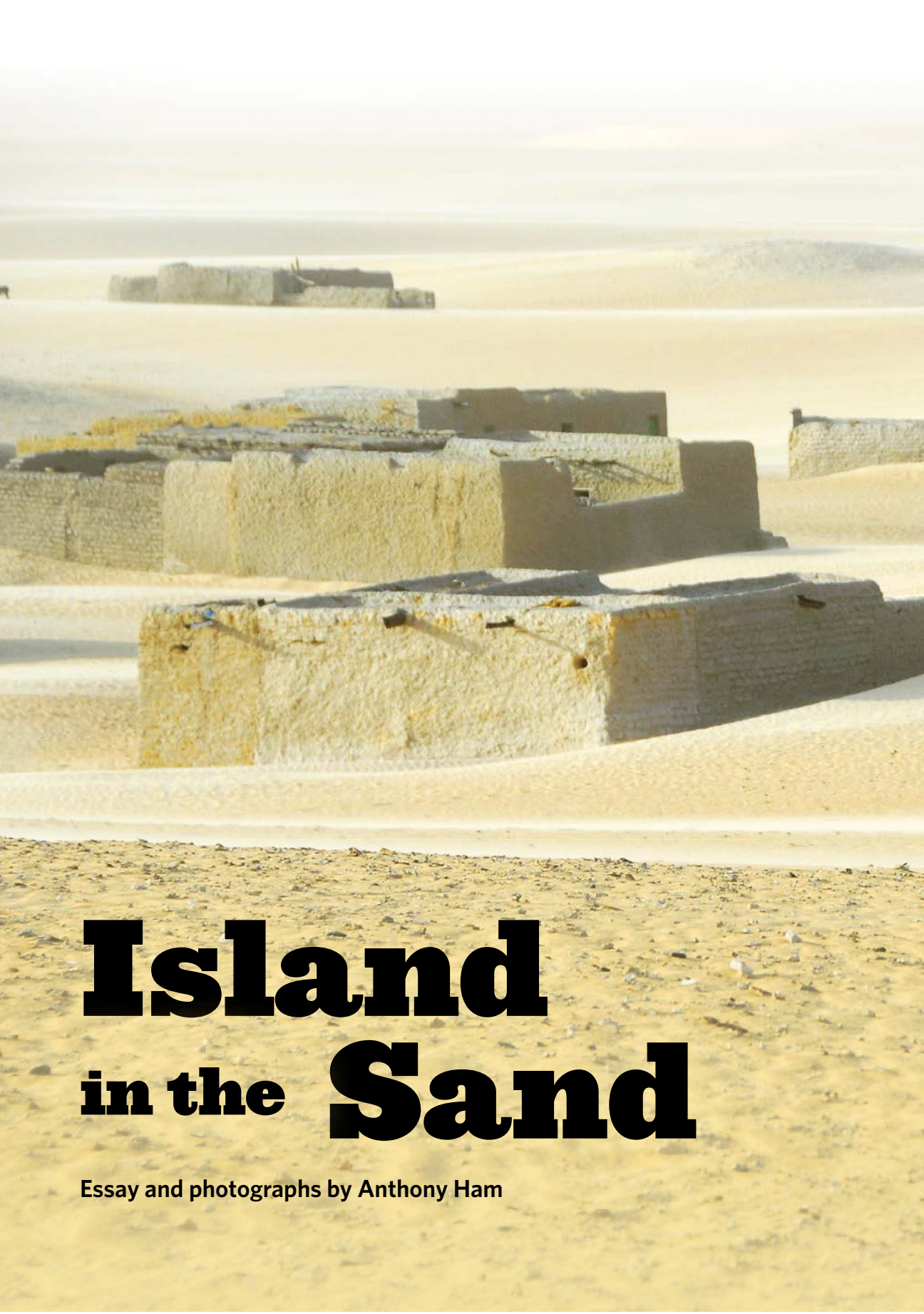

Island in the Sand

Essay and photographs by Anthony Ham

Azima walks on the dunes surrounding Araouane. Behind him, the town's dwellings are submerged in the desert sand.

I WAIT BY AN EMPTY TIMBUKTU roadside in the pre-dawn January chill. Nothing moves in the fetid stillness of the seemingly abandoned city. With its plastic bags, fly-blown offal, listless dogs, and collapsed walls, the city's decay could be anywhere in urban Africa, save for its color: Timbuktu is the color of sand that blew in from the desert on yesterday's orange wind and settled upon the city overnight. There is no sign of Azima, my Tuareg guide and friend of long-standing, or of the car that will carry us into the desert.

The city stirs. A muezzin calls the faithful to prayer, and a camel bellows in protest. The day's first wind rustles the rubbish by the side of the road, and goats hurry through distant streets en route to the desert fringe, there to pass the day foraging on thorns. Weak car headlights, indistinct in the gloom, jounce over the potholes beyond the dust like wild spirits of the night departing. Swathed in blankets, Timbuktu's inhabitants draw near to the Songhai ovens, domes of mud and sources of heat on street corners, then scurry home with bread and glowing coals for the precious first tea of morning. A cold sand wind drives me indoors.

