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Mohamed Ould  
Boubacar at Lavage  
de la Paix

**From left:** Mohammed  
Dicko at Lavage Auto;  
Ibrahim Ag Mouhamed

road. We bought this carwash at the beginning of the reconquest of Timbuktu. For a year we hardly had any work, but then the NGOs started to come and the business grew.” The carwash belongs to his brother, who bought it so that he and his siblings would have employment. “It also gives work to others,” says Ibrahim, “and one day it could be a big business and give work and hope to the youth”.

Hope is something hard-won in northern Mali today, with daily rocket attacks and landmines devastating the lives of people across the region. Although a peace accord was signed in June, many wonder how long it will be before the myriad groups jostling for power unleash more instability.

But the residents of Timbuktu are nothing if not resilient. The city has, after all, been one of the most important in the Islamic world for a thousand years and seen its fortunes rise and fall countless times. Still, finding employment for the youth remains a big priority for the elders of the city.

Hotel owner Alhous Ag Tajou gets his car washed at the Auto Lavage Kokadje. He explains that the carwash serves a dual purpose: as a way of creating jobs and as a meeting space for groups.

“Where there is a carwash, there is usually a *grin*, an informal meeting place to talk about what is happening in the town, the country, the world.” The *grin* – an important part of Malian culture for as long as anyone can remember – needs a place to meet, and the carwash is the perfect space. “People go to the *grin*

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## WHERE THERE IS A CARWASH, THERE IS USUALLY A GRIN

to find out the news, and they take their motorbike to the carwash nearby and say, ‘Wash that for me’. At the same time they drink tea and visit with their friends. The carwash is first of all a job,” says Alhous, “but it also serves the *grin*”.

Mohammed Ould

Boubacar recently moved back from Bamako and opened Lavage de la Paix, or “Peace Carwash”.

As well as being a business, his carwash provides a place for his father and his father’s friends to hold their *grin*. The old men, in traditional robes of blue cotton, play a game of checkers with sticks and stones in the sand.

“They come here to play games,” says Mohammed, who also runs a mechanic’s workshop alongside the carwash. “They come here every day because here, there is space. At home, there is no place for them and there are children everywhere. Old men cannot play games with children around them, it bothers them.”

On stormy days no one works, but Billy Litni still comes to his carwash. “I’ve been sitting here since 8am,” says Litni, while filling a water barrel with a hose from his tap. “But I haven’t had a car all day.” Billy’s carwash is a business, but it also fulfils another purpose: his is one of the only functioning taps in the neighbourhood.

“I came here anyway,” he says, despite knowing no one would come to wash their car, “to fill the water barrels for my neighbours who don’t have water. We have to help each other out.” ☉