

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
Martial Frindéthié, PHD

Timbuktu (2014)

Abderrahmane Sissako (1961-)

OVERVIEW

Auteur Abderrahmane Sissako is a Malian-Mauritanian film director and producer. His father is from Mali and his mother from Mauritania. Sissako was born in 1961 in Kiffa, Mauritania, and grew up in Mali, where he completed his primary and secondary education. Sissako returned to Mauritania at age 19, and, thanks to a study grant, flew to the Gerasimov Institute of Cinematography of Moscow to study film between 1983 and 1989. Sissako has been living in France since the early 1990s. He is married to Ethiopian filmmaker Maji-da Abdi. Sissako has produced a handful of shorts and documentaries, and a number of feature films, including *Life on Earth* (1998), *Waiting for Happiness* (2002), *Abouna* (2002), *Bamako* (2006), *Timbuktu* (2014), which garnered a dozen awards, and *Black Tea* (2024). In 2023, along with fifty other activists from around the world, Sissako signed a letter calling for an end to hostilities in the war between Israeli forces and Hamas and for Israel to withdraw from the Gaza Strip.

Film Sissako explains that at a time when Islam was being portrayed as a violent religion by the Western media, he wanted to make a film that would tell the truth about Islam. He wanted to show that Islam was not the hostage taker that it was portrayed to be, but, instead, that Islam and the Muslims were taken hostage by imposters with a twisted understanding of the *Qur'an*. The film is a story of power abuse, humiliation, resistance, women's courage and resilience, sexuality, and more. Besides being nominated at the 67th Cannes Film Festival (2014) for Best Picture, at the 2015 San Francisco Film Critics Circle for Best Foreign Language Film and at the 87th Academy Award (2015) for Best International Film, *Timbuktu* won many accolades at the 40th Cesar Award (The French Academy). The film won Best Film, Best Director, Best Original Screenplay, Best Cinematography, Best Editing, Best Music, Best Sound. It also won the 2015 New York Film Critics Circle Award for Best Foreign Film, the 2015 National Society Film Critics Award for Best Foreign Film, and the 2015 French Critics Award for Best Film.

Background Sissako explains that the idea for *Timbuktu* came to him when a Malian couple was stoned to death in Timbuktu by the jihadists for having sex and a child outside of marriage. Though Timbuktu was already liberated from the jihadists at the time of filming, the city was still dangerous, so, Sissako shot his film in Walata, a Mauritanian town that bears strong resemblance to the Malian town of Timbuktu. Most of the actors for the film had no prior acting experience: Ibrahim Ahmed, who plays Kidane the herder, was at the time a Tuareg musician living in Madrid, whom the filmmaker contacted after seeing his picture in a magazine. Toulou Kiki, who plays Kidane's wife Satima, was at the time living in France. She is a Tuareg singer from Niger. The film's supporting cast was recruited from a Tuareg refugee camp in Mauritania. The languages spoken in the film are Tamazight, Arabic, Bambara, and French. *Timbuktu* is the most celebrated of Sissako's films.

CHARACTERS

<i>Satima</i>	Wife of Kidane.
<i>Kidane</i>	A herder who is condemned to death for killing the fisherman who killed his favorite cow.
<i>Abdelkrim</i>	The chief jihadist, who is in love with Satima and who pays her unwanted

SYNOPSIS

In 2012, irredentist demands by ethnic Tuareg groups in northern Mali quickly turned into a rebellion against the Malian state. Aided by Salafist groups from North Africa, notably Libya, as well as Boko Haram fundamentalists from Nigeria, this rebellion cuts Mali in two when the Malian towns of Gao, Kidal and Timbuktu were occupied by the rebels, who terrorized the inhabitants, in their intention to institute first in the captured towns, and then throughout Mali, a fundamentalist Islam. As can be seen in *Timbuktu*, the

terrorists banned music, cigarette smoking and soccer. They insisted that women wear veils from head to toe, and that men do not wear pants that cover their ankles. The penalty for anyone violating these rules was imprisonment, public flogging or stoning. Thus, *Timbuktu* begins with the jihadists destroying cultural artifacts (animist statues) with Kalashnikov bullets and announcing new laws over loudspeakers. In this tense atmosphere, Timbuktu's inhabitants who dare to defy the bans are severely punished. One young man receives 40 lashes for playing soccer. A young woman receives 40 lashes for singing. Another girl is arrested on suspicion of telephoning her boyfriend. In this tense atmosphere, jihadists and Timbuktu residents alike try to break the law whenever it suits them. One of the chief jihadists, Abdelkrim, who goes into hiding to smoke despite the smoking ban, is in love with the wife of a nomadic shepherd, Kidane, to whom he pays impromptu visits, knowing full well that this is against the law on adultery. Another jihadist hides in order to dance. Other jihadists chat passionately about European soccer when their leaders are not around. For some Timbuktu residents, defiance must be unambiguous: a fish seller refuses to wear mittens and is arrested. A mother refuses to give her daughter's hand to a jihadist, but the marriage takes place without her consent. And when Kidane is sentenced to death for shooting a fisherman who killed his favorite cow, his wife, Satima, prefers to die with him rather than live to be the wife of the jihadist who has been stalking her and who will undoubtedly take advantage of her husband's death to make her his wife.

SCENES

Do not kill it, wear it out Islamic State fighters in turbans and armed with machine guns fire from a speeding pickup at a frightened antelope, which is trying to escape in the Malian desert. One of the fighters advises his peers not to kill the antelope, but to exhaust it. The animal manages to escape.



Destruction of pagan objects Another group of Islamic State fighters has gathered traditional masks and wooden sculptures in the desert. They fire machine guns at the artifacts, which explode into pieces under the impact of the bullets, scatter and lie on the desert sand.



