INTRODUCTION

The historic manuscripts of Timbuktu are revolutionizing our understanding of Africa, increasing our knowledge of African history and unveiling the mysteries of this paradoxically famous yet almost unknown city. Historically, Timbuktu was one of the great centres of Islamic learning. Today it is home to the highest concentration of manuscript collections, public and private, in West Africa – there are as many as sixty private libraries in the city alone. These family collections have been preserved from generation to generation for hundreds of years through climatic fluctuations and political turbulence. Although many manuscripts have been displaced through pillaging and plunder, or destroyed by fire, floods or insects, as many as one million may have survived, dispersed throughout the region from the shores of the Mediterranean to the northern fringes of the forest regions of Guinea and Ghana.

The manuscripts range from small fragments of paper to books and treatises running to several hundred pages. Manuscript books were imported from the Middle East and North Africa from the 14th to 19th centuries, as well as written and copied in the region. Many are the primary texts of Islam – Korans and collections of Hadith (the sayings and deeds of the Prophet Muhammad), as well as devotional texts and Sufi writings. There are the canonical works of the Malik school of Islamic law and the Islamic sciences, including astronomy, mathematics and grammar. And there are also numerous original works written in the region: poetry, commentaries and historical chronicles as well as correspondences, contracts, and marginal notes and jottings – often a surprisingly rich source of historical information.

This trove of literary treasures is testimony to the great intellectual achievements of the scholars of the region. It is changing our notion of sub-Saharan Africa from being the lands of ‘song and dance’ to a continent with a rich literary heritage. Families are now reassembling collections that have been dispersed among different branches, and building libraries to shelter them or putting them in the hands of expert caretakers. Meanwhile African history is being written and rewritten as new manuscripts and manuscript collections are brought to light.

For too long Timbuktu has been a place everyone has heard of but cannot find on the map; a place which has been described as more a myth or a word than a living city. Through conservation, cataloguing and study of its manuscripts, Timbuktu is now being revealed as a city with a rich written history. In the process, our notion of Timbuktu is shifting from it being the ‘end of the world’ to an important historic centre of Islamic scholarship and culture.

There remains a great need for serious study across disciplinary and national boundaries to discover the richness of these sometimes still unidentified pieces of paper. This book does not itself represent new scholarship, although it is based on original academic research, primarily that of Professor John
Hunwick. Rather it is a homage to the scholars of Timbuktu and an attempt to bring these written sources of African history to a wider public, as well as to enlighten the many who have grown up to believe that Africa had no written history. The hope is that this book will serve as an inspiration to further study and research; and above all that it will raise awareness of a magnificent heritage which is transforming our understanding of the history and culture of this part of the world.

A THOUSAND YEARS OF HISTORY

‘Timbuktu had no equal among the cities of the blacks...and was known for its solid institutions, political liberties, purity of morals, security of its people and their goods, compassion towards the poor and strangers, as well as courtesy and generosity towards students and scholars.’

Tarikh al-fatâsah, completed 1665

Founded around 1100 CE as a seasonal camp for desert nomads, Timbuktu was to develop over the next couple of centuries into a thriving commercial city that was a key crossroads for the intellectual, social and economic development of West Africa. Situated on the northernmost bend of the great Niger River, between the gold mines in the southern reaches of West Africa and the salt mines of the Sahara desert, it became a major centre of inter-regional and trans-Saharan trade. An estimated two-thirds of the world’s gold came from West Africa in the 14th century, the period in which the Malian Empire reached its zenith. A substantial proportion of that gold passed through Timbuktu, an important hub in the transportation of goods, people, ideas and books.

Timbuktu was an Islamic city from its foundation. Muslim Arabs had extended their control across the whole of North Africa by the end of the 7th century CE. In the following centuries Islam and the Arabic language were spread deeper into the African continent not by conquest but by Muslim traders who ventured across the Sahara primarily in search of gold. Thus Arabic became the written language first of traders and travellers and then of scholars and kings. Diplomatic and commercial relations between North Africa and the Niger Bend and between the Niger Bend and territories further south required communication over great distances. The written word was used to regulate commercial transactions (including the slave trade), to legitimize authority and even to instigate war. Scholarship was thus not only an intellectual and spiritual pursuit, but a means of social and political influence, even at times a matter of life and death. The renowned scholars of the region often came from wealthy trading families; trade created an affluent ruling elite whose scholars had the means to purchase books and the time to read and write.

