The Illinois Amistad Commission
and The DuSable Museum of African American History
Present:

The Libraries Of Mali
Historians have repeatedly emphasized that Africa, particularly the regions south of the Sahara Desert, rely primarily on an oral (spoken) tradition. This infers that Africa would not be a place where you would find any written history or even a place where traditions were written down. In the 1970s, however, information began to surface about manuscripts that had been hidden for years in the country of Mali. The vast majority of them were written in Arabic, some were written in various other African languages, and there is even one that is reportedly written in Hebrew. The oldest manuscript dates back to the 1200s. Let’s examine how these manuscripts got there.

Arabs, who first came to Africa (Ethiopia) seeking freedom from religious persecution in 615 CE, flooded into North Africa as conquerors less than a quarter century later. Once settled in North Africa, Arabs wanted access to the gold sourced in the lush areas of western Africa and traded and transported across the Sahara Desert. Arabic was first used in West Africa as a language of trade and commerce. Timbuktu, being on the southern edge of the desert and just twelve miles from the Niger River, became an ideal location for trade. According to legend, the city of Timbuktu was named after a very vigilant old woman who took honest and careful care of traders’ goods while they were away. The first writers and scholars in Timbuktu were Africans who usually came from wealthy trading families. Visitors to early Timbuktu reported that books were more highly prized than any other commodity. Let’s learn more.
Notes: “The Timbuktu manuscripts” is a general term for the very large number of historically important manuscripts that have been preserved for centuries in private households in Timbuktu, Mali.

The manuscripts of Timbuktu include works about art, medicine, philosophy, astronomy, and science; works of literature; and priceless copies of the Quran. The discovery of the manuscripts shows that African history is not based on oral tradition only.

- Manuscripts have now emerged not only in Mali but also in Kenya, Tanzania, Senegal, Nigeria, and Ghana. Most of them are written by hand in Arabic.

- From the collection of books in Timbuktu emerged the Sankore Mosque. The expansion of the mosque into a center of learning was financed by a wealthy Mandinka woman. Many scholars were attracted to live in the quarters of Sankore. This became West Africa’s first university—the University of Sankore. Scholars would teach students in their homes based on the manuscripts in their possession. Once students completed studies, they were turbaned.

- Foremost among the collections in Timbuktu today are those of the national Ahmed Baba Institute. There are other large collections in the Mamma Hiadara, Fondo-Kati, and Al-Wangari libraries. There are many other libraries in the city of Timbuktu including that of the Djingereber Mosque, the Konate Library, the Boularaf collection, and the Library of Mohammed Tahar. Most of these libraries are open to the public.

- The libraries in Timbuktu and Mali in general are different from the libraries in the United States in that the libraries of Timbuktu are mostly private collections and
are owned by individuals and families. They are passed down from one generation to the next.

- The manuscripts were buried during the French colonial rule of Mali. During that time, all African intellectuals hid their manuscripts. The reason was simple: **colonialists were deporting thousands of the precious volumes to Europe.** The ancient manuscripts of the **El Hadj Oumar Tall Library** are still in the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris. There are others in various European capitals.

- Malians conscientiously guard their manuscripts and regard them as priceless family possessions. In one book, the following words are written: "not be sold . . . but to remain in the inheritance of Mohamed al-Tar and his descendants forever!" Books are a source of great pride for their owners of yesterday and today.

- One other principal difference between books in a modern library and the books in the library of Mali is that these Malian books are not bound, nor are the pages numbered. The manuscript is kept in precise order based on the memory of the scholar or person who is in possession of the manuscript.

- Timbuktu had a well-organized system of copiers. These were people who were paid to make handmade copies of the manuscripts. Usually, at the end of each manuscript, one can find the name of the copier, that of the proofreader, and the amount that was paid for their services.

- The margins of the books were used in much the same way that family Bibles are used among African Americans. The margins are used to keep notes on what is important to the family, such as births, deaths, weddings and natural disasters. Some margin notes even contain information on medicine.

**Below are some of Timbuktu’s renowned scholars:**

- **Ahmed Baba** was undoubtedly the most influential member of the Aqit family. He studied with his father, his uncle, and Al-Wangari. Ahmed Baba wrote at least seventy works in Arabic, most on law and grammar. One of his most famous writings was a collection of biographies of scholars. Ahmed Baba spent the first part of his life in Timbuktu. He was expelled in 1593 and transferred to Marrakech, where he was imprisoned for two years. He was forced to stay in Marrakech after his release. He taught in the Mosque of Nobles in Marrakech. Upon his return to Timbuktu, Ahmed Baba continued to teach and write. In 1970, a center for conserving the manuscripts was created in Timbuktu and named after Ahmed Baba.

