

## The Road to Timbuktu

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Mali is a beautiful country. But not in the conventional sense. In the north, the Niger cuts through the Sahara: desolate and scorching hot. It travels south, feeding waterfalls, swamps and marshes before heading into verdant Senegal. There is history here too: Traders, scholars and emperors have passed through and brought fame to this land for a thousand years. Evidence of this history remains still. But the reason you would go to Mali, the reward for seeking Timbuktu is the company of those you meet on the road.

There are many roads to Timbuktu; you can fly on a chartered flight from Paris if you like. There are few truly unexplored and inaccessible places left. We had decided to always travel by the cheapest means possible and live in the simplest accommodation available. We took the route Malians would take.

One bus ride in particular comes to mind: The roads had become dirt track over the years and the track had been washed away by rain so this was, according to the guidebook, "strictly 4 x 4 territory." Our bus was crowded, hot and still. The aisle seat wasn't a seat next to the aisle, it was a box within it. A broken door held together by twine was a blessing. Every time the bus jumped, the door would open just a little and allow some cool fresh air into the bus. If the bus jumped over a particularly large gap in the track though, bundles of utensils and clothes might go flying out the door while I tried to hold onto the homemade rabbit cage someone had left at my feet. I locked eyes with a chicken sat at my neighbour's feet. The chicken calmly stared back.

It was times like that when we really spoke to people. We could engage with them as fellow travellers rather than tourists. The bus would often break down for 6 or 8 hours on end. No complaints; nobody asked how long it would take. The conductor/mechanic would pull out various bits of metal and start work. Everyone else would lay out sheets by the roadside and wait. Food was exchanged, tea and coffee made and business discussed. Eventually the broken part of the suspension would be replaced with wedge of wood fashioned on the roadside and off we'd go for an hour or so before something else gave way.

"Is this it?" Bob Geldof had asked, when he got to Timbuktu. He did not find colossal monuments, no awe inspiring structures. He was surprised. For Timbuktu was the one of the world's great trading cities. At the hub of the Salt-Gold trans-Saharan route, two-thirds of the world's gold supply had once passed through it. Mansa Musa, Emperor of Mali, gave away so much Gold while on a pilgrimage to Mecca that the price of Gold collapsed around the world for decades to come. Scholars expelled from Spain after the reconquistida were invited to settle in Timbuktu. A hundred years before Cambridge was founded, Timbuktu was the greatest university town in the world with 25,000 students and over 180 madrassas.

But its inhabitants never built baroque architecture to proclaim the Emperor's glory. No gold lined the walls, no frescos were considered necessary. The mosques were built from mud blocks. Sparse, simple and sufficient. Mosques were built for prayer, the madrassas for learning and they serve their purpose still. The mosque remains cool, despite temperatures of more than 40 C outside. The tattered prayer mats would be seen as source of shame to the mosque caretakers around the world;

here they are testament to the vast proportion of the town's inhabitants that dutifully line up between the ancient pillars five times a day. The children in the madrassas do not write on paper very often. It is expensive and wasteful. They practice handwriting and take notes on thin slabs of slate using pens made from reed. I have studied at some of the greatest universities of the world but nowhere do students treasure knowledge as here. There is nothing ornate about these buildings. There is no proclamation to the world about the greatness of man. No arrogance. No hubris. No wasted effort in enticing envy. They were built by men who knew their purpose. And they fulfil it well. Beautiful but, as in the rest of Mali, not in the conventional sense.

Again and again, we met people of incredible faith; people who maintained a trust in providence regardless of, or perhaps, because of their circumstances. Bou Baakr told us his father ran a mine in Sierra Leone. He had worked in the mines but came back to Mali after the war and the death of his father. He is a guide. Like most of the airport staff, he spends his nights sleeping on benches at the waiting room in the airport. It would cost half a day's wages to get a ride back to town so they only leave the airport a couple of times a week. His grandfather went for the Hajj (a pilgrimage to Mecca) many years ago. But with no money to pay for passage, he walked. He walked two thousand miles over three years across North Africa to Mecca. Bou Bakr doesn't have any money either, nor is he a particularly religious man. But one day, he intends to go to Mecca like his grandfather. "They think I'm crazy but I'm not crazy. This is my dream!" He wants to visit Switzerland too. Later on, when he was out of earshot, another guide confides in me that he is, in fact, crazy. He has crazy ideas. He has crazy dreams.

