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### APPLICATION OF THE EPISTEMOLOGIES OF THE SOUTH TO ADDRESS THE ECOLOGICAL CRISIS: A NARRATIVE CASE STUDY OF BURKINA FASO AND THE LEADER YACOUBA SAWADOGO

Barwendé Médard Sané

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APPLICATION OF THE EPISTEMOLOGIES OF THE SOUTH TO ADDRESS THE  
ECOLOGICAL CRISIS: A NARRATIVE CASE STUDY OF BURKINA FASO AND THE  
LEADER YACOUBA SAWADOGO

A Dissertation Presented  
to  
The Faculty of the School of Education  
Department of Organization and Leadership  
Organization and Leadership Program

In Partial Fulfillment  
Of the Requirements for the Degree  
Doctor of Education

By

Barwendé Médard Sané  
San Francisco, California  
March 2023

## DISSERTATION ABSTRACT

The purpose of the study is the country of Burkina Faso and the pedagogical aspects of Yacouba Sawadogo's leadership and commitment to ecology, using epistemologies of the South to address climate change in Africa. Knowing that Sawadogo's achievement happened within a contextualized community whose members impacted him, this study explores the different aspects, the cultural belief systems, and the foundations of his achievement. The study uses a qualitative narrative case study methodology. First, I found that to the Sahel hero, the ecological crisis comes from the human crisis, which means the distance humans created between their authentic identity and the current state of being human. If the planet's inhabitants recalibrate their consumerist and exploitative mentality and relate to the earth as a mother, they could regrow and become better. In so acting, they could find solutions to addressing the ecological crisis. Second, Sawadogo's hope and determination are grounded in his faith in God and the mentorship he benefited from his koranic mentor and the revolutionary President Thomas Sankara. Third, Sawadogo is a genuine Afrocentric pedagogue who was taught by his own experience and the earth herself. Revolted by his peers' defeatism, he applied innovative methods and became an influential ecologist capable of raising and transforming similar farmers and ecologists. My research challenges colonial heritage in Africa, addresses the new forms of recolonization on the continent, and highlights the significance of Afrocentric contributions to climate change. Beyond Sawadogo's merit, understanding the context of the emergence of such leaders, including their challenges, pain, and consolation, helps pave the way to raise similar leaders who care for the earth. Ecological peacemakers are indispensable to the current challenges of our world.

This dissertation, written under the direction of the candidate's dissertation committee and approved by the committee members, has been presented to and accepted by the Faculty of the School of Education in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctoral of Education. However, the content and research methodologies presented in this work represent the candidate's work alone.

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March 29, 2023  
Date

Dissertation Committee

Dr. Jane Bleasdale  
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March 29, 2023

Dr. Danfeng Koon

March 29, 2023

Dr. Luis Enrique Bazan

March 29, 2023

## **DEDICATION**

I dedicate my research to Yacouba Sawadogo, President Thomas Sankara, my father, Koudaogo Daniel Sané, the people of Gourga, and all people of goodwill around the world who are committed to addressing climate change.

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

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## CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

### Statement of the Problem

In December 2020, Yacouba Sawadogo, a farmer from Burkina Faso, West Africa, was declared the winner of the United Nations Environment Program's 2020 Champions of the Earth award for Inspiration and Action (Dodd, 2021). He successfully utilized traditional cultivation techniques, called Zai and stone cordon, to improve agricultural practice and transform his barren land into a forest of 40 hectares rather than continuing with standard methods used by neighboring farmers to improve their farming. Yet, while researchers and journalists have highlighted the ingenuity of Yacouba Sawadogo (Mwenda, 2019; Kinda, 2021), few have contextualized his contribution within a historical-political context nor captured the more profound philosophy guiding his efforts.

There is a problem because Sawadogo's achievement did not happen *sui generis*. He belongs to a community, and this community forged his persona. In African societies, individuals generally are inseparable from their communities for many reasons. First, individuals emerge from communities, and individuals build communities. Members of communities rely on one another for services and assistance. When people say, “a person is a person through other persons,” they mean each community member achieves their personhood thanks to the community.

