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Introduction

BOOKS AND REBELS IN THE DESERT

FROM AROUND late march 2012, reports about events in the Sahara Desert gave Timbuktu a prominence that the town had not enjoyed for more than a century, since the late nineteenth-century European imperial conquests of Africa. If you had only heard about the place but never thought about its actual existence, Timbuktu was now a contemporary reality, a regular item on international television news channels and websites. Like other African towns, Timbuktu would make the global news only because of a natural disaster or man-made crisis such as a civil war. This town on the edge of the desert, with sand always blowing and settling into everything, reached international headlines because of the impact of events that originated far to its north, beyond the borders of Mali, in countries that do not even share a border with this landlocked West African country. The popular uprisings of the Arab Spring started in Tunisia in December 2010, spreading eastward, firstly to Egypt and then to neighboring Libya and beyond North Africa to other Arabic-speaking countries. Sustained protests in Libya grew into an armed insurrection against the Libyan regime of Colonel Muammar Gaddafi. He responded not by fleeing the country, like the ruler of Tunisia, but by threatening more violence against the protesters. Malians were following these events on their transistor radios, mobile phones, and grainy television screens. Timbuktu's inhabitants also listened and watched, but they never felt that they would become part of the news, that their lives would be affected by these events. Then, in March 2011, NATO-led aerial attacks sped up the fall of the Libyan regime and ultimately the killing of Gaddafi in August 2011. Especially from the early 1980s, Gaddafi had fostered and equipped rebel movements from African countries, including Mali, such as the groups from north of Timbuktu in the vast Azawad region. They identified

themselves as *Kel Tamasheq*, or Tuareg nationalists. They had been engaged in cycles of insurgency and extended peace talks with the central government since soon after independence in 1960; the first armed rebellion began in 1963, the second in 1990, and the third in 2006.[1] Another insurgency unfolded in 2011, as a consequence of the Arab Spring, and this new insurgency swept through large swathes of northern Mali. With the fall of the Gaddafi regime and the breakup of his army, the exiled Tuareg rebels fled southward with large caches of weapons, driving 4×4s fitted with rocket-launchers, through the Libyan desert, across Algeria, and back to their homeland in Mali where they picked up eager young recruits. They arrived in northern Mali, not for new rounds of talks with the government, but ready to fight, to seize territory, and to proclaim their own state. They would soon declare the establishment of the Republic of Azawad, the region of the country they believed belonged to them.

In 2012, the *Oxford English Dictionary* voted "omnishambles" its word of the year. Mali, at the time seen as West Africa's model democracy by some Western think-tanks, became a case of omnishambles.[2] Years of corruption by twice-elected President Amadou Toumani Touré were revealed, Malian soldiers refused to fight insurgents, and the political elite in Bamako were in complete disarray, unable to address any of the mounting challenges in the country. From every perspective, the situation was a shambles: from the rebel massacre of soldiers at Menaka, to a battle in Aguelhok in the far north of the country at the start of 2012, to a coup d'etat led by a mid-ranking officer, then numerous changes at the presidential office, to a military command wracked by corruption while ordinary soldiers went without pay. These poorly equipped soldiers had, over years of neglect, lost any sense of duty and, when they had to face small bands of well-armed rebels, they simply fled. More and more territory fell effortlessly to the rebels of the MNLA (Le Mouvement national pour la Liberation de l'Azawad, or the National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad).

The fall of Timbuktu was a matter of time. It came right at the end of March 2012. Many people simply fled the town, fearing what might happen next, and those who remained lived in fear. A handful of adventurous, unemployed youth joined or attempted to join the rebels, out of curiosity or to survive the new political reality. Timbuktu was a symbolic and strategic location. For centuries, victorious warring parties in the larger region had seen the town as a necessary location to control. Timbuktu was born as a trading settlement, probably at the end of the eleventh century, and since that time has always attracted merchants crossing the Sahara with their diverse wares. It was a gateway to northern Africa and provided access to the Niger River for traders coming south. For the

contemporary rebels, taking Timbuktu meant an important town was under their rule. The capture also offered instant global media coverage. They already had nominal control over large swathes of the desert and settlements that were unknown, even to most Malians. Taking Timbuktu was a prize worth all their effort and sacrifices. They entered the precincts of the town without a battle.

After the shock of the fall of Timbuktu, there was not much to report, and Timbuktu fell off the news cycle. Mali was not a priority of the major international broadcasters, except in some of the French-language media, since it was a former French colony. The Arab Spring was still unfolding in hotspots like Egypt and Syria and there were many other tragedies and wars to cover. Meanwhile, the rebels faced a divided population, some fearful, others welcoming them. The rebels who captured Timbuktu had splintered from an older Tuareg nationalist movement that stressed ethnic solidarity. The groups called Tuareg are historically nomads whose language is commonly called Berber. The splinter group, Ansar Dine ("supporters of the religion"), stressed religious identity. They proclaimed themselves Muslims first and only incidentally invoked any ethnic or linguistic identity, such as Tamasheq or Berber. They stressed their adherence to a literalist interpretation of the Quran, believed that they could create some kind of theocratic state in the Sahara, and were also bent on driving out any Muslims who visited grave sites of holy men, which they viewed as a pagan practice. The Ansar Dine linked this kind of activity to the practices of Sufis, who had in recent years built up a large following in the larger West African Muslim communities. The rebels, in turn, were labelled by their detractors as Salafi and Saudi-influenced, and not rooted in Africa.

One of the popular expressions in the town is that "Timbuktu is the city of 333 saints," because of the long history of numerous pious individuals who inspired the town's population. The tombs of the saints are regarded with reverence and as historic monuments by the locals, even by those who had little time for them. Disregarding the local respect and reverence for the holy men, the rebels soon set about knocking down, with hammers and hoes, the tombs of these Timbuktu saints. The Ansar Dine rebels believed the tombs were un-Islamic. Moreover, attacking the tombs demonstrated their capacity, as well-armed men, to do whatever they wanted irrespective of local sentiment.

The Ansar Dine's fighters took over key government buildings, including the town's newest major modern architectural addition, the archive-library that had opened in early 2009. This two-story facility stood opposite the famous, centuries-old Sankoré Mosque, a UNESCO World Heritage Site. The new building's reception hall and public spaces have high ceilings with handcrafted

brass chandeliers made in Morocco. It was, at the time, fully furnished with the required workbenches for conservators, desks for librarians and administrators, ample reading room space, living quarters for visiting researchers, and a large auditorium. An underground vault, with extra-thick walls for storing the book and manuscript collections, would keep the items at a stable temperature in the event of power-outages switching off the air-conditioning. The government administrative buildings, spread through the town, are shabby and rather neglected relative to this new structure. When their eyes fell on the newest building in town, designed with touches of the regional Sudanic style, the rebels saw the spot for their headquarters. They could not refuse the seduction of an attractive modern building.