Hostage-taking A Western doctor is escorted, blindfolded, through the desert dunes by two Islamic State fighters. They take him to a secret location in the mountains, where other fighters await. The jihadists remove the doctor's blindfold and hand him his glasses and a glass of tea. One of the jihadists translates to the group leader the dosage of medicine the doctor has brought them. The jihadists put the blindfold back on the doctor and put him in a pickup truck to take him back.



New laws Two jihadists crisscross the streets of Timbuktu, announcing in Arabic and Bambara (the Malian national language) over a loudspeaker the new laws erected by the Islamic State in the city. Smoking and music are forbidden. Women must cover their feet with socks and their hands with mittens.



Roll up your pants Armed jihadist patrol the streets and rooftops, forcing men and women to respect the city's new edicts. One man is forced to roll up his pants. Every time he tries, his pants fall down to his ankles. So, the man decides to take off his pants and continue on his way in his boxer shorts.



Don't desecrate the mosque Armed jihadists enter the Timbuktu mosque while worshippers are meditating. The imam of the mosque asks them what they want. They tell him they have an announcement to make. The imam replies that they have no right to enter the House of God with weapons and without taking off their shoes. One of the jihadists replies that they are on a jihad mission. The imam retorts that the House of God is not the right place for their jihad. He adds that in Timbuktu, people dedicate themselves to God with their heads, not their weapons. The imam asks the jihadists to leave the mosque to allow the faithful to pray in peace. The jihadists leave the mosque.



Stay away from my nets A young shepherd named Issan watches over his adoptive father Kidane's herd of eight oxen. While leading his herd to drink at the river, Issan is stopped by a fisherman setting his nets, who warns him to keep his cows away from his nets. The boy leads his herd along the river, away from the fisherman's nets.



Issan deserves more than a calf Kidane, Issan's adoptive father, is in his tent in the desert with his wife, Satima, and daughter, Toya. Kidane tells his wife and daughter that if his favorite pregnant cow, GPS, gives birth to a calf, he will give the calf to Issan. Satima replies that Issan deserves more than a calf—he deserves the whole herd. Kidane acknowledges that it is true that Issan is a good boy, who deserves to have the whole herd one day. Toya tells his father that for the time being, Issan would be very happy to have GPS's calf.



Kidane goes to sing in town A water vendor distributes water to his customers on his motorcycle. He brings water to Satima. Toya milks her father's sheep. She brings milk to her father. Kidane asks his daughter if she has already drunk some. Kidane quenches his thirst, then takes his daughter in his arms and speaks to her tenderly. He tells her that he is going to town and asks her to take care of the goats and her mother, and that he will bring back a present for her. Kidane says goodbye to his wife and daughter and sets out in the desert sand. His daughter calls him and runs to embrace him. Kidane tells Toya to look after the house until he returns. Toya tells her mother that she asked her father not to forget them.



Imam: You are hurting Islam The leader of the jihadists has come to see the imam. He asks the imam why he wants him to renounce jihad. The imam replies that he has no lessons to teach anyone about their jihad, and that he himself is busy with his own jihad, which consists in the perfection of his soul. The imam tells the jihadist leader that the abuses and violence his men inflict on the population in the name of Islam go against the edicts of Islam. Where are leniency, forgiveness, and piety? The imam points to the mittens that the jihadists want to impose on women and asks him to which law of the *Qur'an* does this correspond? The imam asks the jihadist leader that, before imposing anything on the population, the jihadists should explain to them how it conforms to the laws of Allah. The imam advises the leader of the jihadists that their actions should be marked by leniency, forgiveness and piety.



I cannot work with mittens At the Timbuktu market, the jihadists are in heated discussion with a fish seller who refuses to wear mittens. She tells them that she cannot do her job properly with mittens, and that she has always worked bare-handed. The jihadists insist that the law of the *Qur'an* demands that she be fully covered. The fish seller replies that she was brought up to wear a veil, but that she will not wear gloves to sell her fish. The young woman tells the



jihadists that she is fed up with their daily harassment. She hands the jihadists a knife and tells them to cut off her hands if her bare hands bother them. The jihadists order her to follow them.

You do not know everything A young jihadist teaches Abdelkrim, a jihadist lieutenant, to drive a stick-shift pickup over desert dunes. Abdelkrim causes the vehicle to stall every time he tries to drive. The young jihadist tells Abdelkrim that, in the end, he does not know everything. Abdelkrim replies that only Allah has the answer to everything.



I am a married woman Satima washes her hair in front of her tent. Toya sees Abdelkrim's vehicle arrive and tells her mother that the bad guys are coming again. Abdelkrim and his driver get out of the car and greet Satima and her daughter. Without looking up, Satima reproaches Abdelkrim in Tamazight (her Tuareg language) for always coming when her husband is away. She reminds him that she is a married woman. The driver translates what Satima says into Arabic for Abdelkrim.



You must cover your hair Abdelkrim tells the driver to tell Satima to cover her head, and that exposing her hair is indecent. Satima raises her head, looks Abdelkrim in the eye and replies that she did not invite him to her place, and that he is not obliged to look at things that bother him. Abdelkrim tells the driver to tell Satima that she can phone him if she needs anything. Satima ignores him. Abdelkrim and his driver return to their vehicle.

A disturbing image As they return, the jihadists' path crosses that of Kidane on his way home. Kidane and Abdelkrim size each other up. Abdelkrim sees a shrub in the gap between two dunes, the visual effect of which evokes the image of a tuft of hair on the pubis of a woman lying on her back. Abdelkrim asks his driver to reverse. He orders him to stop right at the sight. **Abdelkrim shaves the dunes** Abdelkrim asks the young driver what he knows about inner strength and good men. The young driver replies that they are believers, and that's good enough for him. Abdelkrim, visibly annoyed by Omar, replies that Omar's Arabic is unintelligible. Then Abdelkrim pulls out his Kalashnikov, aims at the tuft of hair and shaves it with a flurry of bullets.



