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 complexes 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 blunt 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?"

I 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