

FEATURED STORY

July-August 2007

Space, Time, and Timbuktu

The legendary city on the Sahara's southern fringe can look back on a history of commercial, intellectual, and religious wealth. Today as in the past, however, political power eludes it.

By Marq de Villiers and Sheila Hirtle

Azalai, the salt caravan run by the Bérabiche Tuareg from Taoudenni, arrives in Timbuktu. Each camel carries four slabs of salt that weigh some 120 pounds each.

Photo by Miranda Dodd

The Well of Buktu, so-called, is a paltry thing, about three feet across and not much deeper, and contains no water at all. A goatskin bag hangs over the opening, suspended from three slender wooden poles poked into the ground, a show-and-tell of how the water was drawn to the surface in those days when there was water, if there ever was any. The whole thing is set up in a sandy courtyard that serves as a kind of anteroom to the municipal museum of Timbuktu.

An old man, wizened and sly, was sitting on a bench in the shade, smoking up a storm. He'd have sold us a postcard or even a goatskin bag if we had wanted one, but he didn't try very hard.

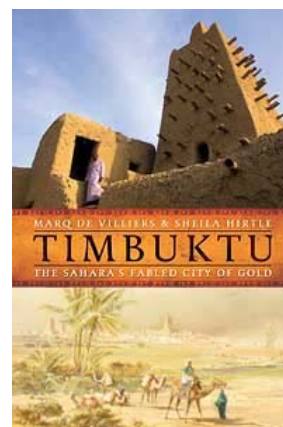
"Is this really the well of Buktu?" we asked.

He hesitated, assessing our credulity, then grinned. "It is a well of the same type," he said at last. "No one knows where the real well was, but there must have been one. Who is to say it wasn't here?"

Who indeed? A Well of Buktu, or Tin Buktu, is part of the founding myth of Timbuktu, a thousand-year-old settlement on the southern border of the Sahara Desert. Although now it is a peripheral city of 30,000 in the modern state of Mali, its name evokes, for those familiar with its history, a luminous past as a crossroads of caravan routes and of learning, and still holds, for jaded Western tourists, the promise of a remote and exotic destination. Its name may even be a guide to fact, when fact is lost in the mists of unrecorded time. The most common version of the story of the city's origin goes like this:

Timbuktu was founded by a group of Tuareg herdsmen around the start of the eleventh century. This particular group's range was the desert between the Niger River and the oasis town of Arawan, about a week's journey north of the river. In the wet season (such as it is in the desert), they would linger in the north. In the dry season, the summer, they would bring their herds closer to the Niger to graze. They set up a camp in the dunes at a convenient spot a half-dozen miles from the river, where they dug a well. Tin means either "well" or merely "place" in the Tuareg language, Tamashek—a member of the Berber family of languages. After a few years that convenient camp became more permanent, and the nomads would leave their goods there in the charge of an old woman named Buktu. Accordingly, the Tuareg herders would refer to returning to Tin Buktu, "the place of Buktu."

Well, as a story it's tidy enough, though some traditions say bukту isn't a person's name at all, but means "woman with a large navel" in the language of the Songhai, an unrelated ethnic group centered downriver from Timbuktu. Others suggest that the woman referred to as Buktu was not a Tuareg at all, but a native Songhai. In a further refinement, the word is also translated as "woman with a large lump," which is then taken to mean navel (no doubt one of the earliest references to an "outie" in literature). All such romantic notions were scorned by the nineteenth-century German explorer and linguist Heinrich Barth, who pointed out that the Songhai word for navel also means a shallow depression between sand dunes, and that in origin the city's name, Timbuktu, most probably means nothing more than "the place between



This article was adapted from the forthcoming book by Marq de Villiers and Sheila Hirtle, *Timbuktu: The Sahara's Fabled City of Gold*, which is being published in August by Walker & Co. Copyright © 2007 by Jacobus Communications Corp. (Click book cover for ordering information.)



The authors' Tuareg guide and translator, Mohamed Al Hassan Al Ag Moctar dit Halis, stands before the Minaret of the Sankoré mosque. Built of mud plaster, the minaret is pierced with beams that serve as scaffolding when renovations must be done.

