

## THE QUEST FOR TIMBUKTU

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Even today few of the general public believe that there is such a place as Timbuktu. It is regarded as a mythical place of banishment, if not amusement as a child's game. How different from scholarly circles in early nineteenth century Europe when Timbuktu was a place to discover – even to risk one's life for a prize (Fraser, 2003).

The town or city of Timbuktu in the Republic of Mali lies at the southern edge of the trans-Saharan caravan route where 'brown Africa' meets 'black Africa' (Fig.1). It was from Timbuktu that gold and leather, tropical timber and all kinds of spices came to the Mediterranean coast, making its citizens wealthy during the 16th century. 'What a treasure trove Timbuktu must be' thought the traders and scholars, little knowing that it was the sandy entrepot from where the camels and slaves set out on their grueling 2000km trek.

When I visited Timbuktu (or Tombouctou according to the French under whom it was administered in colonial days) in October 1969 I was keen to see the houses where three successful explorers had stayed. I was on the Trans-African Hovercraft Expedition that had left Dakar in September and travelled up the Senegal River to Kayes (Hepper, 1972). Thence we went to Bamako by train and down the Niger to Kabara, 6km from Timbuktu. Actually, while the SRN6 hovercraft was being reassembled at Bamako, three scientific members of the Expedition (Prof. Ronald Harrison-Church of the London School of Economics, A.T. "Dick" Grove of Cambridge University and myself as Kew botanist) used the three-deck ferry "Général Soumaré" that plies the Niger when the water is deep enough. The hovercraft brought the kit and the rest of the expedition some days later.

Our ship called at little communities along the Niger, such as Niafunké (Plate 1) reached by a single gang-plank, before reaching Kabara by dawn on Friday 31 October. In my diary I noted my impressions of the scene. Goods and people were unloaded in a hustle and bustle on to the quay; already there awaiting shipment were great slabs of salt, each slab like a tombstone 1m (c.4ft) long, 35cm (15in) wide and 4cm (1 1/2in) thick (Plate 2). They had been brought by Tuareg traders strapped on to the sides of camels from central Sahara far to the north (I was told from a place called Taoudaley, or may be Taghazi?) where at that time forced labour was said to be still practised in the salt mines. Salt is a precious commodity as Timbuktu is some 1300km from the Atlantic coast.

Eventually, we disembarked and boarded a tourist office vehicle for the short drive to the city.

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<sup>1</sup>All photographs taken by the author October 1969.

