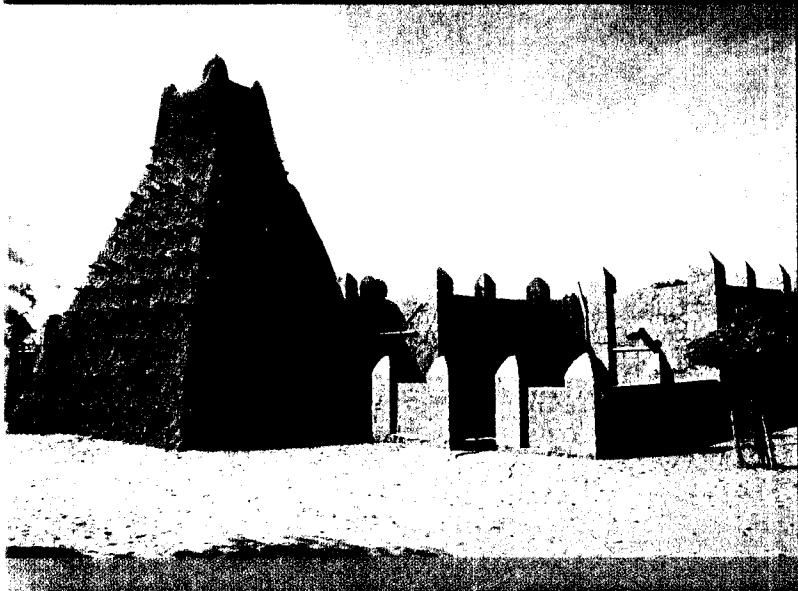


THE TOMES OF

*There was treasure buried beneath
the sands of the Sahara, and now it
shines again* By ALAN HUFFMAN

A DUSTY HAZE MUTES THE HORIZON IN TIMBUKTU during the dry season, so on this mid-December evening the sun simply fades away without setting. Dusk settles upon the wide, sandy streets and mud-bricked alleys, and the city, without streetlights, descends into the darkness of the desert. Silhouettes drift past lamp-lit windows, and the fires of street-side clay ovens send shadows dancing up the walls.



Children materialize from the darkness, run up and clasp the hands of strangers, then disappear. The sky is soon dense with stars, and meteorites streak by so often and seemingly so close that I actually swing my head when one appears to shoot like a bottle rocket toward the street below.

My friends and I are sprawled on the steps of our hotel, watching the apparitions and shooting stars and the occasional bouncing headlight of an unexpected moped go by, when a young man steps into the arc of dim light falling from the building's doors. "Do you remember me?" he asks, repeating a refrain we have heard countless times from people on the street here, usually from young men dressed in too-neat Tuareg outfits who want to be our guide or to sell crafts. We do remember this guy, a lean Malian whose robe actually looks worn. He approached us a few days before, and, like so many people in Timbuktu over the last millennium and almost everyone of a certain age today, he wanted to sell something—in his case T-shirts. His name is Ali Baba Ahdoudoye. Tonight he wants only to talk. He asks how we like the place, then casually throws out his most tantalizing tidbit of local color. "My family, we have important manuscripts," he says, taking a seat on the steps.

love for the old books," he says, his face suddenly animated.

At this point it occurs to me: Only in Timbuktu would you likely meet a T-shirt salesman who spends his evenings deciphering ancient texts. What is even more amazing is that, in Timbuktu, this is not extraordinary.

FOR MANY TRAVELERS, the chief reason for visiting Timbuktu is to say they did, to check the place off the intrepid world-travel list. That is why you occasionally meet hawkers selling T-shirts that proclaim, "I've been to Timbuktu and back!" The name instantly conjures a location that is remote and inaccessible, and with good reason. By the mid-19th century, only four Europeans had made it here, and not all of them made it back alive. From Morocco, on the north side of the Sahara Desert, the traditional camel trek took more than 50 days. Today, by four-wheel-drive, reaching the city requires an arduous, dusty, 20-hour drive from Mali's capital, Bamako, 135 miles of which is off-road.

