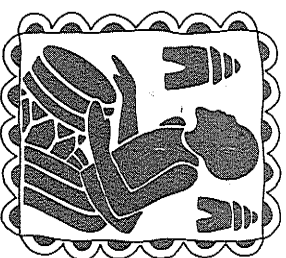


ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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Of Water and the Spirit

*Ritual, Magic, and Initiation
in the Life of an African Shaman*



MALIDOMA PATRICE SOMÉ

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INTRODUCTION



My name is Malidoma. It means roughly “Be friends with the stranger/enemy.” Because the Dagara believe that every individual comes into this life with a special destiny, some names are programmatic. They describe the task of their bearers and constitute a continual reminder to the child of the responsibilities that are waiting up ahead. A person’s life project is therefore inscribed in the name she/he carries. As my name implies, I am here in the West to tell the world about my people in any way I can, and to take back to my people the knowledge I gain about this world. My elders are convinced that the West is as endangered as the indigenous cultures it has decimated in the name of colonialism. There is no doubt that, at this time in history, Western civilization is suffering from a great sickness of the soul. The West’s progressive turning away from functioning spiritual values; its total disregard for the environment and the protection of natural resources; the violence of inner cities with their problems of poverty, drugs, and crime; spiraling unemployment and economic disarray; and growing intolerance toward people of color and the values of other cultures—all of these trends, if unchecked, will eventually bring about a terrible self-destruction. In the face of all this global chaos, the only possible hope is self-transformation. Unless we as individuals find new ways of understanding between people, ways

that can touch and transform the heart and soul deeply, both indigenous cultures and those in the West will continue to fade away, dismayed that all the wonders of technology, all the many philosophical “isms,” and all the planning of the global corporations will be helpless to reverse this trend.

It has taken me ten years of battling with insecurity, uncertainty, hesitation, and God knows what other types of subtle complexities to write this book. The greatest obstacle I encountered was finding a suitable way to tell my story. I could not speak English when I arrived in the United States ten years ago, even though I had taken some English classes at the Jesuit seminary in my teens. Although I have made great strides in orally communicating in that language, it was still very difficult to write this book. One of my greatest problems was that the things I talk about here did not happen in English; they happened in a language that has a very different mindset about reality. There is usually a significant violence done to anything being translated from one culture to another. Modern American English, which seems to me better suited for quick fixes and the thrill of a consumer culture, seems to falter when asked to communicate another person's world view. From the time I began to jot down my first thoughts until the last word, I found myself on the bumpy road of mediumship, trying to ferry meanings from one language to another, and from one reality to another—a process that denaturalizes and confuses them.

I have had to struggle a great deal in order to be able to communicate this story to you. It is basically the story of my initiation into two different and highly contradictory cultures. I was born in the early fifties in Burkina Faso in West Africa, then called Upper Volta by the colonial French government who invaded my country in the early 1900s. Although my parents did not record my birth, and to this day are still in conflict as to the exact date, my papers say that I was born in 1956.

When I was four years old, my childhood and my parents were taken from me when I was literally kidnapped from my home by a French Jesuit missionary who had befriended my father. At that time Jesuits were trying to create a “native” missionary force to convert a people who had wearied of their message along with their colonial oppression. For the next fifteen years I was in a boarding school, far away from my family, and forced to learn about the white man's reality, which included lessons in history, geography, anatomy, mathematics, and literature. All of these topics were presented with a good dose of Christianity and its temperamental god who forced everyone to live in constant fear of his wrath.

At the age of twenty I escaped and went back to my people, but found that I no longer fit into the tribal community. I risked my life to undergo the Dagara initiation and thereby return to my people. During that month-long ritual, I was integrated back into my own reality as well as I could be.

But I never lost my Western education. So I am a man of two worlds, trying to be at home in both of them—a difficult task at best.

When I was twenty-two, my elders came to me and asked me to return to the white man's world, to share with him what I had learned about my own spiritual tradition through my initiation. For me, initiation had eliminated my confusion, helplessness, and pain and opened the door to a powerful understanding of the link between my own life purpose and the will of my ancestors. I had come to understand the sacred relationship between children and old people, between fathers and their adolescent sons, between mothers and daughters. I knew especially why my people have such a deep respect for old age, and why a strong, functioning community is essential for the maintenance of an individual's sense of identity, meaning, and purpose. I used this knowledge as my starting point.

My own elders had experienced French colonialism and the culture of the West as a force that used violence as a means to eradicate traditional lifeways. They had seen their own youth stolen from them as they vainly struggled against the incursions of these intruders. During these years, in which my people were trying to make sense of a people whose every action seemed to go against the natural order of things, creating chaos, death, and destruction, the sense of unified community that sustained their tribal life was profoundly destabilized. These foreigners seemed to have no respect for life, tradition, or the land itself. At first my elders refused to believe that a race of people who could cause such suffering and death could possibly have any respect for itself. It did not take long before they realized that the white man wanted nothing short of the complete destruction of their culture and even their lives.

For some of my people, befriending the white man was the best way they could find to fight back. By doing this, they hoped to get to know how the white man's mind worked and what they thought they were accomplishing by invading another people's ancestral lands. Not all of my people were willing to have this much contact with the whites. Some village people, who chose to see things only from their own tribal perspective, believed that to have become so spiritually sick, the white man must have done something terrible to his own ancestors. Others who knew a little about military culture, imperialism, and colonialism thought that the white man must have destroyed his own land to have to come here and take the land of others. In spite of the best efforts of all my people, the whites kept on coming; kept on doing whatever they pleased; and kept on taking more and more of our land, our beliefs, and our lives.

