Mohamed Alber agar Almuhdi from Timbuktu learning manuscript conservation skills with David Jacobs, Head Conservator at the British Library, during an internship at the British Library’s Conservation Department in London.

Opposite: Abdel Kader Haidara, Director of the library founded by his father, Mamma Haidara (d. 1981). Mamma Haidara devoted his entire life to collecting manuscripts to enrich his library. He discovered in his son Abdel Kader talent, intellectual capacity and devotion to conserving the family collection.33

Overleaf: Moulaye Hassan ould Chuya, custodian of Al-Wangari Library, beside a chest of manuscripts. Historically, this chest was used to store and transport manuscripts, as well as to protect them from floods, fires and foes over centuries. They originally belonged to the 16th-century scholar and teacher Muhammad Baghagogo al-Wangari.

Coast of both East and West Africa have meant that few old manuscripts have survived in those areas – the very earliest date from the late 17th century. Nonetheless, unknown numbers of manuscripts have been lost to conflicts, plundering, floods and fires. Forced migration has led many families to hide their manuscripts (sometimes even burying them in the sand), entrust them to friends and relatives, or take the risk of keeping their collections with them. During the period of French colonization, the libraries of the region went underground, only to surface again after the French withdrew in 1960.

Many of the private libraries of Timbuktu today have been passed from generation to generation for centuries, or have been reassembled from collections that had been split between different branches of the same family. For perhaps the greatest protection for the manuscripts are notes found in many collections commanding that they be kept within the family and forbidding their sale. One such note, from the Library of Mohamed Tahar, instructs that the book is ‘not to be sold or [pawned] but to remain in the inheritance of Mohamed al-Tahar and his descendants for ever!’34 (see page 141). That these collections still survive today is due to a strict adherence to family heritage, and a devotion to knowledge and its transmission that has been passed through many generations. The ongoing preservation of these private collections is dependent upon maintaining the close association between the collections and their custodians, so often the direct descendants of the scholars who originally collected, wrote or copied the manuscripts we find today.