

Personal names and spiritual direction among the Moose¹

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Introduction

SPIRITUAL WISDOM IN ANOTHER CULTURE is the subject about which I have been invited to write. I will therefore place the present discussion in an appropriate context, namely, the socio-cultural setting of a precise group, the *Moose*, who make up about half of the population of Burkina Faso, in West Africa. Christianity reached there in 1900, and today Christians account for about 20 per cent of the population, the great majority of which (50 per cent) practise a traditional or ancestral religion. This consists essentially in a preoccupation with ancestors which includes worship directed towards them. The personal name and its associated attributes are such a special expression of faith, and of confidence in God, in the culture and religion of the *Moose* that they allow us to regard them as a form of spiritual direction.

A different conception of faith and of spiritual direction

Two preliminary points need to be made to help readers who are more familiar with a Christian experience of spiritual direction to enter into a quite different conception of existence in general and of faith and religion in particular.

In the Christian tradition the ministry of spiritual direction is an activity which has a precise content and particular aims and methods. It is carefully distinguished from other practices such as therapy, counselling, confession, the ministry of inner healing, etc.² Such careful distinctions have their advantages but can prevent a more global approach to persons and their problems. Our African languages have no single word for spiritual direction, but there is an experience here which corresponds to a similar reality even if it does not use the same methods. Our practice avoids compartmentalization and excessive individualism, and emphasizes a focusing vision of the complete person.³ Traditional African spiritual direction is more markedly an experience of wisdom, and is part of a

general tendency, in the culture, towards harmony and integration in the cosmos, and especially with the world of spirits and ancestors.

The Judaeo-Christian approach to faith and religion is very personal: each individual believer enters into a unique personal relationship with God. The individual human person has various rights and obligations: conversion and vocation, mission and destiny, salvation or damnation are all individual experiences. Consequently the Christian experience of spiritual direction has a certain personalist character. The Gospels, of course, have a certain general or institutional application and validity, as does Christology, for example. Furthermore, the spiritual growth of the individual is lived out, and finds its authenticity, within the Church. Personal freedom and responsibility, however, insists that the individual be the leading partner in any spiritual dialogue.

The African understanding of existence and of religion is quite different. Individual destiny is always intimately connected to that of the group. Salvation, consequently, is more communitarian than individual, and there is no talk of the damned or the excluded. Worship is directed to God, not in an immediate or personal way, but is mediated by ancestor-worship and through intermediaries such as the elders and sacrificers. At the sacrifices, God is always named without being designated.⁴ The rejection of direct confrontation of the deity in prayer springs from the respect which the *Moaaga* has for God, and also from the fact that in daily life there is no access to the *Naaba* (chief, emperor) except through intermediaries. The God is designated by the word *Naaba Wênde*, between whom and human beings the natural intermediaries are ancestors, spirits and elders. This conception of the relationship between human creature and the creator also affects the spiritual path.

Personal names in biblical and African culture

The journey begins with a significant experience in the life of the human person among the *Moose*: the receiving of an individual name. Why this choice? According to traditional customs a name is not conferred haphazardly. As in the Bible, a name marks out some of the milestones on the journey through existence of the human person.

It is useful to remember the convergence between the significance of personal names in the Bible and in African tradition. Names define the faith or the destiny of a human being. To change someone's name is to impose on that person a new personality, and

consequently a new vocation. To mark the taking possession of their lives God changes the names of Abraham (Genesis 17:5), of Sarah (Genesis 17:15), of Jacob (Genesis 32:29). Jesus in the gospel changes the name of Simon into Cephas (John 1:42). Among the *Moose* to change a personal name is also to change the person's social status and purpose.

INDIVIDUAL NAMES AMONG THE MOOSE

The *Moose* distinguish three kinds of name: *Sondre* (literally, 'call-name') which corresponds to the family name in western terminology; *Yüure* or *yù peelle* (literally 'white name', 'proper name') which is the forename, by which the individual is normally addressed or named, and of which there can be several; *Zab yùure* (literally '*nom de guerre*') which is the name chosen by the person at the time of some change in some position, for example, by a king after enthronement or an ordinary person after the death of a parent.

Sondre

According to traditional custom, a child bears the name of its *sigre*, the founder of the tribe or a famous ancestor. The use of the *sondre* does not imply that the *sigre* is reincarnated in the person now using the name, as in Buddhist traditions about the transmigration, but the child stands in relation to the *sigre* as an acorn to an oak. Each of the *Moose* has a *sigre* in whose spirit the individual *Moaaga* is clothed. To bear a particular *sondre* is to imitate the moral, social and religious conduct of the relevant *sigre*. Not only does the accompanying *sigre* protect the child against the occult but through education the ancestor infuses spiritual wisdom, with the result that the *sigre* lives on in the child. Biological life is received from the parents but spiritual life is from the *sigre*. A child's education involves exposure to the influence of the family and society, but also of spirits and ancestors, especially the *sigre*.