Through trade, conquest and intermarriage, the peoples of black Africa and the Mediterranean mixed, making the Niger Bend one of the most ethnically diverse areas of Africa. Timbuktu has at one time or another been under the political control of almost every ethnic group in the region, each power determined to maintain the security and profits of West African trade routes. But through this succession of foreign overlords the scholarly class in Timbuktu exercised a considerable autonomy. Its learned men or ulama constituted the city’s ruling elite, serving as imams and teachers, scribes, lawyers and judges.

Over the course of the 15th and early 16th centuries, Timbuktu gradually lost its prominence as a centre of long-distance trade as the trans-Saharan trade routes were diverted by the arrival of Portuguese ships along the coast of West Africa and then by the discovery of gold in the Americas. The city has also endured the vicissitudes of climate and politics throughout its existence: repeated pillaging and sacking as described by the Timbuktu chronicler al-Sadi in the Tarikh al-sudan; fires as described by Leo Africanus, who visited in the early 16th century; conquest by a succession of West African peoples, as well as by the Moroccans and the French; and recently the Tuareg uprising in the last decade of the 20th century and the floods of 1999. All have taken their toll through the centuries. But the independence and civic pride of Timbuktu’s citizens has ensured the preservation of the city’s culture and libraries into the 21st century.
TIMBUKTU’S LITERARY PATRIMONY

Until recently the significance of this region’s literary heritage has been difficult to appreciate because of its dispersal. Ironically this may also have assisted its survival: the colonial conquest resulted in manuscript collections being hidden away, sometimes literally buried in the desert sand, for fear of them being seized. It is only during the past twenty-five years that the wealth of the region’s past intellectual life has been unearthed again.

New evidence of all kinds continues to feed into the corpus of our knowledge of the Niger Bend region; however, there remain many obstacles. In the recent past, scholars able to study these manuscripts seriously have been few. Not only have the manuscripts themselves been at risk, but so has the expertise necessary to read and interpret their content. Under colonial rule, education and literacy in Arabic was largely supplanted by French, and hence many of the families owning manuscripts lost the ability to read and appreciate them. Arabic has only recently been reintroduced at university level in Mali, so that while there are numerous highly qualified Malian historians, only exceptionally have they mastered Arabic and been able to exploit these written documents in their research.

Above: The men of Timbuktu return from Friday prayers. Mali remains an overwhelmingly Muslim country. Under colonial rule, however, education and literacy in Arabic were largely supplanted by French, so that many families inheriting manuscripts lost the ability to read and appreciate them.

In Western academic institutions a major reason for neglect in the study of the Arabic literature of Africa is the unfortunate divide between Middle Eastern Studies and African Studies. The consequent compartmentalization of the African continent into zones that are classed as ‘Middle Eastern’ and ‘African’ is a legacy of orientalism and colonialism. North Africa, including Egypt, is usually seen as forming part of the Middle East, though in fact Middle East experts are not generally keen to venture farther west than Egypt. Northwestern Africa – the Maghreb – is generally regarded as peripheral to Middle Eastern studies and extraneous to African studies. Even the Sahara has generally been viewed as something of a no-go area, while the modern countries of Sudan and Mauritania lie in a kind of academic no-man’s-land. Northwestern Africa, despite the area’s close and enduring relationship with West Africa, has been excluded from the concerns of most Africanists. Although several scholars have made valiant attempts to integrate the
whole of northern Africa into continental history,¹ most works on Africa still focus on the lands south of the Sahara. The scholarship that underpins this book has endeavoured to bridge this gap, but there remains much work to be done.

This is a book about manuscript traditions and the written word. It does not attempt to exploit the rich oral traditions² of the Niger Bend area or the intensive archaeological research that has been carried out,³ detailed study of which is necessary to gain a more comprehensive picture of the region. Archaeologists, anthropologists and historians are still debating questions concerning the historical movements of many of the ethnic groups in the Niger Bend,⁴ the whereabouts of the capital cities of the great empires,⁵ as well as their succession of kings. Their work has been greatly hampered by the disgraceful pillaging of archaeological sites and private libraries over the centuries.

