal workers were considered as the “energy of action” and supernatural (The Annenberg Foundation copyright, 2004)

2.3. Service

This sector of the economy consists of trade, education, the military, singers and others.

2.3.1. Commerce

(Civilization Overview: African Kingdoms, 2016) Another sector of the Malian empire was commerce. Probably this was the main source of the empire’s wealth. This sector includes trade and taxation. At the time the trade developed in the Mali empire such that it cities attracted traders from all over Africa. The most famous learning and trading centres of the Empire were Timbuktu, Gao and Djenne. In these cities the shops of the artisans, merchants, and especially weavers of cotton cloth are very numerous.

2.3.2. Education: At the time, Timbuktu had become a very important city in the world because of two reasons. Firstly, it became a major trading centre. Example Berbers carried Fabrics imported were from Europe to Timbuktu. Secondly, it was a major scholarly centre. It had a famous university with a large library containing Greek and Roman books.
It was found by (Singleton 2004, cited by (British Museum, 2010)) cites a Sudanese proverb “Salt comes from the north, gold from the south, and silver from the country of the white men, but the word of God and the treasures of wisdom are only to be found in Timbuktu”.

Gold and salt were its two most important products for trade. It was forbidden for ordinary person to trade with gold nuggets. All the gold nuggets belongs to the King treasury given to him, people only received gold dust. Any ordinary person who had gold nugget must exchange it for gold dust. The Empire had two big gold mines in its southern part of the empire (Bambuk and Bure) Fig 2

2.3.3. Silent barter
Silent barter is a way of trading whereby goods are exchanged for other goods without the parties directly speaking to each other. One party would come to a place (market), place his or her goods there, and withdraw from the scene. He or she signals the other party by the beating of drum. The other party comes to inspect the goods and put some amount of gold dust besides it and goes away from the scene. The first party also comes to inspect the gold dust if he or she is satisfied with the quantity of gold dust then he or she takes it and leaves the scene. The second trader also comes and the goods away with any face-to-face communication.

There are possibly two reasons for this silent trade. Firstly, the empire consisted of many different tribes with different languages so sometimes it was difficult for people of different languages to trade. However there is a much stronger reason that was, to hide the origin of the gold or goods.

The Malian empire did not have enough salt just like its predecessor the Ghana Empire. Salt is a necessity commodity without which life is difficult. Gold, was traded for salt. They were in need of the commodity and the only way to get salt was through trade with the people of the desert that had surplus salt because it was their natural resources. The major salt mines were located at Taudenni, 500 miles north of Timbuktu, with nothing but the Sahara Desert in between them. (Levtzion, 1980) Cited that Gold is always associated with myths. This is truth even until now in my own region (Western Region) of Ghana. Gold is still believed to be associated with some spiritual relation. Occasionally, animal sacrifices are done in the area where the gold is mined.

\footnote{(now spelled Tombouctou in current-day Mali)}
Land area of the Mali Empire between 13th and 16 century

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Area</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1250</td>
<td>100,000 km²</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1312</td>
<td>1,294,994 km²</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1380</td>
<td>1,100,000 km²</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1500</td>
<td>400,000 km²</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mali_Empire - website](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mali_Empire - website)

3. Conclusion

In conclusion, the large territory of the empire coped with good leadership under the Mansas, more specifically Mansa Musa. This large territory includes the area of two big gold fields. The empire got a lot of gold (taxes) from all the people in this big territory. The Gold was very common in the area such that people. The sources of wealth of the Mali Empire were its ability to control the gold salt trade because it lied across the trade route. It also had the Niger River in its territory. The Niger River had many uses. It was used as the trade route for easy transporting goods from one place to another, most of the trade takes place in cites located along or near the river, it also aided in agriculture.

From table 1, In the year then empire had an area of 100,000 km² (38,610 sq mi) that was the beginning of the empire under Sadjiata. However during the time of his grandnewphew Mansa Musa, it can be observed that the area of the empire had increased by 1195% reaching 1,294,994 km² (500,000 sq mi) in the year 1312 and that was the peak of Mansa Musa. During this time power and wealth, the empire was at its peak. It could collect taxes from all of the people and ensure traders security.

5 km² = kilometre square

6 sq mi = square miles
Map showing the trade route in the Mali Empire

Fig. 1 (mrgrayhistory, 2016)

Map showing the wealth Mali Empire

Fig. 2  source (British Museum, 2010) catalogue page 3
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