



On the prowl: Mali child cat hunters honor age-old tradition

A corpse of a cat, thrown by youths, hang over power lines in the city of Timbuktu, Mali. As part of an age-old tradition in the city, in the desert north of the troubled Sahel state, youth hit the streets after dark in order to trap, skin and then cook cats.

Fifteen-year-old Kadi Ben Wahab puffs out his chest and poses for a photo with several friends, before setting off to hunt cats in northern Mali's Timbuktu. As part of an age-old tradition in the city, in the desert north of the troubled Sahel state, Kadi and his band of hunters hit the streets after dark in order to trap, skin and cook cats. They dance and sing after a successful hunt, throwing the skins of their prey over the electric cables that hang over the alleyways. "I killed this one a few days ago," says Kadi, pointing to a cat skin hanging nearby - not an uncommon sight in Timbuktu. The boy says he is the best cat hunter in his neighborhood and, as such, is the leader of his gang. The children standing beside him are

between six and 12 years old. Despite their nighttime escapades, they lead otherwise ordinary lives: going to school during the day and eating dinner with their families in the evening. But after dinner they often sneak out to hunt cats - always targeting neighborhoods other than their own. Their weapon of choice is a crate-like wooden trap, which contains a piece of mutton as bait and can be pulled closed with a piece of string.

But Timbuktu children also use torches so they can hunt and kill their feline prey with clubs. Others use dogs. Bemused adults allow the children to use cooking utensils so that they can cook their kill. The unusual pastime offers children an escape in an otherwise tough environment: landlocked and

conflict-torn Mali is one of the poorest nations in the world. Compounding the shortage of distractions from the daily grind, Timbuktu is in Mali's volatile north, where a jihadist insurgency has raged since 2012.

'The best hunter'

None of the Timbuktu residents interviewed by AFP were able to date the origin of the city's cat-hunting tradition, although several cast it as a rite of passage for boys. The practice nonetheless appears to be older than living memory. Timbuktu poet Sane Chirfi said that after one of his octogenarian relatives had died, an old cat trap was found in his possession. "It goes back a very, very long time," he said. "It's impossible to

find anyone in town who didn't hunt cats as a child."

Another Timbuktu writer, Salem Ould El Hadj, told AFP that he ate cats as a child "like any other Timbuktu citizen". However, poet Chirfi said that aspects of the tradition are being lost. Once, only runaways or strays were hunted. Nowadays, hunters target domestic pets too. Abdoulaye Sow, a man in his twenties who is from the same neighborhood as Kadi, said that he had lost his own pet cat Pipo to the hunters two months ago.

"It didn't stand a chance", he said,

adding that his pet was likely hard to kill. Despite the violent loss of his feline companion, there appeared to be no hard feelings. "It's just the way it is," said Sow, shrugging his shoulders, before pointing out that kids from his own neighborhood killed cats belonging to others. One need only look up, he said, to see the dozen or so cats that Kadi's gang had hung on the nearby cables in recent weeks. "He's the best hunter". — AFP



A young boy carrying a cat he has just captured in a homemade trap on a street in the city of Timbuktu, Mali.



A cat tries to escape from a trap it was caught in, on a street in the city of Timbuktu.— AFP photos



Russian baby tiger fights for life after frostbite, surgery

Russian animal rescuers said Wednesday they were fighting for the life of an Amur tiger cub who had been found dying from exhaustion and frostbite in the country's far east. An emaciated female tiger cub aged around four or five months and suffering from severe frostbite and injuries was found by a local fisherman on a river bank in the south of the Primorye region late last year. The fisherman reported the find to wildlife carers who evacuated the cub to a rehabilitation centre, said Amur Tiger Centre.

"External examination showed that she was severely exhausted as a result of which the tip of her tail was frostbitten," the centre said, adding that the cub's lower jaw also became necrotic after an injury. The tiger, who weighed just around 20 kilograms - roughly half the norm - when she was found, underwent an intense rehabilitation course and

gained about 10 kilograms in preparation for surgery. The dead tip of her tail was also cut off. Late last week the cub underwent a 2.5-hour operation, with doctors transplanting healthy tissue to repair her jaw.