Many years later, my generation finds itself gripped by a powerful irony. Suddenly it has become popular to defend tribal people, their world view, and their lifeways. But while the West is engaged in a great debate

about what it means to preserve culture, the indigenous world is aware that it has already lost the battle. It seems obvious to me that as soon as one culture begins to talk about preservation, it means that it has already turned the other culture into an endangered species. Then you have the purists on either side who want indigenous cultures to remain "exactly the same as they have always been." In many cultures, the Dagara included, it is no longer a question of preservation but of *survival* in some form or another. The culture's own reality has already been superseded by the "fashionable" modernity. I see my position as a two-way passage of information, as both a bridge and a conduit. By agreeing to move between both worlds, I seek to bring about some kind of balance.

I deeply respect the story I have told in this book. I respect it because it embodies everything that is truly me, my ancestors, my tribe, my life. It is a very complicated story whose telling caused me great pain; but I had to tell it. Only in this way could I ultimately fulfill my purpose to "befriend the stranger/enemy." This is not the first task set me by my elders, nor will it be my last.

My first "assignment" after my initiation into the tribe was to seek entrance into the university. I did so equipped with the special knowledge that initiation had provided me with. I had one thing in my pocket—a little talisman. This talisman was an oval-shaped pouch stuffed with a stone from the underworld and some other secret objects collected in the wild. Though it is common to carry talismans in my village, for they are a great source of power and protection, people fear them. Every Dagara knows that powerful objects are dangerous. Depending on the actions of its bearer, such objects have the power to help, but also to hurt. Therefore, talismans are treated with great respect and care. My pouch was sewn tightly shut and then decorated in a way that enhanced its ugliness and scariness. These objects are always made to look ugly and fearsome, perhaps to stress their supernatural quality. Besides, my experience of the other world has led me to understand that anything that crosses from that place into this one is seldom beautiful, as if anything spiritually potent must look ugly and smell bad in order to work. My talisman certainly did. At one end of the oval pouch was a tuft of strange animal hair.

The government of what was then called Upper Volta had a school called the Centre d'Études Supérieures, whose course of studies was the equivalent of a four-year college in the West. It had been built several years earlier by the now-departed French colonials as part of the incentive to the newly independent countries in Africa. The end of territorial colonialism was followed by a period of "neocolonialism" that took the form of bilateral cooperation, economic sponsorship, and professional support in every pertinent department of the new government. And so the college was just

one of the many faces of this new colonialism, whose goal is to place the newly independent countries into a state of perpetual indebtedness. It is important to understand that modern Africa does not exist as it is by the will of its leaders, but by the will of the very powers that divided it between them.

Every student in the center was there on scholarship, and every year there was a huge number of candidates who applied for the few scholarships available. Those who obtained them were usually students whose parents were either well-to-do or could pull some strings. The politicians would simply order the scholarship board to grant the awards to their relatives or children. Wealthy people who lacked political power bribed their way to scholarships for their loved ones, but even the wealthy did not always succeed, for after the "political" scholarships were granted, there were few left for the bulk of the candidates.

The year that I applied was no different from any other. I had filled in my application for a scholarship knowing that I had no chance of getting beyond the filing. But I also knew that my tribal elders had given me instructions on how to apply, even though they had no basis upon which to work. How, I wondered, could these people, accustomed to village life, know how to get one's needs met in the city? Yet I felt it was still worth a try. What did I have to lose? To my great surprise, I was scheduled for an interview and was not only informed of my acceptance to the school, but given a full scholarship on the spot. I cannot tell you the details of how my talisman worked, for I prefer not to blurt its effectiveness, but it is still helping me today to speak in big assembly halls. Though invitations come in unorthodox ways, I always seem to be able to get where I need to go and say what I need to say.

I spent four years in that center for higher education, which later became the national university. I walked away from it with a bachelor's degree in sociology, literature, and linguistics, and a master's thesis in world literature. I still did not know why I had been there. The system did not care whether you really learned anything or not. It was based upon the regurgitation of memorized material fed to one by professors who read from their notes in bored, sleepy, and sometimes even drunken voices. Most of what they said was incomprehensible. Our only reason for being there was our need to transcend the alarming social and economic situation in which most of us were caught. We did not need to be told that a proper Western education was the key to good Western jobs and a decent life.

For most people, top performance in that school meant hard work. As an initiated man, I did not have to work hard to get my degrees. I skipped a great deal of the classes, made sure that I was present at the exams, and walked away with my diplomas. The answers to the exam questions were

mostly visible in the auras of the teachers who constantly patrolled the aisles of the testing rooms. I just had to write these answers down quickly before any one of them noticed how strangely I was looking at him/her.

During my second year in college, the teachers began to notice me. It was harder and harder for me to cut classes. When I was picked by the professor to reply to a question, I continued to instinctively seek the answer in his aura, as I did during exams. To me it was like being asked to read out of an open book. This method worked so well that one day one of my teachers looked at me suspiciously and asked, "Have you been reading my mind?" Of course, I said no. We were in the modern world, where such things are impossible.

My talisman continued to work for me. I was awarded a scholarship to the Sorbonne, where I received a "D.E.A." (Diplôme d'Études Approfondies) in political science. Later I continued my education at Brandeis University, earning a Ph.D. in literature. I am not writing about all these accomplishments to impress you, but to show you that what I have learned as an initiated man really works (at least for me) in Western reality.

Coming to the United States was a matter of necessity. I could not reconcile myself with what France reminded me of. Every day I was told in a thousand ways that Africa gave its life force for France to look, and its people to live, like this. The temperament of the Parisian was most conducive to irritation, discomfort, and even murderous thoughts. The African had become a pest, reminding the French of their own guilt. My own racial consciousness was heightened as a result, and led me to dangerous behavior such as jumping into the Métro without paying, and eating my way through a supermarket. I came to the United States shortly after my mentor announced it in the course of one of our numerous divination sessions during my first trip to the village. He said I was going to cross the big sea into a land where I will be able to do what I must. A scholarship brought me here. That's the way most Black Africans enter into the heart of the civilized world.