Timbuktu may be the end of the earth, but it is also the start of a very long road, a once-lucrative trans-Saharan trail that connected Africa's interior with the Mediterranean. Our destination is Araouane, one hundred seventy miles to the north. Among the Sahara's oldest caravan towns, perhaps even older than Timbuktu, Araouane was for centuries renowned for the sweet water from its wells. It was also one of the few places of refuge along the waterless tracts to the Saharan salt mines of Taoudenni, and beyond to the historically great kingdoms of Morocco.

Like Timbuktu, Araouane was a prosperous trading town, where gold, silver, ivory, precious stones, ostrich plumes, and slaves passed through en route to the north, while glass and paper from Venice, pearls from Paris, and linen from Marseilles headed south. A European visitor to Araouane in the early nineteenth century found money to be of little use there; the only acceptable currency was gold and silver. And like Timbuktu, Araouane was a renowned seat of learning, famed for its Islamic scholars and priceless manuscripts.

But now Araouane's days are numbered. Surrounded by sand dunes poised like giant waves above the town, and with the camel caravans that keep Araouane alive being consigned slowly to history, Araouane could soon disappear forever beneath the sands.

Our journey to Araouane is no ordinary Saharan journey. For almost a decade, I have been traveling through the Sahara in the company of the Tuareg, immersing myself in its solitude and searching for stories from its vanishing worlds. In the course of this quest, the Sahara has become one of the grand passions of my life. But increasingly, much of the Sahara is off-limits, plagued by rebellion, banditry, and the latest low-intensity war between the Malian army and Tuareg rebel groups. Depending on whom you believe, to these age-old perils of desert travel has been added the shadowy presence of al Qaeda, which has established bases deep in the Malian Sahara; they have been blamed for killings and kidnappings from Egypt in the east to Mauritania in the west. If true, the Sahara north of Timbuktu has become one of the most dangerous places on earth. After weeks of discussion, and against all sound advice, Azima has agreed to take me to Araouane.

When Azima's battered Land Rover arrives in a cloud of dust, he emerges in robes of vivid blue, sandals slapping in the sand. Behind the wheel sits Baba, Azima's most reliable driver and a veteran of many a dangerous desert encounter. Alongside Baba is Ali, his face gnarled like a desert acacia; Ali, who says not a word, not even in greeting, has spent his life guiding camels along the caravan route north of Timbuktu. Azima is as effusive as Ali is reserved and his chant-like

In the middle of a sand sheet in the Saharan desert, a dead tree leans against the wind, surrounded by swirling dust.

ritual greetings will ripple through our conversation until long after we are underway. But his customary cheerfulness is tempered by a nervousness that I have never before seen in him; his eyes scan the street and he hurries me into the car.

We set off in silence.

We are two hours north of Timbuktu when Ali speaks for the first time, and his words are not welcome: "Put a turban on the white man." I have seen nothing, but my colleagues have seen a car. "It is very strange to see one car alone in the desert," Azima says as he conceals my face under meters of blue cloth. "And it was a very new car. It smelled bad."

Ever since leaving Timbuktu, we have seen no other signs of life; the litter of trails through the sand has been strangely empty. True, we gave a wide berth to Agouni, the only settlement of note between Timbuktu and Araouane and the place where, in 1826, Alexander Gordon Laing, the first European to reach Timbuktu, was hacked to death by his Tuareg guide. According to Azima, Agouni's reputation has scarcely improved in the almost two centuries since and it remains a bastion of Islamist fervor. But Azima is shocked to find the Sahara so silent and devoid of its usual signs of slow commerce and human movement. "I have never seen the Sahara like this," he says. "This is the first time I have traveled this road without seeing a single person, not even a single animal at the wells."

Azima has always assured me that he has been unconcerned about making this journey. But now that we no longer have a choice, he advises me to be more careful. "Twice in Timbuktu, you told people that we were going to Araouane," he says. "There are rebels in the desert, yes, but there are many more listening in Timbuktu."

We continue in silence, before Azima speaks again, shouting to make himself heard above the straining engine: "Soldiers don't come into the desert, even this close to Timbuktu. The government gives them petrol so that they can patrol the Sahara, but they sell it on the black market. If we have trouble out here, we are on our own."

He again falls quiet. Then, as if talking to

One of the camel caravans that keep Araouane alive travels along the dangerous trans-Saharan trail from Timbuktu.

himself, he speaks an old truth I have heard from nomads across the Sahara: "There are many tracks into the desert. There are not so many that lead out."

Yesterday's wind has returned with relentless force, and eddies of dust snake across the earth, howling through the emptiness like the ghoulish tails of desert djinns. Sand hisses and spatters against the car and even inside it we are soon coated in a fine layer of grit; visibility is down to less than a hundred meters. We make slow progress, meandering north under a weak sun.