The *sondre* is not chosen at random but after careful consultation. Before the ceremony of *sigr koom* (ancestor's water), the new-born is given the title *sâan pèelga* (stranger, or white guest), a reference to the baby's pale skin. The senior member of the family pours the *sigre* water. Some signs allow the identification of the protecting ancestor who will drink the water, and whose name will be given to the new-born after the ceremony. The whole family gathers to pre-

sent welcoming gifts: grain-water poured as a libation, a sacrificed white chicken etc. At a ritual recognition by the family marking the membership of the new arrival, the *sigr koom* formally presents the baby. Henceforward the child is neither a stranger nor a guest but has an identifying name and forename. The ancestor's biography is familiar to the tribal historians and to the women of the family, who will henceforth refer to the past in a way which puts pressure on the child to behave in the socially expected way. For example, the name *Tân soba* or *Tâp soba* (archer) can be used for such purposes like this:

The archer does not loaf on the threshold!
 He spreads out his arrows and discards the broken ones!
 Warriors' beer is fermenting for tomorrow!
 For the hero to draw off the drink!
 War is not a dinner at which we stand on ceremony!
 The mother of the hero warms the heart!
 The mother of the coward scalds the guts!

All these verses call out the courage and determination which the warrior needs to protect the tribe, and especially the family. Behind the *sondre* is being constructed the vocational destiny of the person named. The colonial bureaucracy diminished the significance of all this by systematically imposing the father's name on all children. Nevertheless the *sondre* has not lost its original sense nor its affective overtones. Reference to it by the tribal historians and the elders can have quite unpredictable emotional consequences. The individual is reminded by the guardians of tradition of the ideal life which ought to be lived, which has already been led by the model ancestor.

Yùure

The choice of *yùure* or forename is determined by the circumstances of life or birth. A child might be called *Tiiga* (Tree), *Tânga* (mountain), *Tênga* (earth), *Nooaga* (chicken), or *Kùilga* (stream). These names signify that the spirits of tree, stream, mountain, earth or whatever have been prayed to, or that a chicken has been sacrificed, before the child came into the world. Often children in the same family will have the same forename but with different attributes: *Tiiga* (tree), *Ti bila* (little tree), *Ti raogo* (male tree) or *Ti poko* (female tree).

The forename can be a blessing or a forecast made about the child. My own father, for example, is called *Bèeb wûunda*: literally 'enemies will complain'. Such a forename predicts success in life in spite of the hostility and jealousy of opponents.

A forename can express gratitude to some notable benefactor. If a chief, for example, has given a bride in marriage, the first son born to the man and woman might be given a forename which recalled the gift and the thanks of the recipients: for example, *Rîm belem nooma* means 'the king's being is beneficent'; another forename, *Rîm pùg nooma* means 'the king's service is good'. The first daughter born to the same couple might also be handed over to the chief to be given eventually as a bride for someone else. The social chain is therefore not broken, and the chief can go on doing good and the subjects continue to be grateful.

The current practice of giving divine names ought also to be mentioned. In 1966 Fr Étienne Poulet mounted an investigation in the east of Burkina which collected over 500 forenames in which the word *Wênde* (God) appears with a particular attribute.⁵ The faith and hope of the *Moose* find expression in these divine names which are living worship from society towards the controller of everything. Some examples:

<i>Rel Wênde</i>	rely on God
<i>Sidbe Wênde</i>	truth is in God
<i>Da yâg ne Wênde</i>	be humble before God
<i>Da welg ne Wênde</i>	do not separate yourself from God
<i>Wênd kûuni</i>	gift of God
<i>Wêndzoodo</i>	friendship with God
<i>Wênd puiire</i>	share in God
<i>Wêndmanegda</i>	God disposes

Zab yùure

Zab yùure is a motto. This name is taken as an adult, during initiation, at the funeral of one's father, or by a chief at an enthronement. It sums up a truth, a wisdom, a philosophy which experience of life has revealed to an individual. It is a programme of life or government which a new chief announces to his people, which explains its mysterious character, and sometimes its combative or defensive note.

Here is an example of the motto of an emperor: *Naaba Koom*: 'one hundred disciples assembled cannot know God', that is, cannot

penetrate the divine plans and mysteries. This slogan means that no one can reach the core of the emperor's thought.⁶ Another motto attributed to another emperor was *Naabi Kugri*. *Kugri* means 'stone'. The stone conferred has taken root! To uproot it will be difficult'. The slogan was a way of promising that the kingdom would be consolidated by the new chief's beneficent rule, and to warn enemies against any attempt at destabilization. A newly appointed chief chooses a new forename and three mottoes which indicate the intentions of the new government. Henceforth it is forbidden, under threat of a fine, for the citizens to use the king's old forenames. All those who had this forename before the royal investiture are now obliged to style themselves *Naab yùure*, that is 'bearing the king's forename'.