The new archive-library is a replacement for the older, original archive built in the early 1970s, called the Centre de Documentation et Recherche Ahmed Baba (Cedrab), which English-speakers simply called the Ahmed Baba Centre.[3] That is an unremarkable labyrinth of low, single-story buildings, which could be mistaken for an old primary school building organized around a courtyard. Its form gives no indication of its function. Furthermore, it was located in a neighborhood on the edge of the town, not close to any historic structure such as the iconic fourteenth-century Sankoré Mosque. By the time of the rebel occupation, Timbuktu thus had two archival-library buildings—the original, older one, and the new, recently constructed showpiece—and while most of the staff were placed in the new one, it was still in preparation for full operation. Conservators were making covers for each manuscript and the administrative staff were moving between the two buildings. The older one still held the bulk of the manuscript collections, which had to be moved, in the near future, to the new building that the Ansar Dine were occupying.

There are a number of families in the town who have manuscript collections of their own.[4] Since the late 1990s, charismatic representatives of two families have managed to raise funds from international cultural foundations to support the construction of buildings to house their collections. Mali attracted international aid, and independent cultural initiatives, such as the family manuscript collections, were among the projects that aid agencies supported. Other families with smaller collections, perhaps a few trunks or just a shelf or two, simply kept their materials at home. An association of these private family archives had been established in the early 2000s but not all families joined this body. Unlike the archive-library in the new building, that operated under the regulations of the Ministry of Culture in the capital, the association of private archives was not restricted in how it worked or raised funds. When the rebels settled into the

archive-library, they restricted access to the building, and there was a fear that the materials that had already been moved there would be neglected, mishandled, or possibly disappear.

The rebels had no interest in the original archive-library, where nearly all the materials were still stored. Meanwhile, the leadership of the association of private family collections began planning to secure their materials and move them surreptitiously to safety, in case the manuscripts were laid upon by the rebels. Why the rebels would have involved themselves with these families and their manuscripts has never been clear. There appears to have been no immediate threat to the private manuscript collections. There were probably rumors in town, after the occupation of the main archive-library building, that the rebels would search homes for valuables, and the two private libraries with their sponsored computers, cameras, and conservation equipment might have attracted attention. Would the rebels occupy these private libraries and lay claim to the manuscripts? There was never any such attempt; the occupiers had other concerns. Attacking tombs with hoes and hammers did not mean manuscripts would be torn up or burned. Yet the owners of the private libraries locked up their homes, hid parts of their collections as best they could, and left town with their most valuable manuscripts. Hiding materials and moving them elsewhere were ways of preserving manuscripts from the many earlier episodes of conflict in and around Timbuktu. Manuscripts, and entire collections, were always mobile, as the following chapters illustrate.

I was in regular contact with colleagues in Timbuktu throughout this period. Hearing the news about the occupation of the new archival building, I was worried that the manuscripts would be forgotten and neglected. If a battle should take place around the building, a fire could destroy the entire collection, as has happened with other libraries in war zones around in the world throughout the twentieth century. In all the major wars and civil conflicts of modern times, libraries have been direct or indirect objects of destruction. Less dramatically, the desert sand and dust, termites and other insects, and the occasional seasonal rain that takes everyone by surprise, which had caused damage in the past, could easily return if there were no daily inspections of the stores where the materials were meant to be kept securely. Furthermore, in the rush to move the manuscripts, it would be easy to mishandle them. Meanwhile, efforts to quietly move some or all of the manuscripts out of Timbuktu and to the capital had begun. The organizers of the moving project would later tell stories of packing tin crates, filled with manuscripts, onto donkey-carts in the dark of night and then leading the carts to Kabara, a small port on the Niger River, about fifteen kilometers (nine

miles or so) away. There, the crates were transferred onto awaiting *pinasses*, traditional riverboats, to cross the river, where taxis were waiting to take the manuscript-filled crates. After a short stretch of driving through the bush, the vehicles would turn onto the country's longest tarred road, all the way to the capital. Apartments in quiet residential neighborhoods on the outskirts of the capital were turned into storage houses for these tin crates of manuscripts. Eventually, in this way, the collections from the old archive-library building, the original Cedrab storerooms, also arrived in the capital, Bamako.

Unable to deal with the multiple challenges the rebels posed as they took more territory, the political elite in Bamako decided to do the unthinkable. The Republic of Mali had a history of representing itself as a genuinely independent, postcolonial state.[5] But now, after fifty years of independence from France, the ex-colonial power was called in to save the country from further collapse. To maintain the territorial integrity of the country, the French soldiers landed in the northern regions to deal with a situation the Malian military was incapable of handling. At the end of January 2013, the rebels were driven from Timbuktu by the French military in Operation Serval. The rebels fled into the desert, possibly a tactical retreat into terrain they knew so well. A few days later, on February 2, the president of Mali's former colonial ruler triumphantly landed in the town. French President Hollande and his Malian counterpart, acting head of state Dioncounda Traore, declared Timbuktu "liberated." The rumors and blurry images of rebels destroying the mud-brick tombs of local saints became enduring emblems of those tumultuous times in Mali. Even more startling were the images of the remains of old manuscript books they had set on fire. Fanatics bent on destruction.

What was reported, on the day the rebels fled and the first news crew entered the archive-library, was that thousands of manuscripts had been set on fire and destroyed. About a week later another news source reported the story of the undercover transfer of the manuscripts out of town. But the image of books burning had already been broadcast and repeated relentlessly (and somehow it persists, more than a decade later). The new reportage was about the movement of the book collections, undertaken right under the noses of the rebels. A fresh image was circulated: many hundreds, perhaps thousands, of tin crates filled with manuscripts leaving Timbuktu on donkey-carts, then crossing the Niger River in complete darkness to the awaiting taxis on the opposite bank, then transported onward to safety in the capital. The booklovers of Timbuktu had risked their lives, fooled the rebels, and saved their heritage. All done before the rebels were even expelled.

