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Title

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Permalink

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Journal

Ufahamu: A Journal of African Studies, 17(1)

ISSN

0041-5715

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Publication Date

1988

DOI

10.5070/F7171016919

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The Fate of Timbuktu*

by
Tijan M. Sallah

The poor fate of gold fragments. When he thrust them into the charcoal, they glowed in the fire red hot but did not coalesce. Timbuktu, the ancient land of the Ethiopians*, in fragments. Labyrinths of ruins, abandoned courtyards, desolate cacti, and the primitive endurance of camels. Timbuktu, and its fate of camels. And there was thirst for salt and rain, the aboriginal essentials. The pillars of civilization stood buried in nostalgia, in a mind confused by the galloping pace of a world obsessed by accumulation. Its children called it Tombuktoo, the oasis of the Old Lady Buktoo.

Now there seemed to be despair riding on the backs of caravans, human caravans, scavenging for hope in an ego-centered world where the culture of substance had succumbed to that of acquisition. And even the Chiefs of Timbuktu, most have betrayed their subjects, traded their dignity for the wine of Europe. The poor fate of gold fragments. The goldsmith watched them meticulously, piece by piece, fragment by fragment.

And the youth of Timbuktu, more patriotic than their fathers, unsettled by the pieces, sang the song of Hope Kingdom.

Anthem of Timbuktu

I sing of Timbuktu in this evening of betrayal.
Now that the Nkrumahs and Toures and Kenyattas are gone.
Gone, gone to their eternal pilgrimages, and all we have
Are their legacies of wisdom and defiance and rapture.

I sing of wounded hopes and ruffled hearts in the sun.
The errors of Chaka distilled in the impending
Cape-quake.
I sing of the valor of Chaka and Samori and
Sounjatta,
Skilled strategists, lovers of our Ebony land.

I sing of the Lizards and Crocodiles of our past,
Those who raided our wealth-tree to please marauding
fleets.

* Timbuktu: used in its generic symbolic sense here as Africa.

* Ethiopians: a generic term meaning people of "burnt skin", hence Africans.

I lament for conspicuous Kankang Musa, draining
Timbuktu gold to consecrate the glory of other lands.

I sing of the pirates of our sorrow.
Those who bequeathed to us a lasting grief.
I sing of our heroes, moons before and moons after,
The Nkrumahs and Mandelas and Nassers and Nyereres.

I sing of the gems of Timbuktu,
The Machels and Bikos, the Anta Diops and Shabazzs,
Brave warriors against our oppressive skies.
I sing of their dreams of a New Earth.

I sing of the spiders and scorpions of Timbuktu,
The Amins and Bokassas and Nguemas,
Buffoons who crippled our Timbuktu tree.
I sing against the scorpions in the bow-tie.

I sing of a New Timbuktu, free from the Eagle and
the Bear.
Where doctrines do not devastate our peasants,
Where the earth is our bedmate.

I sing of a New Timbuktu, free from the Stabbing and Fear.
Where the soil is rich, and the sky is azure,
And the earth is lush enough to bring forth
More Black Jacobins.

And when I sang, the youth danced and their eyes glared and their hearts pumped, as they forcefully pushed for the New Timbuktu. Timbuktu, gold in fragments, had assimilated so much: filth, greed, individualism, and even a hedonistic materialism. The young girls auctioned their bodies to the highest bidders in the hotel-rooms of vampires; the young men pushed needles into their bodies to evade the responsibilities of civility; the mothers followed the incestuous path of mosquitoes; the priests drank water from the breasts of virgins; the chiefs accepted cowries in exchange for ordinary service; the hens bribed the cows; the dogs the cats; and the pigeons the trees. Bribery as the rule, and rules as roads to bribery. And those with the cowries made the rules, and Timbuktu fell deeper and deeper into the pit of fragments.

Why should anything more matter? The youth asked themselves. Timbuktu needed a rebirth, a renaissance, a journey into a world of enlightened civility. Lessons from the past were needed, for the nest of community, the interlocking grass of mutual

regard, had all dissolved into the specter of hens-drinking-their-own-eggs. And the bats of decay aided in the negative ceremony. The noise of countless self-indulgent beetles created the frightening specter of the exile of trust. Timbuktu, in fragments. And the goldsmith slowly lost his smile, as the shiny metal bits failed to coalesce.

And the goldsmith saw that in his feeble hands and fingers were the pattern of precious metal bits, separated by age, that repelled each other like fire and water. Pumped and pumped, and the stiff air made no progress through the stubborn charcoal. The goldsmith's face rotated from a cool glare to a collage of skin flushed with frustration.

Song of the Goldsmith

Gold-country in ruins, kin unwedded to kin.
Fishermen with odors of shoes.
Cobblers with odors of fish.

Gold-earth in sad fragments.
Trees wither from neglect.
And metal repels metal, O,
When is the birth of the New Earth?

And the song was muttered with every thrust of fresh metal into the rebellious embers. There was the vague outline of the New Earth, but no sense of how to get there. Gold here. Silver there. And even bronze in acid. But the Chemistry of the New Earth eluded even the skilled Mind.

Some of the youth waited for the Redeemer, the force that would cement the diverse bits of metals into the longed-for Promise. Some pushed for the forces at hand. Lady Buktoo, they said, was still with us, with her much-needed majestic feminine power, with her passion for attraction and for creating homely trust, with her old fashioned dignity of luring and cementing and building the quiet, elusive Ground. And for the patiently trying goldsmith, the delicate art of uniting individualistic metal-bits apparently became an exercise in harnessing feminine powers.

The dream came to the goldsmith that, through trying, the metal-bits will coalesce. Timbuktu shall be rebuilt. And once again the Ethiopians will have a home.