

**Theft of
the
Golden
Manuscript**

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Introduction

This is the first story of Detective Dabo, a time travelling African investigator.

First and foremost, he has been created to share knowledge of African history; the mystery genre is the framework in which to present that knowledge: another way of teaching African Studies. So it is hoped that these stories will engage all, especially those in secondary school education, studying History and Geography.

Timbuktu University. Not from the European, Christian-based template, but from the North African Islamic model. Students came from all over the Islamic world, to study there; scholars came to teach and to enhance their personal knowledge. Scholars from sub-Saharan Africa, such as Ahmed Baba of Mali and Ibrahim Kanemi of Chad, taught in Morocco and Muhammed al-Fulani al-Kishnawi of Nigeria, taught in Egypt, where Muhammed Bagayogo was given a doctorate by Al-Azhar University, during his pilgrimage to Mecca.

Dedication

to Agatha Christie, Brian Clemens and Lynda La Plante

for the twists and turns that have inspired me, to begin writing in their genre

Theft of the Golden Manuscript

I

He stands on one of the streets of sand and watches early evening life go by. Men in blue robes and white turbans, are leaving the place of prayer – dust and reverence in the air - while a man on a donkey passes by. As the robes of the men are tickled by the breeze, so the dresses of the three women also. Each carries a bowl of content on her head, crucial items of daily living, like sacred couriers. Under a tree, a woman pounds grain in a mortar: a friend joins her, reviving conversation. A boy riding one, herds three other donkeys, along the thoroughfare of earth. A dark-robed turbaned man, with a walking stick, walks behind six goats of piebald colouring.

He stands on a street in a city in Mali, where the Sahara Desert meets the Niger River: a street in Timbuktu. It is 1570, during the Golden Age of the city. But why is Detective Dabo there? Let me tell you.

On the arrival of the camel train from Fez, commotion erupted. As everyone was settling in, happy after reaching destination, something was discovered missing. Discovered by Ibrahim of the Caravans, famed leader of the camel trains. His agitation then spread to his camel, which was felt by the others with four legs, causing a ripple of disruption to pass among them, resulting in a chorus of honking and bellowing. In the animal clamour, their drivers walk here and there, cursing and searching: the hue and cry of man and beast. When the item did not turn up, Dabo was summoned. He is on the case, of the Theft of the Golden Manuscript. He is glad to be here; his first case, in the celebrated university town of West Africa.

How is he summoned? By a wish. And how is he transported? By a wave of music. Once a wish is registered in his head, a wave of music is generated, on which he travels to the country of the one who has summoned him. He came to Timbuktu, via the melody of a kora.

But what is a manuscript? In its traditional meaning, a handwritten book. And the libraries of the great teachers of Timbuktu, were full of them. Books from Egypt and Morocco, that came across the desert with the camel caravans, as well as from Mali and Mauritania. And that is how the Golden Manuscript, came to be in the City of Books. The first person Dabo went to interview, was the leader of the caravan. The caravan man had wished him to be there and he was: standing on a street of sand.

As blue and white turns to pink and orange, Dabo goes out of the city, to where the caravan has come to rest: between the dunes and the city walls. On the dunes, a couple of boys are rolling, gamboling down them, then re-ascending to the top: Kings of the Little Hill. Cartwheeling, somersaulting, in the largest sandpit in the world. The Saharan desert, gives them the softest playground ever created. As the sun goes down, laughter is raised.

And there are camels everywhere. Like ochre slaves, congregating at a conference for freedom. And what they have carried is being unloaded: and the most important item is salt. Slabs of salt, mined in the salt mines of northern Mali. So the first thing Detective Dabo did, after being introduced to Ibrahim of the Caravans and the wishing of peace and the return of the wish, was to have the slabs searched. In case the missing text had been sandwiched between the slabs of salt – or in other baggage - he had the pack of each of

the thousand camels searched; but the Golden Manuscript was not located in the transit items of the dromedaries.

After the search of urgency, the legendary leader invites the famous detective, to drink a glass of green tea, to which Dabo squeezes a little lemon. Body wrapped in indigo, head wrapped in black, the man who incorporates the roles of facilitator, mediator, adjudicator and peacemaker, in his position as caravan head, invites the greatest detective of sub-Saharan Africa, into his tent of camel skin, to sit on a rug woven by his wife. The detective, lovingly known by his friends as the Lemon Sleuth, due to his love for the yellow blessings: in his drinks and over his food.

The animals have been seated, unpacked and fed. While this is happening, tents are put up and fires appear. Soon, a platter of rice and roast vegetables is placed before Dabo and his host. Although there is some unease due to the theft, all over the mobile village, the travellers are enjoying the joy of destination and the reward of rest.