We should leave Satima points out to her husband that all their neighbors have left, and that perhaps they, too, should think about leaving. Kidane replies that there is no point in running all the time, between hunger, thirst and jihadists. Satima insists that it would be wise to get closer to other people rather than live alone in the middle of the desert. Kidane tells her it will all end one day, and their neighbors will return. Satima tells Kidane that the jihadists scare her. She tells him they come snooping around their tent when he is not there. Kidane asks his wife if the jihadists have entered his tent. She replies that they did not. He tells her to be strong and patient.



Soccer aficionados Three jihadists discuss soccer. Two of them are enthusiastic supporters of the French national team. The third is a fanatic of the Argentinian team. He tries to convince his two interlocutors that France is a weak country, which has never won anything except through corruption, and which must have sent a few boats of rice to starving Brazil so that the Brazilian team could lose to France at the last World Cup.



Zabou the madwoman Zabou appears, carrying a rooster on her shoulder and dressed in a long, brightly-colored dress with a long train at the end. She is the village madwoman. She stops in front of the jihadists, stares at them, hurls an insult, then walks away, leaving them astonished. In a narrow street, she blocks a jihadist vehicle, arms outstretched in a cross, in front of the slow-moving vehicle, which then comes to a halt.



Not so convincing a convert The jihadists want a young Malian rapper to make a video testimonial. However, the young man cannot read with conviction the text that has been written for him. The jihadists get angry and tell him to stop pulling their leg. One of the jihadists models for the young man how he needs to project. They put him back on camera, but he is unable to perform.



A song for Allah The jihadists hear the sound of music. They patrol the town's alleyways to investigate where the music comes from. They discover the culprits: Kidane, his wife Satima and his daughter Toya. The jihadists don't quite know what to do, because the song is an ode to the Prophet and to God. The jihadists call their leader Abou Hassan to ask if they should arrest the family or let them sing.

Not my ball A soccer ball has come rolling down the streets of Timbuktu, and the jihadists try to find its owner. No one will claim it. The jihadists decide to increase their sensitization campaign over their loudspeakers: It is forbidden to play soccer. It is now forbidden to sit in front of one's house. It is forbidden to wander in the streets. Adultery during the month of Ramadan is punishable by stoning. **A ballless soccer game** A young man is tried for playing soccer. He is condemned to receive 40 lashes. On the town's soccer field, some teenagers play soccer with an imaginary ball and celebrate imaginary goals. Two armed jihadists come to check. They circle the field on their motorbike, look around, see no ball, and leave.



"I will do it the bad way" Abu Jafaar, a jihadist from Nigeria, comes to ask for the hand of the girl suspected of talking to her boyfriend on the phone. The conversation is translated from English into Bambara by one interpreter and then from Bambara to Tamazight for the mother by another. The girl's mother refuses to give her daughter in marriage to a man of unknown origin, especially in the absence of the girl's father. Abu Jafaar threatens the mother, saying that he will marry her daughter by force, and that he "will do it the bad way." Abu Jafaar has the girl jailed.



An illegal marriage Safia is forcibly married to Abu Jafaar, under the cover of night, without her mother's consent or her father's presence. The imam, accompanied by Safia's mother, goes to see Abu Hassan, the jihadist leader, to ask him to clarify his position on a marriage that the imam considers illegal. **This marriage is legal**



Abu Hassan explains that the marriage is legal and in line with Islamic laws, which say that if you are satisfied with a man's faith, you should give him a wife. Abu Hassan states that Abu Jafaar is a pious man and a worthy soldier of the Prophet. The imam replies that such actions are repeated in Timbuktu and create frustration and fear among the population. Abu Hassan replies that he has not seen any frustration or fear among the people since his arrival in Timbuktu.

Amadou the fisherman kills Kidane's cow Issan, Kidane's adopted son, takes the herd to the river to drink. GPS, Kidane's favorite cow, gets separated from the herd and is caught in Amadou's nets. In its panic, GPS destroys the nets. Amadou gets angry and kills GPS with a spear.



This humiliation must stop Issan runs home crying to tell Kidane the news. Kidane retrieves his pistol, which he had wrapped in a cloth. Satima asks him to go and talk to Amadou without his gun. Kidane replies that the humiliation must stop. He puts the gun in his pocket and heads for the river. Satima watches her husband walk away through the tent's sheer curtain.



Kidane kills Amadou Kidane has come to confront Amadou the fisherman on the river. They start fighting. Amadou overcomes Kidane, who reaches for his pistol. A shot is heard, and Kidane and Amadou fall in the river, both unconscious. After a few minutes, Kidane comes to and realizes that he has shot and killed Amadou. Kidane pushes Amadou off his body, staggers to his feet, and runs towards his tent. **Kidane is arrested** A man discovers Amadou's body floating in the river and alerts the jihadists, who set out to find the culprit. Kidane is intercepted by a jihadist patrol. He is taken to the town's prison and incarcerated. **Kidane's family worries** Toya and her mother are worried about Kidane's absence. They go to a place in the desert where the telephone connection is often better and try to contact him on his cell phone, in vain. From his prison cell, Kidane begs the guards to let him talk to his wife, but none of them seems to understand Tamazight (the Tuareg language he speaks).



40 lashes for playing music The jihadists hear guitar playing and people singing. They patrol the town to find out where the music is coming from. Inside a house, a group of young people are playing guitar and singing. The jihadists suddenly open the door. The musicians (two young women and three young men) scurry out, but are quickly caught, arrested and brought before the jihadists' court. They are sentenced to 40 lashes for playing music and 40 lashes for being in a room together. **Public flogging** The musicians are flogged on the public square to serve as examples for those who intend to break the law. One of the young women cries and sings in defiance as she is whipped. The jihadists film the scene. The population watches in disgust.



