THE ISLAMIC LEGACY OF TIMBUKTU

by
Tahir Shah

The Caravan of **Sultan Mansa Musa, ruler of the Mali Empire**, snaked its way through the scorching heat of the central Sahara on its long return from the 1324 pilgrimage to Makkah. Eight thousand soldiers, courtiers and servants - some say as many as 60,000 - drove 15,000 camels laden with gold, perfume, salt and stores of food in a procession of unrivaled size.

Their destination was, first, the newly conquered city of Gao, on the Niger River. From there, they turned toward another metropolis just added to the Mali Empire, one surrounded by unrelenting dunes, a fabled oasis city on which Mansa Musa had longed to make his mark: Timbuktu. Thirsty and flagging under the searing sun, the caravan entered Timbuktu's ochre walls in the year 1325.

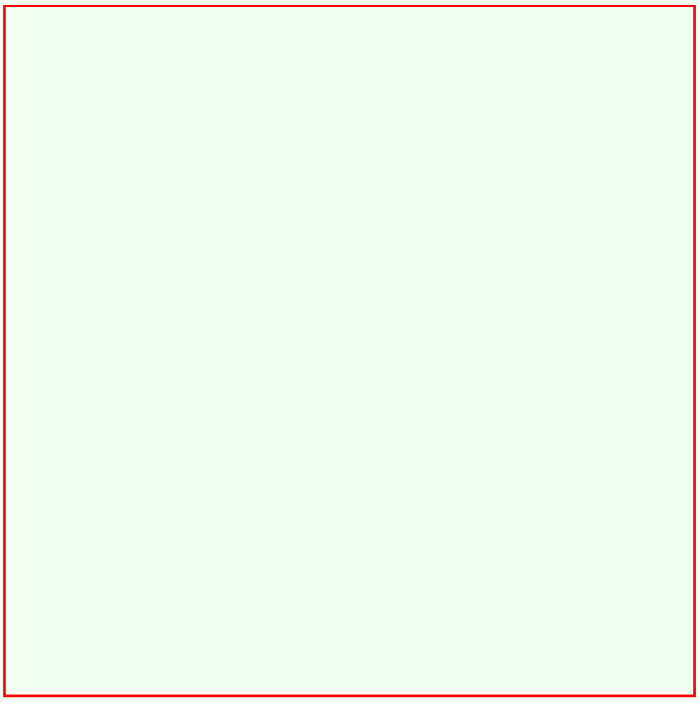
No word in English connotes remoteness more than Timbuktu. Thanks to the astonishing wealth that Mansa Musa had displayed on his visits to Cairo and Makkah, it also connoted riches. **For eight centuries, Timbuktu captured the imaginations of both East and West, albeit for very different reasons.** In 1620, the English explorer **Richard Jobson** wrote:

> The most flattering reports had reached Europe of the gold trade carried on at Timbuktu. The roofs of its houses were represented to be covered with plates of gold, the bottoms of the rivers to glisten with the precious metals, and the mountains had only to be excavated to yield a profusion of the metallic treasure.

