



MALI



Area: 478, 841 square miles (1, 241,238 sq km)

Population: 24.02 million (2024)

Capital: Bamako

Ethnic Groups: Mande (50%), Peul (17%), Voltaic (12%), Tuareg (10%), Songhai (6%)

Languages: French (official until 2023), Bambara (80%)

Religion: Islam (90%), Christianity (5%), Other (5%)

Life Expectancy: 63.2 years (2024 est.)

Literacy: 33% (2022)

Economy: Agriculture (millet, rice, corn, vegetables, cattle); industry (food processing, construction, phosphate, gold mining); exports (cotton livestock, gold).

Global Gender Gap Index: 0.804 (World Economic Forum 2024; among the bottom ten globally)

Images of the Past

“What is crucial is the way an image can transform us and change our vision of the world.”
--Souleymane Cissé (Interview with Yasmina Price, Cannes Film Festival 2023)

Among the earliest images created in the territory of what is modern Mali were ancient cliff paintings and petroglyphs from the mountainous regions of Dogon people. These rock art images consist of representations of mythical beings and ancestral figures, together with the observable, natural world, including everything from sacred animals to stars mapped in the local night sky. In the celebration of Sigi, anciently rooted Dogon performance arts reenact the creation of the world every sixty years, a cycle that corresponds to the orbit of a white dwarf star, the companion of the dog star Sirius, first observed by western astronomers in the second half of the nineteenth century and represented in the cliff dwelling imagery many centuries earlier.

The ancient Malian landscape was also home to the rich cultures – Fulani, Bambara, Tuareg, Dogon, and others -- and agrarian past featuring centuries of successful rice, sorghum, and millet agriculture and herding. The lands straddled an ecotone, the crossroads of multiple environments that ranged from desert to Sahel to savannah grasslands. Along the richly endowed Inland Niger River delta, early societies developed complex trading networks and urban centers beginning in the 4th century at Jenne Jenou, Gao, and Timbuktu. Salt, gold, textiles, food, and iron traveled south towards the medieval town of Begho (in modern Brong Ahafo, Ghana) and north across the Sahara to the Mediterranean, Nile, and beyond. Islam arrived in West Africa via merchants and missionaries. Rulers eventually converted to the faith. In the 13th century CE, Sundiata Keita became the first ruler of the Mali Empire (1240-1645 CE). His feats were retold in the epic poem of Mali’s heroic *Sundiata*, a narrative transmitted orally by *jali* (griots), and in Souleymane Cissé’s masterpiece film, *Yeelen* (1987).¹ One famous ruler, Mansa Musa (r.1312-37), is documented in the medieval Catalan Atlas of Africa (1375). Depicted seated on a throne and holding a gold nugget almost half as large as a man’s head, the king reportedly gave away so much gold during his pilgrimage to Mecca that the price of gold collapsed faraway markets. The later Songhay state (late 15th century to c.1591) built mosques and libraries, expanding trade in books and manuscripts, gold, salt, and other commodities.

¹ *Yeelen* was shown at CFAF’s first annual film festival in 1991, and again in 2015; the filmmaker attended the 2005 festival.

Colonial and Post-Colonial States

The enormous territory of the former Songhay empire gave way to the ravages of the Transatlantic and trans-Saharan slave trades and, eventually, to colonization by France. French colonizers ruled Mali as part of French West Africa (as French Sudan and Sudanese Republic) until the territory's independence, as part of the Mali Federation in 1959 (and then, after the withdrawal of Senegal, the Republic of Mali) under the socialist government led by the first president Modibo Keita, elected in 1960 and overthrown in 1968. After 31 years of dictatorship, a military coup led by Amadou Toumani Toure in 1991 instituted a multi-party democracy, which later elected Toure in 2002.

This success was short-lived. Beginning in 2012, stability gave way to a series of rebellions, military coups, and interference from invading Islamist elements from the north – some linked to Al-Qa'ida – that together have created a modern era dominated by militias, terrorism, banditry, ethnic-based violence, proxies, and extra-judicial killings. Aside from a brief period during Ibrahim Boubacar Keita's first presidential term (2013-2018), Mali has failed to establish peace and security, amidst high food prices, worsening climate, and continuing conflict. Once the prey of French colonizers, the territory has been subjected to the presence of Russia's Wagner Group mercenaries, who have propped up the authoritarian regime and been targeted by rebels. The current junta removed the presence of French troops (and French as the official language), while seemingly deepening relationships with the Russians. Once home to Sankoré University, the place of many of Timbuktu's ancient manuscripts has become the sleeping quarters for terrorists.

Return to the Source

Today, among the many Malians known around the world, are singers, including Fula Grammy-winner and women's rights and peace activist Oumou Sangaré. Sangaré, known as the "songbird of Wassulu," mixes the musical traditions learned from childhood with modern sentiments of concern and hope. "Humanity, I'm worried about humanity," sings Sangaré, who urges her listeners rediscover Timbuktu's ancient wisdom: "Poets, writers and even the griots from Mali wonder/ Where are the values our ancestors gave us?/They will all disappear if we don't pay attention/Malian people, let's wake up from this deep sleep/Do not forget how great we were/And be sure that we still can be!"²

When the Malian film director Souleymane Cissé (b. 1940), the man often called Africa's greatest living filmmaker, claimed that tradition is the source of modernity, he was proposing cinema as a weapon of the imagination. Cissé's filmmaking style has been described as part of the "return to the source" genre. His and other films in the genre honor the past through references to sustainable and indigenous cultural elements, values, and storytelling; yet they also look to the future by demonstrating mechanisms for change and transformation. Mali has never needed these artistic visions more than it does today.

Resources for Reading and Viewing Mali Through an African Lens

Souleymane Cissé, *Baara (Work)*, 1980); Finyè (*The Wind*, 1982); *Yeelen (The Light)*, 1987).
Maryse Condé, *Segu* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1987). A novel set in the period 1797-1860.
Manthia Diawara, *African Cinema: Politics and Culture* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992).
Dani Kouyaté, *Keita: The Heritage of the Griot* (1996). A dramatized film about the story of Sundiata.
D.T. Niane, *Sundiata: An Epic of Old Mali* (New York: Longman, 1995).

² From the song "Timbuktu" (Lyrics & music: Oumou Sangaré, Mamadou Sidibé).

Yasmina Price, "Souleymane Cissé: The Work, the Wind, and the Light," MUBI Notebook (Cannes Special)

post (May 17, 2023). Accessed at <https://mubi.com/en/notebook/posts/souleymane-cisse-the-work-the-wind-and-the-light>