My fate is sealed Abu Hassan, the leader of the jihadists, explains to Kidane, through an interpreter, that his judgment will be carried out swiftly according to the laws of the *Qur'an*. He explains to Kidane that he will also have to earn the forgiveness of Amadou's family, by compensating them with 40 heads of cattle. Kidane replies that his fate is sealed and remains in God's hands. Kidane asks the translator to tell the jihadi leader that what pains him most is not so much death as leaving his daughter unprotected in such an uncertain world. The translator replies that everyone's fate is sealed by God. The leader of the jihadists tells Kidane that it pains him to know that his daughter will soon be an orphan. He asks the translator not to translate this last remark to Kidane



Everybody knows you smoke Abdelkrim hides behind the dunes to smoke. Omar, his driver, tells him that everyone knows he smokes. He tells him that with him, he need not hide to smoke.



I am a cracked body Zabou explains to the jihadists that she arrived in Timbuktu after the earthquake that destroyed her native Haiti. She speaks of herself as a cracked body and soul. She tosses a protective talisman to one of the jihadists, who snatches it up and thanks her.



Dancing and punishment A girl is taken away by some jihadists, who suspect her of being on the phone with her lover. An adulterous couple is buried up to their necks and stoned to death in public. The jihadist who has received Zabou's talisman withdraws to Zabou's terrace to dance. Little does he know that other jihadists are watching his artistic performance.



We cannot forgive Kidane is brought before his judges and Amadou's relatives. The judge asks Amadou's mother if she forgives Kidane. She replies that she cannot forgive him, as her son's blood is still warm. Kidane takes the floor to say that he regrets Amadou's death and accepts his fate. He adds that his greatest sorrow is not to see the faces of his daughter and his wife again before he leaves. He asks God to help his judges understand his pain.



I can do nothing for her Satima phones Abdelkrim. He recognizes the young woman's number. Abdelkrim passes the phone to his driver and gestures him to tell Satima that he can do nothing for her.



Judgement Day The town gathers to witness Kidane's execution. Kidane is driven to the execution site in a pickup, escorted by four armed terrorists. A woman from the town keeps Satima and Toya company in their tent. The water vendor comes to fetch Satima on his motorcycle to take her to see Kidane one last time.



The death of Kidane and Satima The jihadists ask Kidane to turn his gaze towards Mecca. He tells them that his daughter and wife are in the other direction, and turns his gaze in the direction of his tent. Kidane finishes his prayer and sees Satima get down from the water vendor's bike to run to him. Kidane runs to his wife. A jihadist shoots and kills them both as they are about to embrace. Abdelkrim orders the water seller to be captured. The water seller starts up his motorcycle and speeds off.



Breathless Toya and Issan run desperately across the desert, stumbling and getting up again. The water vendor gets off his motorcycle, trying to outrun the jihadists, who are chasing him on foot. Images of Toya, Issan and the breathless water vendor are juxtaposed with that of the desert deer fleeing the jihadists' bullets. The film ends in suspense.



CHARACTER ANALYSIS

KIDANE Kidane is an affectionate man, but with a swollen pride and reckless impetuosity. His family would still be together if he had listened to Satima. However, his propensity to act in the moment and think later lead him and his wife to death, and leave his daughter Toya an orphan.

Affectionate Kidane is a loving husband to his wife, Satima, and a caring father to his daughter, Toya, and Issan, the little orphan he has adopted. Their days are filled with cheerful conversations and their evenings with songs to the glory of Allah, accompanied by the sounds of Kidane's guitar. Kidane never leaves home without kissing his daughter and giving his wife a discreet look of love. He is very fond of Issan, to whom he promises the calf of his favorite pregnant cow. Unfortunately, the cow is killed by the fisherman.

Proud When Kidane learns that the fisherman has killed his favorite cow, the shepherd grabs his pistol, telling his wife that "the humiliation must stop." Clearly, the fisherman suffers just as much humiliation at the hands of the jihadists as Kidane. So, it is not the humiliation from the fisherman that Kidane is talking

about, but the incessant humiliation from the jihadist, this trampling of his pride, of which the fisherman's act is just the last straw. Kidane is a man with a wounded pride, who seeks redress, and who in the process meets with death.

Impulsive Kidane grabs his pistol to go and confront the fisherman who killed his favorite cow. Satima, his wife, advises him to leave his gun at home. In his anger, Kidane ignores his wife's advice. He feels that he has been humiliated too many times, and that the fisherman's act demands reparation. Kidane's impetuosity destabilizes the family when he kills the fisherman. He himself is condemned to death. His wife, running towards him, is killed along with him, making their daughter, Toya, an orphan.

SATIMA Although she rarely leaves her tent, Satima has a clear idea of the danger surrounding her family. She warns her husband about it. Unfortunately, Kidane does not take her warning very seriously, and he gets himself into a situation that earns him the death penalty. Loyal to her husband, Satima decides to die with him.

Perceptive Satima is a very insightful woman. She seems to be more aware than her husband of the danger of their situation in Timbuktu. With the unexpected visits from the jihadist Abdelkrim, who makes improper advances at her, and their isolation since their nomadic neighbors folded up their tents and fled, she sees nothing positive on the horizon. She begs her husband to do as their former neighbors did and leave. However, he is confident that the situation will improve. In the end, Satima's fears come true, as both she and her husband are killed.