Having reached Timbuktu, we headed to Dogon country. Pushed out of the flatlands of Bamako by progressive waves of invaders, the Dogon fled east until they arrived at the Bandiaggra escarpment around the time that Columbus landed in America. At Bandiaggra, they were pushed off the edge of the plateau to the plains below. The dense jungle at the bottom of the cliff was infested with dangerous animals and the flatlands above claimed by even more dangerous people. So the Dogon made their homes on the cliff side. Too inconvenient for the invaders and inaccessible to predators from the lowlands, this was a safe home. But first, the Dogon themselves had to carry out a forced displacement of another people. The Telum (pygmies) had already made their homes on the cliff 300 years earlier. So the Dogon fought them for 60 years until the Telum were overcome and pushed out into the jungle below.

Every 60 years, the Dogon honor their ancestors who won this land for them. They honour their vanquished enemies too, for they gave up their land so that the Dogon could flourish. The Sigui ceremony consists of secret dances and rituals are passed on by elders to children to be guarded until the next 60 year cycle. The spirits of the Telum are still said to remain in their houses at the very top of the cliffsides which the Dogon do not enter. A Dogon village is usually built lower on the cliffside. The view from the cliff is of the plains stretching out below. The overhang above protects the village from the rain and the worst of the sun. During rainy season, the small streams of fresh water cascading over the overhang become raging waterfalls on either side of the village dwellings. This is Mali, beautiful, but not in the conventional sense.

The majority are of the Dogon are not Muslim, but here too, an awareness of meaning permeates buildings and rituals. Dogon villages consist of cone shaped granaries with each male and female possessing a separate granary. The female granary contains grain, tomatoes, onions, jewellery and

the personal belongings of women. Men including husbands are not allowed to access the granary. The togu-na is a low building made of 8 tree trunks and a thatched roof under which elders meet to discuss important affairs. The roof is low so one can only sit underneath the togu-na. The idea is that if nobody can stand, nobody can come to blows.

There exists still a cordiality and sense of community despite the influx of tourists. The Dogon greet each other with elaborate ritual. Upon meeting an acquaintance, a dogon will ask about the other's health. The reply is Swey (Fine). They will then ask about their father. Swey. And how is your mother? Swey. And your brother? And your cousin? Swey. And so on. Then the other person repeats the same questions. This ritual is repeated over and over again at every meeting.

A fusion and mixture of religious beliefs exists among the Dogon. The village of Begnimato contains three segments; Christian, Muslim and Animist Dogon live together but separately. The division in beliefs is not always so apparent. We happened to be staying a Dogon village during a lunar eclipse. Just after a dinner, we heard some drumming and chanting. We walked into a square outside the mosque and saw a crowd. Women were standing in a circle and dancing. A pair of girls would hop into the circle and dance while the rest clapped. They'd hop out and another would hop in. Women carrying babies in slings on their back would jump in and out of the circle, with the baby seemingly sleeping through the noise. The boys had a separate circle and were dancing to the beat of sticks, pots, large water canisters and whatever else came to hand. Women sang and chanted in the background. In the corner by the wall of the mosque, women chanted prayers to Amma (the primal father of the Dogon religion) while here and there people repeated "La illaha il Allah (There was no God but Allah). No tension, barely an acknowledgement of the inherent contradictions of their chants. Each followed their own religion. Some had fused aspects of both. The village had gathered together to experience the divine and share an affirmation of their place in the world whether as children of Amma or servants of Allah. It was a lamentation, an exhortation and a celebration all in one.