Second, individuals are aware that they are ambassadors of their communities. The community values are their values, and the community problems are their problems. Third, communities take care of individuals, and individuals take care of communities. However, heroic individuals can make a difference when they succeed in developing exceptional capabilities that

bring more life to the community. Sometimes, such individuals go against the grain, including inventing their ways. And when they succeed, others learn from their experience.

When international institutions recognize Sawadogo's achievement without situating him within his community, there is a problem because Sawadogo is not without his community. Celebrating Sawadogo without studying his pedagogical leadership, including his context and community values and challenges, promotes superficial leadership without roots. In this research, I studied the pedagogical aspects of Sawadogo's commitment to ecology knowing that he has used Afrocentric knowledge and wisdom to address climate change in Burkina Faso. What sociological and philosophical traits of Yacouba Sawadogo's commitment ground his achievement, and how can his pedagogy help raise new ecologists? This research on Sawadogo analyzes a person who became a beneficiary of international recognition through other persons. Therefore, I involved people who attended Sawadogo's pedagogy and helped build his legacy.

In the middle of the 1980s, Africa, including Burkina Faso, suffered the consequences of a severe drought. President Thomas Sankara (1949-1987) in Burkina Faso responded to this challenge by launching a vast campaign against the phenomenon in his country. Sankara invited people to plant trees and protect precious forests. “One village, one grove” was the slogan. Each village should care for one grove of trees.

Reforestation was the main pillar of Sankara's environmental policy. From October 1984, the PPD mobilized people to plant trees. Over fifteen months, the state-directed program of reforestation planted ten million trees across Burkina Faso. In rural villages, families were required to plant a hundred trees per year, mainly as a way of replenishing wood fuel sources. (Peterson, 2021, pp. 201-202)

When the presidential news reached Yacouba Sawadogo, a farmer from the village of Gourga, he decided to leave his business and undertook the mission of transforming his barren field into a forest (Mwenda, 2019). Burkina Faso is a landlocked arid country where most of the population relies on agriculture to live. Constantly, peasants and farmers must battle the effects of drought and climate change. After twenty years of independence, Burkina Faso remained a poor agricultural country. The rural sector, which occupies more than 90 percent of the population, represents only 45 percent of the gross domestic production (GDP). Although most of the population was engaged in farming, the country was still experiencing food shortages and famines and remained dependent on international aid. As a result, farmers struggled between agriculture for daily living, including living without consistent care for the environment, respecting the ecosystem, and improving the climate. In addition, the international market demanded farmers produce cash crops, including cotton, at the expense of food crops.

Today, after almost forty years of relentless efforts, everyone calls Yacouba Sawadogo in West Africa “The man who stopped the desert” (Dodd, 2010). The expression “The man who stopped the desert” is the title of a documentary by Mark Dodd in 2010. The term does not mean that Sawadogo succeeded in stopping the entire desert, but he stopped the progress of the desert on his land. The concept of desert designates a region that receives very little precipitation. In arid regional countries, precipitations are typically less than 10 inches of rain annually. High temperatures, rocky or sandy landscapes, and sparse vegetations characterize these countries. Desertification designates the phenomenon by which previously fertile land becomes increasingly desert-like, dry, and barren. The process is caused by climate change and human activities like deforestation and overexploitation.

Sawadogo's specific technique, the *Zai*, means literally “starting earlier.” For that reason, many called Sawadogo the village idiot because no one could understand what he was doing. All farmers waited for the rainy season to start working on their farms. Sawadogo was seen sweating his guts out, trying to break the solid earth on his plot. He looked ridiculous. Sawadogo's technique consists in digging cavities in the arid soil and filling them with cow manure, and when the water comes, these cavities retain the moisture. Everybody in the Sahel knows that water retention is fundamental to flourishing agricultural practices. Observing with wonder the successful method of Sawadogo, his peers could not believe their eyes. As a result, he regained respect and consideration from his peers. His fields provided better crops, and most importantly, the trees he planted started to grow. Sawadogo made a difference in challenging the desperate status quo, thanks to his patience and determination.