Visitors often express disappointment in what they find upon arrival, and the city does appear to be little more than a squalid, forgotten outpost of mud and concrete buildings in the desert, whose shimmering sand dunes and rocky escarp-

There is something transcendent about the mix of people on the streets, which offers

This time there is no salesman's pitch in his voice.

His family library is more than 400 years old, Ahdoudoye says, and, like most that survive from the series of crucibles that destroyed the former Mali Empire, its manuscripts were long ago hidden to prevent them from being looted during successive foreign occupations. I am generally familiar with such manuscripts, most of which were written from the 13th to the 16th centuries, when Timbuktu was a citadel of learning known across Africa. There is a push to preserve the texts before it is too late. Most that were not looted or destroyed hundreds of years ago now languish in rotting boxes, and they are deteriorating into dust.

Ahdoudoye says he is translating his family's books from Arabic and has so far learned from them how to make medicine from tree sap "for use in the treatment of surgery wounds," how to find water in the desert and how to find your way by closely observing a camel's behavior. His mother told him the texts had been handed down from generation to generation, always with the admonition that the family must never let them go. "I have



Imam Mahamoudou Baba Hesseye, right, at a library. His family protected a stash of books for 500 years.

ments stretch for more than 1,000 miles to the north and 3,000 miles east to west. Even the guidebooks typically note that Timbuktu has little to show for its storied past. The city appears listless and hopelessly poor, with little infrastructure. Impressive drifts of discarded plastic bags accumulate everywhere—against buildings, in the dunes, in the branches of the few stunted trees. Rivulets of sewage flow down the middle of the streets,

MAP BY MARY KATE CANNISTRARO; PHOTOGRAPH BY ALAN HUFFMAN



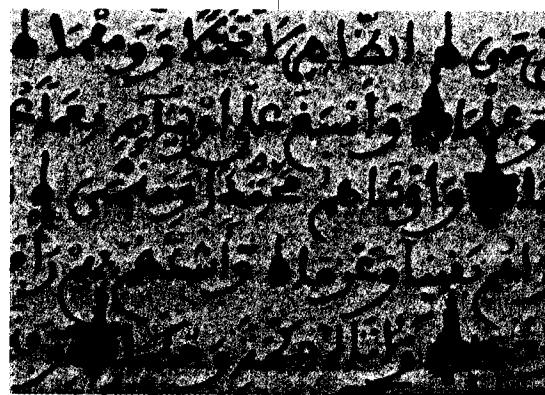


the first clue that Timbuktu is more than a down-and-out way station in the desert.

Two manuscripts of the Koran. The document below, from the collection of texts at the Ahmed Baba Center in Timbuktu, is dated 1223.

soaking into the sand. But there is something transcendent, and instantly engaging, about the mix of people on those streets, which offers the first clue that Timbuktu is more than a stranded, down-and-out way station in the desert. Each day an eclectic parade of humanity passes in front of our hotel: camel-mounted nomads in indigo robes and turbans; rakish Arab merchants selling silver jewelry and carved ebony; families of indeterminate ethnicity piled atop overloaded donkey carts; mothers in colorful African gowns with bowls on their heads and babies on their backs; Muslim women clothed from head to toe; a few gangsta wannabes; and pretty girls in J. Lo T-shirts riding smoking mopeds. It looks like a casting call for a bizarre movie that I cannot begin to imagine—part “Lawrence of Arabia,” part “The Road Warrior.” The question comes to mind: What are these people doing together here, in the middle of nowhere?

During three days in Timbuktu I pose the question to



anyone I think might have an answer, or who seems willing to give it a shot. The consensus is that before colonization, the city was a point of convergence for caravans from the Mediterranean, via the Sahara, and from West Africa, via the nearby Niger River. Though dark-skinned Africans—whom their northern counterparts sometimes refer to as “Africa Africans”—had long made use of the local well, the city itself was founded in about 1100 by desert nomads. So the cultural melange was initially about water, and then about trade.