Through most of the period of the rebel occupation and lockdown, during which time ordinary folk stayed indoors, I was able to get updates on the situation from a few colleagues in Timbuktu. Some had arrived in Timbuktu only recently to work at the Ahmed Baba Centre, because they had the linguistic skills to work with the manuscripts: they were able to read and classify the materials. They were the researchers who were preparing catalogs of the manuscripts. A few of them had higher degrees and even doctorates from universities in North Africa. When the rebels took over the town, some of them left with their families, to Bamako and then to their villages or hometowns. There was an exodus from the town by bus and boat. Other colleagues stayed on, making use of the closure of institutions to concentrate on reading manuscripts, making copies, or writing their own texts. One of them managed to leave the town to conduct research for work he was copying and editing; a few managed to go in and out, bringing out parts of their manuscript collections and computer hard drives to the relative safety of the capital. Rebel access patrols appear to have been rather lax.

I was also able to stay in touch with those who had relocated to Bamako. Telecommunication lines with Timbuktu broke down after the occupation; electricity supply was uneven, and then the state cut the internet connectivity, except for specific hours on some days. Despite these impediments, however, I was able to put together stories from people in Bamako who got news regularly from within Timbuktu.

No library or archive was attacked and razed to the ground and no manuscripts were willfully destroyed as the French marched into Timbuktu and the rebels fled, as was reported by Sky News, Reuters, and other news sources. There was a need for a compelling story to broadcast to the world as Timbuktu was retaken without a fight; a bonfire of local, valued, old, handwritten books was to be the story of Timbuktu. However, manuscripts were moved out of the town. What percentage moved *during* the occupation and what *after* the rebels fled Timbuktu is unclear. This is a significant distinction to make but it is now a theoretical concern, because a large amount of material eventually was moved to the capital, where it remains in storage. In order to keep the integrity of their collections, the owners probably decided *after* the end of the conflict that it was better to keep their collections together in the same place. So, they were taken to the capital. This mobility of the materials is not new. Timbuktu has always been one node in a larger setting of nomadic movement. Scholars and their manuscript books moved around and over long distances, as will become clear in the following chapters. Historically, scholars, teachers, and students were not only found in the settlements and towns of the Sahara and the adjacent territories to the south

(the area often referred to as the Sahel) but also in the nomadic encampments that were highly mobile. Book learning, especially in the territories to the west of Timbuktu, in what is today southwestern Mauritania, flourished from the late seventeenth century among sedentary *and* among some nomadic groups. In the history of the wider region, there is a long history of manuscripts moving around. Books always moved with their authors and owners. Books were borrowed and copied, then returned to their owners.[6] Throughout the following chapters, the history of the mobility of scholars, books, and other objects will become clearer. But Bamako, the capital, created by the French, was never a center of scholarship or the production of texts. There was scholarly activity there, but it began only in the post–World War II period (see chapter 8).

Manuscripts, Books

Up until very recently, the small cohort of scholars concerned with the Sahara and Sahel, and who used written historical evidence, referenced these manuscripts, and still fewer scholars—philologists, specialists concerned with the study of texts—actually worked closely on specific manuscripts from the collections held in the state archive-library, the Ahmed Baba Centre (Cedrab). There is a long tradition of specialist scholarship published in academic journals and by academic publishers that relied on the written culture of the larger region.[7] There were occasional brief articles in popular magazines that included images of the manuscripts. However, Timbuktu and other settlements in the larger region were never seen as part of the global history of books. When I searched the words "Timbuktu" and "books" together in the catalogs of major libraries in Europe in the early 2000s, I got no results, except in the catalog of the British Library where I came across a California publisher of poetry called Timbuktu Books, whose works were all unrelated to West Africa. African history and book history were not subjects that intersected. According to the dominant view, Africa was never supposed to have writing, until the coming of colonialism. This was explicitly articulated by the philosopher G.W.F. Hegel in the early nineteenth century and repeated by the English historian Hugh Trevor-Roper in the 1960s. What is remarkable is that recent works that claim global coverage of books and libraries have completely ignored this West African book culture. The footage of thousands of books going up in flames, and then the images of tin crates filled with manuscripts, were captivating, especially to Europeans with memories of a long continental past of book and library destruction well into the twentieth century. Now, out of this once-mythical place, there were real books, tangible

objects, things that can be held and touched, read and moved. Not books of the imagination: texts organized not as ancient scrolls, but as codices made of paper held between leather covers. Objects that looked familiar, resembling the book in Europe from the medieval or early modern periods. Does it take such a crisis, and the confusing media reportage of books first presented as destroyed then revealed to have been saved by moving them hundreds of kilometers, to bring attention to a long-established book culture in the interior of Africa, one that predates the arrival there of European explorers, late nineteenth-century colonialism, and the spread of the printing press on the continent?

By the end of the rebel occupation, and in the reportage immediately afterward, local tour guides, who spoke some French and English but who had no knowledge of the collections, gave foreign journalists exaggerated figures about the numbers of manuscripts destroyed or the drama of how they were moved out of town—sometimes incorporating both contradictory stories at the same time. Hundreds of manuscripts turned into thousands, then turned into hundreds of thousands; manuscripts that were always organized as codices sometimes became scrolls in these presentations. One or two well-heeled collection owners, who in recent years had emerged as brokers between the family collections and the outside world and had a more detailed knowledge of the materials, did not dispel the myths about the figures and contents. Later, they continued to embellish the numbers.

The town of Timbuktu became the sole focus in the reportage of a writing culture that is, in fact, present in numerous surrounding towns and settlements across a much larger desert space. Timbuktu was indeed a significant place for scholars but not the only locus of literacy. At the time of the crisis, the focus on Timbuktu was, in a way, understandable, but the coverage never changed and did not touch on the much more expansive extent of libraries across the region. Other settlements across the desert had open-air classes to teach basic literacy. Their authors' works were copied and circulated. Timbuktu, like so many other towns, had its period of ascendancy and then of decline. In the following chapters, I introduce the history of scholars and collectors in Timbuktu and in connected settlements, their major writers and copyists, and the titles of manuscript books written by scholars in the region. I introduce some specific manuscripts in greater detail. The material—economic and political—and intellectual contexts of which they were once part will be elucidated along the way. In most cases, an actual text can be closely described but the context of its production is often difficult to identify with any detail. What motivated writers living often precarious lives to write the works that they did, and *when* they did? Who were

these authors and what were their arguments? How did various manuscript collections grow, change and move, or stay in the same place?

The evidence for writing in the region goes back to tombstones with Arabic inscriptions that date to the early eleventh century.[8] Before there is a history of writing on paper or parchment, there is a history of writing on stone. The earliest evidence of writing in the larger region around Timbuktu is not on paper but on stone and rock, going as far back as 1011 CE (fig. 1 shows a map of the region). There are over four hundred, probably reaching closer to a thousand, extant inscriptions that record the names and dates of the death of men and women with high social status. Among them could be the rulers or elites of the time. While the Arabic calligraphy of the inscriptions is not the most striking or polished by the standards of similar inscriptions elsewhere, or later writing in the region, its syntax is clear, classical Arabic that includes many local, non-Arabic first names. The accompanying images of the inscriptions on tombstones together with line drawings of the script (figs. 2a–d) are from the early twelfth century—one for a man described as a king, the other for a woman described as a queen.

