



Writings in the sand

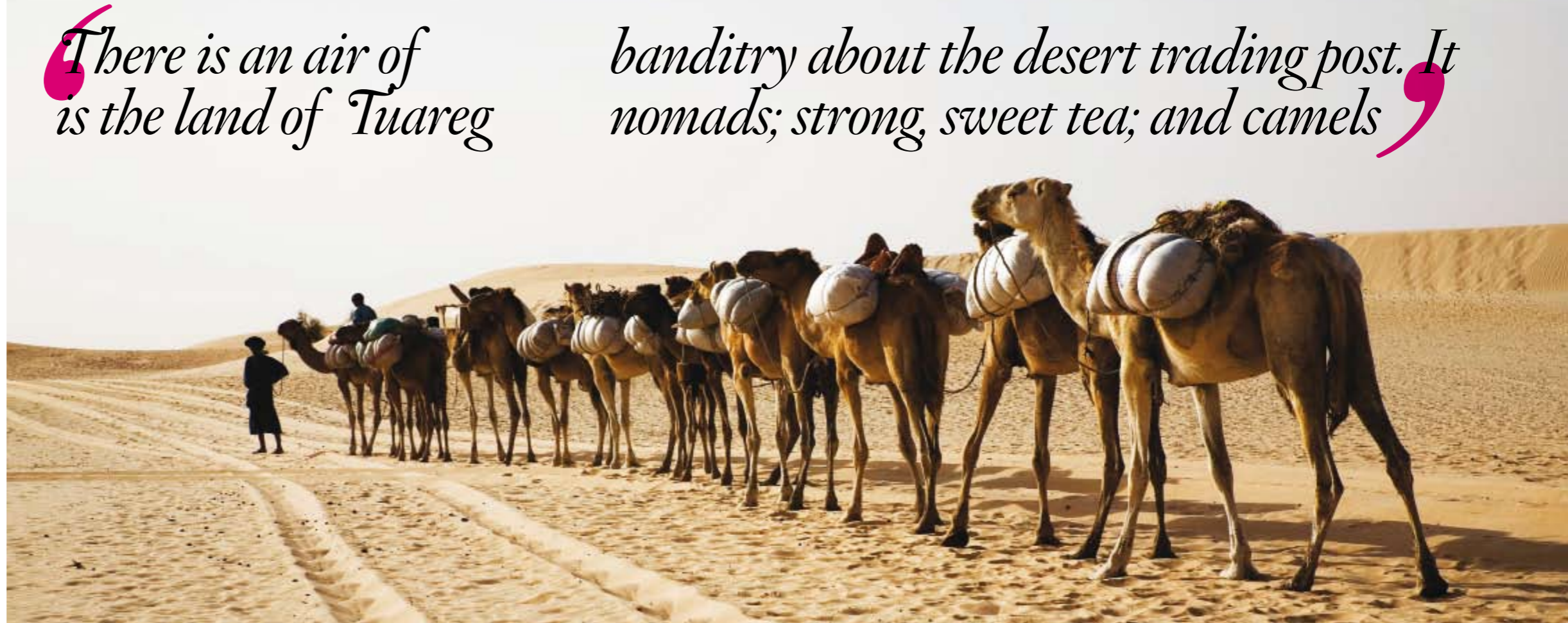
The discovery of priceless manuscripts from Timbuktu's golden age could forever reshape African history – and South Africa wants to be a part of it

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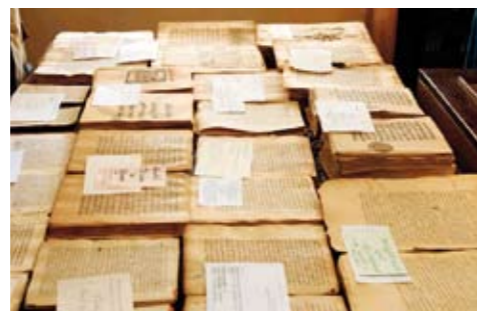