This is where the story of Timbuktu gets interesting. Commerce in gold, ivory, salt and slaves made the city fabulously wealthy from the 13th to the 16th centuries, and the city's

leading families parlayed those profits into universities and libraries, now known by their French name, *bibliothèques*, which attracted students from throughout Africa and the Middle East. Publishing and the manufacture, copying and trade of books and manuscripts became Timbuktu's leading industry at a time when the Renaissance was just beginning in Europe.

Then, starting with invasion and occupation by the Moroccan army in 1591, and cul-

minating with colonization by France in the 1880s and '90s, most of the great libraries were looted or destroyed. The centers of learning collapsed, and the majority of the evidence of Timbuktu's contributions to the world was lost—everything, that is, except what went underground, often literally. As Ahdoudoye puts it, "My family, they make the manuscripts down in the ground." History went to the victors; hence the story of Africa as a benighted continent, without so much as a rudimentary written record of its past.

MENTION AFRICA, and the typical Westerner pictures a place of violence, hunger, disease and ignorance. For much of the continent, recent history offers scant evidence to the contrary. The influence of Timbuktu and other educational centers in Africa on human civilization has garnered barely a footnote. Yet the story of Timbuktu's reign as a center of learning on a continent that is among the world's most diverse is not just a disclaimer trotted out for disappointed tourists. It is a work in progress, and scholars predict it will actually change history, and, in the process, put to rest the prevailing notion that Africa is one long tale of woe.

This interests me, so one morning my Moroccan friend and translator Brahim Karaoui and I strike out for a library that we

A man poles a boat across the shallow Niger River near Timbuktu.

legal treatises, manuals for conflict resolution and, remarkably, astronomical computations that predate Copernicus and Galileo. None of this is evident to the untrained eye—most of it is in Arabic—and I do not get much from Haidara. The furrow in his brow hints at the tedium and weight of his work, and he seems a bit guarded about discussing the texts—an understandable response, considering that outsiders have not always had the best interests of Timbuktu in mind when inquiring about them. As Brahim translates, Haidara gently deflects my questions about the families who hoarded the books, directing me instead to the imam of the Grand Mosque.



I have been told that the manuscripts contain poetry, religious missives and astronomical computations that predate Copernicus and Galileo.

have been told has the largest collection of texts in Timbuktu, the Ahmed Baba Center, one of five official repositories in the city. Guided by a couple of giggling girls who eventually hand us off to a purposeful man, we find the nondescript complex of concrete buildings that make up the center, which was named for the scholar who headed Timbuktu's Sankore University in the pre-colonial era. Inside, perhaps 20 men are quietly cataloguing a cache that includes an estimated 20,000 manuscripts dating as far back as the 13th century. There is a lot of sorting going on. There is also a palpable sense of mission: No one stops working when the American and the Moroccan walk in the door.

The workers direct us to Bouya Haidara, a supervisor who is poring over book No. 1204 in a room filled with decaying, embossed leather-bound books and loose, yellowed manuscripts. The buildings of Ahmed Baba are not air-conditioned, and the few display cases would have long since been decommissioned in a more modern library, but the manuscripts do not disappoint. Written in a florid, almost baroque style of calligraphy, often with notes in the margin such as might be found in a used textbook, they are embellished with gold-laden ink and artful watercolors and drawings. I have been told that the manuscripts contain poetry, religious missives, travelogues, complex

After nosing around the record room for a while, Brahim and I head off through the warren of alleyways to find him.

On the ground, Timbuktu's air of mystery translates into an inscrutable urban layout, and we frequently have to stop to ask directions. Two elderly Tuaregs with Coke-bottle glasses lead us to a shop run by a woman who is preoccupied with learning how to operate her new cell phone. (Cell phone service arrived in Timbuktu recently, a graphic example of the weird advance of global technology, considering that the city has yet to otherwise acquire even the most basic infrastructure.) Without looking up from her phone, the shopkeeper tells us that the imam of the Grand Mosque is out of town. She then offers to dispatch a boy to retrieve another imam in his stead. Soon Mahamoudou Baba Hasseye, the affable imam at Timbuktu's Sidi Yahia Mosque, arrives, resplendent in a silver caftan, white turban and reflecting sunglasses.

