

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 *Yielbongura*, "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 *Kontomblé* 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 *Kontomblé* 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 controlling 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 "Frenglish" 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 checkup, 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.