- The earliest scholar from the Mediterranean region to settle in Timbuktu was **Ibrahim Al-Sahili.** He met **Mansa Musa,** the great ruler of Mali in 1324 and accompanied him back to Mali. He was born in Granada, where his father
worked. He received training in law and was also a notary public. He traveled to Egypt, Syria, Iraq, and Yemen and also made a pilgrimage to Mecca.

- **The Kounta people** in Mali live predominantly around the Niger River, east of Timbuktu. Some of them also live in Timbuktu. The Kounta have been associated with religious learning for a number of centuries. Many of them are regarded as saints in the Sufi tradition of Islam. The position of spiritual leader within the Kounta tradition is transmitted from father to son. The Kounta are the people in northern Mali who have been best able to protect their manuscripts.

- **Al-Wangari** was perhaps the most celebrated teacher of his generation. He was a scholar whose family originated from Juula, where scholarship and trade always went hand in hand. He is known to have been a very good man. He was constantly attending to other people’s needs, even at cost to himself. He spent most of his time helping others.

- **Abd Al-Rahman Al-Sadi** wrote the book *Tarikh al-sudan*. He was a former priest in the town of Djenne who was employed by the city of Timbuktu. His book was about the history of the Songhay or Songhai Empire from the middle of the fifteenth century until it was invaded by the Moroccans.

- **Askia Dawud**, who reigned from 1549–1583, is credited with being the first to establish public libraries in Timbuktu.

**Activity One**

**Reflection** — Students should complete the Critical Reflection worksheet. See appendix A.

**Activity Two**

**Language Arts** — Students will imagine they have just stumbled upon an ancient library while visiting Timbuktu. Write a letter to a friend describing what you found and where you are.

**Activity Three**

**Math/Science** — Like the ancient Egyptians, the early book collectors of Mali were great watchers of the stars. On the attached activity sheet (see appendix B), use the coordinate plane to graph a star constellation. Once the dots are in place and connected, list your coordinates and create a meaning for your design.

**Activity Four**

**Geography** — Using the attached map of Africa (appendix C), students should pencil in the Niger River. Once the river is complete, students should identify where Timbuktu is
located on the river. Students should answer the question “Why is Timbuktu called the 'City on the River Bend'?”

Activity Five

Film — Students should watch the BBC documentary African History: The Lost Libraries of Timbuktu. The documentary is one hour long and can be viewed in full at http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Heh_91lhenA. After viewing, students should complete activity six.

Activity Six

Portfolio Entry — This activity requires adult supervision. Using the instructions found at http://www.wikihow.com/Make-Paper-Look-Old, students should try their hand at antiquing paper—making paper resemble an ancient manuscript. On the antique paper, students should create a page that resembles a manuscript from Timbuktu. Students can put on their sheet any information they think is useful. Tell the students to be sure to leave notes and artistic expressions in the margins of their manuscript just as the people of thirteenth-century Mali did.

Activity Seven

Current Events — Students should read about the current armed struggle in Mali and attempts to save the libraries of Mali from being destroyed. Any current article will do. A suggested online article can be found at http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2013/jan/28/mali-timbuktu-library-ancient-manuscripts. Once students have read the article, they can have a reflective group discussion.

Resources

For Teachers

The Hidden Treasures of Timbuktu: Rediscovering Africa’s Literary Culture by John O. Hunwick and Alida J. Boye


“The World Class University of Sankore, Timbuktu.” Downloaded from http://muslimheritage.com/topics/default.cfm?ArticleID=371

For Students

*Hidden Treasures of Timbuktu* (video). Can be seen in full at http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ggFucEBPm58
Appendix A

Critical Reflection

1. Compare and contrast the libraries of Timbuktu with the libraries you know.

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2. Define *manuscript*, *Islam*, and *Quran*.

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3. Identify and describe Ahmed Baba, Abu Al-Sahili, Modibbo Mohammed, and the Kounta people.

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4. How did the people of Mali manage to protect their libraries from French aggressors?

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5. Identify and describe Mohammed Bagayogo Al-Wangari and Abd Al-Rahman Al-Sadi.