Like the *sondre*, the *zab yùure* lends itself to the sort of elaboration by which the tribal historians skilfully construct the genealogy of a chief, advertising his virtues and achievements. The *zab yùure* is not the exclusive preserve of *moose* dignitaries. Every *talga* or ordinary citizen can select three mottoes after their father's funeral. As in the biblical mentality, to change name means to change personality and social position. The ordinary person picks a motto after the father's death and henceforward a new personality is adopted. The management of the family business passes on to the next generation. As long as the father lives, the children's own personality remains in his shadow. Once the father is dead, the family has a new leader who must honourably assume responsibility.

In conclusion, the attribution of the *sondre*, of the *yùure* and of the *zab yùure* solemnly connects the past history and the future vocation of the person. All these names define the values and point out the paths to be followed. Names are both guides and objectives. The general significance of names and the relationship to ancestors which in particular they indicate are of great importance for the *Moose*. There is a comparison here with the litany of the forenames which Christian parents give to their children at baptism. The Christian name can easily be joined by the forename of a grandparent or an ancestor. The truth of the name is underlined each time an elder pronounces a blessing on someone by mentioning the *sondre*, that is, the protecting ancestor.

Guiding a life according to the sigre

The early education of the child includes elements of spiritual direction aimed at the effective insertion of the infant into the social,

cultural and economic network of the community. Such accompaniment is determined by a particular anthropological vision, which we can understand better by further investigating the reality of the *sigre*.

The *Moaaga* has a vision of being which posits a pre-existing vital force created by God and called *kinkirga* or spirit. The *kinkirsi* (plural of *kinkirga*) live in the undergrowth, trees, rocks, forests, seas, the firmament, mountains, hills, in fact in the whole world. There are good and bad spirits. To exist is, in the first place, to be a *kinkirga*, it is to be able to act freely and capriciously in order to be happy. Popular imagination describes the *kinkirsi* as little beings or else as monsters with big heads. The *kinkirsi* of God are those which incarnate themselves and are born into the terrestrial world through divine magnanimity, according to precept. Other *kinkirsi* are those which have been called up by special rituals conducted near their dwellings: the mountains, hills, streams etc.⁷

This explains the attitude of parents, especially mothers, and particularly the apparent lack of discipline among young children. They seem to be allowed to do anything and parents seem to respect even their most trivial whims. The underlying idea is that the small child is still under the influence of the *kinkirga* and is consequently an independent free spirit which has risked incarnating itself, and therefore settles by itself the limits of its own freedom. If earthly life were to seem too restricted, the spirit might well decide to go back to its previous existence, which was free, independent and capricious. The child will die if the *kinkirga* decides to go back to its earlier life. If this happens the parents will content themselves with the thought: 'Our child has gone back'. Such a return involves not only physical death but also a social and psychological regression.

Behind the seemingly permissive attitudes there is the basic pedagogical insight that the child needs to be the centre of the world, especially that of the parents'. Women understand that an atmosphere of confidence and of affective security generates a feeling of personal worth and self-esteem which is necessary to the sane and harmonious development of the child. It is necessary to add, however, that a child who dies young does not receive a proper funeral since such a child is not thought to rejoin its ancestors and has not had time to transmit the life which it had only just received. Only a person who has had children has the right to a funeral. In this rule can be discerned the limits of the existence of the *kinkirga*. As long as the spirit is trying to preserve its own independence, it remains alone without any real history.

As soon as it gives up its independence and finds a place in a family tree it has necessarily a destiny. When people rejoin their ancestors after death they re-acquire the trappings of eternity, and can act as *sigre* for generations still to come.

Place of the sigre in education

The education of a human being is a perilous business. It involves taming the *kinkirga* and humanizing it. The co-operation of a person's heavenly family is indispensable. This understanding of *sigre* is like the biblical idea of a guardian angel, understood as protector, as companion, as messenger, but with the difference that the guardian angel fulfils a mission entrusted to him by God. A child's *sigre* is an ancestor who takes a particular interest in the person, personally adopting the child and guaranteeing spiritual growth, as a heavenly godparent. Faith in the *sigre* presupposes personal immortality. The dead are not dead, but continue to live through their offspring to whom they communicate ancestral values to guide the child's steps towards eternal happiness. This happiness consists in eventually entering the eternal home where the ancestors dwell, and enjoying their condition. When someone dies the customary hopes are the following: 'that God will refresh the ground so that there may be sleep', in other words, that the earth may weigh lightly upon the person so that eternal rest is possible! Another good wish is: 'That coolness may be conferred on us'. Coolness is a symbol of well-being under all its forms, and in particular health and peace, happiness and harmony.

