

## GOD'S MAN IN TIMBUKTU

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sage of Jesus Christ. He accepted the Lord at a young age and matured to become the first national pastor in Timbuktu. Today the church he pastors, *L'Eglise Evangélique Baptiste de Tombouctou* (The Evangelical Baptist Church of Timbuktu) with 120 members is the largest in the city and growing.

As a child, Pastor Nohu was kidnapped along with other Tamasheq children and forced to attend the French school. The nearby Evangelical Baptist Mission was giving away "click-clacks" (ball point pens) and Nohu wanted one. To receive a pen, children had to recite Bible verses. He was later rebuked and beaten by a Muslim priest for having associated with "infidels." Muslims told him that Christianity is "only for white people." Four years later the Baptist missionaries sent him to a Bible camp where he was able to meet other black Christians. The boy Nohu realized that the message of salvation was not restricted by race or language. He received Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. When he returned to Timbuktu his father tied him up and demanded that he renounce Christianity. However, Nohu had found peace and joy in Jesus. His father put him out of the house; he was stoned and beaten in the streets. Nohu's mother felt disgraced, and with the aid of a Muslim priest, even tried to poison him. The poison did not harm Nohu but the priest became fatally ill. Before the priest died he warned the people that a "Great Spirit" was in Nohu. Family and all in the community began to take his conversion seriously. It was then and continues to be through much tribulation that Pastor Nohu serves the Lord in full-time ministry. The persecution he endures only reinforces his understanding of God's unconditional love.

An intellectual who understands the value of education, Pastor Nohu studied for four years at a Bible College in Côte d'Ivoire before entering the pastorate in northern Mali. In 1998 he came to the United States where he completed a Master's Degree in Economics and Community Development at Eastern University in Pennsylvania. Through his

travels and training he has gained a catalyst comprehension of global missions. Pastor Nohu recognizes that there is a great need for African-American and other missionaries of color. He has formed a partnership with Rev. Hoise Birks in New York and works with other African-American believers.

Pastor Nohu has dedicated himself to the liberation of his own ethnic group, the Tamasheq, and has launched several projects to meet the needs of the people and at the same time to share the gospel with them. The church has a well that serves the entire neighborhood. For the well to perform more efficiently an electric line was added. Since the church renders such a great service to the city, they do not have to pay an electric bill. Pastor Nohu utilizes all the resources available to him to spread the Good News. The Bible proclaims that "he who winneth souls is wise." Nohu's winning ways accorded him favor with the radio network and now he broadcasts weekly. He also projects the "Jesus" film around the city. Many Muslims have become interested in Christianity and even converted through Pastor Nohu's powerful preaching. However, due to the fear of persecution, many new converts remain what I label as "closet Christians." I have encountered secret believers in Jesus in various parts of the Muslim world.

Timbuktu is considered by many Muslim scholars as the fourth holiest city to Islam after Mecca, Medina and Jerusalem. But there is a strong effort to make it the holiest city of Islam outside of Saudi Arabia. Until recently there were only 10 mosques in Timbuktu. Today there are over 30 mosques and the new brotherhoods are more fundamentalist and jihad in orientation. Radical sects, especially from Saudi Arabia, have financed the majority of the new mosques. Their ultimate goal is to turn Timbuktu into an exclusive holy city of Islam where the practice of other religions would be forbidden.

Another strong, growing, political and religious emphasis in Timbuktu is coming from President Mommar Ghadaffi of Libya. He is pouring hundreds of millions of dollars into the country of Mali, especially into the city of Timbuktu. All over this desert city are signs boasting the presence and partnership of Libya. Ghadaffi is building mosques, Koranic schools, paved roads and a water canal for boats from the Niger River. He also recently purchased the largest tourist hotel to make it his showcase in Mali. In addition, he bought a huge tract of land very close to the Ahara Kabara Church that was birthed from

the mother church in Timbuktu led by Pastor Nohu.

After Ghadaffi's visit to Timbuktu religious tensions began to resurface. It became difficult for Christians to get jobs, to trade, and receive basic necessities. The believers in Timbuktu fasted and prayed. And then Holy Spirit inspired Pastor Nohu to serve one of the neediest groups of people, single mothers. Many women in this society are abandoned, oftentimes by very short-term husbands. Pastor Nohu and the other Christians overlooked their own suffering to reach out to others who also suffered and in 1990 the Women's Center was opened. Women are taught skills in sewing, embroidery, knitting and tie-dyeing. They also learn to read and write. Pastor Noah shares the Word with them and draws parallels between the Bible and the Koran to illustrate the Truth of the Scriptures. Men in the community began to question the women's involvement. So, Pastor Noah opened a Men's Center. Now, the men also are learning tailoring and other trades, to read and write and to learn about Christianity. Nohu's ministry is so excellent because participants are free and are neither pressured nor forced to convert. Due to the insistence of Pastor Nohu there is now a clear translation of the New Testament available in Tamasheq. The Tamasheq people or *Kel Tamasheq* are descendants of Berber traders and warriors who crossed and settled in the Sahara from the 10<sup>th</sup> century of the Black African peoples enslaved by them who adopted their language and customs.

Timbuktu was founded in about 1100 A.D. around a small oasis. *tin* which means "well" in the local language, and *Buktu*, the name of the woman in charge of the well. Due to its strategic location between the great kingdoms of West Africa and the marketplaces of Europe Tim-

buktu flourished and at one time had a population of 100,000. Today the city has about 15,000 residents. By the time the white man arrived, what Elliott Skinner refers to as the "Glorious Age in Africa" had already declined. Several decades ago a country music artist recorded a song with the refrain "You can't get to heaven on roller skates and you can't take a train to Timbuktu." Like many in our society at that time the singer was unaware that Timbuktu was and is a real place. Due to the difficulty that European explorers experienced in trying to reach the city, Timbuktu gained a reputation for being remote, impossible to access and thus became a byword.

It is important to underscore that Timbuktu was an intellectual and spiritual capital for the propagation of Islam throughout Africa during the 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> centuries and is the location for three of the most ancient mosques on the continent: *Djingarey Ber* (1325), *Sankore* (1581), and *Sidi Yahya* (1400). These mud structures are endangered due to desertification and preservation projects are constantly in progress. Together the mosques comprise the University of Sankore. There is also the celebrated *Ahmed Baba Institute for Advanced Study & Islamic Research* that houses thousands of ancient texts, and there are many other shrines of ancient and contemporary African history in Timbuktu.

Timbuktu holds an indisputable place in human history and has been declared a UNESCO World Heritage Site since 1988. The city was also among the 2007 nominees to become one of the wonders of the world. And now, I can finally say "I have been to Timbuktu."

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