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Appendix B

Graphing a Constellation Worksheet

Graph seven points on the plane below. Each point is a star. Connect the stars, name your constellation and tell a story about what your constellation means.

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2. ( , )
3. ( , )
4. ( , )
5. ( , )
6. ( , )
7. ( , )
Appendix C

Map of Africa
### Lesson Plan

#### The Libraries of Mali

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Grade Level(s)</th>
<th>Grade 6</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Unit and Time Frame</td>
<td>Three 50-minute periods</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

#### Common Core State Standards
- CCSS.ELA-Literacy. RI. 6.4: Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in a text, including figurative, connotative, and technical meanings.
- CCSS.ELA-Literacy. RI. 6.7: Integrate information presented in different media or formats (e.g., visually, quantitatively) as well as in words to develop a coherent understanding of a topic or issue.
- CCSS.ELA-Literacy. RH. 6-8.9: Analyze the relationship between a primary and secondary source on the same topic.
- CCSS.ELA-Literacy. W. 6.2: Write informative/explanatory texts to examine a topic and convey ideas, concepts, and information through the selection, organization, and analysis of relevant content.
- CCSS.ELA-Literacy. W. 6.3: Write narratives to develop real or imagined experiences or events using effective technique, relevant descriptive details, and well-structured event sequences.
- CCSS.ELA-Literacy. SL. 6.1: Engage effectively in a range of collaborative discussions (one-on-one, in groups, and teacher-led) with diverse partners on grade 6 topics, texts, and issues, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly.

#### Lesson Goals
- Increase students' understanding of the libraries of Mali. Students will be able to:
  1. Explain the significance of the Timbuktu manuscripts to African and world scholarship.
  2. Identify the city of Timbuktu on a map.
  3. Identify and describe some of ancient Mali’s notable scholars.
  4. Explain how the manuscripts of Timbuktu include works about art, medicine, philosophy, astronomy, science, and literature.
  5. Explain how African history is not solely based on oral tradition.
  6. Compare and contrast the libraries of Timbuktu with the libraries they are familiar with.
  7. Explain how the people of Mali hid the manuscripts from French colonialists who were taking them away to France to preserve them.

#### Materials/Resources
- *Hidden Treasures of Timbuktu* (Hunswick and Boye)
- *World Cultures* (Prentice Hall)
| Key Terms and Concepts | Timbuktu: an ancient city in Mali.  
manuscript: a handwritten document.  
Mali: a country in West Africa where the city of Timbuktu is located.  
Sahara: a desert in Africa.  
Arabic: the language of Arabs.  
Islam: one of the major world religions, primary tenets of which are submission to God and the recognition of Muhammad as God’s last prophet. |
|---|---|
| Interdisciplinary Connections | Geography/Writing/Math/Science:  
- Students will identify Mali and Timbuktu on a map. Students will use the Internet to research the physical and cultural geography of Mali and write two paragraphs about it.  
- Students will imagine that they have just stumbled upon an ancient library while on a visit to Timbuktu. Write a letter to a friend describing what you found and where you are.  
- Students will look at some ancient manuscripts that have constellations and use graphing skills to graph constellations on a coordinate plane.  
1. Opening: Students will be asked to think of a time when they discovered or thought about something that could potentially change their lives. Students will write a few sentences about this moment. A few students will be invited to share. Teacher will connect this to the discovery of the manuscripts in Mali and the potential it has to changing the course of African and world history.  
2. Introduction to New Material:  
- Main Idea: The finding of the Timbuktu manuscripts highlights Africa’s literary traditions and contributions to world knowledge and scholarship.  
- Activate Prior Knowledge: Teacher will ask students to think about times they arrived in new places such as a new school or new community and discuss the feelings such encounters produce.  
Teacher will begin the lesson by asking students to attempt to identify Mali on a map and then Timbuktu. Teacher will assist students in this task. Teacher will then inform students that this lesson will look at the famed city of Timbuktu as a center of learning in the ancient world. Teacher will tell students that these manuscripts are primary source material. Teacher will |
make a distinction between a primary source and a secondary source. Teacher will define a primary source as an original document such as a speech, novel, poem, diary, manuscript, eyewitness account, or interview. A secondary source, on the other hand, is a commentary on a primary source—in other words, what someone says or thinks about a primary source. Teacher will then define the Timbuktu manuscripts as a general term for the very large number of historically important manuscripts that have been preserved for centuries in private households in Timbuktu, Mali. Teacher will explain that the manuscripts of Timbuktu include works about art, medicine, philosophy, astronomy, science, and literature. Priceless copies of the Quran, the holy book of Islam, have also been found. Islam is the religious faith of Muslims and includes the belief that Allah is the only God and that Muhammad was the chief and last prophet of God. The number of manuscripts found is estimated to be at least 700,000; most of them are written in the Arabic language. Teacher will explain that Arabic was used in the Mali religion prior to colonization by the French. The dates on the manuscripts range between the thirteenth and twentieth centuries, from the period when Islam became a popular religion in Mali until the decline of traditional education in the French Sudan under colonization.