There is a gap in the documentation between the period of the later inscriptions of the early 1400s and the evidence from the manuscripts of the sixteenth century. In manuscripts produced much later there are references to texts between these periods but no actual material remains of either original works or copies that were made later. Thus, literacy and literature go back well before the sixteenth century. The handwritten works that were passed down to succeeding generations, or were mentioned but have left no trace, are the products of a writing culture that developed in the desert. It is impossible to speculate about rates of literacy but judging from the range of writing and confident expression in prose and poetry, there was definitely a deeply embedded literate culture by the time a figure like Ahmad Baba (discussed in detail in chapters 2 to 4) started writing in the late 1500s. Writing was used to record prayers for common use, to make amulets and charms, and inscribe tombstones. There were preachers or teachers who used their writing skills for purposes of magic and healing and not for scholarship. This book focuses on the works of scholars who wrote mainly serious works to prove their capacities to their peers, to expound theological and legal opinions, and to engage in arguments with each other. The book spans the period from the fifteenth-century arrival in Timbuktu of the ancestors of the town's preeminent scholar, Ahmad Baba, until the time of the energetic manuscript collector and trader, Ahmad Bularraf, in the first half of the twentieth century. In between them, writers from within and outside Timbuktu will be introduced.

FIG. 1. Main places in which manuscript books and their writers circulated between the sixteenth and twentieth centuries.

FIG. 2A AND B. Two examples of the earliest extant writing in the region from Saney, close to Gao, Mali. Both are tombstones; the first, above, is for a Sulayman, son of a king (al-Malik), and is dated to 1115 CE (509 AH), with parts of Quranic verses 35:5 and 31:33. The stone is quartzite, measuring 82 × 34 cm, and the script is ornamental Kufic. The second is the tombstone of a woman, a queen (al-Malika) dated to between 1135 and 1155 CE with the Quranic verse 3:185. The stone is gray schist, measuring 47 × 34 cm, the script ornamental Kufic. These are two of the hundreds of epigraphic writings that reflect the levels of literacy in the region in the twelfth century.

Collecting, Papers, and Scripts

In early December of 2001, I traveled overland from Bamako with four South African archival and heritage specialists to make an initial assessment of the manuscript collections in Timbuktu. On subsequent trips, I visited other towns along the Niger River—Mopti, Jenne (Djenne), and Segou, and smaller towns—where there were smaller collections. However, except in Jenne, I was not taken to view these smaller collections, although I did get a sense of the landscape and the distances people and things moved. I traveled to countries in the wider region—Niger, Mauritania, Senegal, Nigeria, Ghana, Morocco—that have multiple manuscript collections, in various locations, with individual works or copies and commentaries on works originating in Timbuktu. These states did not exist when the history I recount in this book unfolded. But in this vast space—much of it desert or semiarid land with extremely low rainfalls, periodic

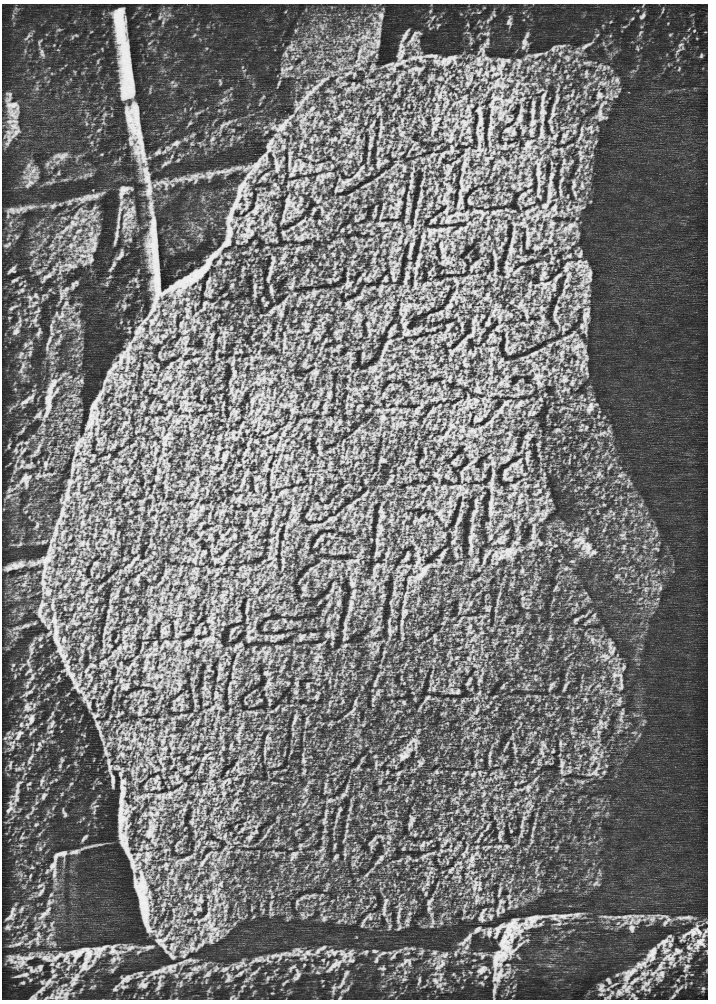

FIG. 2A AND B. (*continued*)

droughts, and often famines as a result—competing political elites exerted nominal control over parts of the region. This usually meant demanding some kind of tribute, which was collected on a regular basis. Timbuktu fell under what is commonly called the Mali and then Songhai states, often cast as empires, between the early fourteenth and end of the sixteenth centuries. There were towns, like Timbuktu and Jenne, with dynamic markets, and oasis settlements and nomadic camps that were connected to each other and the larger world through long-established trade routes that ran over vast distances reaching to the North African coastline. Paper was among the items of this commerce.