During my time in the West, I have found myself facing an interesting paradox. People approach me not because I am an educated man but because the tribal outfit I wear seems to have an effect on them. It initiates contact. Conversations always seem to begin with someone saying, "Nice outfit. Where do you come from?"

Answer by saying, "Burkina Faso."

The response is invariably, "What?" or "Where is that?"

Sometimes I feel like a walking billboard, but these conversations always give me food for thought. I learn to understand my own culture better by comparing it with others. Ironically, I am more free to be African in the West than I am in Africa. In my country, a man with as many degrees as

I have wears a Western suit and tries to act cosmopolitan. He does not want to be reminded of where he came from or what he has left behind. He has turned his back on "superstition" and embraced "progress."

Here in the West I have a great deal of time for spiritual contemplation and study, and much more time to share things of the spirit with others. If I were still living in my village in Africa, nearly every spare moment would be taken up with scratching a living from the exhausted soil that is all colonialism has left us with. The 600 American dollars I send every year to my family feeds them, and many others, for a year. Although I miss them and would prefer to see them more often, I know I am taking better care of them here than I could by going home and picking up a hoe—even if the elders had left that option open to me.

Living in this culture and being openly African also has its moments of comedy and suspense. For example, when I travel to conferences, I always take my medicine bag with me. I have always been afraid to check it in the baggage for fear that it will somehow be lost—a terrible thought to contemplate since without it and the magical objects it contains, I would not be able to do the many hundreds of divinations I perform for people each year.

The first time I carried my medicine bag through the airport, I realized, when I arrived at the X-ray machine, that I could not have my medicine X-rayed. I did not want my medicine to be seen. I realized that if I did, I would have to explain its strange contents to the guards. This would be awkward, to say the least. Besides, I was not altogether sure what this modern technological contraption would do to my medicine.

The guard asked me if I had films in the bag. I said no, but I had something just as sensitive. That did it. Bristling with suspicion, the security officer poured the contents of the bag out onto the table. I saw his eyes open wide as he asked, "What the hell is this?" Other officers joined him and they all looked in surprise at the content of my medicine bag. One of them, a Black officer, said, "That's voodoo stuff," and ordered them to put it through the X-ray machine while he held a talisman in his hand and looked at it with great suspicion.

I stood there wishing I could have checked my pouch in the baggage to avoid this embarrassment, but I realized I could not part with my medicine. By this time, a small crowd had gathered. My heart was beating rapidly. My medicine had become public. I quickly put it all back into the bag and put the bag on the X-ray conveyor belt. My talismans came on screen. The officer stopped the belt, stared at them intently for an infinite amount of time, then reactivated the belt. I picked my bag up with relief at the other end. From that day on, I began to think about new ways to avoid these embarrassing moments.

Every day we get closer to living in a global community. With distances

between countries narrowing, we have much wisdom to gain by learning to understand other people's cultures and permitting ourselves to accept that there is more than one version of "reality." To exist in the first place, each culture has to have its own version of what is real. What I am attempting to share with you in this book is only one of the endless versions of reality.

In the culture of my people, the Dagara, we have no word for the supernatural. The closest we come to this concept is *Yielborgura*, "the thing that knowledge can't eat." This word suggests that the life and power of certain things depend upon their resistance to the kind of categorizing knowledge that human beings apply to everything. In Western reality, there is a clear split between the spiritual and the material, between religious life and secular life. This concept is alien to the Dagara. For us, as for many indigenous cultures, the supernatural is part of our everyday lives. To a Dagara man or woman, the material is just the spiritual taking on form. The secular is religion in a lower key—a rest area from the tension of religious and spiritual practice. Dwelling in the realm of the sacred is both exciting and terrifying. A little time out once in a while is in order.

The world of the Dagara also does not distinguish between reality and imagination. To us, there is a close connection between thought and reality. To imagine something, to closely focus one's thoughts upon it, has the potential to bring that something into being. Thus, people who take a tragic view of life and are always expecting the worst usually manifest that reality. Those who expect that things will work together for the good usually experience just that. In the realm of the sacred, this concept is taken even further, for what is magic but the ability to focus thought and energy to get results on the human plane? The Dagara view of reality is large. If one can imagine something, then it has at least the potential to exist.

I decided to do a little experiment of my own with "reality" versus "imagination" when I was home visiting my village in 1986. I brought with me a little electronic generator, a television monitor, a VCR, and a "Star Trek" tape titled *The Voyage Home*. I wanted to know if the Dagara elders could tell the difference between fiction and reality. The events unfolding in a science fiction film, considered futuristic or fantastic in the West, were perceived by my elders as the current affairs in the day-to-day lives of some other group of people living in the world. The elders did not understand what a starship is. They did not understand what the fussy uniforms of its crew members had to do with making magic. They recognized in Spock a *Kontombé* of the seventh planet, the very one that I describe later in this story, and their only objection to him was that he was too tall. They had never seen a *Kontombé* that big. They had no problems understanding light speed and teleportation except that they could have done it more

discreetly. I could not make them understand that all this was not real. Even though stories abound in my culture, we have no word for fiction. The only way I could get across to them the Western concept of fiction was to associate fiction with telling lies.

My elders were comfortable with "Star Trek," the West's vision of its own future. Because they believe in things like magical beings (Spock), traveling at the speed of light, and teleportation, the wonders that Westerners imagine being part of their future are very much a part of my elders' present. The irony is that the West sees the indigenous world as primitive or archaic. Wouldn't it be wonderful if the West could learn to be as "archaic" as my elders are?

