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Divine Learning:

The Traditional Islamic Scholarship of Timbuktu, Mali

ALEXANDRA HUDDLESTON

Timbuktu, Mali: it's still there, down sandy alleys and inside mud-brick houses, the remains of an ancient system of learning, the foundation of what used to be a center of scholarship renowned throughout the Muslim world, the seeds of Timbuktu's fabled manuscript libraries, and in truth, the very soul of this ancient town's cultural identity—the traditional Islamic scholarship of Timbuktu.

Timbuktu was a world center of Islamic learning from the thirteenth through the seventeenth centuries. The town still contains an estimated 100,000 ancient manuscripts, and over the last ten years, the Malian government and private individuals have been working with foreign donors to properly house, catalog, and restore this scholarly heritage. This fantastic story has entered the international press and spread the mythic image of Timbuktu into the twenty-first century. But in Timbuktu, the manuscripts are not simply inert pieces of paper, there only to be cataloged, scanned, and forgotten again as they are placed upon shelves in climate-controlled rooms; they are part of a living tradition of scholarship that has existed in West Africa since at least the twelfth century.

I spent a year in Timbuktu photographing what remains of this ancient but enduring tradition of learning. My work was supported by a Fulbright Student Islamic Civilizations Grant (2006–2007). Although I am a non-Muslim American woman, I was welcomed into this foreign, male-dominated, tightly knit desert community. The photographs I created illuminate the more subtle qualities of human interaction and intelligence. They resulted from in-depth

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research into the history and culture of Timbuktu, and hours of interviews with imams, sheiks, *marabouts*, and other civic leaders.

Timbuktu is an isolated Sahara desert town, where kids devour the few crumbs of modernity they can access through the Internet, television, or the occasional tourist. The elders shake their heads in resignation and add Western modernity to the list of forces destroying their traditions. Nonetheless, the ancient Arabic scholarship of Timbuktu endures and continues to defy many commonly held assumptions about both Africa and Islam. It shows that a strong literary and intellectual culture has existed in West Africa for over nine centuries, along with a form of Islam characterized by tolerance, a strong belief in peaceful conflict resolution, and respect for women's rights.

Over the course of my time in Timbuktu, I gained a deep respect for this ancient style of learning that is so different from the way I was educated. Each student proceeds at his or her own pace, rather than through a rigid schedule of predetermined classes and examinations. A student pays what his or her

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family can afford—even if it is nothing at all. The teacher-student relationship is expected to last a lifetime, rather than just the course of a semester. This system of Islamic education was significantly weakened by French colonization, by the droughts in the 1970s and 1980s, and by Mali's civil war in the early 1990s, but it nonetheless endures and continues to produce scholars. I have come to believe that its survival is due to these cultural traits that I most admire—traits that emphasize the individual student-teacher relationship in the learning process, rather than the institutional continuum.

In truth, in Timbuktu, respect for learning and for the power of the written word exceeds the interpersonal and also enters a mythical or spiritual dimension. Of the town's 333 saints, all were men of knowledge, either by long study or by divine inspiration. Timbuktu's twenty-first century men of knowledge continue to believe that the path of learning never ends. No matter how old or wise or revered, they continue to learn from their peers and, through the medium of their ancient manuscripts, from their ancestors.

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The photographs published along with this essay show moments in the daily life of the teacher Younoussa Ahamadou Djaroumba and his students. As an itinerant marabout, Younoussa travels with his students from town to town in search of greater economic opportunity and experienced teachers

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with whom he can study. Itinerant Qur'anic schools are one of the most controversial aspects of traditional Islamic education in Timbuktu. Younoussa is responsible for the education of over 15 boys from his native village who have left their families to live and study with him. Part of each day the students

will beg for their meals. This system was instituted in the eighteenth century as a means of universal education because it forced the entire community to support the students. At 30,000 people, Timbuktu is still small enough that family and community ties link the itinerant students to their home villages. As a result, they are often “begging” at the home of a relative. However, there is no doubt that in larger urban centers and in times of medical and other crises, the itinerant students are at risk of exploitation or neglect. At the same time, the itinerant teachers and their students preserve both the life and the spirit of this ancient pedagogy in its most authentic form. Its power is evident in the number of families who still choose to entrust their children to this extremely harsh upbringing—sometimes out of economic necessity, but often because they feel that this is the only way their children will escape the distractions of both a modern and a secular life and focus on their studies and spiritual growth.

In his early 20s, the teacher Younoussa often feels the pull of what his religious calling has made him give up: wealth, motorcycles, fancy clothes, and girlfriends. While he is dedicated to continuing his work as both a teacher and student of traditional Islamic learning, Younoussa does wear his hair longer than is strictly conventional.

An uneasy balance now exists between tradition and change in Timbuktu. It is as yet uncertain how these forces may destroy, transform, or coexist with each other, and whether the town will continue to produce saints, historians, poets, and judges raised under a pedagogic system that has endured for centuries.

As a photographer who often works in the developing world and on underrepresented issues, I may be categorized as a “concerned photographer.” My concern, however, is not to change the world. It is, rather, to open doors between cultures and individuals through photography, and in so doing, to enable them to decide how and if they want to change their worlds. That said, my time in Timbuktu left me with the greatest respect for its traditional culture of learning, and for those who resist the flow of time by continuing to practice it. I have come to question the assumption that tradition and modernity are incompatible, and in my heart, I am now something of a cheerleader, rooting for the continuation of this ancient way of learning into the coming centuries.

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