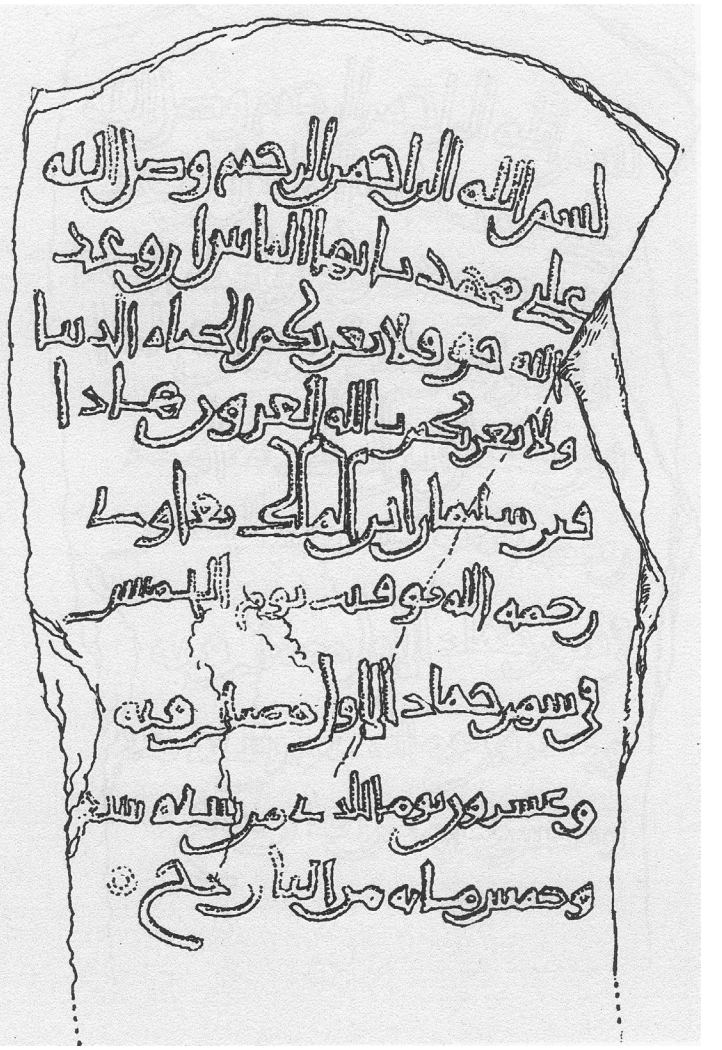

FIG. 2C AND D. Images of the inscriptions and line drawings reproduced by kind permission of P. F. de Moraes Farias and the British Academy, from P. F. de Moraes Farias, *Arabic Medieval Inscriptions of the Republic of Mali* (2003), 12, 20–21 (inscriptions 10 and 18, plates 4 and 8). The book is available online via https://www.fonteshistoriaeafricanae.co.uk/books-available-online/.

FIG. 2C AND D. (*continued*)

There was no paper production in northern Africa throughout the period covered in this book. Yet the manuscripts were all written on paper; there are very few examples of texts on parchment or vellum (prepared and treated animal skins). The importation of paper to coastal and interior settlements was of significance to the rate at which scholars could compose their work. International, long-distance trade involved multiple parties, from paper producers in southern

Europe to Africa-based merchants who distributed the paper among the other goods they exchanged. Gifting was another source of paper. Every sheet must have been highly valued and thus every thought carefully mulled over and prepared before the inked reed was applied to the blank surface. The inks and styluses were the least of the writers' problems because these could be made locally. The composition of a text, therefore, meant having well-formulated ideas in one's head and three things: paper, pen, and ink. And, of course, a smooth, hard surface to support the paper. A writer would sit on the ground when writing. Some of the manuscripts I was shown had suffered badly from insect infestation and other damage such as water stains, while others—most of them, in fact—were in good condition; they could be fifteenth- or sixteenth-century paper from a family's archive or late nineteenth-century paper made from wood pulp. Dating a text seems not to have been a common practice, and copying a text from an earlier period was not uncommon as a method of conservation. In the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, school notebooks from French manufacturers, identifiable by their gridlines, were used for making manuscripts.

The rulers of the early states that evolved in the region, such as the Mali and Songhai states, did not set down much, or anything, on paper. Rulers might have believed themselves above the need to write, although they had the power to instruct others in their court to write for them. While there was no pressure on them to write anything themselves, they did have at least one individual who dealt with correspondence with other rulers. How did they publicize their decrees, administer their realm? They certainly sent out their representatives to verbally give instructions and make demands of their subjects. Timbuktu and other towns were subject to higher political powers living in Gao, four hundred kilometers to its southeast, until 1591, when the Saʿdian dynasty of Marrakesh conquered the region; this is often simplified as the "Moroccan conquest of Timbuktu." During the periods covered by this book, there is, with extremely few exceptions, no written evidence of the laws the rulers issued, taxes they claimed, or other documentary administrative materials, until the coming of the French at the end of the nineteenth century. In the nineteenth century, up to the French advances and conquests—roughly from the early to mid-1800s—the frontiers of Islamic religiopolitical movements were shifting as they asserted territorial claims, and there was a proliferation of texts of a political nature revealing their arguments and claims. (See chapter 6, which focuses on the writers of the Sokoto state, named after the town where it was founded in present-day northern Nigeria.) However, these were not administrative materials. Much of what we know about the political history of the region comes from books written much later, not from

administrative records or correspondence, between rulers and functionaries, or from diplomatic records. There are very few manuscripts from the earlier periods that directly deal with politics at the time. The movements of the nineteenth century, however, did generate a political literature filled with polemic and argumentation. But overall, the political communications or similar texts we have were mostly written decades after the events they describe. This is the case with the important chronicle, the *Tārīkh al-Sūdān* that we rely on for much of the political history of the region in which Timbuktu is located.

During my trips, there was no palace archive to consult the papers or official documentation of rulers or the elites close to them. I visited manuscript collections in family homes. On each trip, yet another family collection was revealed to me. Many of them were in poor condition, while others were well-maintained and curated collections. One collection was just piled up along the walls of a spare room; another was brought out into a courtyard in wooden boxes with books neatly and tightly pressed inside. These book collections were distributed in various homes in the narrow alleys of the town. Timbuktu's Ahmed Baba Centre had some facilities and expertise to conserve and work on the manuscripts, which the private collectors did not have. But in the years to come, the private collectors organized themselves and attracted foreign funding to establish such facilities.

Unlike European manuscript books, the codices of Timbuktu are all loose leaves, unbound sheets of paper. In other words, unlike this book, the pages were neither sewn nor glued together. They are written in the regional styles of the Arabic script. Some of my well-informed hosts would characterize the script of each manuscript—*Suqi, Sahrawi, Sudani, Maghribi, Hawsawi*—reflecting the area in which the manuscript was copied. To the untrained eye, West African Arabic calligraphy is all simply Maghribi because it looks like writing from Morocco, but there are, in fact, a variety of styles. These are not, for example, the Arabic calligraphy of Egypt or the calligraphy developed in Istanbul and used in the Ottoman Empire. A manuscript from outside the region is easily picked out by simply looking at the script style. The style developed by the Ottoman bureaucracy—*Riqʿa*—or the *Naskhi* were not cultivated by Timbuktu writers and copyists, and only in the later twentieth century would there be locals who could and might use such styles of calligraphy.

