

Some say Timbuktu is the end of the world. It is not. It lies in the heart of the country of Mali, a place in Africa with a long history, rich with tales. The vast sands of the Sahara spread to its north. The nourishing waters of the Niger River flow to the south.

Once upon a time, Timbuktu was Mali's most golden city. Step into Timbuktu's marketplace today and feel the hot sun. The sand under your feet is gritty. Look around at the low, clay-colored buildings. Some have spires jutting into the sun-bleached sky. Women in brightly colored skirts walk by. You pass baskets filled with white rice and millet. You see red tomatoes and tan peanuts, rubber sandals and plastic buckets. A fire burns orange in a clay oven, where a woman bakes fresh bread.

**Bringing the Past To Life**

In one part of the market, a very old man prepares to tell a story. You sit in front of him. He squats and pours you a cup of tea. He is a *griot,* or a traditional storyteller.

If you lived in Mali, this is one way you would learn about your country. Griots chant about kings and magicians. They sing about wars and journeys from the past. History has been shared this same way for generations.

This griot has told the story of Timbuktu's famous past a thousand times. Listen as he takes you back 700 years ago, to the 14th century. He begins the way he always does...."Long, long ago, when Mali was a powerful kingdom, there was a great king named Mansa Musa. He made Timbuktu into the City of Gold. Walk around Timbuktu today, and you can still see the enormous **[mosque](javascript:defWindow('mosque'))** that the king built. The gold from the past is gone. Yet another treasure remains."

**Golden Journey**

The griot continues the story. "Mansa Musa was a wise and religious man. He made a [**pilgrimage**](javascript:defWindow('pilgrimage')) to Mecca, a holy city. He traveled with thousands of followers and a treasure-load of gold. He went with his first wife and 500 of her servants.

"A line of 100 camels stretched as far as the eye could see. Each camel carried 140 kilograms of gold. Five hundred slaves, each carrying a heavy staff of gold, followed the camels. Thousands of ordinary people walked behind the slaves. It looked like an entire city winding through the desert."

**A New Treasure**

"The journey took Mansa Musa a year. Everywhere he went, the king gave away his gold. When he reached Mecca, the gold was gone. That didn't matter to Mansa Musa. Now his name was golden. When people heard about Timbuktu, they didn't think of mud huts. They imagined a city shining like gold.

"Mansa Musa gave away his gold. But he brought back a different treasure: knowledge. The camels carried books about medicine, math, law, and more. Scholars returned with the king. So did an architect, or building designer. They helped turn Timbuktu into a city of mosques, libraries, and schools. It had been a center of trade. Now it was a center of learning, [**culture**](javascript:defWindow('culture'))**,** and religion, too. Timbuktu truly was a golden city," the griot says.

**Recovering the Past**

It has been hundreds of years since Mansa Musa ruled. Mali fell on hard times. Trade routes moved from the desert to the ocean. Other tribes and countries wanted to run Mali. Some started battles and caused great damage. In 1960, Mali finally became an independent country. No other country controls it. Today, it's one of the poorest nations. Yet it still has a priceless treasure: books from its golden past. Many of the ancient books are wrapped in leather. Some are written on paper; others on tree bark or gazelle skin. Many are handwritten in flowing [**Arabic**](javascript:defWindow('Arabic')) letters.

Their pages are filled with ideas about stars and math, history and religion, and more. The books let us understand Timbuktu's brilliant past. Some are about making peace. Those ideas, from centuries ago, may help us today. But these books are in danger. Over hundreds of years, families have tried to protect them. Yet sand, weather, even termites have damaged the books. Some crumble in private libraries and kitchen cupboards. Some lie buried underground or hidden in caves. Others are in the leather trunks of traveling [**nomads**](javascript:defWindow('nomad'))**.**

Scientists are working hard to save the books. They are carefully preserving them. They are using scanners and special cameras to store the books on computer, creating a digital library. Soon scholars everywhere will be able to log onto the Internet and learn from Timbuktu's great past.

**Take-Away Treasure**

Before you leave, the griot shares an old Mali saying with you: "To succeed you need three things—the brazier, time, and friends." The brazier is a stove to heat water for tea. Time is what you need to brew the tea. Friends are what you need to drink it. If you have friends and tea, can good stories be far behind?

Today, the griot told you a famous story from Mali's golden past. Ancient books and modern computers also are helping Mali share its stories with the world. As you sip the last drops of tea, ask yourself: What stories will you bring home from Timbuktu?

**Gold and Salt**

Gold and salt helped make Timbuktu rich. Miners dug gold out of mines in the southern part of the Mali Empire. Workers collected salt in the northern desert. They dug 23-kilogram (50-pound) blocks of salt up from under the sand. It's easy to understand why gold was so valuable. But salt? Here's why: People wanted salt because it made food taste better. They also used salt to preserve food, making it last a long time without rotting. Back then, salt was hard to find in other parts of the world. People in Mali even used salt as money. It once was worth as much as gold!

Traders took gold and salt and other goods from Mali to sell in other places. They brought back spices, silk, and more. Timbuktu, where the desert met the river, was in the perfect place to become Mali's biggest trading center. It was the crossroads for traders traveling trade routes north to Europe and Egypt or south to the Atlantic Ocean. Traders rowed up and down the Niger River. They crossed the desert in caravans of camels. From all the goods they sold, the king collected taxes, or money. So the kingdom became very rich.

*Article by Marissa Moss. Top-of-page photograph © Bartlomiej K. Kwieciszewski/Shutterstock. "Tales From Timbuktu" appears on page 12 of the March 2009 issue of National Geographic Explorer.*