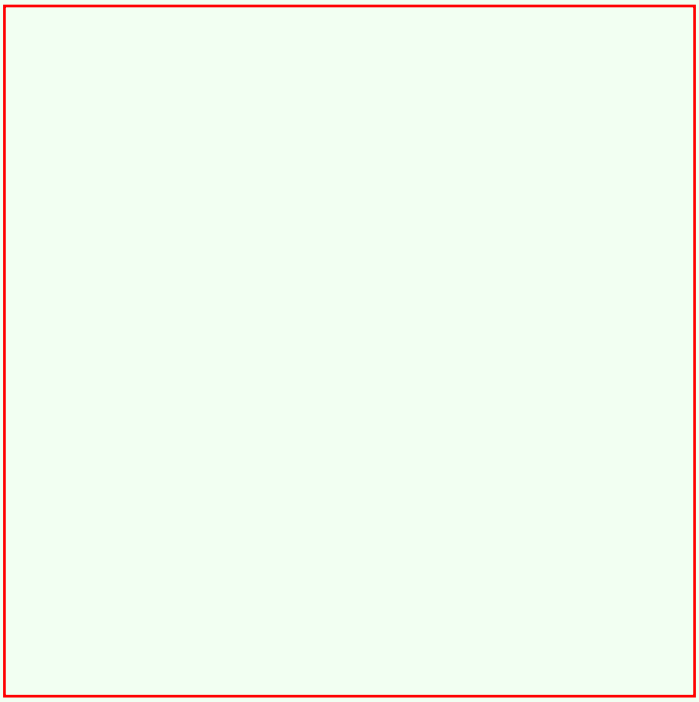
Other reports said that rosewater flowed in the city's fountains and that the sultan showered each visitor with priceless gifts. **Europe's greatest explorers set out to risk their lives in search of the riches of Timbuktu.** Exploration and travel societies sponsored competitions, with prize for the man who reached there by the most difficult route. In fact, most European travelers perished before they ever saw the city rise above the desert horizon, and those who did get there found that the tales they had heard had missed the point.

Muslim travelers - Most notably **Ibn Battuta and Hasan al-Wazan**, also called Leo Africanus - were no less eager to visit the city, but for them and a host of rulers, dignitaries and scholars from Morocco to Persia, the remote city held riches of another sort: Timbuktu was the starting point for African pilgrims going on the Hajj, and a center of some of the finest - and most generously available - Islamic scholarship of the Middle Ages.

Located in today's Mali, Some 12 kilometers (eight miles) north of the Niger flood-plain along the southern edge of the Sahara, Timbuktu today is little more than a sleepy, sweltering stop on the adventure-tourism trail. Most visitors fly in and out in a single afternoon; the city's days as a caravanserai and desert entrepot are long past.



A more purposeful visit, however, has its rewards. There is much to see as one strolls about the stark streets, lingers, looks beyond the soft-drink stalls and engages in casual conversation here and there. Although Timbuktu has been conquered many times by many powers, absorbed into one empire after another, none ever sacked or looted it. As a result, **traces of its Islamic legacy appear at almost every turn.** Qur'anic inscriptions decorate doorways. The tombs of hundreds of famous scholars and revered teachers dot the town - some unremembered, some within the knowledge of local guides. Most noticeably, a handful of fabulous mosques reel upward into the brilliant African sky and constitute the anchor points of the city's plan.



Set on the Islamic world's southwestern edge, Timbuktu was the product of an eclectic mixture of West African and Arab influences that found in Islam a common denominator. Its peoples often saw themselves as the faithful pitted against the pagans lurking beyond the city's walls. **Tuareg, Fulani, Berbers, Soninke and Songhoi lived side by side, in peace, bound together by their belief in God [Allah], their acceptance of the Qur'an, and their familiarity with Arabic.**

Because the city lay on the periphery of the kingdoms that ruled it - and was left to its own devices by

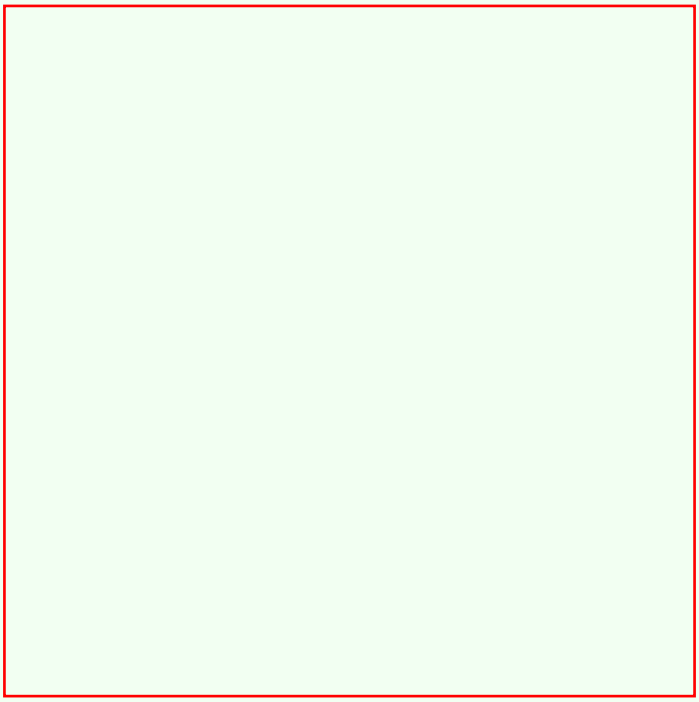
most of them - the community of Timbuktu was forced through isolation to look inward. This introspective attitude influenced all aspects of Timbuktu's society, and nowhere did this become more apparent than in its pious pursuits.