It turns out that Hasseye has both ends of the story covered. Retired from the Malian cultural ministry, he is a leader in the campaign to gather and preserve the manuscripts, and a descendant of a family that for 500 years hoarded a stash of some 800 books by burying them in wooden boxes, including one

CONTINUED ON PAGE 31

tense, John rubbed his bald head reflexively as he waited for the verdict. When it came—the shot's good!—the crowd knew the second the coach did, because he thrust his fist into the air in vehement triumph. And there it was, right there, that thing he craves so fiercely.

"The high of highs," Monica says.

John came home that night, and his children rushed him in celebration, with squeals of "Yay, Daddy!" And then?

"And then," Monica says, "he watched tapes of St. John's."

It is a different life the family lives here, far different from at Princeton. The schedule is more brutal—Ivy League teams travel mostly on weekends—and so, too, is the travel. The hours are longer for John. He sees less of his family. Monica says she accepts this. She understands the challenge her husband has taken on, supports it.

But Gwen watches, and worries. She has made it her calling to remind her sons to carve out time for their children. John dismisses the suggestion that finding a balance between his work and his home life is some desperate challenge. "When I'm working, I'm not neglecting my children, and when I'm with my children, I'm not neglecting my job," he says, matter-of-factly. Still, Moms clearly can get to him. When she called his cell phone Christmas week and he was in his car on the way to work, his immediate comment, she says, was: "I'm on my way to the office, but I spent the morning with the kids. I spent the morning with the kids."

Does she wish her sons had chosen different professions?

"I want them to do what makes them happy," she says. "Whether it's a good thing, you can't make that decision until you reflect and look back. What did you accomplish? What did you lose? What did you gain?"

The night of the Notre Dame win, John took a break from watching tape so he, Monica and Morgan could play a fun, competitive game of Old Maid. Emphasis on competitive.

Who won?

"John," Monica says. Does he ever let Morgan win, since, after all, she is just a little kid?

"Of course not!" Monica answers, astonished. Let her win? That's not the Thompson way. Or her way, for that matter.

"That's why John and I are partners," says Monica, who worked in fundraising

and development at Princeton, and plans to do similar work with charities in Washington. "We both have this vision that a lot of life is about winning or losing. You carry yourself in a successful way. Sure, you can have failures, but you dust yourself off, and you learn something and move on."

"He's grounded," she says of her husband. "That's just who he is. Call it a good upbringing or what have you, but he's a really solid, grounded person."

And that is why, she says, she doesn't worry, ever, that all the hype and attention and discussion about being the son of the father will have an effect on her husband. She has known him 17 years, and she knows he's telling the absolute truth when he says that he long ago grew to understand, and grow comfortable with, who he is.

"I think part of it is, you share a name, you have no choice," she says.

When John and Monica were naming their firstborn son, it was not, Monica insists, a given that he would be yet another John. Other names got at least a test-drive. In the end, though, John it was. But not John IV. Their son is named for both of his grandfathers; his middle name is Wallace, after Monica's dad. That difference, though, will be lost on others once he is grown. Or sooner. Especially in Washington.

"John-John has no concept of his name at all," Monica says of her son. "But I already see it."

Recently, she was shopping and—as is common with the Thompson kids, who are indeed adorable—an adult began to fawn over the little boy.

"What's your name?" the grown-up asked him.

"My name is John Thompson!" he announced.

The adult started chuckling. "Oh," he said, "maybe you'll be the next coach of the Hoyas, too! Wouldn't that be funny?"

Monica quickly gathered the kids together and moved on. She is confident that, like his father, John-John will grow up to be comfortable with—and proud of—the legacy that comes with the name John Thompson.