Accompaniment

In addition to the vertical spiritual direction offered by ancestors and other celestial guides, there is a horizontal accompaniment given by the earthly family within the village community. Every adult may correct a child whose conduct is deemed unsatisfactory. An important moment in the child's education is the rite of passage into adolescence. This initiation lasts three months for boys and four for girls, and is a time of testing and social apprenticeship. Circumcision or scarring takes place which gives the young people adult status and confirms their gender-identity and role. They now have the right to know tribal secrets about beliefs and customs. Initiation-names are adopted which among themselves the members of each graduating class use to reinforce the bond between them. Ties of friendship also form during this special time. The person in charge of the initiation is

a sort of master of novices who requires from all a strict obedience. During the rite of passage the young people also learn to take responsibility and they form a cohort of contemporaries which will last all their life. At moments of crisis a person will readily turn to a friend from this period for advice and counsel.

Within the family certain members play an important, if hidden, role in the spiritual formation of the young. Aunts on the father's side give a lot of helpful instruction to their nieces, who, in turn, are often more open with these women than with their parents. Uncles and aunts on the mother's side also play an important role in the accompaniment of the young who communicate very willingly with them. There is a sort of familiarity which permits the children to make certain demands but also predisposes them to accept advice from uncles and cousins on that side of the family.

There is another kind of spiritual accompaniment given by tales, legends and proverbs recounted at night, around the campfire, by an elder. These narratives have educational, civic and moral components, on which the senior members of the community deliver a commentary. The venerable commentators are the tradition's living memory who are closer to the ancestors whose exploits they transmit.

At the level of social life it is worth drawing attention to the significance of soothsayers, seers, witchdoctors etc. Prejudice readily suspects them of outright dishonesty, or at least of mild deception. In fact, charlatans and persons of dubious morality are quickly exposed. Mostly the witchdoctors are wise persons and masters of the spiritual life, full of psychological insight and medical skill, who rightly inspire confidence among those who, sometimes travelling from afar, take the trouble to consult them. They practise a rigorous diagnostic procedure and prescribe practical and effective action in response to the real problems which are brought to them. If these practitioners are seen to pursue either patients or profits they would lose all credibility and respect. One feature of their therapeutic strategy, and the explanation of their success, is their concern to seek harmony and balance between human beings and the invisible spiritual world of ancestors.⁸

Conclusion

In this article I have tried to describe one part of the religious experience of the *Moose* people. Starting from their understanding of names I have tried to highlight certain features of their spiritual itinerary. For the *Moose* a name is a link with a founding ancestor

or *sigre* who functions as a kind of beacon, a star of Bethlehem, in a person's life. Vocation consists in following the path illuminated by the star. All family, social, cultural and religious structures are guiding intermediaries between the individual and the *sigre* and the *Wènde* god. In an inculturated version of Christian teaching, Robert Ouedraogo, whom I cited earlier, does not hesitate to identify Christ as the *sigre* of each Christian, the elder and ancestor of a multitude of brothers and sisters, and sole mediator between God and human beings. This spiritual insight deserves further study.

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This article was translated from the French by Peter Gallagher SJ.

NOTES

1 Glossary of terms: *Moose*: the inhabitants of the Moogo; *Moaaga*: an individual member of the tribe; *Mossi*: used by outsiders for singular and plural; *Naaba*: chief, emperor; *Naaba Wènde*: God; *Sondre*: family name (in western terminology); *Yiure* or *yù peelle*: forename; *Zab yùure*: name chosen at time of change in social position; *Sigre*: famous ancestor, tribal founder; *Sigr koon*: ancestor's water; *Sâan peelga*: stranger, white guest; *Talga*: ordinary citizen; *Kingkirga*, *kinkirsi* (pl): good and bad pre-existing vital forces created by God.

2 W. A. Barry and W. J. Connolly, *The practice of spiritual direction* (New York: Seabury, 1983); and also various articles in D. L. Fleming (ed), *The Christian ministry of spiritual direction* (Review of Religious Life, 1980).

3 L.V. Thomas and R. Luneau, *La terre africaine et ses religions* (Paris, 1975), pp 38–43.

4 J. Ilboudo, 'Du Dieu nommé sans être désigné: itinéraire spirituel du peuple Mossi', unpublished licentiate dissertation in the Institute of Spirituality, Gregorian University, Rome 1981.

5 E. Poulet, 'Les noms théophores en Moose', manuscript, 1966.

6 Y. Tiendrebeogo, *Histoire des coutumes royales des Mossi de Ouagadougou* (Ouagadougou: Presses Africaines, 1964), p 37.

7 R. Quedraogo, 'Essai sur l'âme du Moaga', *Bulletin Echo du diocèse de Ouagadougou* (June 1963).

8 E. de Rosny, *Les yeux de ma chèvre* (Paris: Plon, 1981).