Beyond the well of Taganet, we cross a vast sand sheet, the famed *azawad* of desert lore, a hallucinatory void; in the strong wind our tire tracks disappear within seconds. We could be traveling in circles, and yet somehow Ali knows the way, directing Baba with perfunctory hand signals to indicate subtle shifts of direction. When I wonder aloud how Ali can possibly know the way in this world stripped of landmarks, Azima tells a story.

"There was once a very experienced guide with the salt caravans between Taoudenni and Timbuktu. But he was very old and became blind. He told everyone that before he died, he wanted to travel with one last caravan to Taoudenni and return. Everyone told him that he was crazy, but he insisted. No one would take him, until finally his cousin agreed. In Africa there is always a joking relationship between cousins, so the man took some sand from Timbuktu and put it in a bag, and the caravan set out. They marched for seven days, past Araouane, and then the caravan stopped. After two days, the old man asked him why they hadn't moved for so long. 'Are you no longer a good guide? Did you forget everything that I taught you?' 'I am sorry,' the cousin said, 'but I am lost.' The old man became angry and told the cousin to bring him some sand so that he could taste it to see if he knew where they were. The cousin brought him the Timbuktu sand, and the old man began to laugh. 'I do not even have to taste this sand,' he said, holding it in his hand. 'We have been marching for seven days and we didn't even leave the streets of Timbuktu.' Everyone was amazed that the old man still knew the sand and his cousin told him the truth. So they continued on to Taoudenni, and the caravan returned to Timbuktu. The old man died in peace soon after."

Halfway across the sand sheet, a dead tree looms from behind the veil of dust, leaning away from the wind. I watch as Azima, Baba, and Ali scurry for firewood, their robes billowing in the wind. It could be the aftermath of the apocalypse, this infernal scene of veiled men silhouetted against the near horizon, tearing in manic haste at what could be the last tree left on earth. I shudder. When Azima returns to the car, he is exultant: "Isn't it beautiful?"

Great swells of sand threaten to engulf the village, climbing the walls and lapping at the rooftops; from above, it resembles a shipwreck breaking into pieces and drifting apart.

Finally, beyond the sand sheet's northern shore, away to the west against a backdrop of sand hills, camels cluster around a well in the midday gloom. On a sand dune to the north a lone building swirls into view and then disappears, like a lighthouse in heavy seas. Baba accelerates. From alongside the building, from atop the highest point for hundreds of miles in every direction, we look out upon perhaps forty mud dwellings scattered in the sandy hollows. Oblivious to the wind, flies swarm and cling to our faces, seeking moisture in the tinder-dry air. Down below, box-like mud buildings, many with sagging walls, sit as if discarded at random by an untidy desert wind, separated not by streets but

by rivers of moving sand. Great swells threaten to engulf the village, climbing the walls and lapping at the rooftops; from above, it resembles a shipwreck breaking into pieces and drifting apart. From time to time, a face peers from a darkened doorway, and a cowled figure, bent double, hurries out into the wind to cross the open spaces between buildings like a sand crab. Were it all a mirage, it would be singularly unimpressive.

Azima draws alongside me. "Welcome to Araouane."

We seek refuge at the home of Mohammed Bashir, Araouane's young imam. The house, like the other dwellings, has sand piled high against the eastern wall; the flatter windward side is strewn with dung pellets from goat and camel, a crucial source of family fuel. In the north wall, the entrance has been excavated so many times that a sand moat has appeared. To enter we must step down into the house from above.

Inside, mud walls support a roof of uneven wooden beams and tightly packed straw mats, and we make ourselves comfortable, cross-legged, on carpets atop the sandy floor. As the faces of curious onlookers crowd the open doorway, a young boy brings us a tin cup of pungent camel's milk, the traditional Araouane brew of welcome.

Azima and Mohammed talk. During the conversation's many silences Mohammed studies me, as I have studied him as he speaks. A Moorish Arab, Mohammed has kindly drooping eyes, a patchy untidy beard, and a turban carelessly draped, more than tied, over his closely cropped head. He smiles easily, although rarely with abandon, and his voice, when it comes, is as spare as the desert wind as he asks: "Are there places in your country like this, where there is nothing but sand?" But otherwise he displays a singular lack of curiosity about the world beyond the desert: Araouane is his world.

"Do you like Araouane?" he wonders.

"Yes . . . very much. But it must be a very hard life here."

"Yes, but Araouane is my home. I don't want to live anywhere else. Here we are free. Sometimes I must go to Timbuktu to buy food, but I haven't left Araouane for one year. If I had food here in Araouane, I would never leave."

The sun rises against a dwelling in Araouane. The mud walls are littered with goat and camel dung pellets, later used for fuel.

"But does Araouane have a future?"

"If the salt mines of Taoudenni close, Araouane will be finished. There is nothing else here. Every house sends two or three young men to work in the mines when they turn twenty years old. And we make a living from the passing salt caravans, although there are not so many of them now. But even if they close the mines, I and many other people in Araouane would rather die here than leave."

"Will Araouane ever disappear beneath the sand?"

