

# Timbuktu:

## The enchanting city and the forgotten cultural centre

> Casablanca - Nour-  
eddine Saoudi

This mythical city features a rich Islamic cultural heritage, buried for centuries under the sands. Currently, it is witnessing a revival, revealing its glorious past and the pre-eminent role that Islam has played in making it. But manuscripts discovered may be lost or stolen. This is a threat to the collective memory of the city and the whole region.

**D**uring my visit, two years ago, to Zagora, in the south eastern part of Morocco, my attention was particularly drawn to a sign at the southern exit bearing the inscription:

“Timbuktu: 52 days” (journey time by camel ride). It brought to my memory what I had read about this enchanting city, of the glorious past during the spread of Islam in West Africa. The

Zagora region was the birthplace of the Saadian dynasty who reigned in Morocco during the 16th and early 17th centuries, and whose empire stretched up to Timbuktu in Mali. Zagora ▶



Mosque

مسجد



Nomadic life

حياة بدوية



City gate

بوابة المدينة

was for many centuries an important stop for caravans from Marrakesh to Timbuktu.

According to an Arab-Islamic historical account, the famous Moroccan traveller Ibn Battuta made his third trip to the West Africa sub-Saharan countries between 1352 and 1354 and visited the city of Timbuktu. It also notes that the Moroccan traveller and historian Hassan El-Wazzane (Leo Africanus), who lived in the 16th century, had been appointed by the Moroccan Sultan Wattasside to conclude an alliance with the young Saadien Emirate who also fought against the Portuguese and to gather forces against the local conspirators. Two years later, Sultan Wattasside sent him, with his uncle, to the Sudan to negotiate with the king of Songhai who came to occupy Timbuktu. The city also enchanted Western researchers such as the Scottish Mungo Park (late 18th), the French Rene Cailler (1828) and the German Heinrich Barth (1853-1854).

This caravan crossroads was also a great centre for cultural and religious activities. Thousands of books and manuscripts were written at the time. Their recent discovery sheds light on key chapters in the history of this region of Africa, highlighting in particular the role Islam played in the dissemination of culture and commercial prosperity.

### Site and development

Timbuktu is a wonderful city in the centre of Mali, one of the largest countries in Africa, with an area exceeding 1.2 million square kilometres. This vast landlocked country is home to a large number of ethnic groups, of which the most famous are the Mandingo, the Songhais, Fulani and Tuareg, all Muslim. They were the descendants of the Almoravids who ruled over Morocco and Andalusia between the 11th and 12th centuries and played an important role in the spread of Islam in the Sahara. It is worth mentioning that the Tuareg live towards the north, around Timbuktu near the Niger River.

In the early 12th century, the Tuareg resided beside a well known as "Tim-Buktu" or "Well of Buktu", in reference to the custodian of the well. Two centuries later, Timbuktu moved from being a mere stopover for nomadic tribes, to an important commercial centre, through which the main products of the region passed: salts, savannah products, and timber. Major cattle convoys to Egypt, and gold, ivory and skins to Morocco were loaded from this centre.

The traders of the city of Djenné which attracted major products from the south had made of Timbuktu a port on the other bank of the River Niger, to expand their trade to the north. This helped their business and ensured Timbuktu's prosperity.

Upon his return from Hajj in 1325, the emperor

Manssa, impressed by Cairo and other cities, decided to develop Timbuktu, by constructing a house and a mosque. He relied on a Muslim architect from Spain who drew up the architectural style of the city.

The golden age of Timbuktu began through the combined assistance of trade and cultural and religious activities. The city became a magnet for students and scholars of religious sciences and humanities. According to the historian and traveller Hassan El Wazzane, there were 120 thousand students and 180 madrassas (religious schools) in Timbuktu which had reached its height during the 16th century, when its population reached 100,000.

The author of "History of the Black Land" Mahmoud Kati (16th century), says: "Timbuktu has achieved a high degree of beauty and splendour. The Islamic religion that was prosperous there and the traditions of the Prophet gave life to everything."