As in the case of "Star Trek," Westerners look to the future as a place of hope, a better world where every person has dignity and value, where wealth is not unequally distributed, where the wonders of technology make miracles possible. If people in the West could embrace some of the more positive values of the indigenous world, perhaps that might even provide them with a "shortcut" to their own future. Many people in the West seem to be trying to find this shortcut through their commitment to learning about indigenous cultures, non-Western forms of spirituality or, most recently, through the Men's Movement. If these seekers fail, and if the modern world lets the indigenous world die, it will probably mean a long, hard trip into the future in search of the values of the "past."

Westerners forget that it is not only indigenous cultures that have a deep commitment to non-Western ideas about reality. Even in a highly industrialized culture like Japan, a connection with the ancestors is taken very seriously. When the new emperor of Japan was installed, many leaders in the West were disturbed by the fact that, as part of his inauguration, he went into the temple and spoke to his ancestors. Why is it that the modern world can't deal with its ancestors and endure its past?

It is my belief that the present state of restlessness that traps the modern individual has its roots in a dysfunctional relationship with the ancestors. In many non-Western cultures, the ancestors have an intimate and absolutely vital connection with the world of the living. They are always available to guide, to teach, and to nurture. They represent one of the pathways between the knowledge of this world and the next. Most importantly—and paradoxically—they embody the guidelines for successful living—all that is most valuable about life. Unless the relationship between the living and the dead is in balance, chaos results. When a person from my culture looks at the descendants of the Westerners who invaded their culture, they see a people who are ashamed of their ancestors because they were killers and marauders masquerading as artisans of progress. The fact that these people have a sick culture comes as no surprise to them. The

Dagara believe that, if such an imbalance exists, it is the duty of the living to heal their ancestors. If these ancestors are not healed, their sick energy will haunt the souls and psyches of those who are responsible for helping them. Not all people in the West have such an unhealthy relationship with their ancestors, but for those who do, the Dagara can offer a model for healing the ancestors, and, by doing so, healing oneself.

Because the world is becoming smaller, people from different realities can benefit from learning about and accepting each other. The challenge of modernity is to bring the world together into a unified whole in the middle of which diversity can exist. The respect for difference works only if connected with this vision.



The first time I presented the material contained in this book was at a multicultural men's conference in Virginia. I needed to discover what, in the sequence of initiation experiences, could be put into words, and then see how this information would be received by the audience. I had heard other people tell the story of their initiation, but these stories sounded greatly different from mine. Some of the stories I'd heard seemed to make the process a mild formality, deliberately safe to the point where everyone was guaranteed to come out fine. In the Dagara culture, initiation is a dangerous commitment that can—and sometimes does—result in death, and I did not want to upset people who might be thinking of it differently. Was I not supposed to make friends with the stranger? I did not want to make initiation sound unreachable either. My wish was to strike some kind of balance between the modern person's mind and his heart by communicating to both of them. Within this group of men of opposing color and culture who had gathered together to figure out how to bridge gaps and reach out to each other, the initial atmosphere was one closer to war than to peace.

On the day of my presentation, the room was jam-packed with busy professional men who had cleared a whole week off their schedules to come to this conference. Their expectations were high. As I began telling my story, I could hear the sound of my own voice competing with the pounding of my heart, and the terrible sound of the audience's silence. Images of my initiation rushed into my mind, as if someone stood behind me passing them to me on picture postcards. I merely took them and passed them on. Soon I forgot my heartbeat, then the crowd, then myself. I realized, as I moved through the landscape of initiation, that a great number of episodes were at the periphery of my attention, not because I did not remember them fully, but because they were part of the untellable.

When I finished, something happened that I had never expected, some-

thing I was not prepared to handle. One hundred and twenty men gave me a standing ovation—men of European, African, Oriental, Indian, and Native American descent. The intensity of their response filled every corner of my mind, body, and heart and threatened to draw tears out of me. I fought hard to keep from weeping while the clapping seemed to go on for an eternity.

I do not remember how I recovered from this response. The whole time all I could do was to wonder what could be the explanation for this kind of overwhelming response. What was it in those men that understood what I had said about initiation so fully that they responded to it as if it were something familiar to them? They were not simple men. On the contrary, they were sophisticated, highly educated individuals—psychologists, therapists, anthropologists, men versed in myth, medical doctors, sociologists, lawyers, and who knows what else. And they all had the same response.

It took me a week and more to recover from the telling of my story. People came to me afterward to ask if I had written it down so they could have it. I had long had a question as to whether I could tell the untellable. I now had my answer. Some parts at least could be told, and so I knew where to start.

Since then, I have told the story of my initiation many times. The response has invariably been the same, and this response has given me the courage to share more information about elders, youth, medicine, healing, and the indigenous world of the Dagara which my own initiation had allowed me to access.

My grandfather's funeral ritual, described in this book, was one of those realities. I presented it once at a conference, leaving out many of the elaborate magical details. I was hardly surprised to find that it too had the power to touch people in this culture.

I have since then, and with great support, conducted a form of the Dagara funeral ritual with Americans as participants. Watching people of this culture devote themselves to a funeral ritual the Dagara way was as baffling to me as my initiation story must have been to them. I was glad the elders from my village weren't present. They would have thought I had made it up. But something in it, maybe the sincerity of over a hundred men mourning their losses, broke my heart. It is in response to them and to others who desired to know more that I have gathered the energy to write this book. It is also for every old person in this culture who feels abandoned, as if he or she has become useless, and for the young ones in search of a purpose and a blessing from some sacred old hands that I write. These two groups of people need to get their relationship straight. Maybe they will discover each other through this book. Their unspoken support has given me the courage to speak out clearly and explicitly.