Photo by Sheila Hirtle

dunes."

Whatever the legends may say, most historians agree that the Tuareg are descendants of Berber groups that were driven from the Mediterranean plains of northern Africa by various invasions and conquests. One way or another, the nomads made the desert their home and founded Timbuktu in the eleventh century. Their camp gradually became an important gateway to the Sahara. Traders began showing up from the river and points farther south, accumulating goods for a venture across the desert itself.

The Tuareg did not hold sway over the city for long, however. Over the centuries Timbuktu has been owned by a succession of foreign emperors, kings, and sultans. From time to time the Tuareg have descended on the city to take it for a decade or two, or merely to loot and pillage before retreating to the desert again. Theirs has not been an altogether happy history. They're a proud and even arrogant culture, but their present status is uncertain and their future bleak. Rather like Timbuktu's.

Arawan lies some 180 miles almost due north of Timbuktu, a six days' slog on foot and camel. It is the last real town—with the last wells—on the way to the historic salt mines of Taoudenni and Taghaza, more than 200 and 300 miles farther on. From the thirteenth century until well into the seventeenth, that salt was quarried by slaves and carried in great blocks by camel to Timbuktu in exchange for gold. Modern salt gatherers from Timbuktu still use Arawan as a way station to Taoudenni (Taghaza is now abandoned). In its heyday, however, Arawan had 3,000 inhabitants and 170 productive wells; today, with the dunes rolling relentlessly in, it has only a handful of residents and two wells.

Arawan was also a way station for caravans headed still farther north across the desert. They would continue on to Taoudenni or Taghaza, or both, to water their camels and rest. Ahead they faced a desert that flattened into monotonous stony plains, with not even a dune or a ridge or a boulder as relief. Still, convoys of as many as 10,000 camels streamed across those reaches, carrying gold and slaves to the towns north of the Sahara, and bringing back manufactured goods from the

Mediterranean along with salt from the desert itself [see map below].

The major sources of gold were to the south, in modern Ghana, Guinea, and Senegal. To the east, on the Niger River, was Gao, capital of the Songhai empire, considered one of the three greatest empires that arose in West Africa. While the empire flourished, from 1464 until about 1600, its kings ruled over Timbuktu. Beyond Gao, caravans from Timbuktu reached other peoples and centers, connecting via the Nile with Egypt and ultimately with the caliphs of Baghdad and the holy places of Mecca and Medina.

Nowadays, from Timbuktu west to the Atlantic it is all desert. Along the way the traveler passes Walata, once a rival to Timbuktu but now much decayed, and the ruins of many far older cities. Among them is Koumbi Saleh, in what is now southeastern Mauritania. It was the capital of the Ghana-Wagadu empire, considered the first great empire of West Africa, which flourished ca. 300 b.c. until a.d. 1100. Today all one sees of the city is crumbling rubble. Also remarkable are the thousands of slag deposits from the smelting of iron ore that have been found on the north bank of the Niger. The area now has no forests for fuel. Southwest, upriver on the Niger, one encounters the city of Mopti, as old as Timbuktu, and the more ancient city of Djenné. Farther on is the heartland of the second of the great West African empires, which prevailed from 1235 until ca. 1500. That was Mali, for which the modern state is named, but the precise location of its capital, Niani, is unknown.



Strategically positioned near the Niger River, Timbuktu owed its rise to trade in gold and slaves, manufactured goods from the Mediterranean, and salt from the Sahara desert itself.

Map by Joe LeMonnier (www.mapartist.com)

Caravan routes once led north across the desert from Koumbi Saleh and other early centers, as did the later routes from Timbuktu. Why those earlier routes fell into disuse and why the cities crumbled is one of the fascinating puzzles of African archaeology. It may have been a combination of ecological collapse, desertification (partly human-caused), and the turmoil of warfare and religious strife. Known climate changes in the southern Sahara provide important clues. Most of the abandonment of settlements took place during a dry phase from 1100 until 1500. The founding of Timbuktu also corresponds with the start of that phase, and may explain why the nomads showed up where they did at the Niger River.