Loyal Satima remained loyal to her husband until the day they both died. She never yielded to Abdelkrim's advances, even reminding him that she was a married woman, and that it was indecent of him to pursue her. When she realized that her husband was condemned to death, and that Abdelkrim would now seek to marry her, she took an action she knew would also lead to her death: she ran into his arms, causing the jihadists to riddle them both with bullets.

ABDELKRIM Abdelkrim is a hypocritical, arrogant character. What he reproaches others for is exactly what he does. He feels all-powerful and gives himself prerogatives over Satima's private life. The frightening thing about Abdelkrim is the sense that his mood can change at any moment.

Hypocrite Abdelkrim is a great hypocrite. He would have severely punished anyone else in the name of the *Qur'an* for the actions he himself undertakes. He harasses and pursues a married woman, while for such a crime the inhabitants of Timbuktu are stoned to death. He smokes when smoking is forbidden by the jihadists, of whom he is one of the leaders. His actions contradict the principles he preaches.

Arrogant Abdelkrim is an arrogant man. He invites himself to Kidane's tent in Kidane's absence, trying to seduce Kidane's wife, Satima. As if he were within his rights at Satima's home, he demands that the young woman, who is washing her hair in the privacy of her own home, cover her hair. Satima reminds him that it is her home, and that he was not invited.

Unpredictable Abdelkrim is an unpredictable man whose mood can suddenly shift from composure to anger. He has facial tics, imperceptible facial muscle twitches, bouts of nervousness and annoyance, which hint at his impulsive character. The viewer is always on the alert, in suspense, dreading the moment when Abdelkrim might explode. A simple thicket in the dunes irritates him, which he shaves with his Kalashnikov. When his driver mocks him that he does not know everything, or that everyone knows that he hides to smoke, Abdelkrim's calm but reproachful gaze makes one fear for the daring young driver.

THEMES

Contradiction and absurdity Sissako makes a mockery of Timbuktu's alleged new masters. The jihadists are confused by their own rules because they did not think them through logically. In *Timbuktu*, the jihadists want to ban not only all vestiges of animist Mali, but also any invention of the West, considered the great devil. And yet, it is with the tools of the West - its means of communication, its vehicles, its weapons - that they are waging their "holy war" and terrorizing the inhabitants of Timbuktu. This is the great theater of the absurd, especially when the jihadists, who have banned music in Timbuktu, no longer know what to do when they hear music glorifying the Prophet; especially when the jihadist, who have banned dancing, catch one of their own dancing on the sly in the courtyard of the town's madwoman, and especially

when this dancing jihadist, who used to destroy animist statues in Timbuktu with Kalashnikovs, gladly accepts an animist talisman from the woman for his protection; especially when, far from the eyes of their leaders, the jihadists, who have banned soccer, passionately discuss the European soccer they are so fond of. The jihadists' own edits make a mockery of them.

Illustrative moment: a song for Allah There are many moments in the film when the jihadists are driven mad by their own principles. The most telling of these moments is when the jihadists hear music playing one evening, and they decide to see and arrest which of Timbuktu's inhabitants has dared to defy the ban on music and singing. Their investigations lead them to Kidane's tent. There, they see Kidane, his wife and daughter, singing praises to Allah to the sound of Kidane's guitar? What should they do? Arrest them and put an end to what is apparently a holy song or let them continue and thereby give them a license to defy the anti-music law they themselves have instituted? Perplexed, the jihadists then take out their cell phones, that instrument of the "diabolical West" whose vestiges they wish to erase, to seek advice from their leader. The film does not show the deliberations that lead to the jihadists' decision, but Kidane is not arrested for this "crime". The jihadists will have their revenge on him another time.

Resistance *Timbuktu* is a film about the courage and resistance of the Malian people in the face of the tremendous violence that came their way from the terrorist invasion when the Salafist group Ansar Dine launched its assault on Mali and laid siege to the historic town of Timbuktu in 2012. When historians write the official history of this episode, they will be sure to say that Timbuktu was finally liberated from the terrorists thanks to the combined effort of two French military operations, Serval and Barkhane, and the Malian Armed Forces (FAMA), although the Malians rose up against the French intervention, accusing it of giving the terrorists the upper hand; the military junta led by Assimi Goïta finally called for the withdrawal of French forces from their country and closed the French military bases in Mali in 2022. In any case, what will receive the least attention in the official story is the organic and spontaneous resistance of the Timbuktu population, who, through isolated acts of defiance, put the authority of Timbuktu's occupiers to the test. Sissako's film features the anecdotal resistance that takes place when the young people of Timbuktu defy the law of the terrorists and flirt, sing and listen to music, play soccer, and when the women simply refuse to cover their bodies completely.

Illustrative moments: Soccer is not soccer without the ball. For the children of Timbuktu, playing soccer without a ball may not be soccer, but it is a gesture of defiance against the jihadists' anti-soccer law. This defiance is all the more successful in that the jihadists who circle around the soccer field where this strange soccer match is taking place, are confused and unsure of what to do. The resistance here is surreptitious. Alongside this veiled resistance, there are more frontal resistances: that of the young people who decide to sing despite the enormous risks they face. That of the singer, who cries as she sings under the lashes of the jihadists. And then there is the bold resistance of the fish seller, who tells the terrorists in no uncertain terms that she will never submit to their law requiring her to wear mittens, that this law is absurd and impractical for the fish seller that she is, and who, knowing all the risks she runs and the impetuosity of the jihadists, all the same, hands them her own knife and says: "Cut off my hands if you want, but I will never wear mittens to sell my fish." This fish seller is just as audacious as the village madwoman, who, with her hair blowing in the wind, wearing her exaggeratedly long multicolored dress, exposes her voodoo practices, blocks the jihadists' path and simply calls them assholes.