Sawadogo's heroism contrasted with the assassination of his hero, President Thomas Sankara, killed without being able to achieve his revolution. Thirty-six years after his assassination, most primarily for his revolutionary ideas, Thomas Sankara's name remains captivating throughout Africa and beyond (Peterson, 2021). The revolutionary leader's legacy consists of a call to Afrocentricity against Eurocentrism, self-determination against colonialism, good governance against corruption, and a green Sahara against a barren Sahara. Sawadogo emerged from the socio-political context of the Sankara revolution, which was fundamentally promoting Afrocentricity and commitment to address climate change with African epistemologies and ontologies. Questioning the aspect of Sawadogo's pedagogy and investigating his cultural beliefs could help develop conditions that favor the emergence of other African ecologists who can contribute to environmental justice by using Afrocentric ideas.

## **Background and Need for the Study**

Climate change is one of our significant contemporary crises. The critical impacts and consequences of the phenomenon are worldwide. All continents and oceans are affected.

Although the globality of the crisis is perceptible, marginalized, and impoverished populations are the most concerned. Perturbations in precipitations, temperatures, and ecosystems are highly impacting their lives. What is climate change, why should we care for the climate, and what is the discourse on the question?

The terms climate change and global warming were popularized in the 1980s. Climate change refers to a natural or anthropogenic climate change, and global warming refers to human-induced warming of the earth system:

The terms global warming and climate change can be used interchangeably. Climate change is more accurate scientifically to describe the various effects of greenhouse gases on the world because it includes extreme weather, storms and changes in rainfall patterns, ocean acidification and sea-level (Colford, 2015, para. 9).

However, various scientists, politicians, and media figures prefer climate crisis or climate emergency to talk about climate change in general. Beyond terminology debates, it is evident that the climate system is warming and the warming in recent decades is unequivocal. But why is climate change happening, and what are the causes?

Climate change is due to natural and anthropogenic factors. Factors that contribute naturally to climate change are volcanic eruptions, ocean currents, the earth's orbital changes, solar variations, and internal variability. Natural climate change has always happened and is observed in geological records. Scientists refer to anthropogenic factors of climate change to describe human-induced contribution to warming the earth. Human activities are contributing to

aggravating changes in the climate, and we have reached a critical state. According to scientists, temperatures are rising by about 0.2° per decade. But in 2020, temperatures reached 1.2°C. That is above the pre-industrial era (World Meteorological Organization, 2021).

The natural and beneficial role of greenhouse gases, including carbon dioxide, methane, nitrous oxide, halogenated gases, and nitrogen oxides, consists of absorbing heat radiation in the atmosphere. The planet would be insupportably colder if greenhouse gases did not exist (Bindoff, 2013). Unfortunately, due to anthropogenic activities, including mining, the release of industrial waste, incineration of fossil fuel, pesticides, herbicides, and fertilizers, deforestation, greenhouse gases have increased since the industrial revolution. Air pollution, in the form of aerosols, also affects climate change and burdens human health significantly (Wild, 2005). Consequently, there is more heat retention and an increase in surface temperatures. As a result, deserts are expanding, and heat waves and wildfires are becoming more common. In addition, heavy precipitations, melting of snow, and land ice occur in many places. As a result, perturbation in flora and fauna is visible. The long-term effects of climate change, determined primarily by anthropogenic activities, include more ice melt, ocean warming, sea-level rise, ocean acidification, and additional unprecedented impacts.