Timbuktu itself is not short of water. Its municipal wells maintain their steady flow from aquifers deep below the surface: fossil waters left over from more verdant times, still being recharged by the Niger. Yet the city's immediate neighborhood is changing, the dunes edging ever closer.



Shindouk Mohamed Lamine Ould Najim, chief of a tribe of Bérabiche Tuareg

Photo by Miranda Dodd

Shindouk Mohamed Lamine Ould Najim [see photograph below] is the chief of a small tribe of Bérabiche whose desert camp is near Arawan. He has a house in Timbuktu, but spends much of his time in the desert. He makes his living operating camel caravans and as a guide, steering not only individual parties, but also movie crews, survey expeditions, prospectors, and adventurers through some of the most difficult terrain on earth. Shindouk comes from a long and illustrious line of desert experts, which is what his business card calls him: *guide de Tombouctou, expert du désert*.

Shindouk's father, Najim, was one of the most famous Saharan guides of them all. Tales of his exploits are legion. Once he even helped save a lost convoy at long distance, by radio. The convoy's guides had become confused and disoriented. With only a few quarts of water remaining, they managed to get Timbuktu on the radio to ask for help. Someone called for Najim. When he came to the military post where the transmitter was, he asked to speak to the most senior guide present.

"Describe the place," he demanded. "What does it look like, the horizon? What is its shape to the west and the north, to the south and the east? Are there any hills? Are there dunes, and what size and shape? Is the ground stony?"

The guide did as he was asked.

"Pick up some sand," said Najim. "Tell me its color: is it clear, with white grains, or dark, with black particles? And its feel. How big are the grains? Is it sharp to the fingers?"

The guide obeyed once again.

Najim sifted the descriptions in his mind. Then he said, "You describe a small mountain ahead of you, to the north. Go there, turn west when you get there, travel for half an hour, and call me again."

Three hours later the convoy reached the mountain and turned left as instructed. Najim came back on the radiophone.

"Do you see a large free-standing rock off to your left?" he asked.

"We do."

"Get the men to push it over. There is water beneath it."

On another occasion, a military convoy had been trying to map the boundary with Algeria. The military frequently employed civilian freelance guides, who sometimes felt exploited and underpaid. Najim had taken this convoy deep into the desert, and one day, he stopped. "I feel dizzy," he said. "I can't even tell where the west is, or where the north. I don't know what to do."

The convoy leaders began to panic. "What can we do?" they asked.

"Two things might help," Najim replied. "More money, and an honorary commission in the Army."

An urgent phone call to Timbuktu military headquarters got patched through to Bamako, the capital, and a short time later the president of the republic himself called to personally award Najim his officer's commission. He also got more money. The mapping survey continued amicably.

In the past, the caravans coming in from the deep desert would have been met by a commercial agent and escorted into town. Then the tallest structure in Timbuktu would not have been the water tower one sees today, but the minaret of the Sankoré mosque, already more than a hundred years old when Timbuktu was occupied by the forces of the Mali emperor Musa, in the middle 1300s. That event heralded the start of Timbuktu's first golden age, and its first great expansion as the main entrepôt for the southern Sahara and a haven for scholars of Islam. The city's second and most significant golden age came several centuries later, under the rule of the kings of Gao.

Then as now, Timbuktu was made largely of mud. The mosques are still mainly mud, as are the tombs and shrines. The central town is a maze of narrow alleyways punctuated by secretive doorways, some providing a glimpse of courtyards, and glassless windows with intricately carved screens of wood. At intervals are ruined buildings and vacant lots that look like bomb sites, but the only bomb that has dropped is time. A shrinking population has no money to repair a city made of mud, in which the buildings melt in the wet-season rains unless protected by fresh plaster.



Pedestrians walk past the Sankoré Mosque. Much of the present construction dates to the nineteenth century, but the mosque was established in the late 1100s.

Photo by Marq de Villiers

We paid a visit to Abdel Kader Haïdara, whose home sprawls off one of the unnamed sandy



A street in the old quarter of Timbuktu. In the foreground with sunglasses is Guiré, a member of the Dogon, one of the indigenous peoples of Mali.

