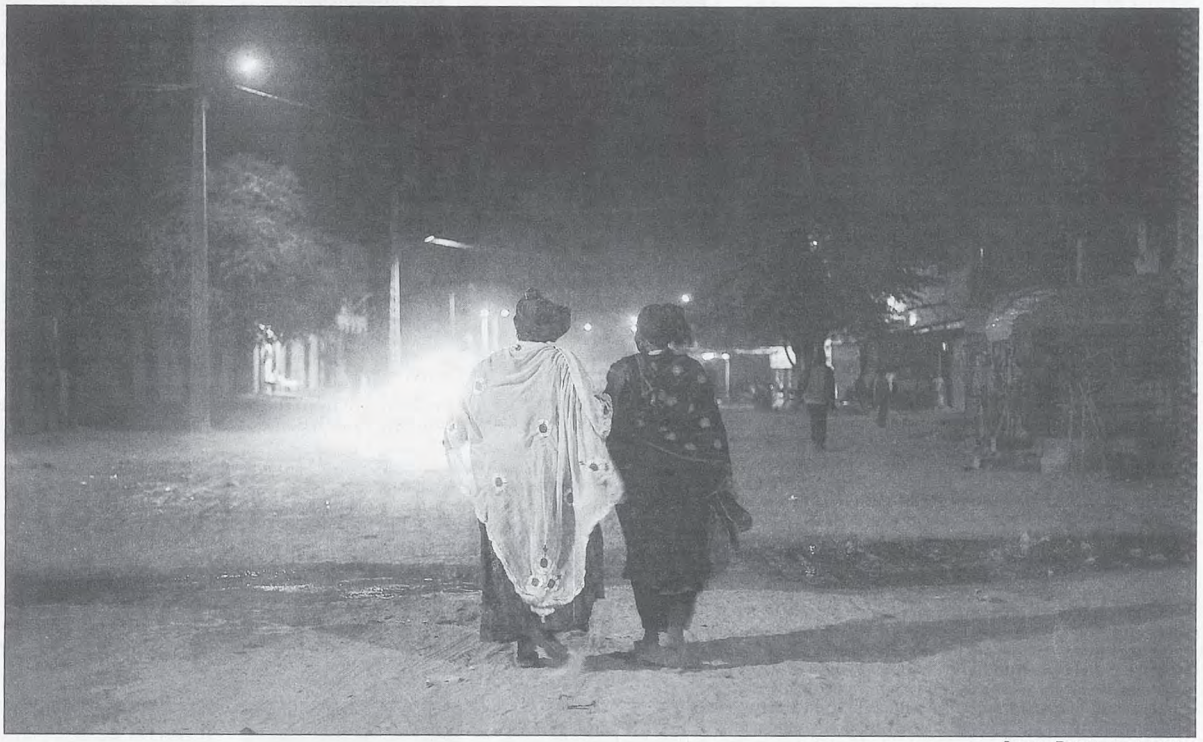
Good life returns to Timbuktu

With the militants gone, residents savor their freedom and tales of resistance

By Robyn Dixon



Jerome Delay Associated Press

MALIAN WOMEN make their way in Timbuktu, where street lights came on for the first time in months after the routing of militants.

TIMBUKTU, Mali — There were public protests and whispers of secret love affairs. Heroes of resistance everywhere: the female fishmonger who angrily knocked down one of the occupiers, the imam who sent them away from his mosque, the elderly sheep trader beaten for complaining about their ill treatment of others.

Residents of this legendary caravan crossing are free of the violent militants who tried for nine months to impose their extreme version of Islam. French and African forces are continuing to chase them farther north into the Sahara.

And although many doubt that they are gone for good, now is a time for sweeping up and storytelling, for the music, flirting, smoking, community meetings and other small joys that make life in a desert town pleasurable.

Two sisters in clothing as bright as parrot plumage mime out life under the extremists, falling all over each other with throaty, guttural laughter. One exaggerates the creeping terrified walk of women under militant rule, then acts out a woman fleeing, her clownish eyes wide and her bottom sticking out comically.

Azahara Abdou, 20, lashed in public 40 times by militants who accused her of fornication — and then raped her while she was in custody — tells her story wearing a low-cut, clingy red tank top and carefully applied eyeliner.

Timbuktu, pronounced "Tom-book-too" by residents, is a maze of sandy alleys between gray mud houses and mud brick mosques, where sad-looking donkeys stagger, heads down, searching for something to eat, and old men sit on benches surveying the street and drinking small glasses of tea.

It's a shell of what it was in its tourist heyday, before November 2011, when gunmen killed a German tourist and kidnapped three others, probably relinquishing them to Al Qaeda-linked extremists for a price. The incident wiped out tourism in a single blow. When the militants swept in five months later, most of the population fled. But the town's bedraggled, trash-strewn streets belie its reserves of quiet bravery.

