middle of the medina in Timbuktu there stands a hundred-year-old wild date tree to which slaves were once attached by their feet (see page 46). Gold remains a major export item for Mali; however it is now flown over Timbuktu and the Sahara. Cloth is still a very precious commodity and high priority is given to how to dress, the materials to use and how to tie a turban, as can be witnessed on the street after Friday prayers or during gatherings at festivals. Modern Timbuktu retains something of the playfulness Leo Africanus witnessed during his visit in 1506: ‘The people of Timbuktu have a light-hearted nature. It is their habit to wander in the town at night between 10pm and 1am, playing instruments and dancing.’

THE AHMED BABA INSTITUTE
The Ahmed Baba Institute (IHÉRIAB) in Timbuktu was established through a UNESCO initiative in 1970 as a national repository and conservation centre for the manuscripts of the region. Today its collection of nearly 30,000 manuscripts is in the process of being conserved, catalogued and studied by a trained team of national and international experts.

MALI’S MANUSCRIPT TRADITIONS
By Dr Mohamed Gallah Dicco, Director of the Ahmed Baba Institute
Colonization dealt a hard blow to this cultural heritage. Many manuscript collections were burned, stolen or seized. In addition, the droughts in the period which followed led many guardians of manuscripts to leave their patrimony behind – entrusting their manuscripts to their neighbours or even burying them in the sand, before departing into exile.

West Africa in general and Mali in particular still conceal many manuscripts which have neither been inventoried nor catalogued. In Timbuktu and throughout the country, many families still jealously hide their libraries, refusing access to researchers for fear that the requisitions and pillaging of the colonial period will be repeated. Our culture is usually considered to be largely based on oral traditions. However, this literary tradition has played a great part in Mali and the wider region throughout its history. It is a key part of our culture.

Aside from those of the Ahmed Baba Institute, manuscript collections are generally in private
ownership, since they have been passed down to their present proprietors from father to son through generations, often over several centuries. Such collections nevertheless also form part of our national documentary heritage.

The significance of the manuscripts lies in their quantity, the quality of their content, and also their owners' attachment to them both as a body of knowledge and a patrimony passed down by their ancestors to which they attach a great moral and spiritual value. For them, the manuscripts are a sacred legacy and a source of great family pride.

There is, however, a difficulty inherent in the nature and content of some of these manuscripts. They treat all subjects and report on all facets of life, including historical, political, social and private events. Such events, though they occurred a long time ago, can sometimes have grave repercussions for the present. For example there are commercial contracts which relate the sale at a particular price of a person whose descendants today claim him as one of the great nobles of his time. It is the nature of history that one remembers only its glories, never its defeats. Some of these manuscripts could make or unmake the fabric of our current society. Certain manuscripts compromise men who are well placed in today's social hierarchy by reporting unfortunate events or servility imposed on their ancestors. There are manuscripts showing the debt of one family towards another, or that an asset (a piece of land or a house) was unjustly acquired. Thus while the manuscripts are a source of legitimate pride for Timbuktu and Mali, they are often also a jealously guarded treasure.

Below Girls in Timbuktu play music and sing in celebration of a wedding.
Plates 1: The Setting
Previous page A simple leather sandal worn on the baking-hot desert sand—a reminder of the hardships of the traditional desert crossing undertaken on foot and camelback. According to a signpost in Zagora in northern Morocco, the journey to Timbuktu took 52 days. A pilgrimage to Mecca required months or years, and demanded considerable stamina and financial means.

Right Nomad with his flock on the outskirts of Timbuktu. The first settlement on this site was established in c. 1100 CE by nomads who would camp here in summer to graze their herds on the banks of the river.

Overleaf The exposed roots of the tree on the left testify to the vicissitudes of the desert climate and the constant shifting of the Niger River. Such fluctuations have affected the Timbuktu region for centuries.

Pages 22–23 Boys play on the outskirts of Timbuktu. Desert dunes surround the town.