The manuscripts, when they had covers, were held together by their original, well-crafted, handmade leather covers. Some smaller texts had no covers, but modern paper files kept the pages together. In the beginning, I never saw manuscripts treated by their owners as precious museum objects; nobody wore gloves when handling them or treated them in the way I had experienced in rare-book

libraries elsewhere in the world. But over the years, as more outside expertise appeared in the town, more of the custodians of family collections began to have what can be called a Western "conservation language." This came mostly from well-established professional and amateur conservators, and at times the owners strained to express the fragility and antiquity of their books. But the idea of conservation, before this sea change, was simply that one should store the objects securely and keep bugs far away. The manuscripts had survived for so long, and their owners used their own insights into what destroys paper. So why intervene? I could imagine these books in the past, passing from one home to another when there was a request for a text. I would later read about Ahmad Baba (d. 1627) writing about his teacher giving books out on loan with ease. And in the twentieth century, a scholar deep in the desert wrote to the collector Ahmad Bularraf (d. 1955), thanking him for the use of a book but complaining that a two-week loan was too short. The writing and collecting activities of these two figures stand at the beginning and end of this book.

In Timbuktu, among the learned elite, books were wholly seen as handwritten works even into recent decades. Therefore, in Timbuktu and the world around it, a focus on the uses of books means looking at a manuscript culture long after this kind of handwritten book culture had disappeared in most of the world. Even when Timbuktu scholars encountered print in the twentieth century, they continued to write out their works, which then circulated as hand-copied books. Into the twenty-first century, this is still a practice. When I met scholars there, they were still only writing out texts by hand; one in particular was especially prolific but never had anything printed until I offered to cover the costs of typing up a large biographical dictionary (*tarjama*) of scholars that he had compiled into a manuscript book. The persistence of the handwritten work meant that some curious developments had taken place. For instance, how many cases might there be of manuscripts that were once printed editions of texts, that somehow reached Timbuktu, especially in the colonial period? In other words, print became manuscript. Many years after my first visits, I discovered such a case, of an article from a Moroccan newspaper turned into a manuscript, and there are probably more. The scholars I write about in this book, and others who, at the time of my writing, are still active, wrote out huge tomes by hand. I have seen how researchers who wanted a copy of a work would have to wait until a copyist could be called to produce one. After a few days, a manuscript copy would be presented, looking like the original. However, the new copy would be made on lined paper. Copying a text by hand is much slower than contemporary so-called "print-on-demand" publishing. But until into the present it was possible to get a copy of

a manuscript done by a local scribe; here then is a *manuscript-on-demand* culture. The absence of copyright and the capacity to make copies also opened the potential for making forgeries and fakes. This phenomenon is not unknown in Timbuktu.

I have visited, for research purposes and out of curiosity, many libraries and archives in various parts of the world and spent some time as a graduate student working in one. The archival materials and rare books were always hidden from the view of the regular user. A researcher never gets to see where the manuscripts are actually stored; they are brought out on request after the researcher has worked through often-arcane catalogs to identify items. The moment a manuscript materializes at your reading desk is often like a magical occurrence. So, coming to Timbuktu, I was somewhat disoriented by my almost-unmediated encounter with manuscripts. I had never seen so many books completely handmade and presented in such an unaffected, matter-of-fact way to a visitor or potential reader. One would expect to find such objects in the rare books section of archives and libraries or locked up in cabinets at antiquarian booksellers. This was the case, to an extent, with the state-run Ahmed Baba Centre. But on the whole, there was an informality and generosity around the materials. They were easily handled and passed around, with some of their owners giving running commentaries, if not on their often-rhyming titles then on their contents, or on how they were passed down in a family. Some of their owners had no idea what they were dealing with; they could not read the language in which the books were written. Arabic was and is a language of scholarship in the region and is not overall used as a lingua franca. A portion of the population speaks an Arabic dialect called Hasaniyya, but it does not have the same prestige as writing and speaking in what is considered classical Arabic. I was given handwritten lists of titles and authors by some owners who were hoping for collaborators to prepare proper catalogs. Extremely little about, not to mention in, the libraries were printed at that point. There were catalogs for the main archives, but they covered only a small percentage of the collections. As catalogs appeared in coming years, they mostly gave partial coverage to the holdings of a collection or did not give sufficient information about the actual books. To put it in specialist language, the codicology was undeveloped.

The collections aimed to conserve a tradition of book production and learning that privileged the hand and the handmade object. Aside from the writer, who literally wrote out his text, there was always a role for a person with a good writing hand, a scribe or copyist, who could make a beautiful final version or additional copies of texts. What I shall be describing is a world of writing that

flourished but also fluctuated, roughly from around 1500 and into the contemporary period, in a severe, dry climate where populations had a precarious means of survival. Many of the writers themselves were pastoralists or connected to families who survived on pastoral activities. Conditions were always difficult but finding a hard surface to put down a sheet of paper and write was a part of that life, at least for the people like Ahmad Baba, Ahmad Bularraf, and others introduced in subsequent chapters.

When one encounters the term "manuscript" today, it mostly covers written material not meant for public circulation, such as private correspondence or drafts of all kinds, from administrative materials and formal declarations to drafts of novels. Nobody, other than archivists or historians, reads manuscripts or books that were handwritten and that were once meant to circulate in that form. There are always exceptions, of course, as we will see in some of the cases I deal with, in parts of West Africa and across the Sahara and Sahel to Ethiopia, for example, where handwritten texts remain highly valued and are still in use.

This is a book about books, *manuscript books*, which will sound strange if we have only known printed books and especially only books printed and bound by machines. The idea of having a print-on-demand book was unthinkable until a few years ago. To get a printed book was a long process; no longer. Then, of course, there is the digital book. These two types of books are even further away from the concept of a *manuscript book*, which was prevalent in medieval Europe until the emergence of printing in the last half of the fifteenth century. These are two ends of the spectrum: manuscript and digital book. Contemporary authors still speak of their manuscript when a work is in preparation, even as a typescript, before publication as a hard-copy or real book. The aim of authors and publishers is to see their books in print, and hopefully thousands of copies in both hardback and soft cover. A book only in the manuscript stage does not matter, not yet.

