grammar and syntax. We also know that textbooks were purchased, copied
and studied on a wide range of disciplines such as Islamic law, morphology,
rhetoric, literary analysis, mathematics (calculus, geometry), geography,
philosophy, botany, medicine (pharmacopoeia, medicinal plants), astron-
omy, astrology, mysticism, dogma, occult sciences, geomancy and music.

Texts from outside of West Africa circulated within the region.
Some were imported; others belonged to scholars who settled in Timbuktu
and brought their libraries with them. Such texts would be copied both by
the scholars and their students. Scholars would also make abridged ver-
sions and write comments in the margins to facilitate teaching, or put the
text into verse to make it easier for students to memorize.

Original works by Timbuktu scholars included extensive biblio-
graphical listings, and many of these manuscripts were available
throughout the region. In his treatise on slavery written in 1615, Ahmed
Baba was able to quote from Ibn Khaldun’s great history and from a book
about Ethiopians by al-Suyuti. He also made his own copy of Ibn Khallikan’s
famous biographical dictionary, a part of which is still preserved in
Timbuktu. Towards the end of the 16th century the scholar Ahmad b. Andag
Muhammad ordered the copying of the twenty-eight-volume Arabic lan-
guage dictionary the Mus hakam, written by the Andalusian scholar Ibn Sidah
in the mid-17th century. Parts of this have survived and are preserved in two
Moroccan libraries. We also know that he purchased the eighth and final
volume of Sharh al-Ahk am; if he bought the final volume, it is fair to infer
that he already owned the other seven volumes. Clearly, he was an avid book
collector and must have owned a considerable number of manuscript
books, although his library has never surfaced. Important works were even
to be found outside the main cities. Ibn Battuta reported how his host in a
village on the River Niger led him by the hand into his council room; there
were “many weapons there – shield, bows, and lances as well as a copy of
the Kitab al-Mudhish by Ibn al-Jawzi.”

90 A SANCTUARY FOR SCHOLARS
ولعم الدين الحاصبي

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ولكن مستكشناها فهو نحن في الدنيا وأشهدنا

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Many of the books studied in Timbuktu were derived from Arabic translations of ancient Greek or Persian texts. These included, among others, the Greek astronomer Ptolemy, who was a basic reference for the Islamic study of astronomy, the Greek philosophers Plato and Aristotle, the Persian medical philosopher and scholar Avicenna (Ibn Sina, 980–1037), and the ancient Greek ‘father of medicine’ Hippocrates. During Heinrich Barth’s travels, al-Bakkay al-Kounti showed him a copy of the Arabic translation of Hippocrates that had come to West Africa as a gift from the British explorer Captain Clapperton who understood that scholars in the region appreciated books more than any other good. ‘[Al-Bakkay] taking out of his small library the Arabic version of Hippocrates, which he valued extremely, was very anxious for information as to the identity of the plants mentioned by the Arab authors.”

A WEALTH OF CONTENT
Arabic writings of West Africa cover all aspects of life and intellectual pursuits in the region. Surviving manuscripts range from small notes on a single page to volumes of 400-plus pages. They fall into two broad categories: texts of a ‘literary’ character such as religious treatises, chronicles and poems, which may be attributed to an author; and texts of a documentary character including letters, contracts and commercial documents, in particular documents relating to property ownership, regional and trans-Saharan trade, and slavery. In between these are formal legal opinions (fatwas) and reports (risalas), often on quite specific topics and addressed to particular individuals or groups.

A typical commercial document included a proclamation such as ‘Let all who read this document know...’. Then the author would document the identity of the purchaser and the seller, provide a detailed description of the commodity, declare the legal validity of the sale, and state that the purchaser had paid the price in full. The document would then provide the
Above left A page from the Tarikh al-nudais from the Ahmed Baba Institute. Manuscripts often feature notes and commentaries in the margin. A text may have been originally written by one scholar, copied by another, and annotated by yet another. Sometimes the notes are comments on the text; other times they are entirely unrelated. Such notes are often what makes a manuscript unique and of particular interest, though at the same time more difficult to catalogue.

Above centre Comments on the grammar of a versified text from the Mohamed Tahir Library.

Above right Annotations on a versified teaching manual on how to write and pronounce the Arabic glottal stop (hamzea), a problem familiar to students of Arabic past and present. From Al-Wangari Library.

identity of the drafter and its date. Many legal documents also included a statement of the validity of the contract, i.e. that the parties to it were legally competent, free from restraint, in full possession of their mental faculties and that their transaction was a lawful one according to Islamic law, the Sharia. Finally 'Praise to God and blessings upon the Prophet' would be stated at the end as at the beginning of the document.