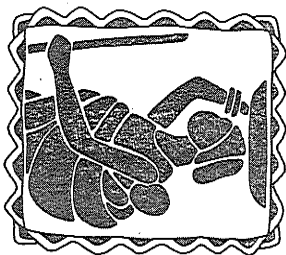
It is time for Africans to clear their throats and enter boldly into the concert of spiritual and magical exchange. Books on other indigenous realities, written by native peoples, can be found everywhere. Those that deal with the deep tribal socio-spirituality of Africans are still the exclusive department of specialists: foreign anthropologists or native anthropologists who have been "foreignized," ethnographers, and sociologists. This is the direct result of five hundred years of European looting of the African continent. For those who do not know what colonialism does to the colonized, Frantz Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks* and *The Wretched of the Earth* are a good starting place. When they are done, I would suggest they go further into reading Chinweizu's *The West and the Rest of Us*. It will suffice to give them a picture of what it means to be on the losing side in the struggle of nations and cultures. The subtle complexes that colonialism has produced in the hearts and psyches of the colonized still linger controlingly in the backyards of our modernity—the third world. It is not fair to think that Africa is only what postmodern specialists have come to tell us it is. Part of the violence in modern Africa is created by leaders who were educated as violently as I have been. I do not know if a person who was raised in terror, then given leadership, can think in gentle terms, for I do not think I would be the kind of person I am today without the powerful experiences that my elders gave me in my village of birth.

Being a man of two worlds is not easy. I have to constantly fight against the depressing energy of exile and homelessness. My degrees did not help resolve the problem of exile, they enforced it. The best degree I hold is the one that my elders have given me. It does not have a paper attached to it—it is ingrained in me, and it too is responsible for my feeling of exile. This feeling has nothing to do with geography, because I don't feel any different when I am in Africa. There I can't wear my African cloak in some quarters without seeming deliberately insulting because everybody else is busy trying to look as Western as possible. In many circles, an African who possesses a Ph.D. is expected to wear a three-piece suit and a matching tie, not an embarrassing village costume. And so, whenever I leave the West, it is not infrequent to see me wearing a cowboy outfit or a tie and speaking "Frenghish" in a Paris airport while I wait for my connecting flight. There an American, Black or otherwise, is treated better than a Black African.

I have to watch where I go and what I do because of this sense of exile. Every year I have to return home to my elders, not to visit them, but to be cleansed. After several years of doing that, I have come to understand that being in the West is like being caught in a highly radioactive environment. Without this periodic cleanup, I will lose my ability to function. Speaking with people in this culture, I also have come to understand that a lot of them born and raised in the West share this sense of exile, and that I may be

better off than they are because I still have elders that I can go to who will make me feel at home for a while as they cleanse me. Sometimes I find myself wondering, however, how long can this last.

Alienation is one of the many faces of modernity. The cure is communication and community—a new sense of togetherness. By opening to each other, we diminish the pressure of being alone and exiled. I have told my story here with the wish that it will be of help to those who pick it up with a sense of hope, searching for answers of their own.

CHAPTER I
SLOWLY BECOMING

The story I am going to tell comes from a place deep inside of myself, a place that perceives all that I have irremediably lost and, perhaps, what gain there is behind the loss. If some people forget their past as a way to survive, other people remember it for the same reason. When cultures with contradictory versions of reality collide, children are often the casualties of that contact. So, like many dark children of the African continent, my childhood was short, far too short to be called a childhood. This is perhaps why it has stuck so vividly in my memory. Exile creates the ideal conditions for an inventory of the warehouse of one's past.

When I was little, two people in my family fascinated me: my mother and my grandfather. I loved my mother because she loved me. Although she would sometimes storm at me for my insatiable greed, she provided me with anything I asked for. Every now and then, when she went to the village market to sell her grains, I knew she would come back home with some treats such as cakes, European bread, or even a worn-out garment.

Every market day then was a new day for me, a day of excitement and expectation. Until I was three years old, my mother would carry me tied onto her back whenever she went in search of wood or grain or simply to

farm. I loved to be knitted so closely to her, to watch her collect wood and carry it home on her head singing. She loved music and perceived nature as a song. While walking any great distance, she always sang to me. The story was always chosen to match the length of the journey, and was usually about some unfortunate girl or woman, usually an orphan.

One I remember in particular was about a girl named Kula, whose mother died and left her with a little sister, Naab, to take to their aunt. Kula asked Woor, her slave, to do the packing while she dressed herself as a queen, putting on gold necklaces, rings, and beads for the journey. Woor, who was more practical than her unmindful mistress, packed a lot of water along with her personal things.

On the road Naab, the little sister that Kula carried on her back, felt thirsty and asked for water. The only person who had brought any water was Woor, but she wasn't about to give it away for free. In payment, she asked for a gold ring.

The day was terribly hot and dusty, and a little while later, Naab cried again for water. Kula again begged Woor, this time trading her gold earrings for the water. This went on and on until the slave girl was dressed up like a queen, and Kula, stripped of her finery, looked like a slave. The next time Naab cried out for water, her sister had nothing left to trade. Woor suggested that she herself carry the child.

Thus, the three girls arrived at the house of the aunt, who welcomed them, mistaking the slave girl for her niece and the niece for the slave girl, and thus their identities were reversed. The slave girl was treated well and kept in the warm comfort of home, while the niece was treated as a slave and sent out to the farm to guard the crops against wild creatures.

As the days went on, the queen-become-slave sang the story of her life to scare the birds and animals away from the crops. A singing human voice in the middle of a farm always keeps the intruder away. As Kula cried out her plight, her tremulous melody touched the hearts of the winged and the four-legged creatures alike. One day the *Kontombili*, the spirits who live in the underworld, were passing by and heard Kula's song. They stopped and listened carefully as her mournful voice rose and fell amid the tall, end-of-rainy-season grass. When she stopped to catch her breath, the *Kontombili* approached her and asked her to sing her song again.