Writing was used for many purposes but what remains of the long writing culture in Timbuktu are the *books*, *the manuscripts*; far less, next to nothing, remains, especially for the earlier periods at least, of private correspondence, commercial records, or diplomatic records. Private correspondence is still kept by families but it is never given prominence or displayed like the manuscript books I saw and handled. Commercial records are to be found, and more could also still appear in collections because there were always contracts to write down, specifying weights and prices of goods. But I have much less faith that new documents from rulers, or the elites close to them, from the precolonial period will be found. Fortunately, whatever manuscript books or other items that I

encountered over the years in Timbuktu were not burned by rebels. Timbuktu's return to the spotlight was reminiscent of the late nineteenth-century scramble to reach this city of untold riches.

Timbuktu and its three oldest mud-brick mosques were listed as UNESCO World Heritage Sites in 1988. The mausoleums that were attacked were therefore part of Timbuktu's local and world heritage. A number of individual manuscripts from Timbuktu have been included in the UNESCO Memory of the World Register. There are at least two dozen libraries in Timbuktu, with manuscript collections of varying sizes. A large share of these manuscripts was moved to the capital, Bamako. I have used the terms "libraries" and "collections," but there is not a single term agreed upon by locals to describe the Timbuktu materials. Some were consciously collected and preserved, while others appear to have been simply forgotten over decades, or longer, and hoarded until there was a flurry of attention to old books in the town in the 2000s. In Timbuktu, colleagues speak most frequently of *maktaba* (library) or *khizana* (store / storehouse) when referring to the collections. The most frequently used term in Arabic for "archive" is simply *arshif* (derived from French or English) although sometimes *mahfuthat* (lit. a place of protection) can be heard. But these latter terms are never used in Timbuktu.

Individual items within collections are most often described as *kitab* (book) or *risala* (letter/epistle), all collectively known as *makhtutat* (manuscripts). There are numerous books whose titles start out with the word "kitab." "Risala" also refers to a text but is used for shorter work or a piece of correspondence. The assumption is often that such a smaller text is a letter written to an addressee for either private or public reading; in this genre, it is not unusual to find a text running into a few dozen pages. There are, however, items that are strictly private correspondence.

What Kind of Book Tradition?

Writing Timbuktu uses "Timbuktu" to stand for a much larger area than the specific historical town of Timbuktu, although a good deal of attention is given to the place itself; many of the writers discussed lived there, passed through it, or had some other kind of connection to it. Timbuktu must be understood as a symbol of a much wider writing culture that stretched across and included the distant edges of the Saharan desert. Timbuktu the town, of course, also featured eminently in European visions of the continent, a mysterious location to reach, imagined as having untold quantities of gold. It became a place to conquer, lured

by the "force of falsity" as Umberto Eco would have put it.[9] But as Leo Africanus observed after his visit in 1506, books, not gold, were the most valuable object in the town (see the next chapter). The scholarship on this fascinating traveler, writer, and captive of the Vatican is extensive but his observation on books in Timbuktu has never been commented on or used as a basis for investigating the place of books in that part of the world. By that time, there was already a tradition of writing, and manuscript books were circulating throughout the region. The book in West Africa in the early modern period was thus not an imported thing, a foreign object, but the product of local writers and copyists. The writers did not arrive on camel-back from Mediterranean Africa, from coastal northern African centers of learning to convert cultures of orality to literacy. Their ethnic and linguistic identities were diverse and claims to being from an "Arab" tribe hardly feature in genealogies from Timbuktu. Elsewhere, where and when this does happen it is, of course, always mythical. In fact, many, such as Ahmad Baba's ancestors, came from areas to the south of Timbuktu. The way of making a book—unbound sheets, always, and in Arabic scripts that were entirely regional—defined the book culture of this part of the continent for centuries. While classical Arabic was the language of scholarship—comparable to Latin at the same time in Europe—there are examples of texts in regional languages written in the Arabic script (this is referred to as *Ajami*). The Ajami writings were most often not prose works but poetry and used to add glosses to classical texts.

Ahmad Baba referred to his ancestors in the fifteenth century as being teachers writing books and having book collections. He himself would build up a large library. In terms of genre, they were works from within traditions of Islamic learning, but they were not merely copies of texts written in Fez or Cairo. When they did make copies of existing works, they added their own commentaries; they also used older texts as a basis for their own new works. They were educated within a well-established scholarly tradition, but also worked within their own contexts, responding to local issues. This was the only tradition of textual and book production in West Africa for centuries, and Timbuktu was central to it. The book culture was *both* Islamic and West African—to claim it was only one or the other would be to deprive the book culture of Timbuktu of its rich complexity.

When print arrived during the colonial administrations—Arabic printing was adopted in Morocco in the late nineteenth century—the manuscript tradition continued, with writers continuing their work and local copyists continuing to produce copies, usually on-demand. In various parts of West Africa, this book

culture continued through the colonial period and the coming of print, persisted after independence in the 1960s, and survived into the first quarter of the twenty-first century. In Timbuktu now, even as I write these lines, a scholar is living who wrote out by hand a massive biographical dictionary of his contemporaries and predecessors. This is how he produced all his work. He is listed as having written twenty-four works in one catalog from 2003; since then, he has written more and made copies and commentaries. One of his works of great value to readers and researchers is a guide to the editing marks in Timbuktu manuscripts! He also produced a summary of the large text. Summaries are themselves part of this tradition of scholarship. A further step would be to release a versification of the work; this has not appeared yet. His main concern during the 2011 occupation of Timbuktu was to finish a manuscript he was commissioned to edit—he had to get a copy from Morocco to finish it. He makes his living as a teacher at a government school in the town, but his fingers never touched a typewriter or keyboard. Throughout the history of Timbuktu, there have been scholars like him, who wrote, edited, annotated, copied, summarized their larger works, and made a living by teaching or trading. There were also those who never wrote anything but were available to make copies, as we learn from colophons. On the other hand, we could speculate that there were those whose lectures were written up and compiled by their students and given as authors of a work. Even today, copyists are always available to copy a text from a library in the town. We can thus identify a West African precolonial book culture that persisted through all the invasions and crises that beset the town and region.