Barely two centuries after being founded as a small Tuareg settlement around 1100, Timbuktu had earned its reputation as the most important Islamic center in West Africa. Its quiet rise to high regard - against enormous odds of geography and climate - is remarkable. Equally astonishing is that Timbuktu also prospered economically, seemingly beyond reason, as if to spite the adversity of its surroundings.

At its height during the mid-16th century, the city had a population of about 60,000. A prime caravan stop and center of manufacturing, it dominated West Africa in trade and exports. **Al-Wazan** wrote that:

> the rich king of **Tombuto**...keeps a magnificent and well furnished court. The coin of Tombuto is gold.... There is a most stately temple [mosque] to be seen, the walls of which are made of mortared stone; and a princely palace also built by a most excellent **workman of Granada**. Here are many shops of craftsmen and merchants, and especially of such as weave linen and cotton cloth.

Though undergirded by its economic success, Timbuktu's key role was cultural, as a crucible of learning. The difficulty of the journey to or from Timbuktu induced pilgrims and traders alike, once they got there, to spend months, even years, in the city before moving on...

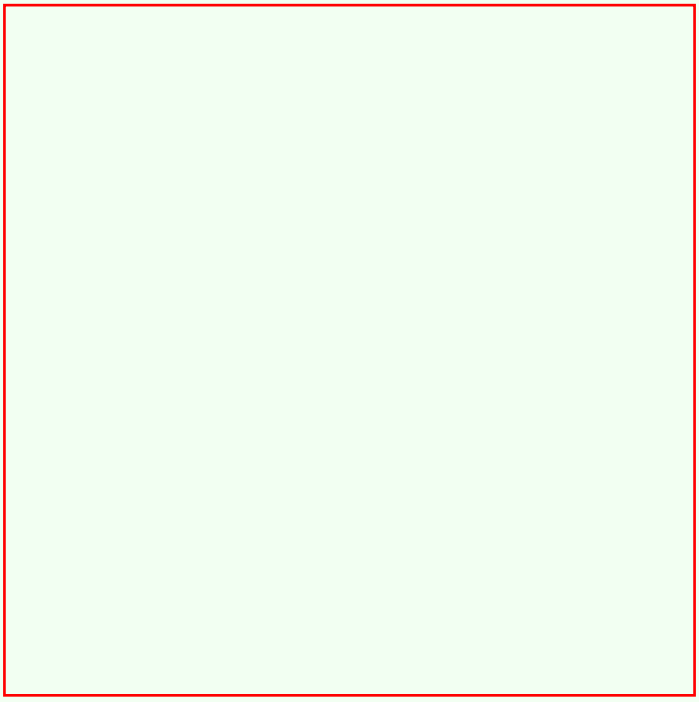


A rich account of Timbuktu's history and Islamic heritage has come to us through a series of chronicles, known as **tarikhs**, written from the mid-17th through the mid-l8th centuries. These texts - some plain and undeviating, others embroidered with ornate rhetoric - help us slip into the world of Timbuktu in the Middle Ages. Here we learn of its great mosques, of its ruling families, of the eminent schools of literature and learning, and of its "golden age."

