

Malidoma Some

- *Burkina Faso, West Africa (1956 - present)*

- *children's version*

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Chapter I

All afternoon, Mother had been grinding the red millet grain to make flour. She stood at the grinding station in the women's quarters, pushing the small piece of granite back and forth, back and forth, over the grinding mill. As she ground the millet, she sang the songs of the Birifor family - father and grandfather, mother and grandmother - all the stories of the ancestors as far back any anyone could remember.

As the sun began to slide down the great dome of sky overhead, Mother ground the millet and sang. Little Malidoma watched Mother grinding, and his mouth watered at the thought of the fine millet cakes she would make. Malidoma had been listening to mother's song and soft whoosh, whoosh of the grinding stone since the sun was high overhead. He had listened while it began to slide down the sky. He had waited a long time for a millet cake and now he felt like he could wait no longer. His stomach growled. It growled louder and louder until it, too, sang the song of the Birifor family! But mother just kept grinding and singing, singing and grinding, back and forth and back and forth.

Malidoma thought he could not wait another minute for his millet cake, but just as he was about to jump up and down, begging Mother to make him a cake right now, a warm breeze whispered in his ear. It twisted and tickled and teased, until little Malidoma began to giggle. He looked around. There was Grandfather, smiling at him from across the compound. Malidoma and his growling belly ran straight across the compound, and hopped right into Grandfather's lap.

Malidoma snuggled in as close as he could, burying himself in the folds of the red boubou that Grandfather wore day and night - his day clothes, his pajamas, and his blanket all in one. Malidoma snuggled in close, but then he started coughing - the boubou was old and blackened by sweat and dirt; it smelled bad and Malidoma wanted to hold his nose. Grandfather didn't care that the boubou smelled bad; it had been his boubou for a long time and Grandfather knew what was important. Grandfather held Malidoma close; soon they were playing together and all thoughts of the boubou were lost in their laughter.

Malidoma's stomach rumbled. "Hungry, are you?" said Grandfather. "Do you know how the animals get their food?"

"No," said Malidoma. "Tell me, please, Grandfather."

"I will tell you just what Ananse Spider told me about getting dinner the easy way," Grandfather said as he settled back to tell a story. But before he could even clear his throat, one of the older men of the village came up.

"Father Bakhye," he said, "May I have your counsel? My sister is sick, and only you hear what the plants and animals have to say. Only you will know what to do." Grandfather sat up taller and put his hand on Malidoma's shoulder. Malidoma hopped up quickly to stand by Grandfather's quarters, away from the grown-ups. Malidoma listened to the soft clucking of the goats outside the compound walls. He wondered what they were mumbling about. He listened to the rumble of his belly and looked to see if mother was making the cakes yet – but no, all he heard was the Birifor song and the soft whooshing of the grinding stone.

It seemed to Malidoma that Grandfather and the man talked for a long time. Then the man stood up. He bowed. "Thank you, father Bakhye," he said. "We will do just what you say."

"Well, Brother Malidoma," said Grandfather. "Where was I?" Malidoma quickly hopped back in Grandfather's lap. "Oh, yes," said Grandfather without a pause, "I was going to tell you what Ananse had to say." Malidoma had spent many an hour watching Spider, but he had never understood a thing he said. Ananse told Grandfather all his secrets, and Malidoma was eager to hear them. He snuggled in close, but no sooner had Grandfather begun to tell Malidoma about Ananse than a woman came up.

"Excuse me, father Bakhye," she said, "but I am very troubled. My son has gone to the city, and now he has forgotten the village and our ways. Is there a ritual we should perform?" Again Grandfather put his hand on little Malidoma's shoulder, and he quickly got up.

Again, Malidoma waited and waited. "Will they never stop talking?" he wondered. He watched the spiders and beetles run around the compound, this way and that. He listened hard, but he did not understand their words. Sun slid farther and farther down its dome back toward the trees on the far side of the village. Finally, the woman got up. She thanked Grandfather for his counsel, and left. Now Malidoma would have his story; he jumped back into Grandfather's lap.

"Well, yes," said Grandfather, "that Ananse never wanted to get his own dinner. Did you know that, Malidoma?"