Mohammed does not answer directly. "The house I was born in disappeared in the way that you say. In the end, people thought it was a well, because you could only see the roof through a hole in the sand. Then it disappeared. We built another house, the one where you are now. I can't tell you exactly where my first house is. It is somewhere out there to the north."

As we talk, the wind buffets the walls without respite and gusts of sand blow in through the door. If first appearances are anything to go by, Araouane's battle against the Sahara seems doomed to failure. Mohammed watches me, and smiles.

"When I was a child," he says, "there were many more people in Araouane. Now there are maybe one hundred, mostly women and children. There used to be many houses and tents, many more than now. Now most of them are under the sand."

"When was the last time it rained here?"

The young imam counts on his fingers. "Six months ago. But it was only a few drops. The last real rains were a long, long time ago, many years."

We lapse into silence.

After a time, Azima suggests that we explore the village. It is mid-afternoon, but Araouane

is cast into perpetual dusk by sheets of windborne sand. Villagers cloaked in turbans and heavy coats huddle behind walls, passing the day, watching the wind.

When Réné Caillié, the first European to reach Timbuktu and live to tell the tale, passed through Araouane on his return journey in 1828, he was greeted "by the howling of dogs" and locals pursued him through the streets, hurling insults and threatening gestures in his direction. Caillié suffered sandstorms, stifling heat, and what he described as "a violent derangement of the stomach." Things didn't improve. "I never saw so dull a place," he wrote. "I was unable to comprehend how the mere love of gain could induce these people to live for twelve or fifteen years in such a dreadful country . . . I looked forward with pleasure to the happy moment when I was to leave this disagreeable country."

Even Ernst Aebi, an American adventurer who arrived in Araouane in 1988 and, in one of the Sahara's more curious tales, set about saving Araouane from the march of history by planting gardens and making the village self-sufficient, was similarly unimpressed. Araouane was, he said on arrival, "a horrible place. Why anybody would have built a village here was beyond me. No vegetation, no shade, just sand and rubble. No beer, either. And ravenous swarms of black flies buzzing over the inhabitants in their tattered rags, and over the camels and goats and salt bars. Surely this was hell on earth." As Aebi pointed out, the name Araouane, is pronounced like "Erehwon," the utopia imagined by Samuel Butler in the nineteenth century; he came up with the name by spelling "nowhere" backwards.

To Michael Benanav, an American writer who traveled to Taoudenni and back with a salt caravan five years ago, Araouane was "a crumbling village that is sinking into the huge swell of sand upon which it is built." Araouane, he wrote, "barely has a pulse at all."

The insults which greeted Caillié aside, it is all true. We lean away from the wind and walk as if through a sand blizzard, between houses and rubble barely visible beyond the wall of sand.

In five minutes, we have walked from the heart of Araouane to its westernmost limits. Alongside a stand of perhaps ten trees which date from the days of Aebi's bold experiment,

and which in the wind emit a roar like waves breaking on the shore, Azima leans on a crumbling wall all but submerged beneath more than a decade of sand. This was the "Araouane Hilton," a simple hotel built by Aebi in the days when trans-Saharan tourism was big business and offered hope to remote villages such as this. But the Tuareg rebellion in the 1990s drove Aebi away and his hotel, too, will soon be gone.

We talk little, our mouths filling with sand. As the wind drives us back to the shelter of the imam's home, I ask Azima how on earth people can live here. He shrugs. "They are Muslim. They trust in God."

At sunset, I sit in the semi darkness of the imam's house, watching through the doorway as an old Moorish muezzin stands at the entrance to the mosque, calling Araouane's faithful few to prayer; he bellows into the wind like a divine madman. In the absence of water, Azima performs his ritual ablutions with sand. Azima and Mohammed then trudge out into the gauze light of the wind-shrouded sunset. It is Islam unchanged in fourteen centuries.

After the sun has gone and the wind abates, Araouane is cloaked in darkness; there is no electricity. Men crowd into the room to talk and to debate the Sahara's troubled times. Here, in the eye of a storm that has spread fear across the open desert and the Saharan campfires of night, people are hungry for news and full of opinions. Azima does his best to translate, but is discreet about doing so: it is clear that those in the room consider talk of rebels and bandits to be a private matter. At one point, Azima leans over to me and whispers: "People here are very worried."

Rumors are circulating that three hundred rebel Tuareg fighters have this week gathered in Kidal, in Mali's far northeast, for showdown talks with the Malian government. "If they can make an agreement," Azima says, "there will be peace. If not, things will get a lot worse. This is a very important week for the Tuareg and for Mali." Whether these stories are true or not, later reports in the Malian press will suggest that, at the very moment we are discussing the situation in the imam's house, the Malian army is destroying the main Tuareg rebel base, close to the Algerian border.

As day breaks and before the wind rises, the villagers of Araouane venture out of their homes.

But everyone agrees that the presence of al Qaeda is a different matter altogether. And, it seems, we have been lucky.

"Yesterday," Mohammed tells us, "the bandits crossed the desert close to here. They were Islamists from Mauritania. If you had arrived a day earlier, you could have been kidnapped."

