Have you heard of Mansa Musa?

Fact: The Africans knew about the lunar cycle and its shadows long before any European thought about it. If you don't believe it, ask the BBC's Michael Palin.

In a recent book, Cynthia Crossen, senior editor of the New York-based financial daily, The Wall Street Journal, wrote: "You've heard of the extraordinary wealth of Bill Gates, J. P. Morgan, and the sultan of Brunei, have you heard of Mansa Musa, one of the richest men who ever lived?"

Crossen, sitting in the centre of the foremost capitalist nation in the world, was not being sarcastic when she followed up her question with this comment: "Neither producer nor inventor, Mansa Musa was an early broker, greasing the wheels of intercultural trade. He created wealth by making it possible for others to buy and sell."

The great British historian on Africa, Dr Basil Davidson, suggested that the rulers of Mali were "rumoured to have been the wealthiest men on the face of the earth."

Mansa Musa I (or King Musa) ascended the throne of the Mali Empire in 1312. He was, perhaps, the most colourful personality in West African history. Of this monarch, Dr DeGraft Johnson wrote that:

"It was in 1324 ... that the world awoke to the splendour and grandeur of Mali. There across the African desert, and making its way to Mecca, was a caravan of a size which had never before been seen, a caravan consisting of 60,000 men. They were Mansa Musa's men, and Mansa Musa was with them. He was not going to war; he was merely going to worship at Mecca."

"The large caravan included a personal retinue of 12,000 slaves, all dressed in brocade and Persian silk. Mansa Musa himself rode on horseback, and directly preceding him were 500 slaves, each carrying a staff of gold dust. This imposing caravan made its way from Niani on the Upper Niger to Walata, then to Tuita, and then to Cairo."

"Mansa Musa's piety and open-handed generosity, the fine clothes and good behaviour of his followers, all quickly made a good impression. One might have thought that a pilgrimage to Mecca undertaken with such pomp and ceremony would have ulterior motives, but no such motives have ever been adduced."

In Egypt, Mansa Musa spent so much money in gold that he devastated that nation's economy. "For years after Mansa Musa's visit," wrote Prof DeGraft Johnson, "ordinary people in the streets of Cairo, Mecca, and Baghdad talked about this wonderful pilgrimage - a pilgrimage which led to the devaluation of gold in the Middle East for several years."

Mansa Musa embarked on a large building programme of mosques and universities in Timbuktu and Gao. In Niani, the capital, he built the Hall of Audience, a building communicated by an interior door to the royal palace. It was an "admirable monument" surrounded by a dome, adorned with arabesques of striking colours.

At the height of its power, Mali had at least 400 cities, and the interior of the Niger Delta was very densely populated. One of the cities, Timbuktu rose from obscurity to great commercial and cultural importance. It became a centre of learning, one of the foremost centres of Islamic scholarship in the world.

The mosque of the University of Sankore was highly distinguished for the teaching of Koranic theology and law, besides other subjects such as astronomy and mathematics.

In the 14th century, Timbuktu had an estimated population of 115,000 people. Typically, 25,000 were at university and 20,000 were at school. London, by contrast, had a total 14th century population of 20,000 people.

Similarly, Old Djenne, one of the early cities that date back to 250 BC (the city was part of the old Ghana Empire.
and passed on to the Mali Empire when Ghana fell), had a population of 20,000 people. London, again, would wait another 700 years to reach this figure.

Also, old astronomical manuscripts from the medieval desert collections in Mali and Mauritania show that the Africans knew about the lunar cycle and its shadows long before any European thought about it.

In 2002, Michael Palin, a BBC programme maker, returned from Timbuktu to report that the Great Mosque of Timbuktu "has a collection of scientific texts that clearly show the planets circling the sun. They date back hundreds of years ... It is convincing evidence that the scholars of Timbuktu knew a lot more than their counterparts in Europe".

Palin added: "In the 15th century in Timbuktu, the mathematicians knew about the rotation of the planets, knew about the details of the eclipse, knew things which we had to wait for 150, almost 200 years to know in Europe when Galileo and Copernicus came up with these same calculations and were given a very hard time for it."

Imam Mohammed Habott, a black Mauritanian, has inherited 1,300 medieval books as family heirlooms. The Mauritanian cities of Chinguetti and Oudane have a total of 3,450 medieval books. There may be another 6,000 books still surviving in the other city of Walata. Some date back to the 8th century AD. There are also 11,000 books in private collections in Niger.

The star of the collections, of course, is in Timbuktu where there are about 700,000 surviving books. And yet, books are said to have come to Africa from Europe. No such thing happened. Africa had its books long before any book ever arrived from Europe.

These books did not come from Europe. They were published in Africa centuries before any European books arrived.

Ta-Seti the oldest

Ancient Egypt is the first major civilisation in Africa for which records are abundant. It was not, however, Africa's first kingdom. On 1 March 1979, The New York Times carried an article on its front page, written by Boyce Rensberger, with the headline: Nubian Monarchy called Oldest. In the article, Rensberger told the world that: "Evidence of the oldest recognisable monarchy in human history, preceding the rise of the earliest Egyptian kings by several generations, has been discovered in artifacts from ancient Nubia... The discovery is expected to stimulate a new appraisal of the origins of civilisations in Africa, raising the question of 'to what extent later Egyptian culture derived its advanced political structure from the Nubians?'".

This ancient kingdom, generally called Ta-Seti, encompassed the territory of the northern Sudan and the southern portion of Egypt. It has sometimes been referred to as Ancient Ethiopia in some of the literature, and as Cush (or Kush) in other literature. The first kings of Ta-Seti may well have ruled about 5900 BC. During the time of the fifth generation of their rulers, Upper (i.e., southern) Egypt may have united and became a greater threat to Ta-Seti.

In Kush (or Ta-Seti), a number of women had the title Kentake, which means Queen Mother, and was recorded in Roman sources as Candace. Some of the women were heads of state. Kentake Qalhata (c.639 BC) had her own pyramid built at Al Kurru, as other Kushite kings did (above photo). Pseudo-Callisthenes mentions that Alexander the Great visited "Candace, the black Queen of Meroe" in the 4th century. She was apparently a "wondrous beauty".