Of these chronicles, none is more detailed or intricate than the **Tarikh al-Sudan**, or History of the Sudan. Written in 1653 by the city's most eminent scholar, **'Abd al-Rahman al-Sadi**, the Tarikh traces the history and society of Timbuktu from its founding until the time of writing. Al-Sadi's work is so reliable, and his descriptions so exact, that 250 years after it was written the French journalist

Felix Dubois used it as his guidebook. "The author displays an unusual conscientiousness, never hesitating to give both versions of a doubtful event," wrote Dubois in 1897.

The two major tarikhs that followed al-Sadi's were essentially less ambitious updates. The first, Mahmoud Kati's **Tarikh al-Fattash**, supplements al-Sadi's work up to the early 18th century. Kati lacks the astute insight of his predecessor, but his book does contain important information on the legal and administrative heritage of Timbuktu. The anonymous **Tadhkirat al-Nisyan**, or ‘A Reminder to the Oblivious,’ is similarly thin in detail, and it in turn brings the history up through the mid-l8th century. The two latter chronicles frequently lapse into nostalgia and lament the decline of Timbuktu's fortunes.



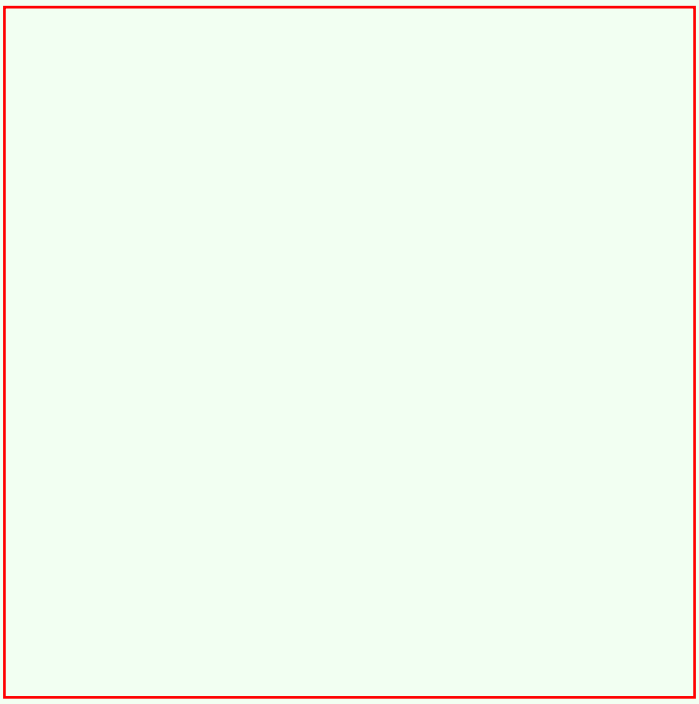
Since its earliest beginnings, when the Tuareg would move down to the plateau each summer from the pastures of Arawan, Timbuktu has been dominated by its mosques. It is to them that the old city, with its triangular layout, owes its specific quarters - each with its unique character. Built literally of the desert itself, the adobe mosques of Timbuktu became famous throughout the Islamic world. They towered high above the sandy streets and afforded the city an impressive skyline.

The northern quarter, at the apex of the triangular city, takes its name from the **Sankore Mosque**. A great, tawny, pyramidal structure laced with protruding wooden support beams, the Sankore Mosque was the bastion of learning in Timbuktu. Its imams were regarded with unequaled respect; its school attracted the noble and the rich as students. Indeed, mentors and scholars alike are said to have flocked to Sankore's **jam'iyyah**, or university, from as far afield as the Arabian Peninsula. Here, surrounded by the Sahara's windswept dunes, students could concentrate their minds as nowhere else. And, as Timbuktu's fame grew in the Islamic world, Sankore became the most important center of Islamic scholarship in Africa [after al-Azhar].