Then a drum and a female voice are heard, giving thanks for the fact of safe arrival. First the encampment goes quiet, enchanted by the solo benediction; then a flute is heard, a lute joins in and clapping accompanies the music. She leads and other voices sing in reply Dabo sits outside a Tuareg tent, happy in the house of enchantment. And as he sits, he thinks of the next move, in the Theft of the Golden Manuscript; interviewing his host, whose reputation is as wide as the desert.

II

"So apart from you, who on the caravan, had knowledge of the Golden Manuscript?"

"No one, not even the imam of the caravan."

"And in Morocco?"

"Only the scribe - and he had been told to tell no one and to never leave his workshop unlocked, while working on the book."

"In Mali?"

As far as I know, only the one who commissioned the book, the great teacher Ahmed Baba.

"And no one has left or joined, since leaving Sijilmasa."

"No"

"OK...Could it have been taken during a sandstorm?"

"No, because it was on my camel; and I am either on it, or walking beside it. True, visibility is lower and there's a certain amount of panic around, but protection from the elements is the priority during a storm, especially a heavy one. And we take a stock check, after the passing of each one."

"Did you have any encounters with any bandits?"

"No, as we had reached agreement with the other Tuareg, including financial assurances."

"Tell me something, have the Berber peoples always facilitated the trade across the desert?"

"Yes, from the time of the earlier empire of Ghana and the one called Mali, to now, the empire of the Songhai. They are the controllers of gold, as we have traditionally ran the trade in salt. The gold comes from the Mali/Senegal/Guinea region and the salt from northern Mali."

"I know ancient Ghana, as I worked on a case there; the Soninke Merchant Kidnapping. As you know, the Soninke founded ancient Ghana. That was a 9th century case, where a Soninke trader from a Wangara family, had been kidnapped. Anyway, back to this one! Who would most benefit from the stolen text?"

"Yes, my ancestors traded with the Soninke in ancient times, as we trade with the Songhai now. So who would benefit? My mind has been taking me to all kinds of scenarios, real and unreal! It would be a prestige item in any library, although it would have to be an unknown text, which only the possessor could consult. So it couldn't be held in one of the main colleges or madrassas of the university – Sankore, Jingerber and Sidi Yahya – but possibly, in one of the many schools, founded and staffed by one teacher. So that's one possibility, though very unlikely for varied reasons."

"Who else?"

"A wealthy student, but once again, it would have to be for personnel use only, unless he could trust his best friend."

"Anyone outside of academia?"

"Not really, as the thief would have to rob it as a commissioned act: as you can imagine, it couldn't go on the open market, so to speak."

"OK...By the way Ibrahim, how many times have you made this journey."

"Too many times to remember. It is like a rite of passage for us; we are not considered men, until we have made the journey across. From boyhood till now, as my beard turns silver like the rings we wear on our fingers. I will not be able to do many more, so I don't want this theft to darken my reputation. All those years, taking the caravans from Fez to Timbuktu and back; I have treated all with respect and all have made profit. Please Detective Dabo, don't let me be remembered as the caravan leader, who lost the Golden Manuscript."

III

As the sound of thanksgiving continues and the things that sparkle begin to twinkle, Dabo removes himself from the evening gathering of camels and men, to go and sit on a dune, pondering the present case. Sad to see the face of the legendary caravan man; after years of sterling service, to have his name of assurance destroyed. He has to solve this mystery, if only to save the reputation of the man. As he begins to ascend the chosen dune, he overhears part of a conversation.

"Don't worry Ali, no one will notice it here"...Then the conversation stopped, as if aware of another presence; scent in the air, or a noticeable change in the dune: a restive quietness. Dabo doesn't want to put his head above the dune, in case he is seen, and the two in conversation, must be feeling the same way. After a few more seconds, he hears the faint sound, of movement across the sand. He crawls to the top of the dune and peaks over: but darkness has enveloped the two figures.

Taking a wide berth of the camp, Dabo re-enters Timbuktu - and laying on the terrace of his lodging, his place of preference for sleeping, he contemplates an aspect of Arabia.

IV

Waking in the morning, after a wash and a cold lemon drink, he quickly makes his way to the house of Muhammed Bagayogo. Sitting in the cooling patio of the house of the Eminent One, he wishes he had time to look through his library: but time is not on his side. Knowing he's a busy man, with his teaching and mediation duties, he keeps his questioning brief and to the point. Having heard cases over the years from plaintiffs from Asia as well as Africa and taught students from both continents, he was the perfect individual, to pursue a certain line of questioning with. After a short discussion, he thanks the celebrated professor, while clasping his hands in front of him and bowing his head, wishing him blessings and peace: the wish is returned.