After she had finished, they asked, "Is this story true?"
And she said, "I only sing what I know."

The *Kontombili* said, "Go home, little lady. Your troubles are over. Your aunt's eyes will be opened and she will know who you are."

Kula went home and, as the *Kontombili* had promised, the aunt recognized her at once as her true niece. She was given her beautiful clothes

and jewels back and placed in the bedroom where Woor the usurper had been sleeping. But Kula had learned true humility during her time as a slave, and she did not wish to switch from such hardship to such immense luxury and comfort. She asked if she could continue to stay in the slave girl's room and be given the leftovers from the rich folks' meals. Dumb-founded, sorry, and confused, her aunt could only keep apologizing for having treated her so badly.

Meanwhile the real slave girl was sent out to the farm to guard it against the creatures of the wild. She could not sing, so she sat and made raucous noises when birds landed on the crops. Along came a different group of Kontombili who had been told of the farm girl and her beautiful singing.

They begged her for some music, saying, "We heard that your voice brings tears to the heart. Please let us hear that song you sing every day."

Unaware who she was speaking to, Woor replied rudely, "What are you talking about? I ain't got no song to sing to nobody." Then she barked harshly, thinking that would scare these beings away. To the sensitive ears of Kontombili this sound was like the smell of vomit.

Disgusted and puzzled, the Kontombili asked Woor once more for a real song. Answering their courtesy with rudeness, the girl rebuked them in the same way. Believing they had been deceived by the girl, the Kontombili grew so angry that they turned her to stone.

I never liked the ending to my mother's stories. Someone always became something or someone else. When a story threatened to end before our journey did, she expertly extended it. I heard the story of Woor and Kula many times, but each time something different happened. Sometimes my mother would depict Kula's life with greater misery, as if she guessed that I did not like the fact that the usurper was turned to stone and, therefore, wanted to make a better case for her punishment. One time she had the little queen eat not just the crumbs from the table, but had her share her meals with the dog.

"But, Mom," I protested, "she didn't do that the other day. She ate only the leftovers."

"Yes," answered my mother, "but if she eats what the dog eats, then she can all the more enjoy returning to her queenhood, and you can enjoy watching the wicked slave die."

For those who think that dogs eat dog food in Dagara land, let them know that dog food is human excrement.

Although her songs were sweet, my mother's tremulous voice made me wonder sometimes if she was not mourning something or someone. I was too young then to suspect that her life and her marriage were not as happy as I thought, and that her heart held hidden sadness.

It felt good to be suspended behind her, but I did not like being unable to see where we were going. Being so small, I could not see over her shoulders, and mostly she would cover up my head with an extra piece of cloth, hoping I would go to sleep. Consequently, the journeys to the savanna were less enjoyable than the journeys home. Once at the wood-gathering spot, however, she would set me free. I would then go wild, running all over the place as if to recuperate from the immobility of the trip. Sometimes, however, she would yell at me to come back to her, or to show me certain things. This is one of the tricks mothers use to keep children within reach.

Children learn by watching adults work and by doing the same things on a smaller scale. With the help of grown-ups, they obtain the range of skills they need to confront their own adult duties. Collecting wood is essentially the work of women, but it is also the work of boys. Bringing dry wood to your mother is a sign of love.

I loved to pursue rats, snakes, rabbits, virtually anything that moved. Though most of the time she let me indulge my wild nature, my mother always seemed to call me when I was in the midst of a feverish chase—and at precisely the moment when my victim seemed most vulnerable.

One day something very odd happened. As I was running around madly, I stepped on a rabbit. It dashed out of its hiding place and a wild race ensued. Looking for a place to hide, the rabbit ran straight toward a small forested area in the bush. I rejoiced when I saw the rabbit run in that direction because I often picked the fruits there and knew every corner of that little bush. I ran faster and we almost arrived there at the same moment. I had to slow down to avoid crashing into a tree, but the little rabbit, having no such fear, disappeared into the bush like an arrow shot into a pot of butter.

I followed with caution, trying to guess where the rabbit might be hiding. The tall grass put me at a disadvantage. I had to beat my way through while the little rabbit slipped along easily. When I turned over the first clump of grass, the rabbit was not there. I checked another part of the bush where I knew there was an animal nest. This nest was an earthen hole dug in a little hill, its opening covered with grass and its inside filled with soft straw. I removed the grass and was ready to leap headlong onto the miserable rabbit, but I never completed the action. All my movements were suspended as if by an electric shock.

Where I had thought there would be a rabbit there was instead a tiny old man as small as the rabbit itself. He sat on an almost invisible chair and held a minuscule can in his right hand. His head was covered with hair so

white and so shiny that it seemed unnatural. His beard was long and white too, reaching almost to his chest, and he wore a traditional Dagara mantle, also white.

All around him there was a glow, a shiny rainbow ring, like a round window or portal into another reality. Although his body filled most of that portal, I could still see that there was an immense world inside it.

But what surprised me most was that the laws of nature in that world did not seem to operate like anything I had seen before. The little man's chair was sitting on a steep slope, yet he did not fall over backwards. I noticed that something like a thin wall sustained him. He was not leaning against the chair he was sitting on, but against that thin wall even though he still appeared upright in the window.

As my eyes moved from that wall and the world behind it back to the man, I saw that his thin legs were bare. His toes were so tiny I could barely see them. Petrified by something that was neither fear nor mirth, but felt like a tickling all over my body, I forgot to scream as the man said, "I have been watching you for a long time—ever since your mother started bringing you here. Why do you want to hurt the rabbit, your little brother? What did he do to you, little one?" His tiny mouth was barely moving as he spoke, and his voice was very thin.

Confused, I tried to reply, "I . . . I . . . don't know."

