Previous pages 122–23 A heavily annotated treatise on phonetics from the Maiga/Almoustapha Konaté Library. The study of Arabic was an important element of the Timbuktu curriculum. For Arabic was not only the language of Islam and its sciences, it was a means of communication across long distances – the lingua franca of West Africa, much as Latin was the lingua franca and the language of literacy in Europe in the Medieval era.

Opposite A Koran copied in 1672 by the Moroccan calligrapher Abdallah b. Masoud b. al-Hajj al-Benaadiji. Many of the illuminated manuscripts found in Timbuktu today were originally copied in the Maghreb, Egypt or the Middle East and transported to Timbuktu. This beautiful volume is one of the great treasures of the Ahmed Baba Institute.

Above The Kitab al-Shifa by Qadi Iyad (d. 1249), transcribed in Maghrebi calligraphy. This popular devotional work described the noble qualities of the Prophet Muhammad.