This was Mali, and it is beautiful, but not in the conventional sense.

But there were no men here. The men were away in the city. Electricity and with it, the 'necessities' of Western lifestyle had not yet been introduced to the village. Nonetheless, it was now becoming necessary for the men to journey into the cities for work for the rainy season when there were few tourists and the fields did not need tending. A 'decent' standard of life had changed. The possessions their ancestors had considered sufficient for hundreds of years were no longer enough.

We ended our trip at the capitol, Bamako. The centre of town is surprisingly undeveloped in parts. People live in huts and paved roads are often falling apart. There is another Bamako a kilometre away. A whole range of restaurants cater to any taste, with cuisines from around the world and prices that match those in central London. You see shiny 4X4's driven by officials and expatriates who work in the charity sector, who shop at stores stocked exclusively with imported groceries. Then again, we met a man who had left his home 25 years ago to work as an aid worker. He had no children, no wife, and no attachments whatsoever. His life's work was serving Allah here amongst the poor. The international world was also more than making its mark: the swanky restaurants were run by Lebanese businessmen, the large construction projects led by Chinese engineers and Indian traders imported second hand clothes west while exporting local cotton to the west

There are many things I have not mentioned here. I have not mentioned being taken off the bus for questioning and left stranded at a police checkpoint miles from the nearest town as we watched our bus drive off. I have not mentioned negotiating a passage out of the colourful town of Douentza, while a friend was ill with malaria and typhoid. Or the night we spent in the Sahara as guests of a Tuareg tribesman. There was an asceticism, a simplicity, a glimpse of a nobility forged in the heat of the desert and preserved in the dry, desiccated and harsh lands of the Sahara. When you carry everything you own from camp to camp, you tend not to accumulate unnecessary things.

Our impression of Mali was not all positive. There are genuinely hospitable and friendly folk but then there are opportunists and aspiring con men (although in Mali, they were fairly harmless compared to what you might see elsewhere). For the tourist, there is a temptation to place upon the locals the label of the other. To see them either as noble people standing against the storm of Western cultural invasion or as venal foreigners lying, flattering and flogging to us what they thought we wanted to see of their cultures. People are people everywhere. And Malians are no different.

On the plane back, my neighbour began to explain what she did for a living. She is in PR; her job involved cold calling journalists and encouraging them to feature products made by her clients in their newspaper. She had been surprised by how easy it was to get this advertising inserted into news as reporting. Journalists are lazy and they are often looking for pre-prepared material to fill column space. She was also surprised by how keen they were to receive free samples of items like bread and crisps. She was creating demand where there was none. Creating 'needs' people never realised they had.

There is a refreshing reality to Mali. Hot, uncomfortable and unpredictable; it is a world away from our insulated and insular existence. I live in cosmopolitan London. I think in two different languages speak seven with varying degrees of fluency. I inhabit multiple cultural milieus every week. Yet I still felt suffocated as soon as I landed in Casablanca and then so much more so at Heathrow. For days, I was painfully aware of the real value of the trinkets and baubles that are a part of our life. As I sat on the bus which took us from the airplane to the terminal, I was aware of everyone's fiercely contested personal space. The personal exclusion zone was more than just physical; attempts at conversation with strangers here were an awkward, strange and, to them, a suspicious event.

There is a lot to be learnt from those that have not yet been so greatly affected by western modes of existence. In a world where we have torn apart our environment, where we face catastrophe and collapse, we need to rediscover the meaning, the purpose and real value of objects and edifices. They have fetish men and fetish stalls. But they have been spared a fetishism of goods. They have masks and dances, traditional and tribal medicines. And we have our own idols and spin doctors. Their understanding of medicine is certainly incomplete, but ultimately, the cohesiveness of society, the mutual respect their understanding of man's place in the world means their society is, in an important way, much healthier than ours. Mali is a truly beautiful country. But not in the conventional sense.