Mohammed has no time for those who would use fear to spread the message of Islam. "Now in Timbuktu there are imams from other countries, especially Arabs, in the mosques. One day after prayers, the people were leaving and these men told them to stay behind so that they could teach the people of Timbuktu about Islam. But one old man said to them: 'Listen to me. Islam was here in Timbuktu long before you arrived. We don't need you to come here and teach us about Islam.'"

Everyone in the room nods in assent.

I ask if they have any problems here, whether from bandits, rebel Tuareg groups, or Islamists.

"No, why would we?" Mohammed answers. "They are looking for money, for rich people. In Araouane, we only have sand. That is why Araouane is good. It is a hard life, but it is safe here, and peaceful."

When the men disperse to do whatever one does in Araouane to pass the night, Azima voices the concerns that have followed us here.

"The rebels have their contacts, even here in Araouane, even among some of the guides. They know everything. They know how many cars are coming, which route they take, the nationality of the people who come. Did you see how they had the food ready when we arrived? Araouane knew we were coming. News in the desert travels very fast."

"So the rebels know that we are in Araouane now?"

"Yes . . . Of course."

I think of Ali, my taciturn guide, and of all the people I have met here in Araouane. I walk outside and scan the horizon by the light of the moon. Nothing moves.

Tuareg rebellions are recurring features of life in the Sahara. When Mali became independent in 1960, its frontiers cut across the open spaces of the desert, enclosing the nomadic Tuareg within borders that they resented and routinely ignored where they could. To the black Africans of the south who dominated Mali's new army and government, the Tuareg were predators, plunderers, and the owners of slaves, a warrior race who had throughout history raided caravans and villages for the mere pleasure of it. As part of its civilizing mission, the Malian government forced many Tuareg to abandon their nomadic life and humiliated veiled Tuareg nobles by conducting ceremonies of public undressing. When that didn't work, soldiers burned nomads to death or buried them alive. The mainstays of the Tuareg economy, cattle and camels, were mown down with machine guns. Rape, imprisonment, and torture were common.

The first Tuareg uprising in the early 1960s was brutally put down. During the almost three decades that followed, Tuareg areas came under strict military control and Mali's meager wealth was rarely distributed in the predominantly Tuareg north. Grinding poverty and a succession of catastrophic droughts and famines wiped away the old Tuareg order; by the late 1980s, very few Tuareg still lived as nomads. In June 1990, a newly militant generation of young Tuareg rose up in anger. When the government struck back, northern Mali and neighboring Niger were plunged into open conflict. The Tuareg fled en masse, retreating into rebel camps or into exile.

Azima was among those who fled with his family. "During the rebellion in the 1990s, we went as refugees to Mauritania," he told me, "and we stayed there for eight months. Timbuktu was very dangerous at this time. Even though I had good relations with the people there, it wasn't safe because I am Tuareg. They thought that I knew the rebels and knew where they were hiding. Many Tuareg were killed in Timbuktu."

Baba, our driver and a Saharan journeyman, would later tell me the story of this time from a different perspective. Born to a Tuareg father and a Songhai mother, he bears visible Songhai tribal scars and refuses to recognize his Tuareg blood: "I am not Tuareg. I am Songhai. The Tuareg are bad people. They are rebels." He was in

Timbuktu for the duration of the rebellion and has distrusted the Tuareg, his deep friendship with Azima notwithstanding, ever since.

"Was it dangerous in Timbuktu back then?" I ask him.

"*Very* dangerous."

"For you?"

"For everyone."

"Do you know people who were killed?"

"Yes. I had one friend who was a driver and he was coming from Niafunké to Timbuktu. The bandits stopped him thirty kilometers from town. They killed him and his apprentice driver, stole everything from the passengers, and raped the women."

"The attackers were Tuareg?"

"They were Tuareg. The government were giving out guns and training people to help defend Timbuktu, to help the army. On the day that I heard my friend had been killed, I went to join them. One time, we were in a fortress camp five kilometers outside Timbuktu, and we saw the rebels enter the town. We wanted to kill them, but when we radioed the military they told us to wait. The soldiers came, left the car and continued on foot. One of the commanders went to the drivers of the rebel cars and pretended to be a rebel. 'When are they coming?' he asked. 'Soon,' they said. So he killed the drivers, not with a gun, but by cutting their throats. And the soldiers did the same to each of the rebels who returned to the cars. I never shot my gun, except in training, but when peace came and they had the ceremony to hand over the guns and burn them, I was outside Timbuktu. When I came back, no one asked me for the gun. I have it to this day."

In the mid-1990s, a peace of sorts was patched together. Some former rebels were brought into the army and government money was plowed into the north, especially the rebel capital, Kidal. A wary peace reigned.