THE LIBRARIES OF TIMBUKTU
Teacher will explain that foremost among the collections in Timbuktu today are those of the national Ahmed Baba Institute. There are other large collections in the Mamma Hiadara, Fondo-Kati, and Al-Wangari Libraries. There are many other libraries in the city of Timbuktu, including that of the Djingereber Mosque, the Konate Library, the Boularaf collection and the Library of Mohammed Tahar. Most of these libraries are open to the public.

NOTABLE SCHOLARS OF ANCIENT TIMBUKTU

AHMED BABA
Ahmed Baba was undoubtedly the most influential member of the Aqit family. He studied with his father, his uncle, and Al-Wangari. Ahmed Baba wrote at least seventy works in Arabic, most of them on law and grammar. One of his most famous writings was a collection of biographies of scholars. Ahmed Baba spent the first part of his life in Timbuktu. He was expelled in 1593 and transferred to Marrakech, where he was imprisoned for two years. He was forced to stay in Marrakech after his release. He taught in the Mosque of Nobles in Marrakech. Upon his return to Timbuktu, Ahmed Baba continued to teach and write. In 1970, a center for conserving the manuscripts was created in Timbuktu and named after Ahmed Baba.

MODIBBO MUHAMMAD (aka IBRAHIM AL-SAHLI)
The earliest scholar from the Mediterranean region to settle in Timbuktu was Ibrahim Al-Sahili. He met Mansa Musa, the great ruler of Mali, in 1324 and accompanied him back to Mali. He was born in Granada, where his
father worked. He received training in law and was also a notary public. He traveled to Egypt, Syria, Iraq, and Yemen and also made a pilgrimage to Mecca. Known as the “Master of Masters,” Modibbo Muhammad is highly regarded in Mali. He came to Timbuktu from the Niger River area in the middle of the fifteenth century and taught the lawyer Muhammad Aqit.

THE KOUNTA PEOPLE
The Kounta in Mali live predominantly around the Niger River, east of Timbuktu. Some of them also live in Timbuktu. The Kounta have been associated with religious learning for a number of centuries. Many of them are regarded as saints in the Sufi tradition of Islam. The position of a spiritual leader within the Kounta tradition is transmitted from father to son. The Kounta are the people in northern Mali who have been best able to protect their manuscripts.

MUHAMMAD BAGAYOGO AL-WANGARI
Al-Wangari was perhaps the most celebrated teacher of his generation. He was a scholar whose family originated from Juula, where scholarship and trade always went hand in hand. He is known to have been a very good man. He was constantly attending to other people’s needs, even at cost to himself. He spent most of his time helping others.

ABD AL-RAHMAN AL-SADI
He wrote the book Tarikh al-sudan. He was a former priest in the town of Djenne who was employed by the city of Timbuktu. His book was about the history of the Songhai Empire from the middle of the fifteenth century until it was invaded by the Moroccans.

3. Discussion: Students will respond to the following:
   • How true is it that African history is only based on oral tradition?
   • What actions did people take to protect their libraries from invaders?

4. Critical Reflection: Students will complete the following:
   • Define manuscript, Islam, and Quran.
   • Identify and describe Ahmed Baba, Abu Al-Sahili, Modibbo Muhammad, the Kounta people, Muhammad Bagayogo Al-Wangari, Abd Al-Rahman Al-Sadi.
   • How did the people of Mali manage to protect their libraries from French aggressors?
   • How are the libraries of Mali different from or the same as the libraries we know today?

5. Closing: Teacher will reiterate the highlights of the lesson.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Assessment</th>
<th>Observation, critical reflection activity, participation in class discussion, writing, geography, and math/science activities</th>
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