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PREVIOUS SPREAD
Archivists from the Ahmed Baba Institute at a Timbuktu mosque
ABOVE Salesman at the ferry crossing to Djenne, south-west of Timbuktu
ABOVE RIGHT On the trans-Saharan trade route
RIGHT The ancient manuscripts could prove as significant a find as the Dead Sea Scrolls



Drowned in sand and desperately poor, modern-day Timbuktu, in northern Mali, has always lived in the shadow of its past. On any given afternoon, its dusty streets are enveloped in silence. Heat radiates from above and rises up from the hard-baked earth. If there is a wind, sand blows in from the Sahara Desert and drives people into their homes. The ramshackle houses of mud and tents of straw that dominate the city centre speak of a place whose time has past.

Timbuktu was also a world-renowned seat of learning, home to universities of more than 25 000 students and scholars. Yet the Timbuktu that has survived into the 21st century is one of the poorest places on earth. Almost one-third of Malians are malnourished and 90% of the population survives, barely, on less than R14 a day. For many hours daily, Timbuktu's 30 000 inhabitants get by with neither electricity nor running water. Sewage runs in rivulets all along the sandy streets. In a city once famed for its scholarship, there is not a single book shop. The only reminder of the exotic allure the city once possessed has, until now, been its wonderfully rhythmical African name. But the discovery of vast storehouses of up to five million priceless manuscripts from the city's golden age could prove to be as significant as the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls and, in the process, forever reshape the history of Africa. In 1997, Harvard University professor Henry Louis Gates Jr visited Timbuktu. As a tireless campaigner against what he describes as the

most terrible of all cruelties visited upon the African people – the West's refusal to accept Africa as its intellectual equal – Gates was drawn to Timbuktu by rumours of hidden libraries in the sand. 'I knew that the mind of the black world was locked in those trunks,' he told the *Washington Post* of the moment when he came across the manuscripts. 'And when I held those books in my hands, tears rolled down my face.' Two years later, Dr John Hunwick, an expert in Africa's written history, made a similar discovery. Invited to view a private collection of books, he came across countless manuscripts dating to the 15th century. Among the leather-bound manuscripts were exquisite works of Islamic scholarship written on gold leaf. Later, volumes of poetry, philosophy, astronomy, mathematics, geography, physics, optics and medicine would emerge. There were also Shakespearean-esque tales of forbidden love and invocations to the Muslims of Timbuktu to practise religious tolerance. Some manuscripts contained notes in the margins,

from recipes to commentaries on weddings, funerals and the scarcity of rains. A 1583 meteor shower was recorded in vivid detail: 'Stars flew around the sky as if fire had been kindled in the whole sky, east, west, north and south. It became a mighty flame lighting up the earth, and people were extremely disturbed.' Timbuktu – *Tombouctou* in French – began as a nomadic Tuareg encampment at the place where the Niger River entered the Sahara Desert or, as one ancient traveller described it, where 'the camel met the canoe'. The first known inhabitant was a former slave-woman called Bouctou (whose name means 'large navel'). She tended the nomads' animals at a well (*tim* in the Tamasheq language of the local Tuareg people) that still stands in the city centre. Thus it is that a name that would captivate the world literally means the 'Well of the Slave Woman with a Large Navel'. Timbuktu's location was its greatest gift. Here, traders ferrying goods from the Mediterranean – glass and paper from Venice, pearls from Paris and linen from France – via

trans-Saharan trade routes met the peoples of the south who brought gold, salt, ivory and slaves to exchange. Timbuktu quickly became the commercial capital of West Africa. The manuscripts that survive bear witness to its distinguished history. At the Ahmed Baba Institute – the largest library in Timbuktu with at least 23 000 manuscripts – Djibril Doucoure, the centre's Chief of Restoration and Conservation, pulls a brittle, leather-bound manuscript from one of the glass cases that line the walls. In flourishes of ornate calligraphy, the book tells how early Malian sovereign, King Abubakari II, sent his ships across the seas in an attempt to discover the Americas 200 years before Columbus. His successor, King Kankan Musa, perhaps the greatest of all African kings, went on a 1324 pilgrimage to Mecca, reportedly accompanied by an entourage of more than 60 000 people bearing 180 000kg in gold. As he travelled east, the king distributed so much gold as gifts that world gold prices plummeted and it was a generation before the market recovered.