The surgery was successful but it is too early to make any predictions and say if it will be possible to release the cub back into the wild, said Amur Tiger Centre. "The most important thing right now is to halt the tissue necrosis and save the tiger's life," said Sergei Aramilev, the centre's head. "People are doing their best." Russia and China are home to the big cats which are also known as Siberian tigers and are listed as "endangered" by the International Union for the Conservation of Nature's Red List.

There are around 600 tigers in Russia, said Pyotr Osipov, head of the Amur branch at WWF. "Heavy snowfall and changes in temperature have significantly complicated tigers' life this winter," Osipov told AFP, adding that two tiger cubs had recently been found frozen to death. President Vladimir Putin has personally championed the protection of the Amur tiger. In 2010, Putin, then the country's prime minister, hosted an unprecedented 13-state summit that aimed at doubling the big cat's population. — AFP



This picture released by the Amur Tiger Center shows a Siberian tiger cub receiving treatment from Russian veterinary doctors at the Center for Rehabilitation and Reintroduction of Tigers and Other Rare Animals in the village of Alekseevka in the Russian Far East.— AFP

'Scream' returns to satirize new 'golden era' of horror

Twenty-five years ago, "Scream" - starring Neve Campbell and Courtney Cox - revitalized horror with its highly self-aware take on the increasingly stale and formulaic slasher genre. This Friday, a film again entitled "Scream" - again starring Campbell and Cox - returns to breathe new life into the... you get the idea. "Thank God we are working in a franchise, and in a universe, where it's okay for a movie to be wildly self-reflexive," co-director Tyler Gillett told AFP. "There were more instances of that meta experience than we can count when we were making the movie."

Just like in the 1996 original, characters in the new "Scream" spend much of the plot debating the tropes of horror movies in order to guess which one of them - female? Black? virgin? - will be killed off next. They realize that the latest swathe of attacks in their bafflingly violent California hometown are targeting people related to the killers from 25 years before. Handily, one character explains horror audiences' new fondness for "requels" - films that follow chronologically from previous movies, but reboot the franchise with younger characters related to the original cast.

"There are certain rules to surviving - believe me, I know," a returning David Arquette tells his younger, new co-stars. The film also revisits several locations and scenarios. It starts with a scene that evokes Drew Barrymore's infamous and shocking death in the original, when she ill-advisedly answered her landline, with the killer on the other end, before the opening credits have even rolled.

In the new film's opener, a Gen-Z teen is so baffled to find that her parents' old landline still functions that she initially does not even answer. "The disregard we all have for landlines... for us, it's fun," said co-director Matt Bettinelli-Olpin. "Placed at the beginning of the movie, it just lets you know we're aware of it, the movie's aware of it, we're going to move forward with that awareness together. "One of the things that 'Scream' does so well is it never underestimates its audience."

Whodunit?

While the filmmakers wanted to make a "love letter" to the late Wes Craven - who directed all four previous "Scream" films - Gillett said the movie could never just be "pure nostalgia." Unlike the original, which emerged when the slasher horror genre was floundering, the new "Scream" arrives in an era of critically

"Regardless of what you want to call it in order to feel good about watching a horror movie, for us it's all gravy. As long as people are excited about the stories... that's all upside to us."

One thing that has not changed is the "Scream" franchise's "whodunit" element, with the identity of the killer hidden behind a distinctive "Ghostface" mask. Keeping the plot's twists from leaking



In this file photo, actors Neve Campbell, Courtney Cox, and David Arquette arrive at the premiere of The Weinstein Company's eScream 4i held at Grauman's Chinese Theatre in Hollywood, California.— AFP

acclaimed, socially aware arthouse horror from the likes of Jordan Peele.

Characters in the film pompously discuss their love for "elevated horror," referencing films like "The Babadook" and "Hereditary" as well as Peele's "Get Out" and "Us." "We're in the middle of a golden era. And so we're hoping that this movie introduces people to some of those movies that they aren't familiar with," said Bettinelli-Olpin. "We're obviously playing with and poking fun at this idea of 'elevated horror,'" added Gillett.

was vital to the filmmakers. During the audition stages, actors were only shown scenes from the film's first two acts. "Even when the cast members got there, we only gave them pages up until where their characters were," said executive producer Chad Villella, who worked on 2019 hit "Ready or Not" with the two directors. "They really embraced the secrecy of it all." — AFP