

Bruce Chatwin, *Gone to Timbuktu*

Bruce Chatwin worked at Sotheby's and then for *The Sunday Times* in London. One of the most influential travel writers of his generation, he wrote several books, including *In Patagonia*, *On the Black Hill*, *The Songlines*, and *Utz*. He died in 1989.

His latest book, *Anatomy of Restlessness* – a collection of essays, stories, articles, and reviews spanning a 20-year period – amplifies his thoughts on travelling and the virtues of nomadic life.

Read the following excerpt from *Anatomy of Restlessness* (1997), in which Chatwin talks about the African city of Timbuctoo and states there are two cities: the real and the mythical, the city that exists in the unforgiving quadrants of geography and the city that exists only in the mind.



Bruce Chatwin

Gone to Timbuktu

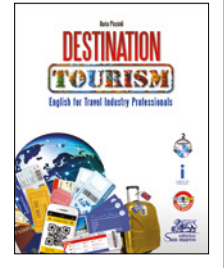
Timbuctoo, Tumbuto, Tombouctou, Tumbyktu, Tumbuktu or Tembuch? It doesn't matter how you spell it. The word is a slogan, a ritual formula, once heard never forgotten. At eleven I knew of Timbuctoo as a mysterious city in the heart of Africa where they ate mice – and served them to visitors. A blurred¹ photograph, in a traveller's account of Timbuctoo, of a bowl of muddy² broth with little pink feet rising to the surface excited me greatly. Naturally, I wrote an unprintable limerick about it. The words "mice in the stew" rhymed with Timbuctoo and for me both are still inextricably associated. There are two Timbuctoos. One is the administrative centre of the Sixth Region of the Republic of Mali, once French Sudan – the tired caravan city where the Niger bends into the Sahara, "the meeting place of all who travel by camel or canoe," though the meeting was rarely amicable³; the shadeless Timbuctoo that blisters⁴ in the sun, cut off by grey-green waterways for much of the year, and accessible by river, desert caravan or the Russian airplane that comes three times a week from Bamako. And then there is the Timbuctoo of the mind – a mythical city in a Never-Never Land, an antipodean mirage, a symbol for the back of beyond or a flat⁵ joke. "He has gone to Timbuctoo," they say, meaning "He is out of his mind" (or drugged); "He has left his wife" (or his creditors); "He has gone away indefinitely and will probably not return"; or "He can't think of anywhere better to go than Timbuctoo. I thought only American tourists went there."

GLOSSARY

- 1 unclear
- 2 as dull as mud
- 3 friendly
- 4 becomes extremely hot
- 5 not interesting



The Mosque of Djenne,
southwest of
Timbuktu



“Was it lovely?” asked a friend on my return. No. It is far from lovely; unless you find mud walls crumbling to dust lovely – walls of a spectral grey, as if all the colour has been sucked out by the sun. To the passing visitor there are only two questions. “Where is my next drink coming from?” and “Why am I here at all?” And yet, as I write, I remember the desert wind whipping up the green waters; the thin hard blue of the sky; enormous women rolling round the town in pale indigo cotton *boubous*⁶; the shutters on the houses the same hard blue against mud-grey walls; orange bower-birds that weave their basket nests in feathery acacias; gleaming⁷ black gardeners sluicing water from leather skins, lovingly, on rows of blue-green onions; lean aristocratic Touaregs, of super-natural appearance, with coloured leather shields and shining spears, their faces encased in indigo veils, which, like carbon paper, dye their skin a thunder-cloud blue; wild Moors with corkscrew curls; firm-breasted Bela⁸ girls of the old slave caste, stripped to the waist, pounding at their mortars and keeping time with monotonous tunes; and monumental Songhai ladies with great basket-shaped earrings like those worn by the Queen of Ur over four thousand years ago.

And at night the half-calabash⁹ moon reflected in the river of oxidised silver, rippled with the activity of insects; white egrets¹⁰ roosting in the acacias; the thumping of a *tam-tam* in town; the sound of spontaneous laughter welling up like clear water; the bull frogs, whining mosquitoes that prevented sleep, and on the desert side the far-off howls of jackals or the guard-dogs of nomad camps. Perhaps the Timbuctoo of the mind is more potent than one suspects.

GLOSSARY

- 6** a long flowing garment worn by men and women in Mali, Nigeria, Senegal, and some other parts of Africa
- 7** shining
- 8** a caste within the Touareg people
- 9** an annual vine having white flowers and smooth, large, hard-shelled gourds
- 10** types of white heron



ACTIVITIES

1 Answer the following questions.

- 1 What did the narrator know of Timbuctoo when he was eleven?
- 2 What feelings did the name ‘Timbuctoo’ arouse in his mind?
- 3 Where is Timbuctoo?
- 4 What is the “Timbuctoo of the mind” according to the narrator?
- 5 What does the narrator remember vividly about the city?
- 6 What was his reaction at seeing the city for the first time?
- 7 What was the surrounding landscape like?

2 Timbuctoo (Timbuktu) is an old city in the West African nation of Mali. It is home to Sankore University and was an intellectual and spiritual capital and centre for the propagation of Islam throughout Africa in the 15th and 16th centuries. The city has always had a mysterious and mythical image which has survived to the present day in other countries: a survey among 150 young Britons in 2006 found 34% did not believe the town existed, while the other 66% considered it “a mythical place”. Describe the painting

Caravan approaching Timbuktu, seen from a distance, 1853, from Heinrich Barth, *Travels and Discoveries in Northern and Central Africa*, vol. IV, London, 1858.