But 3, she says, is a little early to start. ■

Jennifer Frey is a reporter for The Post's Style section. She will be fielding questions and comments about this article Monday at 1 p.m. at washingtonpost.com/liveonline.

Timbuktu

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 16

that sits in a corner of his living room. In passing, he mentions that his relatives have been imams at the Sidi Mosque since the 16th century. Among the intellectual leaders of pre-colonial Timbuktu was one of Hasseye's ancestors, Muhammad Baghayo-gho Wangari, who amassed a large library on law, literature, manufacturing, science, history, geography, Islam, astrology, traditional medicine and crafts. "People of influence in Timbuktu, he asks others to write, that's why there are so many *bibliothèques*," Hasseye says of Wangari and his peers. "He paid gold for knowledge."

HASSEYE LEADS US down a serpentine alley to his home, a simple but comfortable two-story mud-brick house typical of Timbuktu. Upstairs, his turquoise-washed living room is filled with books, both old and new, and after turning off a TV blaring a soccer match, he reclines upon a row of cushions and explains his family's legacy between sips of potent local tea. Speaking in French, the official language of Mali since the days when the landlocked West African nation was known as French Sudan, he says that in addition to his role as an imam, or religious teacher, he sees the preservation of the manuscripts as his calling. He believes the manuscripts confer upon his family a *baraka*, or blessing for life, he says.

The literary heyday, he says, lasted until the transatlantic slave trade and colonialism wrecked much of the continent. Timbuktu was an important center for a succession of empires that encompassed parts of present-day Mali, Mauritania, Ghana and Niger, but, "when colonization arrived, the first thing they do is destroy African cultures," Hasseye says. "Second, they destroy the economy. All the richness, they take it all. The richness deep in the earth, the manuscripts that were buried, they are unable to exploit."

Hasseye estimates there are more than 70,000 manuscripts in Timbuktu's official centers, but it is possible that far more survive—no one knows for sure. Although the documents are typically written in Arabic, some include passages in Hebrew and in African tribal languages. Most are scattered across holdings in Mali, Morocco and France, and some may still be buried in the sand. Even for the collections that remain in Timbuktu, the first hurdle in gathering and preserving them is to persuade families

to give them up, which is not always easy. It was the families' determination to hold on to them, after all, that ensured the manuscripts' survival. Some of the books are also important family histories, known as *tarikhs*.

The chief proponent of the effort to preserve the manuscripts of Timbuktu is Abdel Kader Haidara (no relation to Bouya), who is visiting the United States seeking support for the work while I am in Mali.

International interest in establishing a manuscript conservation center in Timbuktu has simmered since the late 1960s, but the project took on new vigor in the late 1990s, after Henry Louis Gates Jr., chairman of Harvard's African and African American studies department, visited during the filming of a PBS documentary and met Abdel Haidara. After two days of being cajoled, Haidara agreed to show Gates his family's manuscripts. Gates later tells me over the phone that seeing the books was a revelation. "It was one of the greatest moments of my life," he says. "I was overwhelmed."

"I knew that the mind of the black world was locked in

Timbuktu is on the southern edge of the vast Sahara Desert.

exhibit of 25 manuscripts this summer called "The Legacy of Timbuktu: Wonders of the Written Word."

The manuscripts on loan to the museum include writings on the Koran, animal rights, women's rights, food preparation, travel, the making and playing of musical instruments, art and conflict resolution. Among those who wrote

18th-century prince from what is now Guinea who studied at Timbuktu before being sold into slavery in Natchez, Miss. The prince's saga contradicts another widely held Western belief—that Africans sold in the slave trade were uncivilized. In fact, many were doctors, dentists, lawyers, professors, musicians and members of royal families. And a large number were Muslim.



"I knew that the mind of the black world was locked in those trunks," Gates says. "And when I held those books in my hands, tears rolled down my face."

those trunks," he says. "And when I held those books in my hands, tears rolled down my face." Gates previously had believed the claims of Western scholars, historians and philosophers that Africa had no intellectual tradition, no written record. "This put the lie to that," he says.