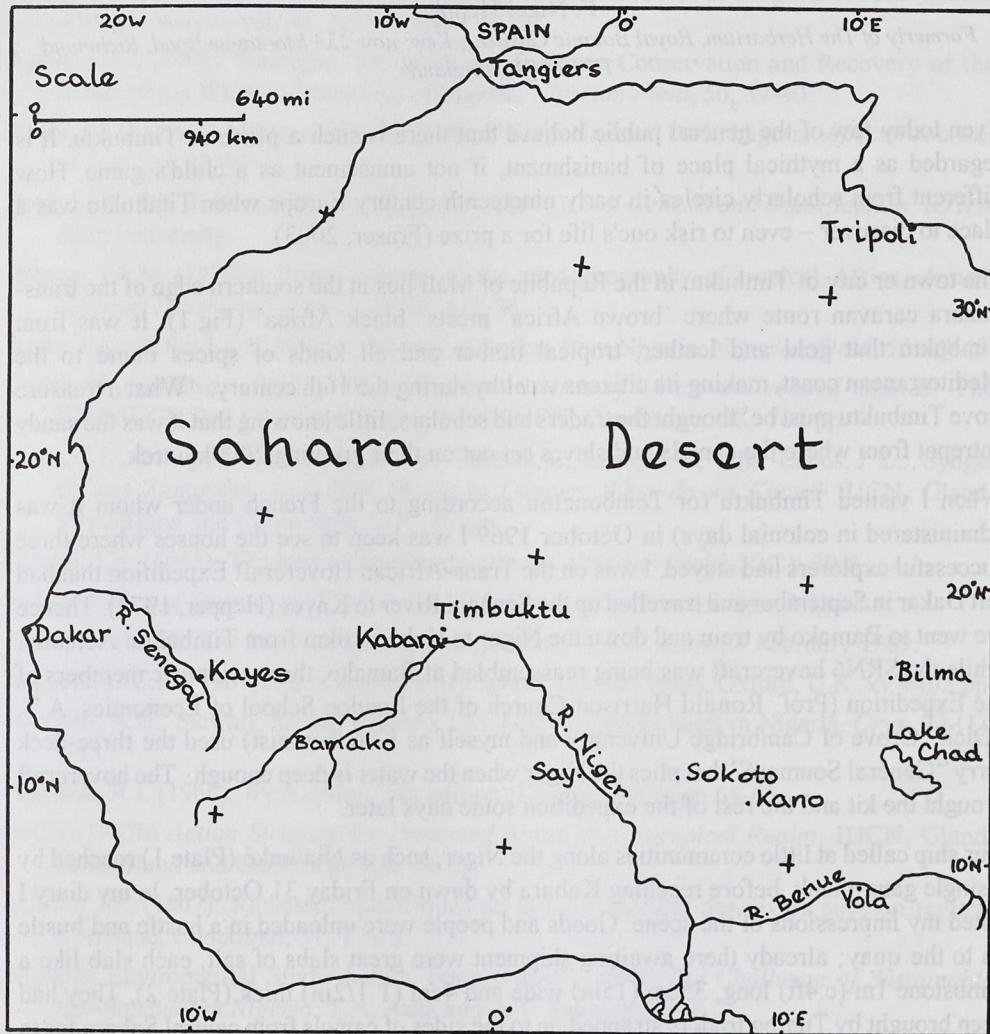


Fig.1. Map of West and North-west Africa showing Timbuktu and other places mentioned in the text.



Plate 1. Niafunké, last stop before Kabara on the River Niger.



Plate 2. Slabs of rock-salt on the quayside at Kabara, the port of Timbuktu.

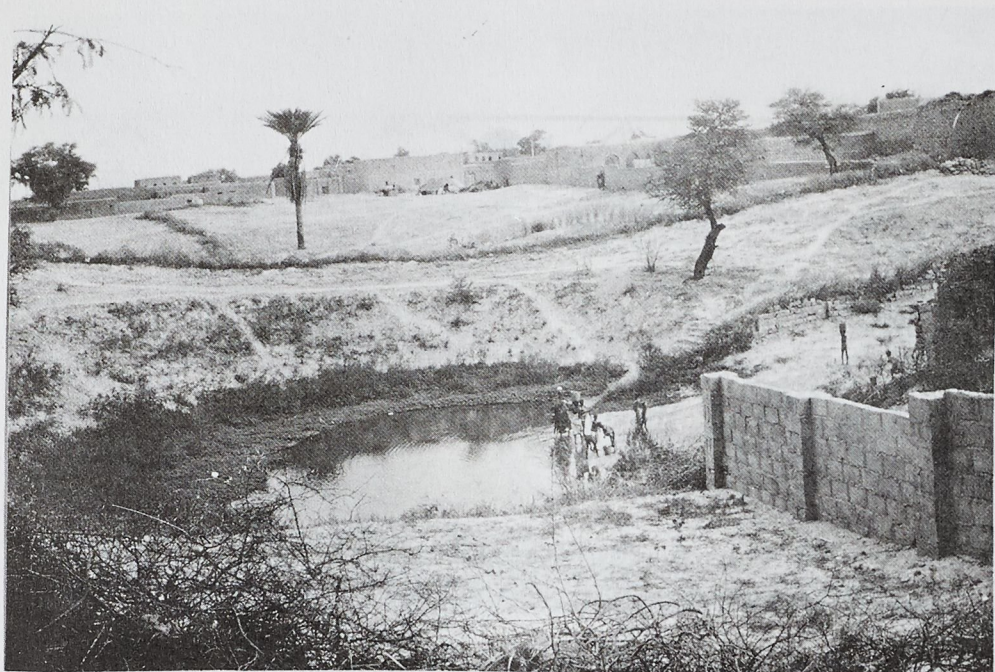


Plate 3. A pool supplying water to part of Timbuktu in 1969.



Plate 4. The old mosque at Timbuktu dating from AD1327, where the world's first university was established by 1400.