Manuscripts also tell the story of the city's demise. When armies from Morocco swept into Timbuktu in 1593 to plunder its riches, the elders of the city responded with a scholarly rebuke: that nowhere in the Koran could they find justification for one Muslim nation invading and enslaving another. Unimpressed, the invaders put Timbuktu's scholars in chains, mounted them on camels and sent them into exile. By this time Portuguese traders had also begun to arrive on the West African coast, thereby reorienting Africa's trade away from the Sahara. Timbuktu began a decline from which it never recovered.

RESTORING AFRICA'S LITERARY HERITAGE
I shelter with Mary Minicka on the terrace of Timbuktu's Hotel Colombe, waiting for the midday heat to pass. The only movement on Timbuktu's main street below are donkeys stirring up the sand and bearing wicker baskets of salt from the great mines of Taoudenni, deep in the desert's heart. ▶

Manuscripts survived thanks to families who stored them in trunks, which were buried beneath the sand



Part of a South African team of manuscript conservators, Minicka has the delicate task of restoring Timbuktu's literary heritage. She and her team examine each document for signs of damage. The pages are then 'dry-cleaned' using soft brushes and erasers to remove dust, grit and grime. This is followed by the use of water and chemical solutions – the most risky stage. Then books are bound, with local leatherworkers trained to adapt their skills to imitate ancient book-binding techniques. The final step involves constructing a 'rare-book box' for safe storage.

Minicka speaks of 'an astounding book-making tradition' that surpassed anything Europe could muster until the invention of movable type in the 15th century. In a later email, she writes, 'I feel that I am the kiddie in the candy shop when I am in Timbuktu.'

Her colleague, Alexio Motsi, explains the manuscripts have survived thanks to local families who stored them in wooden trunks, which were buried beneath the sand or hidden in desert caves, to save them from invaders, whether the Moroccans of the 15th century or the French colonial forces who arrived four centuries later. Experts believe the manuscripts found represent only a fraction of what originally existed. This raises the delicious speculation that beneath the shifting Saharan sands lie reams of undiscovered manuscripts.

However, the desert climate means the paper on which the manuscripts were printed – and which normally has a lifespan of 500 years – has become very brittle. Termites have also taken their toll. The difficulties of keeping the manuscripts in the controlled conditions necessary for preservation are also all too evident in a city where power supply is erratic and wind-blown sand manages to inveigle its

way into every corner. For this reason, South Africa is also funding the construction of a new library, just across from the mud minaret of the Sankore Mosque, where great scholars once roamed the corridors and books lined the walls.

REWRITING HISTORY

To understand why such efforts at conservation matter, and why the discoveries of manuscripts in the sand have generated such excitement, it is necessary to remember what once passed as authoritative African history. Africa, historians had argued, was a continent with no written history, its past reduced to unsophisticated hearsay in the hands of Africa's lyrical but unreliable storytellers.

In 2001, President Thabo Mbeki, on a state visit to Mali, visited the manuscripts and came away convinced that cultural projects such as these could form the centrepiece of his crusade to oversee an African renaissance. Listing the manuscripts of Timbuktu alongside other well-known signposts to a sophisticated African past – the pyramids of Egypt, the obelisks of Aksum in Ethiopia, the Benin bronzes – Mbeki inaugurated 'Operation Timbuktu', the first official cultural project of Nepad, the socioeconomic revival plan of the African Union.

