

Journey to the Centre of the World: In Timbuktu the Road of Hope is also the Road of Despair, 30 October 2005. *The Chronicle Herald: Nova Scotian*

There were moments when it did feel a little as if we were headed to the end of the world. Sadio Kante, a Malian journalist and friend, and I had been travelling overland for two days from Bamako, the capital of this impoverished West African country. There were still 200 kilometres of “improved secondary road” to cover before we would reach the fabled city of Timbuktu. To me, the road looked anything but “improved”. In the parched sandy plain dotted with courageous shrubs and herds of cattle, it stretched ahead of us in the scorching afternoon heat like a lunar landscape with gaping gullies and sandy quagmires. The official name of the road linking Timbuktu with the south of Mali is “Route d’Espoir” or Road of Hope. People who travel it regularly — truck drivers and tour guides — prefer to call it the “Route de Désespoir” or the Road of Despair.

It peters out and turns into deep sand dunes a few kilometres south of the Niger River, which sweeps across West Africa in a great arc, making an audacious curve north into the Sahara Desert at Timbuktu. At the south bank of the river we had to navigate a sandy spit, a makeshift terminal for a small car ferry that crosses the Niger whenever the full quota of four vehicles have arrived to fill it. The ferry wasn’t in much better shape than the road — its motor had given up the ghost and a small river canoe with an outboard motor had been lashed to its side to propel us, ever so slowly, across the river to the desolate little port of Koriome that today serves the town of Timbuktu.

Once upon a time, half a millennium ago when Timbuktu was at its peak, the Niger River watered the town with long inlets filled with hippos and river canoes or “pirogues”. Today, the river has receded, leaving Timbuktu high and very dry. The canals that were once busy thoroughfares for pirogues are now filled with sand. And from the river port of Koriome, we had to drive another fourteen kilometres along a narrow stretch of pavement before coming to an archway over the road that announced that we had reached the “Timbuktu the Mysterious City”.

At that point, I breathed a sigh of relief and reflected on what I expected to find in Timbuktu, an ancient town on the southern doorstep of the Sahara Desert, the place my grandmother always threatened to send her grandchildren if we misbehaved or refused to eat all our green beans. Would it be a never-never town of blowing sand, dilapidated and crumbling mud houses? A place of unimaginable suffering and poverty and misery?

Certainly, that had always been how I pictured the place when my grandmother threatened to send me there. And initially, in the late afternoon heat as we drove into town, it seemed I hadn’t been far wrong. The sand on the roads was as deep and treacherous as a January snowfall in Nova Scotia. There were homes made of straw mats flanked by more imposing two-storey dwellings of ancient brick, forming a medieval labyrinth of sandy paths just wide enough for a pair of camels or a donkey cart and certainly not meant for the aging Land Cruiser we were riding in.

On first impression that evening, Timbuktu did indeed live up — or down — to its reputation as the proverbial end of the world. But first impressions can be very deceptive, especially in Africa. In the relative cool of the next morning, as we moved from one home to another, seeking out learned elders of the city, things began to look very different indeed.

Timbuktu historian Salem Ould Alhadj received us in the relative cool of his second-storey living room, and bade us sit on cushions scattered on the Persian carpet while he enthusiastically recounted the history of his beloved town. It was founded, he said, in the 12<sup>th</sup> century when an elderly woman named Bouctou operated a small well — a “tim”, offering water to the nomadic Tuareg people who came through with their camel caravans. Hence the name, Timbuktu, or “the well of Bouctou”. Then, in the 14<sup>th</sup> century, Kanku Musa, the emperor of the Mali Empire that covered much of West Africa at the time, passed through the town on his way to Mecca for the Islamic Haj pilgrimage and ordered that a magnificent mosque be built. That mosque, the Djingerey-ber (or Grand Mosque), built in 1325, is still the major place of worship for the Muslim population of Timbuktu.

After that, Salem Ould Alhaj said, two more mosques were built and one of those, the Sankore, became the world’s first university. “In the 16<sup>th</sup> century, the population of Timbuktu was one hundred thousand. Twenty thousand of those people were students and professors. This was a world centre of learning, with scholars coming from Turkey, Egypt, Nigeria, Senegal, Spain and all over, to share their knowledge and to study. In the 16<sup>th</sup> century the biggest industry in this town was the writing and selling of manuscripts that dealt with every subject you can imagine — history, law, astronomy, medicine, mathematics, law, geography and of course, Islam and theology.” It was a crossroads of trans-Sahara trade, the place where the river met the desert, with camel caravans loaded with salt and textiles coming from the north and gold, grains, cereals, cola nuts and also slaves coming from southern and greener parts of Africa.

There was gold in Timbuktu, Ould Alhadj says, but more important than the yellow metal was the knowledge and Islamic culture that flourished during that century before Moroccan armies conquered Timbuktu in 1591 and it began its slow decline. But not before hundreds of thousands of manuscripts had been written and tucked away in family archives that today are being turned into libraries.

Today, those libraries are being opened and the written treasures being revealed to the world, dispelling myths that Africa had no history of written culture. South Africa, Norway and the United States are financing projects to catalogue, restore and digitize some of the manuscripts, but with sixty private libraries in Timbuktu, it will take a long time before the knowledge in these written treasures can be shared with the rest of the world.

“Europeans searched for Timbuktu because they wanted gold,” says Ben Essayouti, the curator of the museum and a teacher of literature in a high school in Timbuktu. “They were looking for yellow gold and they missed the real nature of the gold in Timbuktu, our wealth of learning, tolerance, scholarship and civilization.”

That culture is still here in Timbuktu — doors are never closed, the sound of prayers and muted voices reverberate in narrow alleyways redolent with myrrh and frankincense, and there is always a warm welcome and a history lesson for passing strangers in this town that proclaims itself the mysterious city. As it was in its glory days five centuries ago, the town is still a meeting place for people from all over the world, a melted pot of the different civilizations — Arabic, African, and European — that have taken turns dominating the town over the past millennium. Today it draws tourists, researchers, merchants, Islamic preachers and Christian missionaries from all over the

world and with Internet and cell phone service, it feels like a cosmopolitan centre — even if the road to Timbuktu itself is very long.

“For some people, I know that Timbuktu is thought to be the end of the world, or even a place that doesn’t even exist” says Ben Essayouti, with a smile. “But for us here, Timbuktu is the centre of the world.”