The eastern corner of the city was home to the much smaller Jami' al-Suq, the Market Mosque. Like many of the less grand mosques of Timbuktu, it has fallen into disrepair, been enlarged or been rebuilt many times. The adobe construction, characteristic of sub-Saharan buildings (See Aramco World, November-December 1990), weakens when it rains. Each year, after the winter downpours - if they occur - many of the city's major buildings must be patched up and reinforced, but it is unexpected thunderstorms that are the dread of Timbuktu. The noted mosque **Jami' al-Hana** collapsed in a storm in 1771 and killed 40 people...

When the grand caravan of Mansa Musa arrived on that scorching day in 1325, the sultan ordered the **Granadan architect and poet Abu Ishaq al-Sahili**, who had traveled with him from Makkah, to build a magnificent mosque - one far larger than any the region had known - in the western corner of the city. Its name, **Jingerebir**, is a corruption of the Arabic **Jami' al-kabir**, or "the great mosque." Five hundred years later, in 1858, the British traveler Henry Barth wrote that the mosque “by its stately appearnace made a deep impression on my mind. [It]...includes nine naves, of different dimensions and structure."

Giant and rambling, and **one of the first mosques in Africa** to be built with fired-brick walls, **Jingerebir** at once became the central mosque of the city, and it dominates Timbuktu to this day. In times of crisis, in years when rains failed and the Niger River had risen insufficiently or not at all in its annual, life-giving flood, the people of Timbuktu gathered at Jingerebir. Within the cool shade of its walls, the imam - who often doubled as the town's ruler - would lead his congregants in prayer.



According to the tarikhs, Timbuktu's religious leaders, judges and officials all tended to be graduates of the city's illustrious schools. In the city where the study of Islamic principles was regarded as of supreme importance, **al-Wazan found "a great store of doctors, judges, priests [Imams, religous scholars], and other learned men."** This scholastic elite was underwritten largely by the city's business class, who themselves formed a considerable part of the student body. Especially at Sankore, it was also these scholars who provided energy and direction to civil administration, commercial regulation, legislation, town planning and architectural projects - in addition to maintaining a number of superb libraries. The ranks of the city's elite were limited, however: Six families have provided two-thirds of Timbuktu's qadis, or judges, during the last 500 years.

By the mid-16th century - the so-called golden age of Timbuktu - the city boasted well over 150 schools, and the curricula were rigorous. The Islamic sciences formed the core of the academic syllabus, including Qur'anic interpretation (tafsir), the traditions of the Prophet (hadith); jurisprudence (Fiqh), sources of the law (usul), and doctrinal theology (tawhid). Apart from the religious courses, students were also required to study grammar (nahw), literary style and rhetoric (balaghah), and logic (mantiq). Scholars focused on the way that a person should behave within the context of Islamic society.

Only when religious and linguistic literacy had been achieved was a student assigned to a particular

mentor. The relationship between pupil and master often grew to be a strong one, and favored students might work as mulazama, or private secretaries, to their teachers. As the community grew, an **intellectual genealogy** developed, similar to those acknowledged elsewhere in the Islamic world, that linked masters to pupils and those pupils to their own students. Strong academic and religious ties with other scholastic centers of the Middle East and North Africa linked Timbuktu to the rest of the Islamic world.

As the number of students increased, so did the fields of study available. **Subjects** such as history, mathematics, astronomy and cartography in time joined the wealth of courses available.

Although Timbuktu prided itself on the rigor of its teaching for even the youngest of pupils, **visiting traders or travelers were encouraged to enroll while they stayed in the city**. Thus many itinerant non-Muslim merchants were led to conversion in Timbuktu through encounters with Muslim scholars. Even older visitors could be assured that the city's scholastic community would educate them. Indeed, **the people of Timbuktu were reputed to be so philanthropic that they would afford any visitor an education regardless of his means** - maintaining that any - one who had endured the journey to their desert metropolis had earned himself a scholarship.