There are students everywhere – so many – and here and there, a turbaned teacher. Following on from the advice of the scholar and to familiarise himself more, Dabo goes to the central market: and everyone is there. Bozo women, selling the fish that their men have caught; Wangara merchant, owner of goldweights and dealer in dust; Moroccan date trader, bringing the blessings of the palm tree; Fulani women, selling the produce of the long-horned ones; Malinke blacksmiths, magicians of iron and everyone is under their spell; Bambara women, bring the staples of rice and sorghum; Yemeni scholar, selling manuscripts in the City of Books... In the place of bright colour and the sweetest form of chaos, Dabo stands and takes everything in.

After awhile, lost in thought, Dabo walks down to the Niger, because his friend contemplation awaits him there. Little children are splashing in the water, like the first children that ever did so; their older siblings are swimming further out. Their mothers, washing clothes, the overseers of all. Laughter is on a longer visit today, passing here and there amongst the younger and the older. They are like the Givers of Thanks, at the Shrine of the Crucial River.

He watches the reverie, then steps on, searching for a quieter place. Finding one, he sits against a tree, inviting contemplation to sit beside him... I've got a week or so, before the caravan leaves. He thinks of the voices, well, that one particular voice he heard last night on the dune. He was familiar with some West African languages, as he'd worked on such cases as the Robbery of the Dogon Masks and the Stalking of the Wolof Marabout, but that voice he heard, spoke a different version of the sacred tongue, to the one he heard spoken by the Tuareg or by the Mandinka teachers, for example. That is why he'd gone to see Muhammed Bagayogo, to help him identify the ethnicity of the speaker. The Eminent One thought it was probably a Saudi Arabian or Yemenite voice he'd heard. So he went to the market place and wandered around, hoping to hear the dune voice again, or at least one similar to the one he'd heard.

If not during a sandstorm, maybe a time of sleep? Maybe he should go back and speak with Ibrahim again: questions. His mind drifts off to the three girls, playing a hop and stepping game. A blind man walks by, with a walking stick as tall as him. Over yonder, a Fulani man walks behind his small herd of cows - and under a nearby tree, two elderly men are sitting, deep in conversation. This would be a perfect afternoon, if the case wasn't perplexing him. He goes again to the encampment outside of the city, to speak once more, with Ibrahim of the Caravans. As the heron becomes beauty in the sky and the fisherman skilfully throws his net, Dabo reluctantly raises himself from the riverbank and walks to where the camels have taken up temporary residence. Walking down A street, Dabo gains a shadow, that the sun has not told him about.

V

But what the sun had not told him, he had deduced. Since leaving the house of the Eminent One, he felt he was being followed.

As he enters the camp, he senses whispering in one corner, a murmur in another – and eyes are watching him here also. Now the disappearance is common knowledge, others are on the lookout for the item: to gain recognition and get a reward. While the camels munch on hay, men regurgitate possibilities. All over the encampment, men are huddled, talking of theories and conspiracies. While the tea is being brewed, stories are being concocted. A goat, not wanting to be tied, goes jumping around. A small group of men and boys, laughing and joking, endeavour to contain it. He desires freedom of movement, but they prefer a tethered variety. After the inevitable tethering, the traditional tea: the raising of little glasses. The sound of metal on metal, as the silversmith uses his hammer, in the making of a necklace.

Dabo thinks that individuals amongst the Tuareg, may excel in the detection profession. These are the men who follow the clues of the sky and the wind, to find their way across the Sahara; can they follow the clues to the Golden Manuscript? What are the clues? As a boy milks a young camel and another helps with the making of flat bread, Dabo walks past them, making his way to the tent of Ibrahim of the Caravans.

After the wishing of peace, which Dabo returns and the answer of yes to a glass of tea, and the request of a knife to cut a lemon, Dabo begins to ask questions of the legendary man of the camel trains.

VI

"Now, just let me clarify this again. The item could only have been taken yesterday morning, before leaving camp, or on the last stretch of desert, before touching Timbuktu."

"Yes, as it was with me in the tent during the night and placed on my camel after the praying prayer."

"So there's the likelihood that it could have been taken, during your talk with God."

"When I think about it, that is probably the most likely time; because everyone is either getting ready to leave, looking after the animals or praying."

"So all that movement and going back and forth could give the thief his chance."

"Perfect chance"

"But I've got another scenario. What if someone had replaced the Golden one with another one - of the same size, thickness and binding and you not suspecting anything, you had put it on your camel. It could have been done swiftly last night, with all of our before sleep activity - for themselves and the animals - or in the sandstorm you said you'd come through early evening yesterday. Tell me, do you know of anyone who suffers from sleeplessness ? Restless during the moonlight hours."