"Then be friendly to him from now on. He too likes the freshness of this place, he too has a mother who cares for him. What would his mother say if you hurt him? Now go because your own mother is worried."

While the little man was speaking, I spotted the rabbit, which had been hidden behind him in the magic circle all that time. It moved farther into that steep marvelous place, and then disappeared behind a tree. Meanwhile, I heard a cracking sound, as if the earth itself were splitting open. No sooner had I heard this than the old man stood up, slung his chair over his shoulder, and walked into the opening as if he had commanded it. The earth closed up on him, leaving a gust of fresh breeze in his place. At the same moment, I heard my mother's faint voice calling me, "Maldoma, please answer me, where are you?"

Still caught in the intensity of the experience, I opened my mouth to answer, but no sound came out. She called again and again and finally I was able to scream back at her. I could not see her, but I heard her give a yell and run toward me.

When she reached me, she lifted me up in the air and ran out of the bush with me as quickly as she could. "I have been looking for you since noon," she said, gasping for breath. "It's almost dark. What have you been doing all this time?"

"I saw a man in the bush and he said I should be friends with rabbits."

"What man, what rabbit?" my mother said in a panicked voice. "What are you talking about?" Not waiting for an answer, she provided one herself. "Oh, my poor child. Some witch must have taken his soul away. Please, spirits of nature, help me get him home alive." She went on and on, making sounds that seemed like gibberish to me, but were the primal language with which she conjured the protecting spirits.

When I was able to get her attention again, I said, "The man is very small and very old, Mama. He lives there, in the bush, but he just left."

"Oh, dear ancestors, my child has seen a Kontomlé. What else can it be? Don't talk anymore. Let's get out of here. I'll never take you out again."

Saying this, she loaded me onto her back, tied me to her with a piece of cloth, and walked breathlessly to her basket, now filled with heavy pieces of wood. She then lifted the whole thing onto her head and proceeded toward home. There was no singing or talking on that whole six-mile journey. As we neared the house, she finally spoke. "You will not tell anyone about this or I will never take you with me again. Do you hear me?"

"Yes," I replied. And that was all she ever said about the matter.

There was a reason for my mother's unwillingness to discuss this experience with me or to have me discuss it with others. The Dagara believe that contact with the otherworld is always deeply transformational. To successfully deal with it, one should be fully mature. Unfortunately, the otherworld does not discriminate between children and adults, seeing us all as fully grown souls. Mothers fear their children opening up to the otherworld too soon, because when this happens, they lose them. A child who is continually exposed to the otherworld will begin to remember his or her life mission too early. In such cases, a child must be initiated prematurely. Once initiated, the child is considered an adult and must change his/her relationship with the parents.

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My grandfather had been my confident interlocutor for as long as I can remember. There is a close relationship between grandfathers and grandchildren. The first few years of a boy's life are usually spent, not with his father, but with his grandfather. What the grandfather and grandson share together—that the father cannot—is their close proximity to the cosmos. The grandfather will soon return to where the grandson came from, so therefore the grandson is bearer of news the grandfather wants. The grandfather will do anything to make the grandson communicate the news of the ancestors before the child forgets, as inevitably happens. My grandfather obtained this news through hypnosis, putting me to sleep in order to question me.

It is not only to benefit the grandfather that this relationship with his grandson must exist. The grandfather must also transmit the "news" to the grandson using the protocol secret to grandfathers and grandsons. He must communicate to this new member of the community the hard tasks ahead on the bumpy road of existence.

For the Dagara, every person is an incarnation, that is, a spirit who has taken on a body. So our true nature is spiritual. This world is where one comes to carry out specific projects. A birth is therefore the arrival of someone, usually an ancestor that somebody already knows, who has important tasks to do here. The ancestors are the real school of the living. They are the keepers of the very wisdom the people need to live by. The life energy of ancestors who have not yet been reborn is expressed in the life of nature, in trees, mountains, rivers and still water. Grandfathers and grandmothers, therefore, are as close to an expression of ancestral energy and wisdom as the tribe can get. Consequently their interest in grandsons and granddaughters is natural. An individual who embodies a certain value would certainly be interested in anyone who came from the place where that value existed most purely. Elders become involved with a new life practically from the moment of conception because that unborn child has just come from the place they are going to.

A few months before birth, when the grandchild is still a fetus, a ritual called a "hearing" is held. The pregnant mother, her brothers, the grandfather, and the officiating priest are the participants. The child's father is not present for the ritual, but merely prepares the space. Afterward, he is informed about what happened. During the ritual, the incoming soul takes the voice of the mother (some say the soul takes the whole body of the mother, which is why the mother falls into trance and does not remember anything afterward) and answers every question the priest asks.

The living must know who is being reborn, where the soul is from, why it chose to come here, and what gender it has chosen. Sometimes, based on the life mission of the incoming soul, the living object to the choice of gender and suggest that the opposite choice will better accommodate the role the unborn child has chosen for him- or herself. Some souls ask that specific things be made ready before their arrival—talismanic power objects, medicine bags, metal objects in the form of rings for the ankle or the wrist. They do not want to forget who they are and what they have come here to do. It is hard not to forget, because life in this world is filled with many alluring distractions. The name of the newborn is based upon the results of these communications. A name is the life program of its bearer.

A child's first few years are crucial. The grandfather must tell the grandson what the child said while still a fetus in his mother's womb. Then, he

must gradually help him build a connection with his father, who will help him with the hard challenges up ahead. My father used to complain that his life was calamitous because he never knew his grandfather, who disappeared before he was born. Had he known him, my father said, he would never have lost his first family, never spent his youth working in a gold mine or later embraced the Catholic religion with a fervor grander than the one that linked him to his ancestors. His stepbrothers, who knew their grandfather, did not have the kind of restlessness that plagued my father. The frustration of a grandfatherless male child has no cure.

