TIMBUKTU: SCHOLARS AND LIBRARIES
PAST AND PRESENT

'It is clear that Timbuktu was, and still is, a homeland for scholars, and one of the most important places in sub-Saharan Africa for Islamic knowledge. God willing, it will remain so. God bless its people.'

John Hunwick
The manuscripts of Timbuktu are a testimony to the legacy of the literate culture of Islam which has developed over the past 600–700 years in Africa in general and the Niger Bend in particular. Extraordinarily rich collections of Arabic manuscripts still survive, often precariously, in private libraries in the city of Timbuktu and indeed across the entire Sahel stretching from the Atlantic to the Indian Ocean. The principal resource of Timbuktu scholarship lay in the libraries of individual scholars, some of which were evidently quite large. The celebrated scholar Ahmed Baba, deported to Morocco in 1593 following the fall of the Songhay Empire, complained to the sultan of Morocco that his library of 1,600 books had been plundered; and his, so he said, was one of the smaller libraries in the city.¹

**THE TIMBUKTU SCHOLARS**

Teaching circles were formed in Timbuktu around the great families of scholars. These were typically affluent merchant families, whose wealth allowed scholars the time and means to study, travel and buy books. Students often married the daughter of their master or shaykh. Inter-marriage between scholarly families, and between scholarly families and royalty, strengthened bonds and influence, and fostered a culture of cooperation that reinforced both the quality and the impact of teaching traditions. This coming together of scholars from a wide area attributed to making Timbuktu a rich and dynamic centre of learning.

Knowledge of Islamic sciences was transmitted from teacher to student through successive generations in a continuous chain of learning. Muhammad al-Kabari – referred to as the ‘Master of Masters’ (see page 130) – taught Muhammad Aqit’s son Umar, Sidi Yahia al-Tadallisi, and probably Anda ag Muhammad, whose family married into the Aqit family. The succession of learning passed through a number of generations of these families and then on to Muhammad Baghayogo who then taught Ahmed Baba.¹ This continuous chain of learning was severed by the
Moroccan occupation in 1591, although scholarship was kept alive to an extent by the two great historians of the 17th century, Mahmud Kati and Abd al-Rahman al-Sadi. A new chain was established in the 18th and 19th centuries with the emergence of the Kounta and the Kel al-Suq, only to be severed again by French colonization in the late 19th century. Nevertheless, throughout the 20th century some West African Muslims continued to pursue their education in Arab countries, especially Egypt, at Al-Azhar University in Cairo. In the 21st century, interest in Timbuktu's traditions of scholarship has undergone a new renaissance. Thanks to the efforts of scholars and curators and to significant support from the international community, the manuscripts, scholarship and the city of Timbuktu just might survive.

TIMBUKTU'S MOST NOTABLE SCHOLARS AND HOLYMEN
The following brief biographies recount the lives and achievements of some of the individual scholars who resided in Timbuktu or had a great influence on Timbuktu scholarship. Most of these scholars amassed great libraries, some of which can still be found in Timbuktu today, frequently maintained by their descendants.1

*Abu Ishaq Ibrahim al-Sahili (c. 1290–1346)*
The earliest scholar from the Mediterranean region to settle in Timbuktu was an Andalusian by the name of Abu Ishaq Ibrahim al-Sahili, who met Mansa Musa in Mecca in 1324 and accompanied him back to Mali.

Al-Sahili was born in Granada, where his father was head of the corporation of spice and perfume sellers. He received training in jurisprudence and for a time was a public notary. However, he seems to have disgraced himself while under the influence of 'marking nut', in which state he proclaimed himself a prophet. He set out for the east, and after travels in Egypt, Syria, Iraq and the Yemen, made the pilgrimage to Mecca in 1324.
After a period of residence at the Mansa’s court, al-Sahili settled in Timbuktu, where he was responsible for supervising the construction of the Djingereber Mosque as well as the residence of the Mansa himself. He was trained in Islamic law, and was a talented man of letters. What precise contribution he may have made to Timbuktu’s intellectual heritage is not known. Nevertheless, there is evidence that he strengthened Mali’s ties with Morocco. He was invited to serve the Marinid Sultan Abu al Hasan, but declined and spent the rest of his life in Timbuktu, where he left children who later settled in Walata. His literary skills are evident in the elegant verse and rhyming prose that has survived.

**Muhammad al-Kabari known as Modibbo Muhammad (active 1450s)**

Referred to as the ‘Master of Masters’, Muhammad al-Kabari is at the top of the chain of transmission of Islamic learning of Timbuktu. He came from a town on the River Niger towards the southern reaches of the Inland Delta. His ethnic origins are not known, but it is likely he was of Mande or Soninke stock. According to al-Sadi, he settled in Timbuktu in the middle of the 15th century and taught both the jurist Umar b. Muhammad Aqil and Sidi Yahia al-Tadallisi. He is credited with being the locus of many manifestations of divine grace and when he died is said to have been buried in a plot alongside no less than thirty of his townsmen. His date of death is unknown.

**Sidi Yahia al-Tadallisi (d. 1461)**

This Sufi shaykh was reputed to be a sharif, a descendant of the Prophet Muhammad, with a genealogy going back through al-Hasan, son of Fatima and Ali. Coming from the Mediterranean coast some 50 miles (80 km) east of Algiers, he arrived in Timbuktu in c. 1450, in the middle of a period when the Tuareg controlled Timbuktu. He was welcomed by the Sanhaja governor who had great affection for him and honoured him by building
a mosque in his name and making him its imam. He was the contemporary of scholars such as Muhammad Aqit and Anda ag Muhammad, whose descendants constituted the leading learned families of Timbuktu over the next century and a half. No students of his are recorded, though it is known that he studied with Muhammad al-Kabari.

Sidi Yahia al-Tadallisi remained imam and taught in the courtyard of the Sidi Yahia Mosque until his death in 1461. He was buried in the mosque, and his descendants have served as its imams for over five hundred years to this day. He was greatly respected and is considered the patron saint of Timbuktu. The Tarikh al-sudan praised him in the highest terms: ‘Sidi Yahia attained the very pinnacle of scholarship, righteousness, and sanctity, and became famous in every land, his baraka (divine grace) manifesting itself to high and low. He was the locus of manifestations of divine grace, and was clairvoyant.... No foot more virtuous than Sidi Yahia ever trod the soil of Timbuktu.’

**Muhammad Aqit** (active mid-15th century)

One of the most important families among all the 16th-century scholars in Timbuktu were the Aqit of the Massufa. The first member of the Aqit family to live in Timbuktu was Muhammad Aqit. He was a Sanhaja scholar of the Massufa branch who traced his ancestry over fourteen generations back to Abu Bakr b. Umar, who may perhaps be identified with the Almoravid leader of that name who died in 1087.

Muhammad Aqit had lived in a tented encampment in Masina in the Inland Delta, but moved his family away to forestall intermarriage with the local Fulani. He migrated first to the Walata area and later to Timbuktu. He had a longstanding quarrel with Akil, the Sanhaja governor of Timbuktu, with whom he was finally reconciled in 1450, when he was able to settle permanently in the Sankore quarter. Many of the Aqit became imams of the Sankore Mosque over the following century and some were