But distrust between the Tuareg and Mali's other ethnic groups lingered: the Tuareg consider themselves to be a people apart, and the black Africans of the south agree. For the most part, this tension rarely extends beyond the daily indignities of mutual dislike. "I have had many bad experiences in the south of Mali, even in Timbuktu," Azima once told me. "It is because I

Azima sits atop a dune, robes shielding him from windborne sand and black flies.

am Tuareg. The police will always stop me, and no one else, and ask for my identity card. Bamako is not my capital." Another of my Malian friends, a Dogon man named Ogomono Saye, loathes Timbuktu with a passion—it is in Timbuktu that he is made to feel like a foreigner in his own country and he is routinely overcharged by Tuareg traders and called "*Bambara himchi*" (Bambara boy) to his face. En route to Timbuktu, in Bamako, a taxi driver told me: "I have traveled all over Mali, except for the north. That is a different country."

In 2005 rebel groups once again began attacking remote army camps in northern Mali, and a new rebellion was launched, albeit this time with limited popular support among the Tuareg. It was a dangerous moment in Mali's history. Ogomono, who was in Bamako at the time, remembers a country that stood on the precipice of civil war: "When this rebellion started, people in cities all over Mali wanted to go to the Tuareg Quartiers and kill all the Tuareg who lived there. People were ringing into private radio stations saying 'kill them, kill them.' But the government stopped them."

Whether it was the government, or because the uprising never really gained traction among its own people, this latest rebellion has been restricted to remote corners of the Sahara. Azima, now with a young family, considered returning into exile, and Baba, with two young children, prepared himself to once again take up arms. But the fighting never reached Timbuktu.

Unlike previous rebellions, this one has been clouded by rumors that al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb, a group to which the Tuareg are generally hostile, has taken up residence in the Malian desert. Such speculation has been disastrous for the peoples of the Sahara, slowing tourism to a trickle and destroying the livelihoods of many in the process.

Stories, as yet unproven, continue to circulate that the Hendrina Khan Hotel in Timbuktu, owned by the rogue Pakistani nuclear scientist Abdul Qadeer Khan and named for his wife, was funded by al Qaeda money. Kidnappings of Westerners and attacks on remote army bases throughout the region have been claimed by shadowy groups asserting allegiance to al Qaeda. In response, the US government has declared the Sahara to be a new front in the War on Terror. In 2006, General Charles Wald, deputy commander of the US European Command, described the Sahara as "a swamp of terror" that "we need to drain" and warned that the Sahara could become "another Afghanistan." The Pentagon called it "an al Qaeda terrorist zone" and labeled the desert's isolated massifs "the Sahara's Tora Bora."

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Not everyone agrees. Jeremy Keenan, a respected academic and Sahara expert at the University of London's School of Oriental and African Studies, has described the claims as "one of the world's most elaborate and diabolical intelligence deceptions."

Whatever the truth or otherwise of these claims, just weeks before our journey to Araouane twenty soldiers were killed in an attack on a Malian army base in Nampala, close to the Mauritanian border and well beyond the normal sphere of Tuareg operations. In Ségou, on my way north, I had watched a seemingly endless convoy of Malian military vehicles, piled high with soldiers caked in the dust of Nampala and

bristling with American-supplied weaponry, roll through town, heading north for a final assault on Tuareg (or al Qaeda) positions. And although we did not know it at the time, while we were in Araouane, four European tourists were kidnapped in Niger, close to the border with Mali. Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb claimed responsibility. Three would later be released, but one, a British man named Edwin Dyer, would be beheaded in Mali, perhaps close to Araouane, six months after we were there.

Araouane's importance in all of this lies in its location. Close to the eastern limits of Tuareg territory, and not far from Mali's undefended frontier with Mauritania, a country where the Islamist threat seems particularly acute, the desert around Araouane is beyond the control of any government. As such, it serves as a crossroads for those groups, whatever their persuasion, who would turn the Sahara into a place of fear.

Time in Araouane follows a reassuring rhythm. We wake with the sun, then eat a simple breakfast of stale bread. Like everyone in Araouane, we drink endless rounds of tea and spend hours staring at nothing. For everyone but me, the day is divided into the five daily prayers. Otherwise, the only activity for the people here seems to be watching me, a pastime of which they never tire; when the men go at night, a young boy watches over my shoulder as I write by the light of a small lamp powered by a car battery. Time, the day, passes slowly.

On our second day in Araouane, Azima suggests that I may want to return to Timbuktu earlier than planned. Azima is happy here, as am I, cocooned as we are from the world and its noise. But Baba wants to return and he comes to me when no one is around to try and convince me that we should leave soon for Timbuktu. I have traveled with Baba before and he is a model of discretion, willing without complaint to go wherever he is told. And yet, although he does not say so, Baba is uneasy here, surrounded by so much silence and uncertainty. On a trip with Azima to Kidal last year, he narrowly escaped with his life as Azima managed to convince a band of rebels that he and Baba were aid workers come to help their fellow Tuareg. Baba knows, as we all do, that as a Songhai former member of an anti-rebel militia, he may not be so lucky the next time. I also know from Azima that Baba thinks it foolhardy that I should have entered into what may be al Qaeda territory. Even so, I feel safe here, lulled into a sense of security by Araouane's hospitality. The decision is mine, and I decide to stay, knowing that to understand Araouane one must pass through its long, empty hours. If Baba is disappointed, he does not let me see it.

