

Moussa Koné's story

Translator's Note

The story of Moussa Koné is remarkable and disturbing for several reasons: first of all, it confounds reason itself, one of the more generally reliable tools available to adult humans. In its supernatural 'Joan of Arc' manner, Moussa's testimony drives a metaphorical stake into the ground, as if to proclaim: "Miracles *do* happen. Here is one for you to contemplate." As such, it reassures the believer, beckons to the curious and defies the doubter.

Secondly, once a testimonial has been published it gains a different *sort* of weight, a greater one to be sure, but more importantly, the weight it gains works out to much more than a simple 'plus one' element or factor; upon entering into a category, an 'equation,' if you will, which already contains thousands, perhaps millions of members, its power is multiplied. The linguistic conditionality of the category of such experiences might begin with something akin to this: "If this testimony is true, then I've got a problem." Now balance the equation.

Thirdly, by virtue of its two-pronged nature, with echoes of Nicodemus' queries to Christ ringing in our ears (i.e. 'before' and 'after' – see John 3:1-8), Moussa's story politely begs and perhaps impels respect: less because of the sheer implausibility of many of the events recounted herein than because of the dramatic consequences of those events. Here is a man, ostensibly and apparently fully sensate, who arbitrarily chose to set out on an exhilarating yet perilous new path in his life. My dictionary defines "arbitrary" as: "based on or subject to individual judgment." That sounds quite appropriate in this particular case, but here's the rub – my dictionary also defines "arbitrary" as: "determined by chance, whim, or impulse." Key word that, *whim*, for absolutely nothing surrounding Moussa's 'change of heart, change of life' implies, connotes or betokens whim. Quite the contrary, everything about this man testifies to his level headedness, or, "characteristically self-composed and sensible" comportment. So we have nearly come full circle. Decisions made by level-headed individuals *should* force respect. Furthermore, every passing day since Moussa set out upon his magical new life has confirmed the veracity

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of the causes and augmented the judiciousness of the consequences of the events described below.

Finally, in speaking of consequences, contemporary readers cannot possibly be unaware of or disregard the social-historical circumstances that impinged upon Moussa's conversion. It is one thing to strike out in a fundamentally new direction with few tangible aids or assurances; it is something else entirely to go dragon-hunting armed merely 'with a hope and a prayer.' For this Bible-toting man who has wandered throughout Côte-d'Ivoire over the past twenty-odd years, life has been anything but a picnic. Since his conversion in 1987, Moussa has faced ostracism, taunts and threats on a quasi-quotidian basis. Even a cursory glance at the condition of Christians around the world in recent decades should provoke consternation or indignation in any democratically-minded individual, particularly when viewed under the magnifying glass of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Article 18 of this laudable document states: "Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; this right includes freedom to change his religion or belief, and freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship and observance." Yet the utter failure or outright refusal of individual nation-states *and* the United Nations Organizations to guarantee such a right bodes ill, indeed, for humanity's 'sustainability.' As the poet teases, "How frugal is the Chariot / That bears the Human soul." So, yes, Moussa Koné's story disturbs – multitudinously so.

On a far more prosaic note, it might be helpful for readers to know why I have routinely avoided contracted forms in Moussa's narrative. While the use of contractions in the dialogues he relates is readily justified by the colloquial nature of everyday conversation, an apology must be sought and presented for their removal elsewhere. Full forms were employed for two reasons: firstly, although Moussa's story is a personal testimonial and quite naturally exhibits many of the standard features associated with the genre (repetition, apostrophe, informal tone, frequent rhetorical questions, etc.), removing contractions in places where the English-speaking reader would normally expect to find them enabled me to retain, add or underscore several crucial

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features of the story: the sobriety of the author's personality, the solemnity of his manner, and the gravity of the weighty matters he tackles. If such a decision on my part happens to have added earnestness into the affair, then so be it. That was not my intention, for plenty of evidence of such a trait can be found elsewhere in the author's tale, in passages that have nothing whatsoever to do with the question of contractions.

Secondly, the use of 'uncontracted' or full forms in testimonial storytelling automatically slows down the delivery of the lines, which in turn reflects what I subjectively perceive to be a salient feature of the unique manner of speaking English frequently found among West African speakers. If by 'avoiding' contracted forms I was able to bring to the surface the peculiar sonority or rather *euphony* of a slower rate of delivery, then so much the better, for I have always found it to be a most pleasing feature of 'West African English.'

The King James Version has been used for Biblical citations and the N.J. Dawood translation of the Koran for Koranic citations (Penguin, 1999).

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