Religion (Religious extremism vs moderate) How can the Imam and the head jihadist, both of whom claim to speak from the *Qur'an*, be so utterly opposed in their dealings with the people of Timbuktu? Quite simply because on one side stands a moderate and on the other an extremist, operating from opposing methodologies: gentle persuasion and brute force. The town's imam, the moderate, has never advocated the exclusivity of Islam over all other religions, nor imposed extreme sobriety on the leisure activities of Timbuktu's inhabitants. The fact is that the ancestral animist fetishes of the Malians, the choice to wear the veil, the music and dance, the consumption of alcohol, all this has coexisted with Islam and was even part of the Islamic culture of Timbuktu and of the Malians in general before the jihadist invasion. The jihadists are the ones who have turned them into sins. What Sissako wants to show here is that, unlike the Islam of Kalashnikovs, whips and stoning represented by the militants of Ansar Dine, the measured, tolerant Islam

of Mali, represented by the imam of Timbuktu, has always been in harmony with Mali's animist culture since the 11th century, in effect, a syncretism.

Illustrative moment: The imam and the head jihadist The imam of the Timbuktu mosque has two important meetings with the head jihadist. Each meeting demonstrates the extent to which these two men differ in their respective interpretations of the *Qur'an* and their understanding of Sharia law. The imam criticizes the jihadist leader for putting vanity and pride at the heart of his mission to convert souls. The imam tells him that he has witnessed his treatment of the people of Timbuktu, and that humiliating children in front of their mothers and mothers in front of their children harms Islam and the image of the Muslim. The imam also objects to the forced marriage of a young woman to a jihadist. The jihadist leader replies that he is engaged in a holy mission, and that his actions are in line with the recommendations of the *Qur'an*. The imam insists that Allah recommends forgiveness, explanation, exchange and leniency, and that the jihadist leader's mission does not put God first, but pride. It is obvious that the imam translates Islam as Sissako sees it.



Power abuse When the Salafist group Ansar Dine occupied Timbuktu, it imposed a multitude of laws on the town, each more restrictive than the one before. To enforce their laws, the Salafists preferred violence and force of arms to gentle persuasion. Sissako shows how the terrorists' military superiority is used to oppress the inhabitants of Timbuktu. Indeed, while the terrorists want to convince themselves and their victims that they are consecrated by God and therefore endowed with a divine power that gives them the right of life and death over their fellow human beings, in fact, their authority comes from their weapons, which never leave their side, even when, to the chagrin of the imam, who condemns their methods, they enter the mosque, and even when they set out to ask a girl's parents for her hand in marriage. The jihadists, armed with the power of their Kalashnikovs, forbid the inhabitants of Timbuktu to drink alcohol, smoke cigarettes, play soccer, listen to music and, in the case of women, go out without wearing a veil and mittens. Intoxicated by their power over the population, the terrorists abuse it to the point of absurdity.

Illustrative moments: unwanted visits and forced marriage The Salafists' raid on the town of Timbuktu was carried out by force of arms. Armed with Kalashnikovs, the terrorists have a clear military superiority over the helpless and mostly frightened population, which they use to their advantage. The jihadist Abdelkrim has a crush on Satima, Kidane's wife. He pays unsolicited visits to the woman, who refuses his advances but is reluctant to tell her husband, fearing that in the process, he may become Abdelkrim's target. Nigerian terrorist Abu Jafaar comes to see Safia's mother, a young woman he arrested on suspicion of telephoning her boyfriend, and whom he wants to marry. The mother refuses him her daughter's hand in marriage. Abu Jafaar tells her that he has come to ask the mother's permission out of courtesy, but that in fact he has no need of her permission, and that he will do things "the bad way", that is, by force. On what can Abu Jafaar rely, if not the strength of his gun and those of his jihadist friends? And indeed, Abu Jafaar, with the support of the jihadist leader, marries Safia despite her lamentations and the protests of the girl's mother.



Hypocrisy/selfishness The terrorists' actions are antithetical to their supposed beliefs. Sissako shows that for the terrorists, everything is projection. Their prohibitions are merely the expression of their hidden desires. What they reproach others for doing is exactly what they do in secrecy. Here, Sissako's message is clear: the terrorists are motivated by nothing other than their own interests, a desire for power inflated to the highest degree, and who use the *Qur'an* as a means to quench their thirst for the power they covet. And this is the film's main objective: to show that the Islam of the terrorists has nothing to do with the religion of the Prophet, but is rather a falsification of it for selfish interests. The real Islam, as Sissako shows through the imam of Timbuktu, who confronts the jihadist leader about his violent methods, is one of forgiveness and tolerance.

Illustrative moments The terrorists bury up to their necks and stone to death a young man and woman for having premarital sex. And yet, the jihadist leader Abdelkrim covets Satima, a



married woman, and pays her impromptu visits whenever her husband is away. Despite Satima's pleas for Abdelkrim to respect her married status, Abdelkrim persists in his pursuit of the young woman. And it is this same Abdelkrim who hides behind the desert dunes to smoke, even though he and his companions have decreed smoking a punishable sin in Timbuktu. Likewise, while the jihadists forbid the inhabitants of Timbuktu to play soccer, they themselves engage in passionate debates about the European soccer league. The village madwoman, who overhears them chatting about soccer, calls them "assholes". She knows what she is talking about, for it is in her courtyard that one of the jihadists, a dancing enthusiast, takes refuge from the gaze of his companions to secretly express his passion.

Sexuality Sissako reveals a tendency on the part of religious extremists to police people's sex lives. For the terrorists who have taken up residence in Timbuktu, as self-proclaimed messengers of Allah, it is as if only an orderly sexuality on their terms can guarantee the faithful a place in paradise. And whether the faithful want it or not, the jihadists are convinced that it is their duty to perfect the faithful. However, "normal" sexuality according to the jihadists is one in which the preponderance of the man and the inferiority or suppression of the woman are affirmed. Thus, women are persecuted for their propensity to jeopardize men's preponderance by making them vulnerable to their irresistible charms. If the order of things according to Allah's so-called messengers is to be maintained, whatever in women is likely to cause men to lose their self-confidence, for example, women's self-control, must be erased..