After his visit to Timbuktu in 1828, the French traveller Henri Cailler wrote: "The slaves of Timbuktu could read the Koran. They had learned it by heart, and do teach it to their kids from an early age." He added: "The camel caravans of Tuareg loaded with salt still go down once a year from the mine of Taoudenni. The dock connected by man made channel to the river Niger still receives goods from the south. Of course, trade in ▶

Timbuktu is not what it was, and the desert became inhospitable and the drought severely affected the lands of the coast. But the ideas of Timbuktu, its faith and pride in being “the Latin Quarter” of the “Black Land”, still represent its people and stones. Here the route took the Believers to the Djingareyber Mosque, as well as the mosque which was built by Manssa in the 14th century, defying time. It is built with stones and bongo. Its towers are crossed pieces of wood and its beautiful interior still receives the faithful in his twelve halls.

On the other side of the city is the Sankore Mosque, which ensures that its perimeter is the same as that of the Kaaba in Mecca. The Sidi Yahia mosque, built in the late 15th century is still standing, protected by an iron door of the old style of the city houses. The streets of Timbuktu are clean and wide, allowing the passage of three riders at the same time. On the inside and outside of the city, there are numerous rounded huts made of straw.

### Threat to the memory of the region

Recently, there was a gradual discovery of manuscripts, some dating back to the 13th century. More than 15 thousands manuscripts were reviewed and classified under the auspices of UNESCO, while nearly eight thousand others are “dormant” in the bottom of this mythical city. These valuable documents, containing important information about the glorious past of the region of the Niger River, between the 13th and 19th centuries, may be lost or stolen. It was found that very rare manuscripts, were written in Arabic or sometimes Fulani by scholars of the former Empire of Mali, passing through Switzerland where they underwent some changes before being submitted to rare manuscripts collectors. The chairman of the Cultural Mission of Timbuktu, Mr. Ali Ould Sidi, does not hide his concern, saying: “We must find the documents owned by the locals, in order to preserve and restore them. Otherwise, the

written memory of Timbuktu is in danger of being lost; it is a memory of considerable importance. ”

These documents revealed that Timbuktu imposed itself in the 14th century as the main commercial centre between Morocco and the old Black land, transiting the salt of Taoudenni, gold of the mines of Boree and slaves from Ghana. Some Arab and Persian traders, travellers, and Muslim preachers, coexisted in the city. This was the time when the African coast was divided into Muslim kingdoms, such as the Kingdom of Songhai which reigned in Mali in the late 14th century, and others, such as the Kingdom of Mossi (Burkina Faso).

Thus, the distribution of the manuscripts was linked to progress in the expansion of Islam. The three largest cities in the region, Timbuktu, Gao and Djenne, had been turned into centres of Islamic cultural abundance whose memory is still alive today. In the 15th century, there were 100,000 people in Timbuktu (currently there are only 30 thousand), 25 thousand students ▶



Landscape

طبيعة

attending the Sankore madrassa, which then turned into a mosque. These students wrote down the lectures of scholars on the barks of trees, camel's shoulder blades, and animal skins or on paper imported from the East.

Thus, a true treasure of legal, philosophical and religious manuscripts built up over the centuries. In addition, the margins of these manuscripts contain various reports, on astronomy, physics, music and the economy. The caravans passing through Agadez (Niger), Tichite (Mauritania) and Sokoto (Nigeria) related information on the most illustrious scholars. In about three centuries, knowledge and commerce had mutually prospered.

These cultural treasures, religious and scientific, categorically refute the thesis of the colonizers on the prevalence of oral culture in the African Sahel.

The Ahmed Baba Centre for Documentation and Research, which founded in 1970 by the government with the assistance of UNESCO. It is a fundamental step in the recovery of African history. Its mission is to classify, restore and preserve manuscripts threatened with destruction. The Minister of Culture, Mr. Omar Sisoko, said: "If we cannot recover all of these manuscripts, we will encourage the establishment of private institutions, enabling quick recovery of family manuscripts. This is



Mosque

مسجد

the best way to empower the people and preserve this treasure."

