Above A wooden tablet for writing out verses of the Koran as they are memorized. Such tablets are still used by Koranic students in Mali today.

Above right This board with string attached was used by writers and copyists to keep their lines straight. The string was pressed against the paper to create the faint imprint of rules.

early as the 16th century. These inscriptions at the end of a book cite not only the title and author, but also the date of the manuscript copy and the names of the scribes who produced it. Sometimes they give further details of those involved in the work, including not just full names of the copyists but also of 'proofreaders' and 'vocalizers' and of their employer. They may also include the name of the person for whom the manuscript was copied and the fees paid, who provided the blank paper, and the dates of beginning and ending the copying of each volume (allowing us to estimate how long it took to complete the work). Such colophons, in essence, constitute a labour contract, and they indicate that manuscript copying was a professional business. Working full-time to complete their contracted tasks, the copyist would work at a rate of around 140 lines of text per day, while the proofreader worked through around 170 lines per day.

Two volumes of the twenty-eight-volume Muhkam by Ibn Sidah commissioned by the scholar Ahmad b. Anda ag Muhammad contain remarkable evidence of the copying industry in late-16th-century Timbuktu. They each feature a second colophon, in which the proofreader records that he verified the accuracy of the copying, and records what he was paid. The copyist received 1 mithqal of gold per volume, and the proofreader half that amount.

Calligraphic Traditions of West Africa
Arabic was the principal language of literacy in West Africa for a thousand years down to the colonial period, and the forms of Arabic script used in West Africa all derive from North African or Andalusian hands. Much work remains to be done in studying and classifying these different scripts. Nonetheless, the different types of calligraphy found in Timbuktu, including on imported manuscripts, can be categorized as follows:

- Eastern (Oriental) calligraphy (in many forms, including Naskhi, Thuluth and Riq’a), which was used by calligraphers of the Middle East and their students. This is characterized by the simplicity of its letters.
• Maghrebian and Andalusian calligraphy (Mabsut, Mujawhar and Zemmami), used by the Moroccans and their students. This is distinguished first and foremost by the placement of dots on certain Arabic letters.

• Saharian (sahrawi) calligraphy, used by the Moors and their students. This is characterized by its angularity, with unusual height in certain letters as well as exaggerated lengthening of others.

• Suqi or Sahhaji calligraphy, used by Berber scholars. This is a distinctive style associated with the scholars of the Kel al-Suq.

• Sudanese (sudanii), possibly originating from Maghrebian calligraphy with some influence from ancient Kufic. Used by the Songhay, Fulani, Tukulor, Soninke, Wolof and Hausa, this is characterized by thick letters.

• Kufic, an angular and geometric style, was used by early scribes to copy the first Korans and for engravings on stones. In West Africa, it was often used to write the word Askia.15

MANUSCRIPT BINDINGS AND MATERIALS

West African manuscripts are generally not bound, but consist rather of loose unnumbered sheets (folios) wrapped in leather covers or, in recent times, protected by cardboard. In the Middle East the buyer of a manuscript would traditionally then take it to a binder of his choice, so manuscripts purchased abroad often remained unbound. West Africans typically left them this way, some say to facilitate teaching – pages could be distributed to several students at a time. Often the sheets are neither numbered nor do they have catchwords (raqgas) or a word at the bottom of the page that is repeated on the top of the next page to help the reader maintain the correct sequence. They have nonetheless been kept in order, confirming the mastery of the scholars and students who memorized these texts. Manuscripts such as the Koran which were meant to be carried around would often be placed in a small pouch to be hung around the neck or put in a pocket.
Watermarks can often provide clues as to when particular manuscripts might have been copied. From the modest work which has been done on watermarks and the export of paper to West Africa, it appears that paper was imported from northern Italy, Normandy, Morocco, al-Andalus and probably Egypt. Reports from Tlemcen expressed great anxiety over the use of paper bearing watermarks that featured Christian symbols.  

When Mediterranean papers began to be manufactured from bleached coloured rags, they retained enough chemicals to assure their self-destruction within a few hundred years. Hence many of the manuscripts extant today are copies of earlier works, made as the older papers disintegrated. Although most of the manuscript works in the region are on paper, some are written on parchment made from skins of sheep, goat and gazelle, either imported from Morocco or produced locally. Heinrich Barth reported a great zeal for paper: ‘All these people, who possess a small degree of learning, and pride themselves in writing a few phrases from the Koran, were extremely anxious to obtain some scraps of paper, and I was glad to be still enabled...to give away some trifling presents of this kind.’