

MALI

The country of Mali is located in a region that was once the center of powerful ancient African kingdoms and empires, an ancestry in which the Malians take fierce pride. Known as the “Jewel of West Africa”, Mali is noted for its wonderful blend of cultures, surprising variety in landscape, and unhurried pace of life.

You have undoubtedly heard the phrase “from here to Timbuktu”. You may be surprised to learn that Timbuktu is actually a town located in Mali, and was formerly an important center of learning and trade. The streets and mosques of this intriguing, ancient town contain a wealth of history.

FACTS

Mali is about the size of Texas and California combined. Here you will find flat rolling plains covered with Sahara sands in the north, dramatic sandstone mountains and plateaus in the northeast, and savannah in the south. The Sahara Desert has rendered the northern region utterly desolate. The Niger River runs west to east in this country and is the lifeblood of the central regions, providing precious water and fish for the villages that lie along it.



Overlooking the market, Djenne’s elegant mud mosque is the largest mud brick building in the world. The wooden spars jut out from the walls and give this building its ‘spiky’ appearance, typical of Sahel-style mud architecture. Every year thousands of workers re-apply mud to the outside walls after the rainy season has washed it away: the muddy version of a new paint job.

Formerly occupied by France, the official language of Mali is French, although a host of other languages and dialects are spoken, including Arabic.

HISTORY

Even though Mali is one of the poorest countries in the world today, it has a long and remarkable past as an important part of great African empires. Mali reached its pinnacle of power and wealth during the 14th century, extending over almost all of West Africa and controlling virtually all of the rich trans-Saharan gold trade. At this point, the Malian empire began to decline, and soon fell to the Songhaig Empire.

In the late nineteenth century, Mali became a French colony, and in 1960, it gained its independence.

PEOPLE

The people of Mali are extremely friendly and warm. While not blessed with large sums of money (the per capita income is less than \$300 annually), Malians find richness through honor and respect.

There are 33 ethnic groups in Mali. Migrations through the years, often of whole clans in search of good pasture for their flocks and good ground for their crops, undoubtedly helped create this distinct variety of cultures and ethnic groups in this country.

Malian culture operates on a caste system and family heritage. Heredity and caste determine a person’s occupation. For example, if your father was a weaver, chances are you will be too, as will your children. Bozos are fishermen, Fulani are herders of livestock, Bambara are farmers, and so on.

Among the diverse groups in Mali are the Fulani people, known as the cattle herders of West Africa. They roam the plains of western Africa searching for suitable grazing lands for their livestock. In fact, the most famous festival in Africa is the Fulani *Cure Salee*, (*Salt Cure*) which is

centered around cattle. The *Cure Salee* is a time when the men show off their finest features and their charm in a *yaake* (dance performance), to woo the Fulani women. The men blacken their lips to make their teeth seem sparkly-white, paint streaks down their foreheads and noses, braid their hair, and wear beads, bangles, and shiny jewelry with hopes of attracting the attention of a special woman, and marrying her.

Griots are known as the keepers of the oral tradition, and typically serve high-caste families in their village. The griots memorize the history and myths of their patron's lineage and most can recite the entire history of a family to ancient times. Older griots pass on this history to their children, who grow up to become their patron family's next oral historian.

WAY OF LIFE

For the most part agriculture is the main source of income and existence for most Malians. Their farms are usually small and they only grow enough to keep themselves alive on millet and sorghum, two grains that form the staples of their diet. Sometimes, if they are near water, fish can be added to their diet. When there is drought, the peoples of this country are faced with a real threat of starvation.

Villagers generally live in mud huts; in the larger towns, families

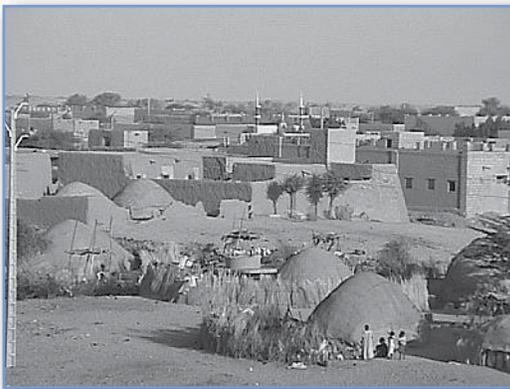
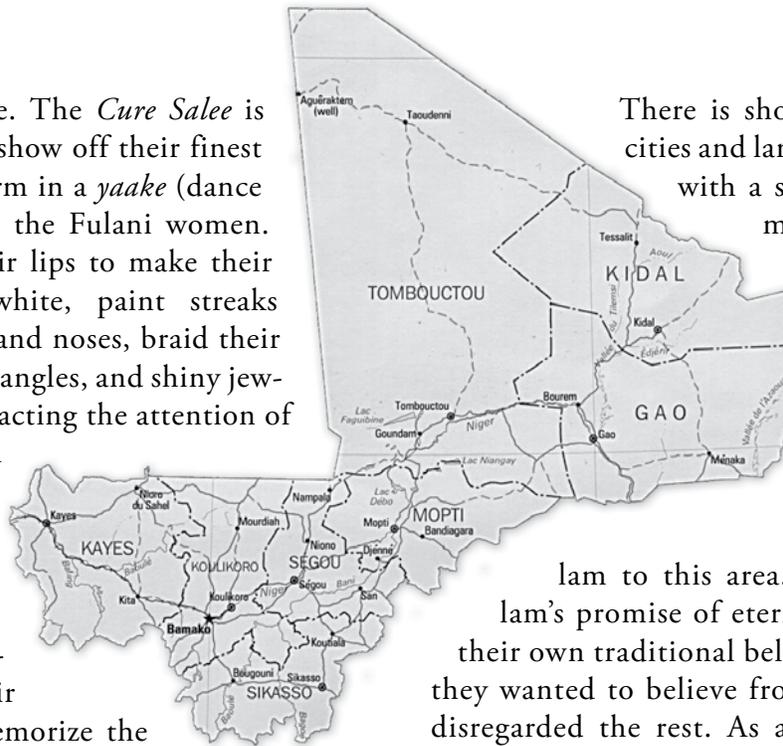
live in adobe houses. Nomads live in tents, usually set up in rows. The task of setting up the tents is left to the women. Sometimes a thorn fence is made around the entire camp for protection from intruders.

There is shortage of housing in the cities and larger towns, and this along with a shortage of jobs has sent many adventurous young Africans back to their families.

RELIGION

Traders, who had little difficulty converting the people to their faith, brought Islam to this area. The Africans liked Islam's promise of eternal life and tolerance of their own traditional beliefs. They took out what they wanted to believe from the Islamic faith and disregarded the rest. As a result, Islam has been heavily mixed with their own traditional beliefs and practices. Interestingly enough, even though many of the men have adopted the faith of Islam, the Muslim women are much fewer in number. The women seem to prefer the African faiths. Mali is about 86% Muslim, and about 3% Christian.

Pray that the Christians in Mali might continue to be a light because many Malians are proving to be disappointed in Islam and are turning to Christianity. Pray that the openness may continue to increase and that the Word of God could impact many of the friendly people of Mali to turn to true Christianity and to the love of God.



The town of Timbuktu (or Tombouctou)



A Taureg tribesman — Drinking tea is a common local custom