This book is dedicated to the protectors of Timbuktu, its scholarly traditions and its manuscripts. The villains of its story are those who in one way or another threatened the autonomy of the Timbuktu scholarly elite. Of course the military powers which besieged Timbuktu might well have presented an entirely different picture, as would the illiterate classes of the Niger Bend. No single type of historical evidence can ever be conclusive, and reliance on the written sources alone risks perpetuating the bias of the scholarly ruling class and their socio-political-economic networks, as well as their attempt to justify their privileged place in society. What’s more, the history of Timbuktu cannot be understood in isolation of events in Hausaland, Futa Jallon, Masina and further afield in West Africa. Fluctuations in the European gold market, the abolition of the transatlantic slave trade, as well as religious movements elsewhere in the Islamic world have all had their effect on the city.

Nonetheless, the literary sources upon which our story is based are an important resource whose potential has only begun to be tapped. Before the 1950s, little was known in the West about the Arabic writings of Africa south of Egypt and the Maghreb, even though one or two collections of such manuscripts were held in European institutions; most notably, the library of Umar Tall and his descendants, which was seized by

Opposite Commercial document on the salt trade from the Maiga/Almoustapha Konaté Library in Timbuktu. Commercial transactions and contracts were traditionally documented in Arabic according to the principles of the Maliki school of Islamic law. Proficiency in Arabic and in Islamic law thus gave considerable influence to clerics and scholars in this highly mercantile society.
French colonial forces in Segu in 1890 and transferred to the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris. The celebrated multi-volume work in German on the history of Arabic literature by the scholar Carl Brockelmann published between 1898 and 1902 covers Arabic writings from Andalusia to India, with a total of 4,706 pages, yet devotes only four pages to Arabic writings in sub-Saharan Africa.

Given the evident riches of the sub-Saharan Arabic literary tradition, and the lack of scholarly attention it has received, John Hunwick and Sean O'Fahey decided to create a guide to its authors and their work. When they initiated the project in 1965 they could not have imagined how much Arabic writing they would uncover and the huge number of manuscripts that remained hidden. Their efforts led to the compilation of a multi-volume series called Arabic Literature of Africa covering writings from Senegal to Tanzania.  

One of the most important ways to preserve a literary heritage is through cataloguing. In the case of manuscripts, cataloguing not only facilitates access to the various works but also records what existed in case manuscripts are destroyed. For unlike books, each manuscript is unique and each copy needs to be recorded. Several catalogues and databases now exist across the region. The dispersed libraries of what was once a hub of cutting-edge intellectual activity on the fringes of the Islamic world are being reunited by cutting-edge computer technologies, capable of pulling together the contents of diverse collections which are now spread across three continents and, in Africa, in at least half a dozen national repositories. We now are beginning to know what the scholars of the region certainly knew two hundred years ago about the most authoritative books in the region and where they were to be found.

Tombuktu Today

The modern Republic of Mali, founded in 1960, took its name from the ancient Malian Empire, though its territories and wealth are significantly less. Indeed Mali is today listed as one of the poorest nations of the world, yet is one of the richest in culture. Tombuktu is still known as the ‘End of the World’ and ‘Mysterious City of 333 Saints’, but it has also recently been acclaimed as the ‘Islamic Cultural Capital of Africa’ and has become a symbol of the ‘African Renaissance’ spearheaded by the South African government of President Thabo Mbeki. Both Mbeki and President Muammar Gaddafi of Libya have claimed Tombuktu within their strategic political sphere. The mosques of Tombuktu, like that of Djenné, are protected through UNESCO’s Registry of World Heritage Sites.

Tombuktu’s economy is primarily maintained today by adventurous tourists who make the journey in order to say they have been there, and to see the doors, dunes, mosques and, recently, manuscripts. Although salt is now mostly transported by trucks, Mali is one of the only places where you can still see the great salt caravans, and it is a tremendous event when a camel caravan comes to a village or to Tombuktu. Slavery was abolished with French colonization, although reminders remain: in the