Likewise, those born in Timbuktu to humble families were also guaranteed their education. So great was the fervor for Islamic learning that even the **tailors of Timbuktu**, among other craft guilds, founded their own centers of learning where instructors oversaw both the workshop and its college. In this environment, students worked as apprentice tailors while they were also instructed in the foundations of Islamic scholarship. By the 16th century, Timbuktu is said to have had more than 26 establishments for tailor-scholars alone, many employing more than 100. Thus these institutes also reinforced the city's role as a significant manufacturer of cloth.

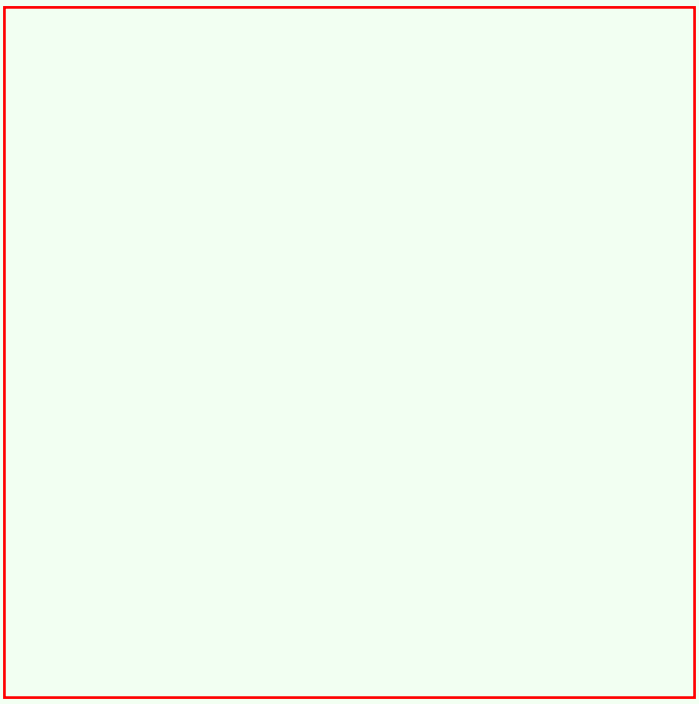
At the height of the city's golden age, Timbuktu boasted not only the impressive libraries of Sankore and the other mosques, but also a wealth of private ones. One of the greatest, containing more than 700 volumes, was left by the master scholar **Hajji Ahmad bin 'Umar**. His library was said to have included many of the rarest books ever written in Arabic, and he copied and annotated a considerable number of the volumes himself.

The libraries of Timbuktu grew through a regular process of hand-copying manuscripts. Scholars would visit the caravanserais and appeal to learned travelers to permit their precious volumes to be reproduced. Alternatively, they duplicated texts borrowed from their mentors' collections, studying the material as they did so.

Al-Wazan commented that "hither are brought divers manuscripts or written books, which are sold for more money than any other merchandise." As late as the close of the l9th century, **Felix Dubois** purchased a number of antique books in Timbuktu, including a copy of the **Divan of Kings**, a chronology of the rulers and events of the Sudan between 1656 and 1747.