"No...I mean, now and again, someone might have that problem, due to the shock of a sandstorm or a bout of homesickness, but it comes and then goes. But I will check that out for you."

"Yes please. As someone with such an issue, could wait all night for the best opportunity. I was thinking he could be a lone wolf, but wouldn't the culprit need accomplices to occupy or detract the guards?"

"I agree: the perpetrator would need a partner or two. Look! There are the two guards there."

As Dabo looks in the direction that Ibrahim is pointing, he thinks to himself; are they the ones who stepped into the encampment, just after me? Were they the ones shadowing me, through the Timbuktu streets? As they pass near where he is seated, he hears them talking and hears the voice from the dune: unmistakable. Watching them for a few minutes, he notices that one repeats a certain action - and the mystery becomes clear. He won't have to interview Ahmed Baba or anyone else. He says to the caravan leader that it is the guards: they are the thieves. He asks Ibrahim to remain calm, but to call them over; but seeing Dabo there and seeing he and their employer rise as they approach, one panics, setting off the other: and hullabaloo breaks out. They go running, generating uproar throughout the camp. Camels honk, goats and people jump out of the way, fires are stepped on; curses and shouts are heard; men try to catch them and others are chasing them. They go dodging, scampering, running for their lives, but with two against many, they are soon caught. As the first hands are laid on them, Dabo steps in and putting his hand within the mans clothing, removes the stolen item. And it is his intervention and the finding of the item, that stops the two culprits, from getting the beating of their lives. They are tied hand and foot in the centre of the camp: everyone guarding the guards. A

prohibition against spitting on them, is announced by the imam of the caravan, but a hundred eyes glare at them and expletives are heard. Groups form in the buzz of the aftermath of excitement. Dabo and Ibrahim return to sit outside the tent of the latter, resuming conversation.

"I had a feeling I was being followed, then as I entered the camp, looking out the corner of my eye, I sensed the two you pointed out as guards. Then as they passed nearer to us, I heard the voice I heard on the dune and I remembered what he said; "Don't worry Ali, nobody will notice it here." He was obviously talking about concealment in his clothing. But what really confirmed it for me, was the almost regular movement of the hand of the Yemeni man, as it passed across his lower chest; trying to make out he had an itch, or some kind of skin complaint, but he was adjusting the manuscript, which with movement and sweat, had loosened the rope, binding it to his chest. Anyone just glancing at him, would think he was suffering from skin irritation, but because I watched him for a few minutes, I noticed a kind of hitching up movement, rather than an itching one. And I'm sorry to say, but I think they took it during your time of prayer. You will find out in awhile, when you and the imam question them. But tell me, why is called the Golden Manuscript?"

"Because it is a copy of a work on the classification of stars, written by Mohammed Bagayogo, the Eminent One, commissioned by another great scholar

"Ahhh, he's the one I consulted about language verification."

"Then you were blessed to be in his presence."

"Yes I was: in a hallowed presence."

"So the book was commissioned by his most famous student, Ahmed Baba, one of the greatest scholars of the Golden Age. It had been copied by a master calligrapher in Morocco, as a surprise present for his beloved teacher: hence all the secrecy." Both the teacher and the student have written books on such subject matter as medicine, law and astronomy.

"And I guess the guards, picking up on the secrecy, realised it was something of much value and because of its size, thought correctly that it's a manuscript. All shall be revealed at the questioning, when the qadi (the judge) gets here"

"There are master calligraphers here too, but having it copied across the desert, for Ahmed Baba, added something extra special to it: copied by a hand from the land, that first brought the religion and Arabic learning, into this region." Ahhh, it will be so good to go to him and give him the book; I think I saw a tear in his eye, when I told him that it had disappeared. I must go to him now, straight after the questioning. You have saved my reputation and that is all I have. I've taken caravans numbering as many as ten thousand across the Sahara, so I'm glad it wasn't one of them this time round! And you recovered a book that should be used by many, rather than read by a solitary reader. I don't where you go after here, but my wish is that you go safely, Detective Dabo. May you days be filled with blessings and may your lemon bowl never empty."

"Bless you, legendary one. May your days overflow with blessings also and your reputation continue to emblazon the Saharan sagas."

VII

As God begins his daily masterpiece in vermillion and red, Dabo returns to the place of first clue: to the dune of the voice. He sits reflecting, as God mesmerises the world with his creative skills. Cases aren't usually solved as quick as this one, but the enclosed scenario of the camel caravan and its restricted route, made detection easier. Dabo is happy that the precious item, will be shared by all who wish to read it, in the library of the Eminent One; happy also, that a reputation has been saved. He does not know where he is going next, but as he sits enraptured in the Master Class of the Original Artist, in the silence of the Sahara, a melody of kora takes him away.