Mohammed Bashir, the young imam of Araouane, would rather die here than leave should Araouane be abandoned.

Later that afternoon, Azima and I climb the ridge of dunes that overlooks Araouane from the south and we sit in the sand, talking from time to time. I ask Azima about his life. At first he says nothing, and we watch as a lone woman in bright yellow robes moves from a well to a house down in the village, balancing a water container atop her head.

"I was born in the desert," he says after a time, "although I don't know the year. Someone told me it was 1970, but I have no way of knowing for sure. When I was a boy, we were nomads and we were always on the move. My father's family is from around Tin Telloun, close to Timbuktu, but my mother's family, the Kel Enshara, comes from close to the well of Taganet. I was born here"—he points away to the southwest—"close to Araouane. It is my country. That is why Araouane is such a special place for me."

A solitary brown-necked raven, the only wild creature I will see in Araouane, lands away to the west searching for scraps, then flies away.

"One day, when I was a small boy, I went to find water on my camel. On my way back to the camp there was a sandstorm. Yes, the wind was bad here yesterday, but a true sandstorm is something different. The sky was black and I couldn't even see my hand. There was no warning, maybe five minutes at the most. I sat down and waited for the storm to end. It lasted for three hours, maybe more. Then I went back to the camp."

A small child in a Barcelona football shirt climbs the hill towards us and sits in silence nearby, watching.

"I didn't even leave the desert for the first time until I was fourteen or fifteen. We went to Timbuktu and the first time I saw it I couldn't believe the lights! But this was a terrible time, the time of the great drought, and we went to the city because we had no food. In Timbuktu the international agencies gave us something to eat. Before we arrived, we had nothing. We even ate animal feed."

The small boy listens, understanding nothing, and Azima speaks with him in Songhai. The boy smiles, grateful that Azima has included him. He inches closer.

"My two sons were born in the desert, as is our custom, but we live in Timbuktu, and I want them to go to school, not like me."

I think back to the first time I met Azima, years ago, when I asked this man who speaks seven languages to write down his name and address for me. He wrote only his first name in the faltering script of a small child, telling me, "I never went to school. I cannot read or write."

He ruffles the young boy's hair.

"One day I will take my sons into the Sahara and we will stay there for a long time, so they can learn about the desert and know it well, so they don't lose the connection."

"Will there always be nomads?"

"Yes, of course. Even I, who has been *sedentaire* for almost twelve years, I still miss the desert. I don't have a fixed telephone in Timbuktu for this reason—if I do, I will feel as if I am no longer a nomad. My brother and my cousin, they are still nomads, but they are unusual and their lives are very hard: the rains never come and there is no water, or pasture for their animals. Even so, I still don't want to be sedentaire. When the tourist season is over, I close up my house, I visit my father for a few days and then my cousin comes to take me on my camel to wherever his camp is. I stay there for maybe one month, go to Timbuktu to buy food, and then go back to the camp. If I have no choice but to be in Timbuktu, every night I go with my friends to the dunes that surround the town, where no one can find us, and we drink tea."

We are silent. Time passes.

A woman wraps herself against the scouring force of blowing sand.

"Before, to show that you were strong, you were a nomad," Azima resumes, picking up the thread of conversation. "Before those droughts it was unimaginable that a *Kel Tamashek* [Tuareg] would live a sedentary life. Now, to show that you are strong, you stay in one place, you become sedentaire. That is why the people of Araouane stay here. It is to show that Araouane exists."

The sun nears the horizon and we have both fallen quiet, lost in thought as we contemplate the great emptiness around us. High above the Sahara, a plane moves north across the sky. Azima chuckles to himself, in thrall of a private memory. I ask him where he is. It is a long time before he answers.

"The first time I ever went in a plane was seven years ago when I went to Spain to visit friends. I asked a French lady to sit by the window, and a friend to sit on the other side, next to the aisle. When the plane started to go fast, I put my head down and prayed. When we took off, I was happy that I am a man because if I was a woman I would have had a baby—I thought my stomach was going to fall out! When my friend spoke, I asked him, 'Are you a Muslim? How can you talk at a time like this?' When we arrived in Paris I asked if I could go home by car. I have since gone back to Europe and it is better now. But not once have I looked out the window, and I am still angry when I see Africans talking on the plane, because we are in the hands of God."

"What does Europe look like to someone from the desert?"

"The first time I saw the ocean in Barcelona, I cried, because it is like the desert—you cannot see its end. For the first week in Europe, I am happy. Then I start to miss the desert. Europe is very difficult for me—everything moves so fast! In the desert we have endless time but no water. In Europe, you have plenty of water but no time. The first time I was in Barcelona and I saw water just lying on the ground, I thought, 'these people are crazy!'

"I could never live there. I see many Africans there and I think that they are very brave. My father didn't want me to go to Europe the first time. He thought maybe I wouldn't come back. When I returned home, I said to him, 'See? I have come back. This is my home.'" He was very proud.