Illustrative moments: policing sexuality The terrorists' obsession with policing the sexual conduct of Timbuktu's inhabitants might lead one to believe that sexuality is the organizing structure of their faith. Here, young women are tried and sentenced to 40 lashes in public for listening to music in an isolated room with young men. There, a young girl is imprisoned on suspicion of being on the phone with her boyfriend. Here again, it is a fish seller who, although veiled from head to toe, is taken away and arrested for refusing to wear mittens, which she says are inconvenient for her business. Her exposed hands are seen by the jihadists as a sexual invitation, an act of lubricity to be punished. Here again, it is Satima, who, while washing her hair in the privacy of her home, an isolated tent in the desert on the outskirts of the town of Timbuktu, receives an impromptu visit from a jihadist leader, who orders her to veil her hair. And for this same jihadist leader, when he spots a bush in the dunes, the disturbing image it brings to him is that of a woman's pubic hair, an image he tries to dispel by shaving the bush with shots from his Kalashnikov. The values that the jihadists want to establish in Timbuktu seem to be nothing more than obsession with the sexuality of the other, especially women.



Amputated femininity The jihadists' prisons are teeming with women. Numerous incarcerated women can be seen, looking distraught, waiting for their sentences to be handed down. When these sentences arrive, they often take the form of dismemberment and disfigurement. Indeed, the filmmaker features a scene that took place in Timbuktu during the Salafist invasion, and which, he says, inspired him to make his film. It involves the stoning of a young, unmarried couple whose sexual relationship led to the pregnancy of the woman. The female presence is constantly represented by the jihadists as a lingering threat to male sanity. Women are the disruptive element that stands in the way of a man's quest for paradise, and their ardor must be suppressed by amputation or disfigurement. The fish seller who defies the injunction to wear mittens anticipates her fate when, in defiance, she holds out a knife to her oppressors and asks them to cut off her hands, as she has no intention of complying with their orders. The young singer, caught in a room with other young musicians, is scarred by public lashes. The affirmation of the female presence is under the permanent sanction of the dismemberment of the terrorists' patriarchal law.

Illustrative moments: the female threat The terrorists' obsession with sex makes women the object of their brutality. It is no coincidence that the jihadists demand that women's bodies be completely covered. A woman is perceived as sinful because her body brings out man's most repressed sexual feelings. In order for man to be saved from the perils of hell, the woman must be erased, both literally and figuratively. Abdelkrim's demand that Satima veil her hair is part of this erasure. The jihadists' demand that the fish seller cover her hands completely is part of this erasure. While Timbuktu's



prisons are swarming with women arrested for reasons as ridiculous as any other, the only woman who is spared is the town's madwoman. No need to scar or amputate her. In her own words, she is already a fractured body. For the terrorists, she is a harmless sexuality.

Forgiveness Sissako's main aim, as he points out in an interview, is to dispel the image that the Western press has given of Islam: the true Islam is not an Islam of violence, but an Islam of forgiveness and piety. The Islam of forgiveness has been taken hostage by the terrorists, and the error of the Western media is to see in the Islam of the Muslim victimizers the representation of the religion of the victim. Sissako succeeds in this challenge by humanizing the terrorists, by making them men like all men, marked by contradictions, doubt, fear, joy and humor, rather than anomalies cast in a single mold of monstrosity. In his film, Sissako offers us a panoply of terrorists: tough, soft, doubtful, comic and so forth; in other words, a panoply of humanity. The terrorists, like their victims, are beings redeemable by Allah, potential beneficiaries of their Creator's forgiveness, not refuse of humanity to be disposed of forever. It is by humanizing them as much as their victims that Sissako predisposes them to the forgiveness of men and God. *Timbuktu* is a successful exercise in forgiveness, a demonstration of what true Islam is all about.

Illustrative moments: Soccer, dance and talisman As much as they try to ban soccer, the terrorists are themselves European soccer fanatics. They debate the big games and the big stars in the absence of their leaders, and shut up as soon as they see someone coming. One of them is a dancing fanatic. But how can he practice his obsession when dancing is forbidden by his bosses? He hides in the courtyard of the village madwoman—who would go looking for him there? And there, he gives free rein to his passion, far from the gaze of his fellow terrorists. Or so he thinks, for his performance has not escaped the gaze of the young rapper converted to Salafism; nor has Abdelkrim's smoking, hidden behind the desert dunes, escaped the attention of his young driver. The terrorists are more human than monsters. They have feelings of empathy that they try to hide as much as they can to be in conformity with their own twisted laws. Thus, the chief jihadist urges his translator not to tell Kidane, whom he has just sentenced to death, that it hurts him to know that Kidane's daughter will soon be an orphan.

Fanaticism The terrorists, as Sissako shows us, are men like any other. They are ordinary men whom fanaticism has blinded and transformed into unrecognizable beings. So the filmmaker takes great care to show them in their ordinary humanity, as people in search of ordinary pleasures: sex, sports, cigarettes, dancing—and this, just after the filmmaker has presented them to us as zealots destroying art objects, harassing women and girls, or stoning their Muslim fellows to death for not following the *Qur'an* to the letter according to their understanding. Sissako's decision to avoid demonizing the terrorists is even more important to him because, as he so clearly states, one day we will have to sit down and talk with these terrorists. One day, we will have to coexist with them, exchange with them and share life with them. How can we do that with monsters? It is therefore necessary, from this perspective, that terrorists be shown for what they are, fanatics blinded by their faith and not an alien species.