One of the translators involved in the South African-funded project, Aslam Farouk-Alli, told *The Mail & Guardian* newspaper: 'The common wisdom... was that written history in Africa only began with the arrival of Europeans. This legacy is proving exactly the opposite, that Africans wrote their own history from as early as the 13th century onwards. Obviously, this is phenomenal. What these manuscripts represent is a retrieval of our authentic past.' ►

ABOVE The Bandiagara Escarpment in Pays Dogon, en route from the capital, Bamako, to Timbuktu

FUNDS OF KNOWLEDGE

LOCAL JOURNALIST ANDY DAVIS WENT TO TIMBUKTU TO VISIT THE RESEARCH FACILITY INTO WHICH SA IS INVESTING R50-MILLION

The co-ordinated chaos of the building site was in contrast to the decaying mud and sand structures around it. On site, Malian construction workers in shiny new overalls and hard hats scurried about like ants on Red Bull. Timbuktu's hot, slow and hazy atmosphere was transformed by this hive of activity, partly due to the presence of a visiting South African political entourage.

As a journalist, I tailed behind the flow of dignitaries and politicians, uncomfortable in their prickly suits. The entourage was led by Minister in the Presidency Essop Pahad, there to crack the whip and ensure the South African-funded project meets its construction deadlines. There had already been several delays due to problems with construction workers, building techniques and materials, not to mention the isolation, the heat and the Saharan sands.

The name 'Timbuktu' has an aura of mystery, but the place is an anti-climax. Port Nolloth of the Sahara. There is an air of banditry about the desert trading post. Dark blue turbans and robes are the uniform. It is the land of Tuareg nomads; strong, sweet tea; and camels.

South Africa is spending more than R50-million of taxpayers' money on a state-of-the-art research facility and museum here. Why? Two beautiful words: African renaissance.

The story goes like this. President Thabo Mbeki arrives in Timbuktu on an African Union trip. At the Ahmed Baba Institute, he sees the ancient manuscripts. He recognises that here is tangible proof of Africa's intellectual heritage and declares the manuscripts to be among the continent's 'most important cultural treasures'.

In a BBC interview, Pahad said, 'This was not just a question of us making a small contribution to helping Mali preserve this fantastic history, but also to help raise the consciousness of our own people about our own continent, our own history, our own rich culture and traditions.'

Libya also has an interest in Timbuktu, with Colonel Muammar Gaddafi planning to upgrade a Timbuktu hotel into a 'mega resort' and dig a canal linking Timbuktu with the Niger River.

South Africa and Libya's diplomatic tussle for influence in the African Union has each country promoting its vision for the African renaissance. On the sidelines, charities, governments and NGOs from Europe, the US and the Middle East are channelling millions of rands into the preservation of Timbuktu family libraries.

As our plane lifted off in a wide arc exposing the extent of the dishevelled sandy town, I was reminded of what Malian historian Abdel Kader Haidara told *The New York Times*: 'Timbuktu is coming back. It will rise again.' ●



ABOVE Archivists from the Ahmed Baba Institute with their new BMW X5, donated by BMW South Africa



TRAVEL NOTES MALI

BEST TIME TO GO April to October. Avoid the harsh Saharan summer.

VISA South African citizens need a visa. It takes about five working days and costs R300.

WHERE TO SLEEP La Maison (www.lesmaisonsdumali.com). This new boutique hotel is by far the best place to stay in Timbuktu. Hotel Hendrina Khan (+223-292-1681), a little older and slightly more run down, offers a slice of the surreal Timbuktu experience.

WHERE TO EAT The best place to eat is your hotel. A few restaurants and roadside stalls offer

local dishes. A popular restaurant is on top of the Grand Marche and there is a decent patisserie across the road from the one and only post office.

HOW TO GET THERE It takes about 12 hours driving from Mopti to Timbuktu. The more hardcore spend a few days crossing the desert in a 4x4 from Gao. The sensible take a slow four-day riverboat trip from Mopti. There are flights from Bamako or Mopti, but the schedules are erratic.

HEALTH PRECAUTIONS Yellow fever, diphtheria and tetanus inoculations are required, and it's a good idea to take anti-malaria pills. Extensive travel-insurance cover is advisable.