

Pastor Hénoc SIB

Peacemaker



I thank Pastor Hénoc SIB whose kind cooperation permitted the writing of this booklet.



Preface

Some explanation is perhaps necessary as to why we are making this document available to our friends and supporters. In the course of our radio and literature ministry, under the name of “Espérance Aujourd’hui”, it has been a privilege to get to know something of the lives and ministries of various Christians working on the mission field in Africa and to see how our modest involvement contributes to their ongoing work.

We have been aware of the activities of Pastor Hénoc Sib as a peacemaker for some time and when the particular events that are described in this document came to light we felt it would be good to share them with you for a number of reasons: Firstly, to help you to understand something of the particular issues that people can face in the African context. Secondly, to give you some awareness of how the church in Africa is seeking to respond to and address these issues. Thirdly, to show how your prayers and support for our ministry contributes practically to the outworking of the gospel on the ground in Africa.

I should maybe add that Pastor Hénoc Sib is one of the leaders of the evangelical Protestant Church in Burkina Faso, a church that was founded through the activities of the mission WEC International.

Ian Flanders

Saturday 24 May 2008. Near Perkoura, a village in the Loropéni department, situated at about 30 kilometres from Gaoua in the south-west of Burkina Faso¹.

Kpièwènamì has just arrived at the family field. She came from the village where she was helping to gather the crops. Now, she is moving toward her husband Palé. She can see him at the other end of the cultivated land; his back bent. He is busy, concentrating on the task of clearing the field by pulling up all the weeds his hands can find.

Palé feels tired. The evening heat remains heavy, sweat drips from his forehead and his tunic sticks to his body.

Suddenly, he notices two men walking in the distance. Stunned, he watches them approach.

They have come into his field, leading and pushing a herd of cows that advance between them. Their shouts mingle with the mooing of the beasts. Clouds of dust are raised, filling the air and enveloping the unexpected procession.

Palé notices the hoofs of the animals treading on his soil, he witnesses the trampling of the family’s seed, the destruction of demanding work, the progressive loss of his possession.

A blaze of anger seizes his heart, hatred controls his mind, driving him to approach the men. He will tell them that they are doing wrong, he will warn them that they are destroying his crop, all the hope it bears, the life it brings.

¹ The details of this story are found on some websites and in a CD sent to the GBM radio department in which Palé’s wife is interviewed.

He finds himself running towards them, shouting and waving his arms. He cannot hear his wife's voice, calling him, pleading for him not to go, to return and be wise.

Already he has reached the herdsmen and he addresses them. The choice of his words is harsh and insulting, utterly degrading. Now they are replying. They do not tolerate the roughness of his speech, the violence of his attitude. One of the two suddenly swoops down on him, forcing him to roll in the thin dust.

The fight proves to be brutal. The blows fall, violent and painful. However, Palé, in a quick movement, manages to floor his opponent.

The other man is still standing, behind Palé. His face is grim. From the cloth of his colourless tunic, he pulls out a hatchet. Destruction flashes in his dark eyes, hatred has taken control. Triumphant, he brandishes the weapon. The sharp blade shines in the light. Suddenly, in a violent movement, the man throws it. The instrument of death cleaves through the air, frightening and hissing.

Petrified, Palé's wife witnesses the tragedy. In a muted thud, the blade strikes her husband's back... He is the man she loves. He is the man who has always cared for her, the father who has generously provided for her children's needs. Now he is falling. As she watches, he hits the ground and collapses.

Terrified, racked by pain, blinded with tears, she runs away. She must tell her family, her friends, the village. Everyone has to know. Two men have just attacked her husband. They have murdered him. Worst of all, they are

Peule. They belong to this horrible tribe they all hate. To her horror, she has lost her status as a married woman, she is reduced to the state of a widow, her children have become orphans! Her future appears bleak!

The two Peule have themselves fled into the deserted plain, leaving the corpse bathed in blood and an ill omen behind them.



A few days later.

I am on the phone with Pastor Moufé Sié Kobjo from the church in Gaoua. He is describing the events occurring in the area where he lives. His voice is solemn. The situation is really serious.

'So you see, after Palé's murder, in retaliation, his brother with some other men went to the closest village occupied by herdsmen. There they frightened its peaceful villagers and killed two innocent shepherds! But his sinful action did not stop at that point! He went further and set fire to the huts. The blaze destroyed the belongings and injured many people.'

'Yes, I know! We are being informed by the media! They are so focused on this sudden rise of violence! The news is alarming!'

'Hénoc, I tell you, the whole population is now really afraid! There are confrontations between farmers and herdsmen in some villages! People are absolutely terrified! Men and women with their children feel forced to abandon their communities in the hope of saving their lives!...

Hénoc, I am waiting for you! Our church is already open to welcome the refugees. We need your help!’

I can only accept my friend’s call and without hesitation, I leave Ouagadougou, situated at about 400 kilometres from Gaoua to meet him, with the two other colleagues he works alongside. I am myself Pastor Hénoc Sib, vice-president of the Evangelical Protestant church.