The insurgents streamed into town in convoys of SUVs filled with heavily armed fighters, among them the Al Qaeda-linked groups Ansar Dine and Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb. They said they were fighting the government and corruption, not the people, but soon plunged into a punitive campaign to impose their ways.

> 'We told them get out of our country, leave our town. It's not for you to tell us how to practice *sharia* law.'
>
> — Juma Traore, one of about 200 women who demonstrated against militant Islamic rule in Timbuktu

The extremists blotted out parts of advertising signs, targeting a mermaid, a cow and informational messages about mosquito nets and AIDS. They smashed bars and shops. And they visited Imam Abdelrahman Aqib at the famous Sankore Mosque, demanding to use it for Friday prayers.

"I didn't let them. I didn't even want to talk to them," said the elderly imam, wreathed in flowing white garments and seated beneath a portrait of his ancestor, the revered 16th and 17th century poet Ahmed Baba, author of some of Timbuktu's thousands of priceless manuscripts.

Aqib has a fearsome reputation in Timbuktu, where believers think that if you anger the old man, you'll meet a dreadful fate. He got his way.

The occupiers' violent, extreme form of Islam clashed sharply with a tolerant attitude here that allows dancing, men and women mixing socially, acceptance of those who smoke and drink, and the wearing of protective amulets. In Mali's capital, Bamako, women in tight-fitting, colorful costumes speed independently around on their motorcycles, a rare sight in Africa.

Timbuktu's religion is imbued with legends of the city's 333 saints. Prayers to them play an important role in daily life. At its height, in the 16th century, Timbuktu was a key post on the Sahel caravan routes, where salt, spices and fabrics were shipped by camel across Africa. It was also a legendary center of learning.

Mayor Ousmane Halle, one of the few government officials who did not flee, recalled that he went out to meet the militants when they arrived.

"I said if it's true that they came to Timbuktu to help the people of the north, why did they destroy everything?" For that he got an eye-glazing lecture on religion. Halle said that once the beatings started, he went back to the militants and complained.

"They said, 'There's a lot of people here who do things they should not do.' "

The zealots set up a base in the Ahmed Baba Center, opposite the Sankore Mosque, and used the square for floggings, meted out with a camel hide whip, with three salt-hardened strands at the end.

The head of the Islamic police, Mohamed Mossa, a Malian from a village outside Timbuktu, was known for the relish with which he ordered people to be flogged, particularly women.

Abdou said she came face to face with Mossa after she was picked up in the market wearing a diamante-studded *hijab*, or head covering, and accused of fornication. There was nothing more specific. When she denied the charge, he ordered 40 lashes, carried out that day, for her denial and an additional 100 two weeks later for the alleged crime.

She was dragged out of jail, made to kneel with a black covering on her face. The first lash was unbearable, she recalled. At the end, she collapsed. The next day, Abdou said, her captors summoned her and told her she was to be set free. Instead, she was dragged into an office and raped by five men. Her father reported the rape to Mossa's superiors, and she was released.

Women were so outraged by Mossa that about 200 of them staged a demonstration outside the police station in October, organizing themselves by sending text messages. Juma Traore, 50, who with her sister Badji, 44, did the impromptu mime of life under the zealots, said she took part because she was too furious to be afraid.

"I was fed up, and I said, 'I'd rather die today than live like this,' " she said. "We shouted. We told them get out of our country, leave our town. It's not for you to tell us how to practice *sharia* law."

The demonstration lasted less than five minutes. Islamic police fired bullets in the air and people fled. Things got worse for women after that.

"But I don't regret it," Traore says.

Timbuktu residents also like to hint at the hanky-panky that went on under the noses of the militants. They celebrate the courage and toughness of Tina, an older woman who fries tiny fish and sells them at the market with a spicy salt, who got into a fight with a militant and got the better of him.

Ali Moubarck, 70, like many Malians, wears protective amulets to keep away evil and make him strong and brave. Berated for selling his sheep in the market instead of going to the mosque, he lost his temper.

"I said, 'You've got to stop hitting people and treating them like animals.' I didn't care that they were angry. I wasn't scared. I could see that if they didn't have guns, they'd be nothing." They manacled his ankles, beat him and took away his amulets, money and silver bracelets.

"I don't regret it, because I had to do it," he said. "People had to see my example."

But much has been lost, and most people agree that it will take a long time to rebuild.

Ousmane Dicko, 50, a building contractor, is wasting no time.

He gathered the members of his community association to clean up his neighborhood, like they used to every Sunday until the extremists stopped them. Pitching in, trying to put things right, shouting instructions and encouragement — the work gave meaning to his regained freedom.

As dusk settled over Timbuktu, dust rose as the men raked up rubbish and reset cobblestones to make the road passable once more.

"I feel like a citizen," Dicko beamed.

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