Plate 5. Interior of the old mosque with square pillars.

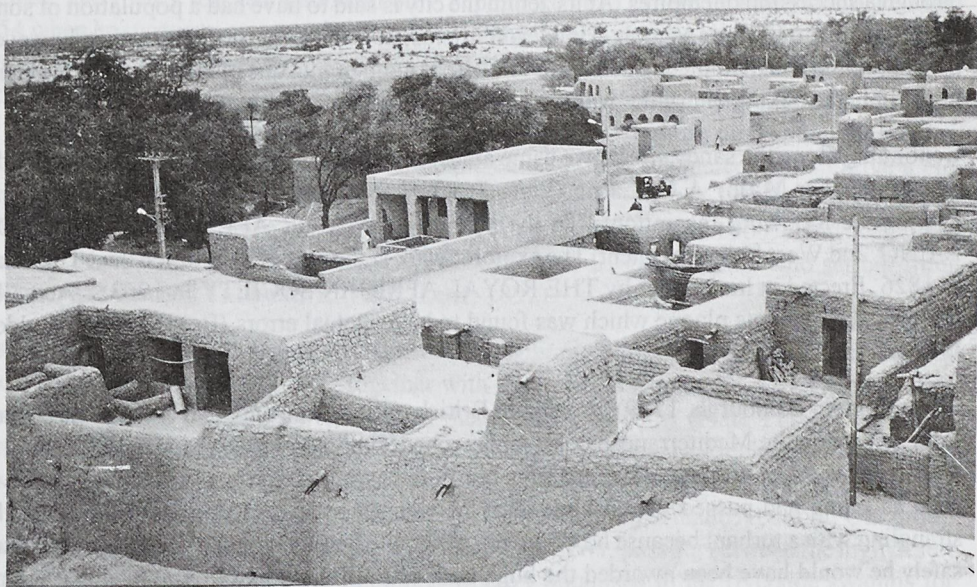


Plate 6. View from the roof of the old mosque across the town of Timbuktu in 1969.

In the past Tuareg tribesmen had controlled this entrance to Timbuktu, but it was open for us as we sped parallel to the canal and marshes that would have repaid intensive ecological study. These marshes are flooded when the Niger is high and until February small boats can reach the city. In fact, Timbuktu had been built beside the river whose course had moved 6km or more to the south during the last eight centuries. We then crossed open sandy country with *Balanites* and *Acacia* trees but little else, save yellowed grasses at that time of year. As we approached the city the tarmac surface was frequently obscured by swirling sand. In the built-up area square mud houses were sometimes faced with limestone brought from a quarry further north. We called at a hotel or rest-house and I took the opportunity to scramble down a sandy slope to a circular pool (Plate 3) where a man was filling a goat skin with the legs and neck sewn up and local people were filling pots with water of dubious quality. At last I had found some plants worth collecting as herbarium specimens.

Our walking tour of Timbuktu began with a visit to the mosque built in 1324 (Plate 4). I was astonished at the similarity with the Ancient Egyptian hypostyle hall at Karnak that is full of pillars (Plate 5). But these large pillars were square, not round, and the roofing was of fibrous palm trunks with sticks laid across them; I was told that the mud walls had been mixed with crushed fruits of the baobab tree, *Adansonia digitata*, evidently to weather better. On the west side of the roof there were some round arches about 3ft across in limestone blocks and we looked down on the courtyard where the end of Ramadan is celebrated and the cemetery is devoted to imams and anyone who falls dead while praying. We ascended the pinnacle by the rough steps inside and gained a good view across the flat-roofed houses to the Sahara beyond (Plate 6). Timbuktu had been founded about AD1100 and through the years control had passed through a succession of empires. At its zenith the city is said to have had a population of some 30,000 with 150 Qu'anic schools (Hodder-Williams, 2003). At the time of our visit, however, the population had dwindled to some 5000. There is another mosque of later construction with large timbers sticking out of the walls.