We should be concerned about climate change for many reasons. On humans, the effects of climate change have been observed on all continents and oceans. The warming and shifts in precipitation lead to jeopardizing life, the occurrence of infectious diseases, undernutrition, and food security due to crop failures. In addition, climate change has increased global economic inequality, and severe impacts are expected in Sub-Saharan Africa and South-East Asia, where most inhabitants depend upon natural and agricultural resources. According to the World Bank, current inequalities based on wealth and social status will continue to worsen for marginalized

people worldwide and indigenous people whose subsistence depends on lands and ecosystems dangerously damaged by the climate crisis.

Many actions can mitigate climate change, including reducing greenhouse gas emissions. To many experts, “In order to limit global warming to less than 1.5° C with a high likelihood of success global greenhouse gas emissions need to be net-zero by 2050, or by 2070 with a 2° C target” (Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, 2018). This effort requires systemic and systematic changes in energy consumption, transport, industry, building, land, and city occupation. Under the Paris Agreement (2016), the parties pledged to limit global warming to 1.5° C or 2° C. Among various strategies, experts recommend using renewable energy, including solar panels and onshore wind, nuclear and hydropower, prevention of deforestation, and restoration of natural ecosystems by reforestation.

To some climatologists, adaptation could be another solution. Adaptation refers to the process of adjustment to current and expected changes in the climate crisis and its present and long-term impact. For instance, adaptation to sea-level rise involves avoiding risky areas or learning to live with constant flooding. In agriculture, opting for adaptation could mean switching to more sustainable diets or diversification. But first, it is indispensable to have policies and politics that enforce laws for sustainable and consistent mitigation, adaptation, or recovery.

Climate change raises a question of justice because countries presenting more vulnerable conditions to climate change are responsible for a minor share of global emissions; most of these countries are in Sub-Saharan Africa and South-East Asia. Climate change is no longer only an environmental issue. It is fundamentally rooted in the social and economic circumstances of vulnerable populations. Natural disasters are severe to the extent that the affected populations are



vulnerable. People adapt poorly or adequately to climate change according to their social and economic capabilities. When ecologists concerned with environmental justice and equitable conditions of life for all make the question political, they are right because political leaders are responsible for making fair decisions. Furthermore, framing exposure with international lenses can help foster an effective response to climate change in poor parts of the globe and provide more consideration for non-Western solutions.

Raising public awareness of the issue is essential to achieving an international commitment to addressing climate change. Unfortunately, there are significant differences between people in both public concern for climate change and a general understanding of the crisis. Climate protests, activism, and demonstrations throughout the globe demand that political leaders take intense action to avert climate change. Politicization and polarization of the climate crisis is another issue affecting the question, particularly in developed countries. According to Chin et al. (2020), the climate change issue is politicized and polarized in the United States. Their study covers 1985 and 2017. That means, despite the increasing scientific consensus on the reality and anthropogenic sources of climate change, people tend to take a position or analyze the problem with their political positions. Unfortunately, polarization and politicization of the question impact people's response to the problem:

Polarization intensifies the impact that partisan elites have on individuals' issue attitudes while decreasing the impact of other substantive information, leading individuals to become more confident in their less substantiated beliefs (Druckman et al., 2013, p. 115).

People are more concerned with climate change when they feel the connection with high temperatures and drought. It means many are not concerned with the preservation of the common

good itself but how they could have to suffer or not because of the consequences of climate change. For most people, the climate crisis is a distant issue threatening people in other parts of the planet or those born far in the future. According to Spence et al. (2012), some describe it as a 'psychological distancing' phenomenon. "The evidence of being personally threatened by climate change is difficult to come by in day-to-day life, or the willful denial that one's actions will cause future personal losses" (Spence et al., p. 89). For others, it is the responsibility of states and governments to care about climate change. Even when they are informed of the issue, they are not ready to engage in costly actions without government statements. The public perception of climate change is essential to reverse the situation because tackling climate change demands general mobilization. Individual efforts should be combined with massive efforts for effective results.

