

Resilience Above All

MUSIC IN THE FIELDS

by Carrie Young

Peace Corps Volunteer, Mali (2001–2002)

Mali, in West Africa, one of the world's poorest countries, has riches that remain a secret to many people of the Western world. These riches are the kind that we all seek, but few are lucky enough to find. They are the secrets to happiness, the keys to laughter and music. And these riches can be found on the most difficult of days, among those who live some of the most difficult lives on our planet.

It is May in Mali, and the rains have not yet come. It is over 115 degrees Fahrenheit and my friend looks up at the sky. We have all been watching the sky for weeks. The spreading desert and the receding grasses in Mali are causing the rains to arrive later and later every year. My friend looks up once again and says to me with utter acceptance: "We think that it may be Allah's will that we die now."

The next day we watch and wait. Nothing matters at this point except that the rains come. Everyone is ready to begin plowing the fields, but nothing can be done until it rains. We continue to watch and wait.

The sun is a third of the way across the arc of the sky. The air is parched.

The dusty, dry red earth of the fields is quiet.

A faint wind slips by me. I look up yet again toward the hills in the direction of the wind and I see a few clouds beginning to blow over them. There is a huge break in the tension of the village as the clouds move in.

The wind begins to blow strong. Bright fabrics blow out from the bodies of the women, dancing and slapping in the air. We all lean against the winds and head for cover, except



for the children, who run frantically toward the giant mango trees. Small mangoes fall from the upper branches and the kids race to collect them in their shirts.

Soon darkness covers us and the rain begins to fall, frantic from the wait. It feels as if the energy of the weeks before has built up in these clouds—as if they had been forced to hold their breath for weeks and now it has all broken loose. The wind blows branches out of the trees and the rain falls with the fury of a hurricane.

After about an hour, the rain calms and continues falling throughout the night.

The village will live.

The next day the men begin working acres of fields with steer and an antiquated plow. The women wake early to prepare lunch. It is made from the corn of the year before. They put the lunch in bowls and balance the bowls on their heads; most have a baby tied with a cloth to their back. They head for the fields. They will do this nearly every day for the next four to five months. Wake early, prepare lunch over a fire, and walk barefoot or in flip-flops to the fields with a child on their back.

When the fields are ready to plant, the men and women of the village will take a tool made of a wooden handle with a flattened piece of metal attached to the end and they will bend over the earth using only this simple tool for hours and hours every day.

Within this daily work to sustain life itself, there is a peace, a connection, and a tradition of laughter and music that makes the Malian culture one of happiness and richness.

There are five main family groups that make up my village. Mine is the Wattara family. Each Sunday all of the men in the family work in the same field together. They line up and work side by side, efficiently moving down the rows. The women prepare lunch, care for the chil-

VOCABULARY

Parched: Dry, arid

Frantically: With great agitation and frenzy; madly; crazily

Antiquated: Extremely old; out of date

dren, and also labor in the fields on these days.

These Sundays are unique, however, for more than just the joint work effort. These are the days of the music in the fields. The music comes from the hands of those women who have helped to raise this village. The grandmothers, little old women who are as tough as diamonds, come out to the fields on these days; in their hands they hold instruments made of gourds and beans, leather and wood. With these simple instruments they create music that contains their souls. Music that feels of their laughter and their losses, the years of hard labor they have done in these same fields. Years of bending, years of calluses, pounding grains and corn, carrying babies, cooking over a fire, carrying water and wood. Years of being a little girl, a woman, and a now a grandmother.

These are the women who send out the laughter and the music in the fields. These are the women who hold the secrets of the village, the secrets that the world is desperately in search of. The secret of how to make music out of toil and how to laugh in the face of hardship and death.

These are the rich people of our world.