The book—as a material object, a tangible thing to hold, open, and read, and then store or pass along—thus has a striking continuity. Paper was imported but the habit of binding paper never came along with it. Travelers brought paper as gifts. Stitched pages, the bound book, almost never appear among the collections in the larger region. When they do, they are printed books brought in from outside, since the late nineteenth century. The reasons for this adherence to a way of bookmaking are not clear. It would be too simplistic to explain it away as simply "tradition." From among manuscript traditions that use Arabic or Arabic-derived scripts this way of bookmaking seems to be unique. Even in northern African Islamic scholarly centers—such as Fez and Qayrawan (Kairouan), or Marrakesh in the south, which had closer contact with Timbuktu—the book culture is different; books are bound, and a copying tradition died out long ago. Only a slightly modified version of the classical Maghribi Arabic script—done by a handful of experienced calligraphers—is used for book titles of the religious establishment, and in official missives of the king of Morocco, for instance.

For all this persistence of a style of book-craft with its unique Arabic calligraphic styles, the world in which this writing happened was filled with crises and instability: famines, droughts, invasions, rulers who hated scholars, and even periods without rulers. In the chapters that follow, many of these crises are identified, especially if they were captured in texts of the time. Books were obviously lost, damaged, and even destroyed during these moments. But the idea of the book did not disappear, despite the breaks and "the disappearance of learning," to use a phrase of Ahmad Baba.[10] When some calm returned and paper entered the markets again, a few learned men sat down and dipped their reed pens into locally made ink.

One of the challenges of working with the collections in Timbuktu has been the unevenness of available tools to find and identify materials. The manuscript catalogs have improved since the first ones that appeared in the 1990s, which were just lists of authors and titles. This was, however, a beginning. Even with the most recent, much-improved, catalogs there is still much to be done. A catalog of a collection—and usually of a set of collections in a subregion such as "western Sudanic Africa"—that gives usable codicological information on how to find an item should make research on West African manuscripts possible. However, we also have to contend with the real world of the collections, which are often held in precarious conditions. The siege of Timbuktu in 2011 and then the transport of whole collections out of the town, is one example of this precarity. Following these events and seeing the need for an account of the larger region's long encounter with manuscript books was one of the motivations behind this book. For our purposes, the range of issues, from the catalog to the collection to the manuscript copy—or in whichever order one wants to see these—constitutes Michel de Certeau's "historiographical operation," the practical procedures, labor, and experience of doing history.[11] An emerging field within philological studies—captured under the recently coined term "social philology"—attempts to bring the actual conditions of researching and cataloging collections into the foreground. The historical conditions described in this work present a good case for reading texts—manuscript books and other writings—not only as sources of information about the past but as part of the making of a past. At the risk of exaggeration, this is a case of manuscripts as actors. The cases of forgery, for example, are clear examples of belief in the force that words on paper could have; a significant case of forgery in the mid-nineteenth century is discussed in chapter 6.

Generalizations about the literary tradition of Timbuktu, and West Africa in the age of the manuscript book, must take the foregoing into account.

Interpretations of the history will shift and change as more manuscripts become accessible for study, existing ones are reread, and contexts—intimate and external to the text—become clearer. The standard history textbook account was that there were two Chronicles in Timbuktu and the anthropologist Jack Goody asserted from his fieldwork that literacy was limited to the writing out and reading of liturgical tracts and amulets.[12] Both accounts overlook a diverse and complex book culture that had specific regional characteristics and was the vehicle for sophisticated ideas and, importantly, debates. With all the cataloging and close-reading of manuscripts, we are now far beyond repeating rebuttals of these simplistic characterizations; there is ample evidence of a complex enterprise of writing (composition, copying, commenting) as a way-of-life, at least for a section of the population in West Africa. This book is therefore an account of material books and the ideas conveyed in them. It is a work necessarily concerned with the intersection of book and intellectual history, since sometimes there is more material that allows me to elaborate on ideas and thought, while at other times it makes more sense to discuss the book as an object, or the trade in books (more on this below). About the latter, chapter 7, on the life and times of Ahmad Bularraf, provides many examples.

This, then, is a short book about a large subject; it covers a vast territory and a long historical period. It is an introduction to writing in the Sahara-Sahel with Timbuktu as the focal point, a condensed history from epigraphy to typography with the bulk of the book focused on the impressive manuscript book tradition of northwest Africa. The subjects of each individual chapter deserve an entire, dedicated volume, and the endnotes could be extensive review essays in themselves. However, a coherent single volume on the written word and the handwritten book—the sign and its supports—has its place in a library today. The history of writing and books in this part of Africa is known far too little and is still seen as marginal to the big questions in African history. *Writing Timbuktu* draws on published research, but also contains new materials based on my own research, and it should provide fresh angles on old topics for specialist readers, whether Africanists, Islamicists, or book historians. The long history of writing and book production in Africa will hopefully get much more attention and inclusion in comparative discussions about topics ranging from epigraphy to philology to the materiality of the book. These, and related topics, have been covered, in various degrees of depth, in existing scholarship but in most cases this knowledge circulates in unpublished university theses and in specialist journals and monographs.

There are, of necessity, many gaps in this work for reasons of space and because of large gaps in the historical record, or sources are not (yet) available on numerous topics. My approach to this methodological challenge is to introduce writing as a practice and the manuscript book as an object but also give readers a sense of the range of the literature that was produced—that is, the contents of the books themselves. And so, at places, it was necessary to give more attention to the ideas than to the book as object, or vice versa. There was a temptation to give more attention to ideas—to do some sort of intellectual history—but this is not the central purpose of this work. Thus, some writers get more attention than others, and their works are introduced because they are available, although in many cases it is not possible to undertake close codicological descriptions of these works because all I had was a digital copy of a manuscript without accompanying data on its provenance or the circumstances of its copying.

In general, the tools for conducting research on manuscripts and manuscript books have only become available in the last two decades or so and are, thankfully, being continuously refined. For instance, the level of detail in catalogs has improved significantly since the first basic ones appeared in the 1990s for Timbuktu collections. While the advances in cataloging and counting the materials in the many collections are valuable tools, the challenge still remains of how to actually find the items. Any philological work necessitates copies of the texts, preferably hardcopies. Furthermore, there are few reliable editions, and still fewer translations, of even the most well-known works. The endnotes hopefully provide a guide around the materials for those interested in the state of the scholarship. There are manuscripts scattered in libraries all over northwest Africa that are hard to reach; only handlists or locally printed catalogs exist for them, and consequently they do not circulate widely—not to speak of seeing actual copies of the manuscripts. There are also a huge number of unpublished theses stored in university libraries all over the region, and elsewhere, that contain some fine scholarship and plenty of primary sources.

With all these caveats, this is a survey of the written word as a conveyance of ideas, and the manuscript book as a medium of communication, in northwest Africa. Many topics deserve separate treatment, such as how books were read, and the complex relationship between orality and literacy over time. A line had to be drawn to bring this volume to a close. But the writing continues.

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Page numbers in italics indicate illustrations.