Continuing along the sandy streets we came at last to the house that had been occupied by the Scottish soldier **Major A.G. Laing** (Plate 7). Over the doorway was a grey stone plaque bearing the following inscription: "To the memory of MAJOR ALEXANDER GORDON LAING, 2nd West India Regiment. The explorer who, at the cost of his life, reached Timbuktu in 1826. Erected in his honour by THE ROYAL AFRICAN SOCIETY in 1963." Actually, it replaced a previous plaque which was found to have factual errors (Bovill, 1964; Hodder-Williams, 1991).

Laing (born in Edinburgh, 1799), dressed in British military uniform, had crossed the Sahara from Tripoli on the Mediterranean coast and reached Timbuktu on 18 August 1826. He was held in house arrest until the governor gave him safe passage from the city. Unfortunately, as soon as Laing had passed the city boundary he was set upon and murdered, evidently by strangling with a turban, because he would not acknowledge Mohammed. Had Laing returned safely he would have been awarded the huge sum of £3000 by the Geographical Society of London. As it was, his widow was presented with a gold medal by the Geographical Society

of Paris (Monod, 1977).

The second house we visited was that of **René Caillie** (or Caillé) who reached Timbuktu on 20 April 1828 (Plate 8). A plaque similar to Laing's was inscribed in French but I did not note its wording and it is too difficult to read on the photograph (Plate 9). This Frenchman had set out to win the prize of 10,000 francs offered by the Geographical Society of France to be the first explorer to reach Timbuktu and return safely. Caillie started out from Senegambia, disguising himself as an Arab trader and having reached the Niger, secreted himself in a covered freight barge since discovery would have meant certain death. On 28 April 1828 he entered Timbuktu and remained there for a few days secretly making notes. What he found disappointed both himself and the readers of his report since the city was a shadow of its former glory.

For the return Caillie joined a slave caravan to cross the Sahara. The conditions were appalling as both men and camels died on the way; he was nearly blinded by the sun and subsisted on camel urine. He was so emaciated that the French consul at Tangiers thought he was a beggar and doubted whether he had ever been to Timbuktu. Eventually he convinced the Geographical Society of France who awarded him the money and I believe he became an obscure academic until his death on 15 May 1838 (Caillé, 1830; Jacques-Félix, 1963)

Lastly we went to the house used by the German explorer **Heinrich Barth** in 1854 (Plate 9). Barth had left Tripoli on 24 March 1850, heading across the Sahara to Bilma, Kano, Lake Chad, Yola and Sokoto in present-day Nigeria. He then crossed the Niger to Say, south of Niamey, and finally reached Timbuktu on 7 September 1853. There he stayed until 11 May 1854 when he started to re-cross the Sahara, reaching Tripoli on 2 August 1854 (Barth, 1857-59). The stone plaque over the door is also inscribed in French: "Dans cette maison habitée de 1853 de 1854 après de la traversée du Sahara l'explorateur Heinrich Barth dit Abd el Kerim né Hambourg 1821 - décède à Berlin 1865 qui a répandu la gloire du Tombouctou et les traditions des peuples Africains dans le monde entier. Cette plaque commémorative a été inaugurée une siècle après la mort de Heinrich Barth par le Président de la République Fédéral d'Allemagne Heinrich Lübke lors de son séjour à Tombouctou en Mars 1966." However, there seems to be no monument to another German explorer, Dr Oskar Lenz, who set out from Morocco and reached Timbuktu in 1880 (Lenz, 1892).

Passing beyond the built up area we came to the beginning of the open Sahara where indigoclad Tuareg traders were gathered, together with their camels (Plate 10). An encampment of rounded huts made of palm leaves housed their African servants (Plate 11). As we gazed northwards beyond the huts and across the interminable sand dunes I realised how daunting it would have been for each of those redoubtable explorers to leave the relative security of Timbuktu and head for home across that sea of sand. Two of them made it on foot. Our group continued in the ferry (Plate 12) eastwards on the Niger River, passing between the high desert dunes (Plate 13) to Gao in Niger Republic, where I botanised in the riverside swamps for several days until we continued to Nigeria by hovercraft.