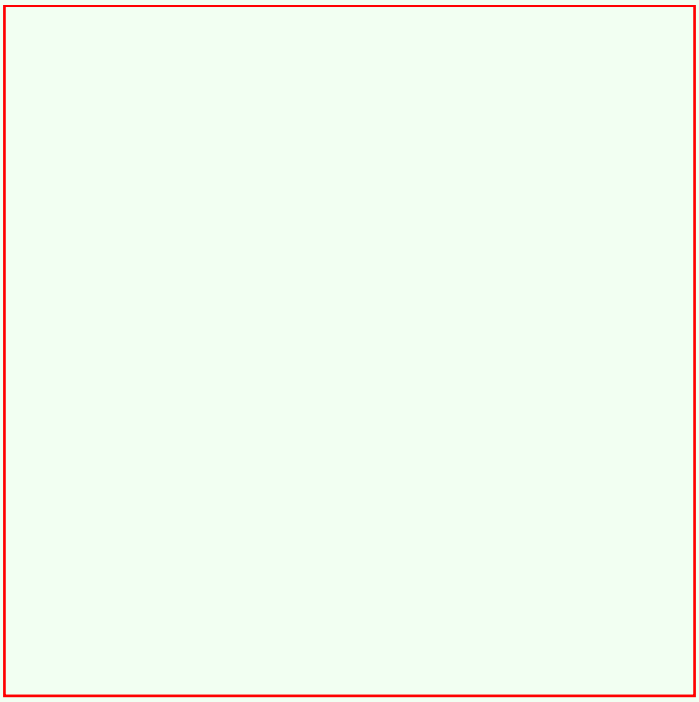
Timbuktu's position as a principal staging point along the pilgrimage route to Makkah may partly explain why so many books were available. Even so, modern scholars are staggered by the sheer quantity and rarity of Arabic texts and poems proffered and composed in the city. Of the books written in Timbuktu, a number are surprising in their scope. **Ahmed Baba's biographical dictionary**, for example, included the lives of notables from Arabia, Egypt, Morocco and Central Asia, as well as Timbuktu itself. Of the city's scholars, none is more lionized today than **Muhammad Askia**, called "Muhammad the Great," who reigned over Timbuktu for more than three decades in the late l5th and early 16th centuries. Regarded as the city's savior, it was he who wrested Timbuktu from the infamous Songhoi ruler Sunni Ali in 1493. Ali was despised as one who undermined Islam by persecuting the

scholastic class, efforts that earned him uncomplimentary entries in the tarikhs. Under Askia, however, scholarship and Islam were again revered and supported, and a new era of stability began that led to Timbuktu's 16th-century golden age.



Like any frontier town, Timbuktu also gained strength from the **melting-pot of peoples** who sought to make their lives within its walls. A mixture of North and West African tribes wove their unique ways into the framework of Timbuktu's culture. The influence of the Songhoi people, for example, extended to the calendar, where Ramadan, the holy month of fasting, was popularly known by the Songhoi word *haome*, which translates, literally, as "closed mouth." The end of the Ramadan fast was known similarly as *ferme*, or "open mouth." Observance of the Ramadan fast has never been easy in Timbuktu, where the desert climate much resembles that of central Arabia, but the holy month has always been taken very seriously in the city.

Like Muslims everywhere, the people of Timbuktu were united by Ramadan. As the sun scorched down, or as the flour-fine Sahara sand squalled through the streets, the faithful would gather in the mosques, protected from the desert and enveloped in the simplicity of the adobe architecture, in order to renew their faith.



With desert dunes surrounding it in all directions, and flapped in a severe and perfidious climate, the fact that **fabled Timbuktu** rose and prospered for 800 years is remarkable. That it also became a center of scholarship so fertile that it advanced the worldwide community of Islamic learning is astonishing. But more surprising still is that Timbuktu's intellectual tradition remained largely intact generation after generation. Even during times of economic depression, caused by shifting caravan routes or spoiled crops, the community ensured that the Qur'anic academies survived.

Early in the 19th century, the young French explorer **Rene Caille** remarked that all the population of Timbuktu was apparently "able to read the Qur'an and even know it by heart." **Some 66 years later**, when the French colonized the region, they recorded that some two dozen key scholastic centers still flourished in Timbuktu. Continuing to teach Arabic, Qur'anic doctrine and traditional lore, the schools had altered little in 500 years.

Now, as the desert creeps slowly southward all across sub-Saharan Africa, Timbuktu stands more isolated by sand and heat than ever. At the same time, in the city that captivated both West and East, some of the richest parts of the legacy of Islam lie only just beneath the city's baked-mud surface, waiting silently to be rediscovered, and perhaps reawakened.

[**Click here** for Sultan Mansa Musa's brother who sailed across the Atlantic to America.]

Tahir Shah lives in London and is the author of "Beyond the Devil's Teeth: Journeys in Gondwanaland," published by Octagon Press, as well as five other books.

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Tolerance in Islam
Biography of Prophet Muhammad (pbuh)
Muslim Legacy in Early Americas:
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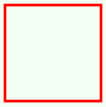

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