In the beginning, the intense intimacy between the grandson and the grandfather might create feelings of jealousy in the father. While a grandfather is alive, the grandchildren do not have much of anything to learn from their father—until they reach their preadolescent age. And the father knows that. He knows that a conversation between a grandson and a grandfather is a conversation between brothers of the same knowledge group. To know is to be old. In that, the grandson is as old as the grandfather. Consequently, the father is too young to have a part in this relationship between wise men.

I used to spend much of my days in the company of my grandfather. He was a man worn out by hard work, who at the age of sixty was virtually a child—weak and sick, yet with a mind still as alert as that of a man in the prime of youth. He also possessed incomparable wisdom stored over the course of half a century of sustained healing and medicine works.

Grandfather was thin and tall. Since I had first known him, he always wore the same traditional *boubou*. It had been white when he first got it, but in order to avoid the cost of maintenance, he had changed the white color of the cloth into red, using the juice of some roots that he alone knew the secret of. In use twenty-four hours a day, the *boubou* was simultaneously his daily outfit, his pajamas, and his blanket. After more than a decade, it had turned into a remnant of himself, blackened by sweat and dirt. Though most of the *boubou* had fallen off under the weight of filth, it still hung firmly on his shoulders, its general architecture intact. Unlike modern Christianity, which links cleanliness to godliness, Dagara culture holds the opposite to be true. The more intense the involvement with the life of the spirit, the more holy and wise an individual is, the less attention is paid to outward beauty. Grandfather owned a walking stick carved with artistic dexterity, its wood also darkened from long usage. His movements were slow, and I found it easier to be around him than around the other kids, who were older, stronger and more agile than I was. So every day, while everybody was at the farm, I was with Grandfather.

Grandfather knew every story ever told or even heard of in the tribe. And at his age he looked as if storytelling were the only thing he could still

do with success. He utilized this talent very well since that was the only way he could gain attention. Each time I sat in his lap, he took it as a request for a story, and he would always begin by asking a question.

"Brother Malidoma, do you know why the bat sits upside down?"

"No. Why?"

"Long, long time ago, and I mean long when I say long because that was when animals used to speak to men and men to animals and both to God."

"Then why don't animals speak to men anymore?"

"They still do, only we have forgotten how to comprehend them!"

"What happened?"

"Never mind. We're talking about bats, and why they all sit upside down."

"Yes. I want to know why they do that."

"Well, see, there was a time when Brother Bat died and no one knew who he was. The town crier took his body to the crocodile, saying, 'The jaws of this damn thing look like they were borrowed from a crocodile. I thought he might be your relative or something.'

"The crocodile said, 'It's true that this guy's got a mouth like mine, but I ain't got no brother with fur, let alone with wings.'

"So, next the town crier took the dead bat to the head of the birds tribe."

"And who's that?"

"It's Mother Sila, you know, the bird that flies high and shoots herself down like an arrow when she goes to catch her dinner. Mother Sila said, 'This animal looks like it's got good wings and reasonable claws, but I never saw anyone in my family with so few feathers.'

"And so, finally the town crier gave up and threw the bat into a ditch. But when Papa Bar found out about this, he was very angry. He rebelled against God and ordered the whole tribe never to look up to God again. Since then bats never turn their faces upward."

"Grandfather, this is too sad. Tell me another one."

Grandfather never had to be begged. He would tell you a story even without your asking. And the times you asked, he would keep on talking until you "unasked" him.

He also knew how to hypnotize you—to speak you to sleep—when he needed to be left alone to do some important work. He never chased a child away from him; in fact, he always thought children were the most cooperative people on earth. One just needed to know how to use their generous services. A sleeping child is even more obedient than a child awake, and so he would often hypnotize one of us, then awaken us into a state where we would be dispatched to run errands for him. Any child seen silently looking for something who would not respond when you asked,

"What are you looking for?" was a sleeping child on an errand for Grandfather. He did not like to request the services of grown-ups because they would grumble and swear the whole time. He always said that the good in a service has little to do with the service itself, but with the kind of heart one brings to the task. For him, an unwilling heart spoiled a service by infecting it with feelings of resentment and anger.

Grandfather knew how to talk to the void, or rather to some unseen audience of spirits. Among the Dagara, the older you get the more you begin to notice spirits and ancestors everywhere. When you hear a person speaking out loud, alone, you don't talk to them because he or she may be discussing an important issue with a spirit or an ancestor. This rule applies more to holy elders than to adults in general. When I was with Grandfather, I felt as if there were more people around than could be accounted for. When he knew I was not following his stories, he used to redirect his speech to these invisible beings. He never seemed bothered by my not listening.



Grandfather's respect and love for children was universal in the tribe. To the Dagara, children are the most important members of society, the community's most precious treasures. We have a saying that it takes the whole tribe to raise a child. Homes have doorless entrances to allow children to go in and out wherever they want, and it is common for a mother to not see her child for days and nights because he or she is enjoying the care and love of other people. When the mother really needs to be with her child, she will go from home to home searching for it.

When a child grows into an adolescent, he or she must be initiated into adulthood. A person who doesn't get initiated will remain an adolescent for the rest of their life, and this is a frightening, dangerous, and unnatural situation. After initiation, the elders will pick a partner for the young person, someone who is selected for their ability to team up with you in the fulfillment of your life purpose. If one obediently walks their life path, they will become an elder somewhere in their late forties or early fifties. Graduating to this new status, however, depends on one's good track record.

A male elder is the head of his family. He has the power to bless, and the power to withhold blessing. This ability comes to him from his ancestors, to whom he is very close, and he follows their wisdom in counseling his large family.

Wealth among the Dagara is determined not by how many things you have, but by how many people you have around you. A person's happiness is directly linked to the amount of attention and love coming to him or her