"But, as the Tuareg say, to know yourself you must travel far from home. That is also why the desert is so special. In the desert you can think. Here you can see everything."

Night falls. The sound of the imam's family, the *toctoc, toctoc, toctoc* of women pounding millet, rises into the wind from beyond the courtyard. Chickens wander in and out, and people come and go, murmuring long ritual greetings and farewells. From nearby buildings, voices, occasionally in song and muffled by the night winds of the desert, die before they can be carried out across the sand. We crouch alongside the walls, wrapped in blankets against the freezing night.

In the darkness, Azima tells stories of famous desert guides and of vast caravans of camels and men swallowed up, like the ancient Persian army of Cambyses, by Saharan sandstorms, and of others that lost their way and died of thirst. As always, there is talk of wars, past and future. "Araouane is empty," Azima says between stories. "Many people went to the mines, yes, but they also are looking for oil in the north and I'm sure people went there from Araouane. I hope they don't find oil in Mali, because if they do there will be war."

I ask him to tell me a Tuareg story and it is clear that the fable he chooses is one that he would like to tell the rebels among his people:

"There was once a man in a village, but he was small and believed that no one respected him. So he went to the blacksmith and told him that he had a problem. 'No-one respects me, and when they greet me, they do it from far away. I want you to make me a gun and knives so that I can kill some people. Then they will respect me.' 'OK,' said the blacksmith and the man paid him lots of money. He waited and waited, then went to see the blacksmith. 'Why are you taking so long? 'Patience,' said the blacksmith. Finally, when the blacksmith was ready, he went to the

man's house with an enormous *azawad* [communal eating plate] of sheep and rice and twenty spoons. When the man saw it he was very angry. 'I asked you to make me guns and knives and you bring me this food. Why?' 'You will see.' So they invited everyone from the village, and they all greeted the man warmly and were very friendly to him. 'See?' said the blacksmith. 'This is how you earn their respect.'"

The conversations strike up again and the men regale each other with epic stories of desert disaster and survival. I leave them to their tall tales and step out into the night to walk with wonder under the stars of Araouane.

On the morning we are to leave Araouane, I awake before dawn to the whispers of people shuffling out for morning prayers. An hour or two later, I wake again to find the room filled with seven or eight silent faces watching me. After a breakfast of rock-hard bread, I climb to the highest dune behind the imam's house to take in Araouane one last time. The air is unusually still and the sunrise shadows are long. People emerge from their houses in ones and twos, shrouded in blankets against the morning cold.

From my vantage point on Araouane's summit, I am reminded that, unlike so many villages in Africa that were hidden in inaccessible places to escape slave traders and invading armies, this is a village that needs to be found: if you do not find it, you die. In this role, Araouane has been a symbol of hope for desert travelers down through the centuries.

But one day, perhaps soon, Araouane will itself disappear like the caravans of old. Perhaps it will be abandoned before it comes to this, when human beings despair of Araouane's isolation and of fighting against the sands that wash over the village. Or it will happen when camel caravans no longer ply the trails between Taoudenni and Timbuktu, and when an absence of rain drives the last nomads from the desert and into the city, the Sahara's winds erasing the last vestiges of the desert's nomadic cultures. Or it will be decreed by rebel armies who may leave Araouane untouched, but make it uninhabitable as the surrounding desert becomes the sole preserve of bandits, strangling life from the village. Do they know this, the men who last night in the imam's house laughed and clapped and sang until deep into the night? Surely they do, but like the frog in the slowly heating pond, many will not leave until it is too late.

I have been to countless end-of-the-earth outposts of human settlement all across the Sahara, many of them more remote even than Araouane. But for the most part they were straw huts and tents that could be moved in search of pasture, or to escape the ebb and flow of the Sahara's natural and human history. Araouane is different. With its long historical story and its buildings built to last, Araouane disturbs me, as it has ever since I stood here and saw it for the first time, precisely because it has aspirations to permanence.

Azima walks along the dune towards me.

"Baba, he wants to go to Timbuktu," he says. I know. "I want to stay," says Azima. So do I.

Then, too fast, Baba revs the car and powers up to the dune's crest where we stand. Mohammed, now dressed in the flowing sky-blue robes of the Mauritanian Moors, will join us on the journey to shop for supplies; he will stay in Timbuktu for a week and return as soon as he can find a truck traveling north. From beneath folds of cloth, he produces a *gris-gris*, a small cloth amulet of protection which contains a verse from the Quran. "It has more power if I give it to you here in Araouane," he says.

Children swarm up the hillside to see us off. "This dune," says Azima, "is known as *Bismillah Araouane* [Goodbye Araouane] because it is the last place in the village." He wraps my head in a turban. I don't need to ask him why.

Too soon, we are speeding down the dune, heading south. When I turn for one last look at Araouane, it is no longer there.

We see not another living soul all the way into Timbuktu. ◘

The town viewed from a dune known as *Bismillah Araouane* (Goodbye Araouane), because it is thought of as "the last place in the village."