

Tuareg Tales in Timbuktu: an initiative for nurturing the oral heritage of nomads

Part of a global non-profit venture against the disappearance of cultural diversity being incubated in California, supported by the Christensen Fund.
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Living Cultural Storybases

Self-empowering Narratives for Minority Cultures

Summary

The retelling of traditional and personal stories is vital for cultural transmission, group solidarity, ethnic identity and evaluation of change. We would like your support to create living networks of stories and songs for communities to share, celebrate and re-interpret their cultural knowledge. Our engagement with Tuareg nomads aims to show how digital technologies can provide appropriate systems, enabling secure dialogue in their language, Tamasheq linked to their content.



Salt comes from the North, gold from the South, money from the white man's country; but the word of God, holy things and fine legends, one finds them only in Timbuktu. (Ancient Sudanese proverb)



The Tuareg - 'blue men of the desert'

The Berber Tuareg number several million, traditionally proud nomadic herders, caravaners and traders who roamed six Saharan countries having the skills to survive in this harsh terrain. Divided and often politically marginalized, recently their feudal clans have seen hard times and conflict. Droughts and famines in the 1970's drove many from desert encampments into urban zones. Their own language is Tamasheq, some speaking Arabic and French. Tuareg are mainly Muslim with their own code of devotion, hospitality, honour and bravery. Inheritance is through the female line, the women enjoying respect and freedom. They have a strong heritage of learning, storytelling, poetry and music: 'griots' from special families are their appointed ambassadors and oral historians.

Tombouctou 'La Mysterieuse'

Timbuktu in Mali became an animist centre in the 14th century ruled by the king magician, Soni Aliber. It was the ancient centre of learning for the African-Islamic world in the 15-16th centuries on the salt caravan, gold and slave routes controlled by the Tuareg. After this golden age it became the fabled goal for German, French and English explorers from the London and Paris Geographical Societies. Timbuktu's unique heritage includes 25000 ancient manuscripts of the earliest books e.g. on medicine, mathematics, astronomy and poetry. Unesco listed Timbuktu as World Heritage in Danger in 1990 because of the sand encroachment of its three unique earthen mosques. However its rich *intangible* heritage has hardly been noticed outside the Islamic world.



Timbuktu - town of the 333 Islamic saints



Exploratory Research

Previous visits to Timbuktu and the surrounding desert by our 'Living Cultural Storybases' (LCS) team included ethnographic research on 'The Cultural Impact of the Internet on Tribal Communities', studying the appropriateness, efficacy and sustainability of the public internet centre. In January 2006, our proposals for using MP3 devices in the desert, for remote story-exchanges and social debate over a 'Tuareg intranet' found enthusiasm from cameleers, teenagers, guides, scholars, a griot and an internationally-eminent Tuareg chief.



Old and young still greatly enjoy the recounting of 'tinfouciens': moral fables and tales like '1001 Arabian Nights', handed down as family heirlooms. The sharing of such stories, along with legends of Timbuktu, clan histories and tales teaching desert survival skills which together encapsulate the Tuareg culture is threatened by urbanization and lifestyle changes.

Some Examples of Living Stories

Some sample stories in Tamasheq were recorded and translated in January 2006. These give just a taste of the rich oral heritage of the nomadic Tuareg: long tales told around the campfire at night or during arduous desert journeys, griot music and historic story telling at clan gatherings, education of the young or Koranic teaching by the 'marabouts'.



Kalil Baber Djiteye, a young Tuareg tourist guide. Vividly remembers stories he was told when he was ten by an old woman tobacco seller: of two magic women who sold milk but had no cows; the pretend lion; two magic gourds.



Al Hadana Ag N'daya, cameleer and herder. A fable with a moral ending enlivened by amusing puns: a rich husband's beautiful wife is abducted under a spell. Years later she is exposed by the imam through a test of her son's lives.



Azima Ag Mohamed Aly, with special responsibilities for TinTelout village. Amusing tales of morals and manners: the first 'magic' radio in Timbuktu; the folly of a slave, a rich man and a holy man who all fell in love with the same woman; a father teaches his son about true friendship.



Mohamedune Ag Ahmed, guide and herder. A tale of two brothers, one rich but mean-hearted, the other poor. The rich man thinks his jar contains a snake, but the poor man's wife knows that good people can see the gold inside. The tables are eventually turned.



Boudjema Handak, a rare desert navigator. Real life stories: how he learnt his guiding skills from his blind father; journeying for the first time to Mauritania; finding three caravaners, lost in the desert: two had died of thirst, one was saved.



Wanti Ag Mohamed Almulud, griot singer-storyteller and historian. A personal performance of 'injaro', about the griots' role as nomadic troubadours, mediating between warring Tuareg clans, or privately commissioned to celebrate social events, recount histories or legends.

Plans for a Scoping Project 2007-2008

We aim to find an engaging methodology and appropriate technical solutions through community-participatory co-design. There are many options for cultural networked-services which will evolve via iterative prototyping:

- Cross-generational sharing of stories and related spoken messages between elders in the desert and youth in the towns (via two-way, interactive podcasts on MP3 handsets and Internet-linked computers)
- Asynchronous networking between dispersed nomadic clan groups for communication, information, education and political empowerment
- Facilitation of women's remote dialogue and story exchanges between dispersed family encampments
- Links between story tellers and the researchers working with the Timbuktu's unique libraries of 25000 ancient manuscripts
- Coupling a web-based story and poetry database with: Tuareg craft work or souvenirs, the annual music festival in the desert, local radio stations, story-telling cafés in Timbuktu, or playback/recording systems located on Timbuktu's dusty streets (thus linking the intangible and tangible heritages)

Acknowledgements

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Want to find out more, get involved or help to sponsor our 501c(3) organization ?

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 web: <http://storybases.org>



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