Gates helped Abdel Haidara get an Andrew Mellon Foundation grant to establish the Mamma Haidara Library, of which Haidara is now director.

Haidara, who continues to buy manuscripts for his library when they become available—in one case, for two cows—is collaborating with the International Museum of Muslim Cultures, in the unlikely location of Jackson, Miss. (chosen, it turns out, because Mississippi is the American state with the largest percentage of African Americans, many of them descendants of slaves who were Muslim). The Mississippi museum is planning an

about conflict resolution is Oumar Tall, a 19th-century scholar from Timbuktu. "Tragedy is due to divergence and because of a lack of tolerance. In the tradition of the Prophet, it is written that those who keep rancor in their hearts will not benefit from divine mercy . . .," he wrote. "It is written by the Guide of mankind that he who associates himself with God and kills voluntarily will not be pardoned.

"Glory be to he who creates greatness from difference and makes peace and reconciliation."

By bringing these manuscripts to the United States, Abdel Haidara later tells me by e-mail, he hopes to show that tolerance has a valued place in Islamic tradition.

The museum plans to highlight a little-known connection between its host state and the manuscripts of Timbuktu: the story of Ibrahima Abd ar-Rahman, an

BACK IN TIMBUKTU, we stroll to the Sankore Mosque, a mud pyramid whose exterior walls are studded with projecting beams used as scaffolding for making repairs after the brief rainy season. Mud, after all, dissolves in the rain, which makes it all the more remarkable that the building has stood since the 15th century. Again, the tenacity and pride of devoted Malians is the reason it survives: On mosque-patching day, everyone turns out to mix mud, and bolster and smooth the walls. The routine takes place all over Mali, and it is the one day each year that all mosques open their doors to non-believers—even the Great Mosque in Djenné, which shut out tourists after a Western woman, whose exact provenance no one, thankfully, seems to remember, was caught inside baring her breasts for a friend's video camera.

The Sankore Mosque is revered espe-

cially because it was the center of the university where Ahmed Baba, a 16th-century scholar, taught. As we stand before the building, soaking it all in, we hear a Snoop Dogg sample of the Doors' song "Riders on the Storm" wafting from a nearby cafe. Around the corner, a teenage boy named Ali, whom we have hired as a guide, points to a camouflaged truck and says it was left behind by Green Berets who were here recently, training local militias in counterterrorism. Some say the exercises have served only to politically empower rebels and bandits, who are fast turning the vast expanse of the Sahara north of Timbuktu into a no-man's land. On the day we depart, two tourists from Qatar will be kidnapped not far from Timbuktu, though later they will be released.

On the northern edge of Timbuktu, the streets slowly play out into the dunes, and mud and concrete buildings give way to the circular straw tents of nomads. Some of the nomads still travel in caravans of donkeys, or, occasionally, of hundreds of camels, to the salt mines in the deeper desert, traveling at night, when it is cool, navigating by the stars. It is a ritual that has been going on for a thousand years. Some of those camels tethered in the dunes are strictly for the tourists, though, and it is possible to charter a flight to an airfield south of the city, which means that the one seemingly incontrovertible fact about Timbuktu—that it is hard to get to—need no longer apply. It seems a safe bet that meaningful cultural change will not be far behind. Again.

People such as Hasseye and Abdel Haidara hope the study of the manuscripts will exert a positive influence in the coming years, though today their story is mostly one for esoteric scholars. Even Ahdoudoye, the T-shirt salesman on the hotel steps, concedes that increased appreciation of the texts comes at a time when, in his view, "the youth don't care so much about education. Now, they want hip-hop."

But Ahdoudoye's explanation for why his family held on to their manuscripts, and why he cares about them today, is powerfully simple: "It is our history," he says. "It is knowledge."

Alan Huffman is the author of *Mississippi in Africa*, which was recently published in paperback.

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