The manuscripts of Timbuktu offer an unparalleled window into societies and intellectual traditions of the Western Sudan from the late 15th century onward, but for decades they have been largely inaccessible. They are now under grave threat from a variety of sources, both natural and human. Starting in 2005, Aluka began to collaborate with partner organisations in Mali, South Africa, and the United States to digitise a selection of the manuscripts and make them available to an international scholarly audience and, at the same time, support critically important conservation and cataloguing efforts. The first of these manuscripts will be available in the digital library in 2008.

Following the collapse of empire of Mali in 1433, Timbuktu was incorporated into the Songhai Empire in 1468, and reached its apogee of prosperity and scholarship in the 16th century during the Songhai Askia Dynasty. Even before the rise of the Songhai Empire, Timbuktu was part of the vast trade routes linking the Western Sudan to the Maghreb, stretching onward to the Fertile Crescent and other regions of the Near East. When Leo Africanus visited Timbuktu in the early 1500s, he reported that its people were very wealthy and that books and manuscripts imported from North Africa were the most profitable commodity. In the latter part of the 16th century, the town was reported to have thousands of students studying theology, law, astronomy, and other subjects.

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The manuscripts and their covers demonstrate a sophisticated visual and technical artistry and reflect a rich intellectual and scholarly tradition. They cover a diverse range of topics and genres, including the natural and physical sciences (astronomy, mathematics, botany, and medicine); the literary arts (poetic verse, panegyrics, grammar); the Islamic religious sciences such as theology (kalām), jurisprudence (fiqh), legal opinions (fatawa); and historical accounts (tarikh). Many of the manuscripts are written in local vernaculars (some of which are archaic forms of the present-day languages of Songhay, Tamasheq, and Fulfulde, among others) with Arabic script. Charts, diagrams, commentaries, and marginalia are plentiful; some recount complex genealogies and scientific theories, others record intellectual disagreements among scholars, teachers, and commentators.

During the past two centuries, most of the manuscripts have been concealed, often buried or hidden to safeguard them from colonial agents, lawlessness, and political instability. Partly as a result of the conditions in which the manuscripts were stored, they face an array of conservation challenges, including damage from insects, desiccation, and the fading of certain inks.

In 2005, Aluka began a dialogue with members of library and scholarly communities, expressing its interest in helping to solve some of the challenges faced by libraries in Timbuktu. In January 2007, after a series of meetings and discussions in Cape Town, New York, and Timbuktu, Aluka entered into a formal partnership with SAVAMA-DCI (L’organisation Non Gouvernementale pour la Sauvegarde et la Valorisation des Manuscrits pour la Defense de la Culture Islamique), a Timbuktu-based NGO whose mission is to help private manuscript libraries in Mali safeguard, preserve, and understand their intellectual treasures. As part of this project, Aluka also partnered with two academic groups, Northwestern University’s Advanced Media Production Studio (NUAMPS), led by Mr. Harlan Wallach, and the Tombouctou Ms Project at the University of Cape Town’s Department of Historical Studies. The
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first phase of this multilayered project is Aluka’s commitment to provide SAVAMA-DCI with the resources to catalogue 600 manuscripts from the Mamma Haidara and Imam Essayouti Libraries in Timbuktu and to digitise 300 of these manuscripts. These manuscripts will appear in Aluka and be featured in Aluka’s online archive as part of its African Cultural Heritage Sites and Landscapes digital library.

The digitisation and preservation of Timbuktu’s fragile manuscripts involves a serious series of challenges: ubiquitous dust and sand, termites and other insects, lack of moisture and humidity in the air, intense heat during the day and dramatic variations in temperature between day and night, inconsistent and insufficient power supply, a lack of Internet infrastructure, and, most important, the fragile and precarious condition of the manuscripts themselves. NUAMPS played a vital role in helping Aluka and SAVAMA-DCI design and install a high-resolution digital photography studio appropriate for these conditions. In March 2007, the NUAMPS team transported and installed the studio in Timbuktu and then provided detailed training and instruction in the use and maintenance of the photography and computing equipment to members of SAVAMA-DCI’s staff. A subsequent training session occurred in September 2007.

SAVAMA-DCI and Aluka are working together to preserve and make these manuscripts available to a broad community of scholars, students, and researchers. Despite the daunting nature of the challenges involved, meaningful and lasting progress has been made. By making some of these manuscripts available in digital form, SAVAMA-DCI and its member libraries in Timbuktu are revolutionising how students and scholars around the world may access this literature for research and study. Furthermore, by offering a selection of the manuscripts through Aluka, SAVAMA-DCI hopes to raise awareness among the international scholarly and library communities of the immensity of the challenge, but also the rewards to be gained, inherent in preserving and cataloguing these materials.

The manuscripts of Timbuktu add great depth to our understanding of Africa’s diverse history and civilisations. By studying and translating these texts, scholars and students of Islamic studies, Sudanic African history, anthropology, historiography, Middle East studies, and African literature have an opportunity to play a unique role in discovering new insights about Timbuktu’s contribution to the history of ideas.

By working to preserve and make available the Arabic manuscripts from Timbuktu, Aluka once again shows its commitment to building a rich scholarly resource about Africa by working with a diverse array of African partners and organisations. The project also demonstrates Aluka’s genuine commitment to building technical capacity, better infrastructure, and institutional ownership among its growing network of African partners. The unique patrimony of the Timbuktu manuscripts must be safeguarded and preserved for current and future generations to ponder, interpret, and grasp.