Most of these manuscripts belong to families. To discover their contents, it is enough to approach the families who are very welcoming. Ismail Diadat Haidara, of the Kati family, describes his foundation, established near the

Djingareyber Mosque, in an old house in Timbuktu that has been restored: "The collection of manuscripts began with the forced departure of Toledo, in 1468, of one of my grandfathers, of the Visigoth origin who converted to Islam. Ali Ibn Ziad al Qaouti, came to settle in Gambo, in the country of Soninke. ▶



Niger River

نهر النيجر

Since then, manuscripts accumulated from generation to generation, and we decided to make them public in 1999.”

This library contains a synthesis of knowledge of the 14th and 15th centuries: court works, texts on the harms of tobacco, descriptions of medicines and remedies; manuscripts on law, language, religion, and mathematics, with comments in the margins from the scientists of Cordoba, Baghdad or Djenne. On shelves protected by metal fences are texts of fatwas on the treatment of Jews and Christians in Timbuktu, on the sale of slaves and their release, the price of salt, gold and feathers, which shows the active commercial life. In addition, there are correspondences of kings on both sides of the desert, decorated by gilded motifs.

These texts are not homogeneous. This is because they are mostly in Arabic, while others were written in local languages, drawing on the Moroccan writing. But thanks to the translators, an African fresco rises again to the surface of history.

Among the documents of great value are: “Tarikh As-Sudan” by Mahmoud Kati, which cites the dynasty of the kings of Timbuktu and “Tarikh El-Fattash” Abdul-Rahman Al-Saadi (17th century), which traces the history of the Coast in the Middle Ages. The discovery of these manuscripts gives this region of Africa the historical basis which has long been denied. They confirm, like an echo, the work of the great Senegalese historian Sheikh Anta Diop and the spiritual depth of pre-colonial Africa. They also provide evidence that the prosperity of this region was founded on the business dynamics triggered by Islam and the Muslim preachers through their ability to provide education for the masses.

This had resulted in a cultural communication that had led to a consolidation of the Sufi dimension in the heritage of the peoples in varying degrees until the arrival of the Portuguese in the 15th century. In his memoirs, Sheikh Dan Fodio (1754-1817), inspired by his ancestors, including Ahmed Baba, said that until the arrival of Europeans, African thought was heavily imbued with Islam that is open to the world. This conclusion was confirmed in the early 20th century.

It should be noted, moreover, that Timbuktu has its own architectural style that distinguishes and unifies the city. It unifies the modern with

the older buildings. Mosques have minarets filled with pieces of wood used on occasions to scale them for restoration. Their walls are covered with a thick layer of a product that protects them from the rain. There is a wall surrounding the mosque and its esplanade. Sobriety marks mosque architecture, in which there are no decorative motifs and where it is dark for lack of openings. Their doors are of local African wood. Near the mihrab is the elevated minbar. The worshipers stand to its left and right. A hall is reserved for women. In these mosques, there is no place for ablution. The African is accustomed to coming to the mosque after performing his ablutions. In conclusion, we call for a combination of local, Islamic and international efforts to save the

precious manuscripts of Timbuktu that are vital to the preservation of the collective memory of this mythical city and its rich Islamic heritage. Meanwhile, Timbuktu, with its extraordinary treasure of cultural and religious heritage, its splendid architecture marked by simplicity, original mosques, and its beautiful desert scenery, deserves to be visited by tourists, particularly Muslims, who should be concerned about the preservation of its unique Islamic heritage. ■

(Special Thanks to natural history tour operator Naturetrek [www.naturetrek.co.uk](http://www.naturetrek.co.uk) and overland adventure specialist Dragoman Overland [www.dragoman.com](http://www.dragoman.com) for images used in this article.)



Old house

بيت قديم