Illustrative moments: Sissako shows us jihadists as ordinary as any other men. Although they have banned worldly pleasures, they love sex. So, like Abdelkrim, the feared jihadist leader who is admonished by Satima, the object of his love, or Abu Jafaar, who is spurned by Safia's mother, they use every trick in the book to win the loyalty of the women they covet. Terrorists are men like any others, plagued by doubts about the destiny of the soul. This is why one of them willingly accepts a good-luck talisman from Zabou, the village madwoman. Deep down inside, the terrorists love to dance. So, one of them hides in Zabou's backyard to express his passion. The terrorists love soccer. So, they hide away to discuss soccer, far from the hearing of their leaders. In the end, the terrorists are ordinary men brainwashed into irrational and dangerous behaviors. One day, Sissako hopes, we will have to deal with them. Until then, the filmmaker refuses to paint them with the wide brush of monstrosity.

Dictatorship When fanaticism operates at state level, it gives rise to a dictatorship whose aim is to harass populations into submission. Every dictatorship needs constituents. Although dictatorships tend to eliminate opposition, their aim is not so much to eliminate their constituencies as to subjugate them by wearing them out—for what would a government be, even an autocratic one, without people to govern? Indeed, the most atrocious dictator needs constituencies, and the more of them there are, the more popular the autocrat can claim to be. In *Timbuktu*, the atrocities committed by the jihadists, the cutting off of arms, the flogging and stoning of recalcitrant persons, are all examples of what could happen to any dissenter and keep the

majority of the population in line. The fanatics, in this case, serve as state police, repressing excesses and ensuring the continuity of the dictatorial nomenclature. Dictatorship makes the punishment of the people the reward for this state police force, which, while rewarding itself by bullying the people, retroactively consolidates the state edifice. In other words, harassment and violence are the maintenance tools of the dictatorship, which knows how to make them into the reward for the state police.

Illustrative moments: Don't kill it; wear it out *Timbuktu* opens with a scene of Islamic State terrorists armed with Kalashnikovs in a speeding pickup truck, shooting at a frightened desert deer trying to escape, while one of the terrorists yells at his comrades not to kill the beast, but rather to wear it out. The film ends with the same scene, this time with three other scenes juxtaposed with that of the fleeing doe: the water vendor fleeing the terrorists on his motorcycle; Toya, distraught, running and stumbling through the dunes; and Issan, out of breath, running after her. This is an allegory of the dictatorship represented by the so-called Islamic State: widespread harassment of the masses, even if it is not always done with the intention of eliminating them. The aim here is to exhaust the masses, to place them in a situation of destitution and need, where their only recourse becomes the dictatorial state, the very thing that has placed them in precariousness. Thus, the fish seller is harassed to the point where her only way out is to place herself under the protection of the terrorists, or to leave Timbuktu, as she confides to one of her relatives. Similarly, young Safia can only find “peace and protection” under the wing of Abu Jafaar, the same man who was her jailer.

Social engineers Harassment and violence are not haphazardly applied by the police state. Rather, they are methods thought out and meticulously codified by a small group of scholars known as social engineers. This small group defines for the culture what is acceptable, and what is not. For each acceptable act, the social engineers formulate a reward, either immediate or promised, and for each unacceptable act, a punishment more immediate than deferred, because the dictatorial state must live in immediacy, even if its promises of well-being—and this is very often the case, even in democratic states—can be deferred ad infinitum. Thus, the jihadist leader tells Kidane that he will be judged and punished as soon as possible. The young musicians are flogged in public the day after their arrest, and the “unbridledly sexual” couple are stoned to death immediately after their arrest. However, the happiness Abdelkrim promises Satima never arrives when she needs him to get Kidane out of trouble, and the phone never works when Toya tries to reach her father. Maybe one day, the telephone will work: this is the dictatorship's promise to the people. In the meantime, Kidane will already be dead, immediately executed.

Illustrative moments: “You don't know everything” Abu Hassan, Abdelkrim and a third jihadist are the social engineers of the Islamic State. They are often found lying in a room, their heads immersed in the *Qur'an*. They are not from Timbuktu, but from Libya. Their Arabic is “pure”, and they make a point of letting their underlings know it. When Omar, Abdelkrim's driver, seems to reproach him for his unholy pursuit of a married woman, Abdelkrim replies that Omar's Arabic is incomprehensible. Omar returns the favor, mockingly telling Abdelkrim, when the latter stalls the car he is learning to drive, “You see, you don't know everything.” And when some jihadists call Abu Hassan to report the discovery of the body of Amadou the fisherman, Abu Hassan tells them to speak English instead, as their Arabic is unintelligible. The social engineers' claim to linguistic and scholarly superiority is part of their method of psychologically manipulating the people. To ensure that their edicts are accepted and applied by the ordinary people, the social engineers, who codify social behaviors, tend to set themselves apart from the people by presenting themselves as the great know-it-alls, imbued with a divine mission. Do they really think so, or are they the victims of a delusion? It doesn't matter, because their delusion, their detachment from reality, leads to absolutism and violence, to mutilated bodies and death.

COMPREHENSION QUESTIONS

1. The filmmaker seems to be saying that women are more courageous and resilient than men in crisis situations. How does he demonstrate this?
2. Why do the terrorists not target Zabou, the madwoman, despite all her excesses and provocations?
3. Why does the rebel leader ask the interpreter not to translate to Kidane that it pains him to know that Kidane's daughter will soon be an orphan?

4. What is the filmmaker's aim when he juxtaposes the images of the deer, Toya, Issan and the water vendor running through the desert at the end of the film?
5. What do you think will become of Toya and Issan, Kidane's adopted son?