After a seemingly endless journey by bus, I arrive in Gaoua and immediately, I am confronted with the full scale of the tragedy. A crowd of refugees fills the whole area. Faces haggard and drawn, they wander about. They are numbered in thousands... Hundreds already occupy the church premises.

I am walking amongst them, greeting some, helping others and giving encouraging words. Distress shows in every eye. Their pain is overwhelming and has taken control of these people’s will. Grief and desolation are everywhere, present especially amongst the herdsmen; terrified, they fear for their lives. All these displaced men and women are caught up in panic. Lost, traumatized, they are fleeing destruction, they cannot bear violence any more. They crave for peace, for the hostility to stop and for a brighter future.

I feel the Lord’s call; surely, he is sending me and I will answer him, I will obey and act. The words of Jesus come to my mind, strong and powerful: *“Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world*

*gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid.”*²

The Lord has passed a message on to us. He has entrusted to us a mission, to spread his peace amongst men, and to announce that he is the peace mankind needs. I feel the necessity of bringing this good news, of sharing hope where distress abounds, peace where war threatens. And in my mind I start to plan future conferences that need to be organized.

In the meantime, we continue to provide shelter and help to these distressed people. Alongside the Protestant church, the State is involved, and other organizations, the Action Sociale and the Red Cross. We all collaborate and our general contribution enables food and clothing to be distributed, personal comfort to be given.



Four months later, in Gaoua.

The Evangelical Protestant Church is organizing a conference open to farmers and herdsmen, to the Catholic Church and the Muslim Community, to the chefs coutumiers³ and the Peule.

I lead the sessions and present our objectives.

We promote non-violence and reconciliation, as Jesus taught us through the Gospels and especially in Matthew 5.

² John 14. 27

³ Each village is represented by a traditional chief, also called the chef coutumier.

I stress the importance of each individual, the need we have for one another and the necessity to find solutions to live together in harmony.

Between the sessions, workshops are held and questions are raised, such as what are the sources of the conflicts in our communities? As an individual, can I offer solutions to solve these disagreements? How can I contribute to improve the quality of life in my environment and favour peace and respect?

As the conference progresses, a man stands up. He wants to speak. He lost his beloved brother, who was killed during the conflicts. He has himself just miraculously escaped death. Deeply affected by the tragedy, he expresses himself openly. He shares his grief, all the pain he has to endure and confirms that if such sessions had been held before the harm was done, none of it would have ever happened. The participants feel compassion for him and agree that the talks are beneficial and will enable each one to strive for a brighter future. They commit themselves to work so that peace is promoted, restored wherever it is lacking, and respected once established...



April 2009, in Gaoua.

Nearly a year has passed since the tragic events triggered by Palé's death deeply distressed a whole community. In the meantime many people were imprisoned and peace has been gradually restored.

The Protestant church is still very active on the ground; it offers support to the individuals affected by the tragedy and some counselling on request.

And today it is also holding its second conference based on the theme of peace. All the representative leaders have been invited. They have replied positively to its invitation and therefore forty are present in the church premises. Once more, the main communities are represented; thus farmers and herdsmen, Catholics and Muslims, chefs coutumiers⁴ and Peule are seated together.

Words of blessings are exchanged between the participants; many recognize the efforts undertaken by the Protestant church that has committed itself not only to restoring peace, but also to maintaining it, and people respect us for this.

Palé's death and the tragic events that resulted are commemorated. Then in front of the assembly, I preach on Abraham.

The booklet *Espérance Aujourd'hui* entitled 'Leçons sur la vie d'Abraham'⁵, inspires me, especially the chapter presenting the two quarrels in which this patriarch became involved and the way he solved them. The subject of these arguments was land and water, two essential elements. But the biblical stories relate that no blood was shed because Abraham acted as a peaceful and just mediator.

⁴ Each village is represented by a traditional chief, also called the chef coutumier.

⁵ Lessons on Abraham's life.

To finish I highlight the character of Jesus who presents himself as the peace given to the world, the messenger of peace sent by God.

At the end of the sermon, I distribute to the participants nineteen booklets *Espérance Aujourd'hui: 'La paix'*⁶. I explain that they represent a useful tool, containing rich teaching for peace makers, for everyone determined to apply the spiritual lessons received and promote peace in his community.

Marveled by the gift offered, the audience warmly receives it. Even those who cannot read French, express their wish to possess a copy! Someone has to read it and explain it to them!

The comments are animated. The importance of the booklets' contents is manifest. Some suggest that they should be translated into the Lobiri language; their impact would be so much greater! The fact that these booklets tackle various aspects of peace; peace with God, peace with men, peace at home, peace in our community, enable them to be a practical and instructive resource, empowering them with a wonderful message !

During the talks, I pray in my heart that the good news of Jesus, the real peace given to the world, who loves these people so much, might be fully received, that these men, these chiefs, these representatives might hear his voice calling them and might turn to him!

⁶ Peace.

Before everyone departs, the whole assembly expresses openly its determination to apply the teaching received, to strive together for peace and encourage people to act for it. Everyone agrees; a civil war has been avoided. Now they all thirst for peace to be maintained, respect promoted and love expressed.

Hélène Flanders