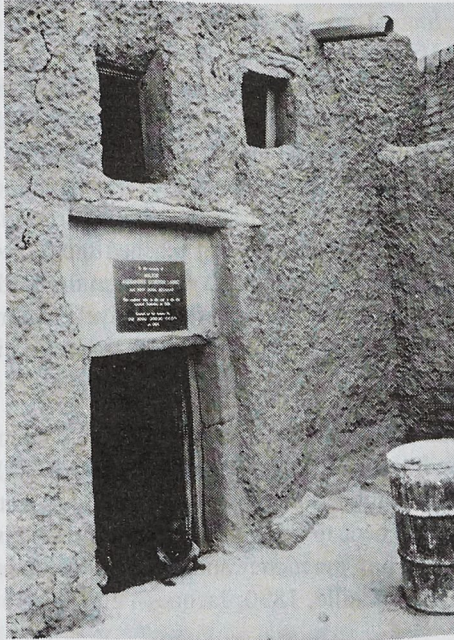


Plate 7. The house where Major Alexander Gordon Laing stayed in 1826.

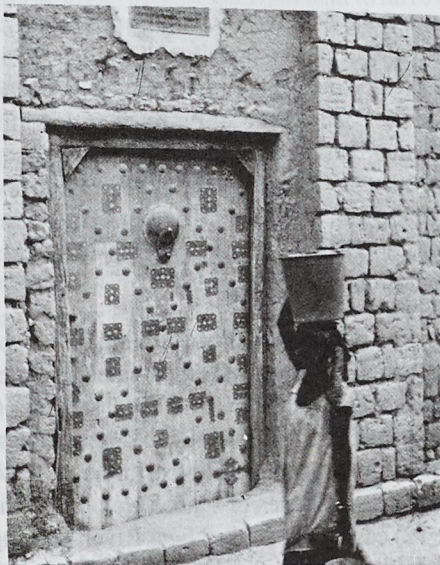


Plate 8. The house where Rene Caillie stayed in 1828.





Plate 9. The House where Heinrich Barth stayed in 1854.

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Plate 10. Tuareg merchants and their camels with the Sahara beyond.



Plate 11. Donkeys and the servants' huts at the northern edge of Timbuktu.



Plate 12. The over-crowded "Général Soumaré, a German-built ferry plying from Bamako in Mali to Gao in Niger

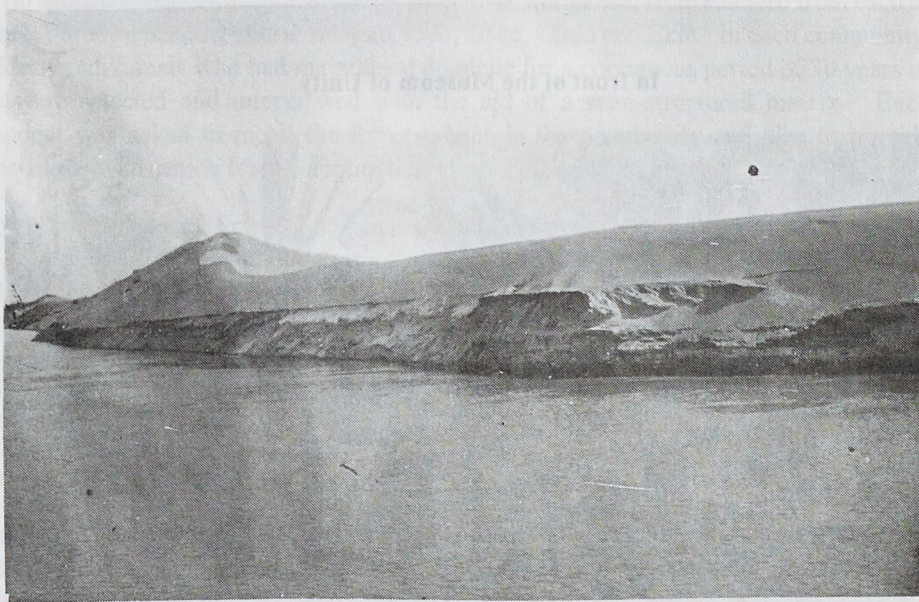


Plate 13. High sand-dunes bordering the River Niger east of Timbuktu.

*On the bank of the fish pond at the Farami Flower Garden.*

**THE VISIT OF THE LAGOS BRANCH TO IBADAN**  
Nov. 15th 2003



**In front of the Museum of Unity**



**On the bank of the fish pond at the Faremi Flower Garden.**