Original writings by local Timbuktu scholars include the historical chronicles (tarikh), correspondence, poems, legal opinions (fatwas), commentaries and annotations. Polemical writings surfaced in the mid-19th century and mainly articulated the rivalry between the Qadiriyya and the Tijaniyya Sufi orders. Attacks on Sufism as a whole appeared generally in the second half of the 20th century as the Saudi Arabian impact on Muslim Africa promoted anti-Sufi sentiments.

It can be difficult to distinguish between books and letters when classifying manuscripts since some letters are very long, such as al-Bakkay al-Kounti's 482-page letter to Akansus, a former Moroccan cultural minister and one of the great figures of the Tijaniyya order. This tradition of writing detailed responses continued to the 20th century.9

Marginal annotations
Scholars from Timbuktu often wrote in the margins of manuscripts. These notes are generally of two types: comments relating to the original text or previous annotations; and comments which are totally divorced from the text, where the writer used the margins to record external events, presumably simply for lack of paper. There are several examples of texts which have been copiously annotated by a single author or by several authors. Sometimes the reader would write notes in the margins about the process of reading the manuscript: 'Today I read to this page... and then such-and-such came to borrow this work...'. But other times these notes provide us with some of the most important historic information from the region.
Perhaps one of the most significant recent rediscoveries are the marginalia that are a feature of many of the manuscripts from the collection of the Fondo Kati. According to the historian and director of the library, Ismael Diadié Haidara, these include a total of 6,162 notes written in Andalusia, the Maghreb and Timbuktu. Some were written by Ali bin Ziyad, who fled from Andalusia in the mid-15th century; most were by his descendants. Among the notes written by Alfa Kati Mahmud, over half pertain to historical events, while the rest concern medicine, natural phenomena, legal issues, and letters to the Songhay Emperor Askia Muhammad. One very interesting item from the Fondo Kati is a work on the Prophet Muhammad produced with very wide margins to its text. The 16th-century owner used those margins not to comment on the main text, but to record important events of the day. In one instance he reports heavy rainfall causing flooding, while another, dated December 1505, speaks of fire in the night sky until dawn, perhaps a sighting of comets. He also noted down news of his fellow citizens: in one case a marriage, in another the death of Ahmed Baba’s grandfather in 1535.

LITERATURE IN AFRICAN LANGUAGES
In addition to the abundant Islamic literature in Arabic in Western Sudanic Africa, there are also Islamic literatures written in African languages – so-called ajami manuscripts. These include writings in, among others, Fulfulde (the language of the Fulani), Tamasheq (the language of the Tuareg), Songhay and Hausa. They survive today both in the various libraries in Timbuktu and throughout the region of the ancient Malian and Songhay Empires.

The ajami manuscripts extend to all fields of scholarship, and include traditional medicine, plants and their properties, occult science, and diplomatic correspondence. Throughout the region, one also finds important works of poetry written in Tamasheq, Songhay and Fulfulde.  

Above left and centre Pages from a work on astrology from the Mamma Haidara Library. The table shows how the signs of the zodiac correspond to the months of the year.

Above right Page from a pharmacopoeia in the Ahmed Baba Institute. Although Malian scientists today are at the forefront of study of traditional medicine, and as many as 80% of Malians continue to use traditional remedies, little research has yet been undertaken into the region’s tradition of Islamic medicine and pharmacology.
The best known *ajami* manuscripts in West Africa are those of the Fulfulde literature of Futa Jallon in today’s Guinea, as well as the Hausa and Fulfulde literature of Sokoto in northern Nigeria. Writers used local languages extensively, particularly at the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th, as a medium for popularizing Islam and also for promoting *jihads*. Fulani scholars wrote works on Islamic disciplines of law, mysticism, grammar, theology, occult sciences and pharmacopeia as well as history and literature. The Fulani ruler Seku Ahmadu himself wrote texts denouncing the innovative practices of the people of the Western Sudan, including nomination of a muezzin who is not qualified, purchase of very expensive and abundant clothing, and burial of the dead in mosques. Many African languages have at some point been written using slightly modified forms of the Arabic script, though since the colonial era this has been largely abandoned in favour of the Roman script. Nonetheless, West African languages spoken by Muslim peoples have absorbed a considerable number of Arabic loan words, some of them through North African dialectal usage. Many historic manuscripts are written in an Arabic which is difficult to understand even for confirmed Arabic scholars if they do not also master the language and cultural environment of the author.\footnote{19}

**TIMBUKTU’S MANUSCRIPT COPYING INDUSTRY**

Books were not only imported to Timbuktu but copied there, and it was above all this tradition of copying which permitted scholars to furnish their libraries. In the early 16th century, Leo Africanus had remarked, with some evident astonishment, that some items of European origin were sold in Gao for four or five times their European price. There is little doubt that locally produced manuscript books were always cheaper than those imported from across the Sahara.

The copying industry in Timbuktu appears to have been extensive and well organized. Our evidence of this lies in colophons dating from as