Photo by Marq de Villiers



Road work outside the Djingareiber Mosque

Photo by Sheila Hirtle

alleys in the southeast quadrant of the city. The windowless main living room was sheltered from the sun, turquoise and cool, with carpets on the floor and red plush banquettes. The walls were lined with bookcases and cabinets and a hulking television set. After the first pleasantries, our conversation ranged from the legends about the founding of Timbuktu, through the golden age of the city, to its gradual decline after the Moroccan invasions some 400 years ago.

Eventually we fell to discussing Ahmed Baba, a scholar who died in the early 1600s but whose name is often still mentioned as though he were a favorite uncle who has just popped out for a quick prayer. Ahmed Baba's personal library included some 1,600 volumes when he died, but he had often remarked that his was one of the lesser collections. We knew that our host was himself the head of the family that owned the Mamma Haidara Library, one of the largest extant collections of ancient manuscripts left in the region, a priceless link to the glorious past.

Could we see it?

We could, indeed. The building that housed it was undergoing much-needed and expensive renovations, so Haidara had, well, brought a good deal of it home. Where better to keep an

eye on it? It was his, after all. Our host led us back into the outer courtyard. In one wall was a battered corrugated-iron door, locked with an old-fashioned padlock. Haidara fished a bunch of keys from his robe and opened the door, pushing it inward with a grinding sound. Inside the small room we saw tottering piles of ancient manuscripts, some in loose bundles, some in battered tin trunks or leather portfolios, others simply heaped on the dusty floor.

Buried in those floor-to-ceiling stacks were all the great themes of Timbuktu's history, the very reasons it exerted such an hypnotic attraction on the Mediterranean world: its flowering, from a pasturing place for Tuareg nomads into a trading emporium that prospered on gold and salt and slaves; its reputation for wealth, which loomed so large it attracted the attention of the Venetian traders and then of the sultan of Morocco Ahmad al-Mansur, who wanted the gold traffic for himself to further his ambition to supplant the Caliphs of Baghdad; and its preeminence as a center of learning, of Islamic scholarship, luring the learned and the pious from Alexandria, Baghdad, Cordoba, Fez, Marrakech, Mecca, Tlemcen, Tripoli.

Intellectual wealth, religious piety, and commercial wealth are intertwined all through the city's history. Only political wealth is missing. Many powerful sovereigns wanted to control Timbuktu, and sometimes they did; but it never became the capital of anything. It was the outlying commercial emporium first of the Mali kings, governing from the southwest, then the rulers of Songhai, governing from the east, then the sultans of Morocco, governing from the north, across the sand seas. In between it was governed, mostly ineptly and fiercely, by various occupiers—the Bambara, now Mali's majority ethnic group; the nomadic Fulani, a cattle-herding people; and the Tuareg themselves. But it never ran its own affairs.



Dust storm over Timbuktu: These storms typically precede the rainy season of June and July.

Photo by Miranda Dodd

Political power still eludes it. After fifty years of independence, the Malian state has yet to build a highway from the capital, Bamako, to Timbuktu. Timbuktu is a northern town, a Tuareg town, a frontier town. No one in the capital cares.

[Hear Marq de Villiers interviewed by Peter Brown, Editor-in-Chief of *Natural History*. \(MP3, 14.6 minutes\)](#)



A husband-and-wife team who live in Port Medway, Nova Scotia, **Marq de Villiers** and **Sheila Hirtle** have collaborated on a number of books. Their latest joint effort, the basis for their article in this issue, is [Timbuktu: The Sahara's Fabled City of Gold](#), which is being published in August by Walker & Company. Among their earlier collaborations are *Sahara: The Life of the Great Desert and Into Africa: A Journey Through the Ancient Empires*. In sharp thematic contrast, they are also the authors of *Blood Traitors*, the saga of German immigrant families caught up in the American Revolution, and *Sable Island*, the story of an enigmatic sandbar off Nova Scotia. De Villiers was born in South Africa, and his first book, *White Tribe Dreaming*, was a history of the Afrikaners of South Africa. His other books include *Windswept: The Story of Wind*

and *Weather*. A native Canadian, Hirtle is an editor and researcher with a background in fine art and design, marketing, and journalism. Her projects include a wide-ranging study of African art and music.

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