There are four common attitudes or reactions to the climate change debate (Chinn and al., 2020). Many are concerned with climate change and are committed to tackling it; some are prudent in their attitudes. They keep the problem in mind when facing choices without engaging in robust actions; others are entirely disengaged and have no care for climate change; others are doubtful about the question. They have no certainty about the veracity of claims coming from scientists. These different attitudes reflect on the surface the conflicting reality of our world. To convince people to act, state leaders sometimes struggle to find the proper guidance, help, or incentives for implementing projects. Indeed, the more people feel concerned better their commitment will be. The less they are informed or awakened to the question, the less will be their commitment.

In 1979, German American philosopher Hans Jonas published *The Imperative of Responsibility* (Jonas, 1984) to draw the international community's attention to how climate

change threatens humans' well-being. To Jonas (1984), destroying the environment is not only an environmental issue but fundamentally an ethical problem because it undermines the survival of humanity and puts the earth at risk. Therefore, human survival depends on our shared efforts to pay attention to the future of our planet. Moreover, he formulated a fundamental imperative: “Act so that the effects of your action are compatible with the permanence of genuine humane life” (Wiese, 2008, p. 135). Besides, numerous authors, artists, activists, and filmmakers have produced many works on climate change, including young activist Greta Thunberg (Ohisson, 2021). Most challenge state leaders and prominent company businessmen and businesswomen for their reluctance to take responsibility and protect the environment (Cook et al., 2016; Anderegg, 2010; Doran et Zimmerman, 2009).

However, there is no significant change, especially expected from developed countries. Religious leaders, including Pope Francis, are among the leaders of climate defenders. He issued an environmental encyclical, *Laudato Si* (Francis, 2015), to invite world leaders to care for the planet. It is an invitation to Catholics and all people of goodwill to live out their faith by caring for our common home (Francis, 2015). The Bishop of Rome is sounding an alarm to help humanity understand man's destruction of the environment and his fellow men and women: “Interdependence obliges us to think of one world with a common plan. Yet the same ingenuity that has brought about enormous technological progress has proved incapable of finding effective ways of dealing with grave environmental and social problems worldwide” (Francis, 2015). Echoing Pope Francis, Batel and Adams (2016) highlight the limits of addressing ecological crises by changing individual psychological behaviors. To Batel and Adams (2016), individual behaviors could contribute positive change and lead to sustainable development if

leaders and key deciders address poverty in vulnerable societies and highlight the role of collective sensitization and empowerment.

In Africa, state leaders are committed to respecting the Paris Agreement. They launched various programs and projects in different countries to educate citizens about the problem. There are publications by Africans to drive climate actions capable of countering the phenomenon of desertification and pollution of the oceans. Among outstanding African ecologists there is Wangari Maathai, whose commitment to the environment was robust and rewarding. She was the first African woman to win the Nobel Peace Prize (Rice & Xan 2011; Klinken & Adriaan, 2021; Maathai, 2004). She has demonstrated outstanding female leadership in this domain. However, the participation of developing countries to address the crisis has been insufficient. Therefore, it is critical to promote forms of wisdom coming from developing countries' ecologists whose philosophies might be different from western approaches.

### **Research Site and Context: Burkina Faso and President Thomas Sankara's Influence**

I come from a part of the world where people have severely suffered the consequences of colonialism and yet have witnessed a prominent resilience. Therefore, understanding the history of my country, including President Thomas Sankara's revolution, is key to understanding my interest in Yacouba Sawadogo's narrative. Burkina Faso means the country of upright people. It is one of the former French colonies situated in West Africa. It is a landlocked Saharan country surrounded by Mali, Niger, Benin, Togo, Ghana, and Ivory Coast and covers 274 200 square kilometers, with an estimated population of more than 20 million people. And President Thomas Sankara, considered the Founding Father of Burkina Faso (previously called Upper Volta), profoundly impacted the history of this country including Yacouba Sawadogo's achievement.

Because Sankara was also convinced that agricultural progress in his country would not be possible unless he engaged in combat against desertification, he initiated massive tree-planting programs all over the country. Peasants, workers, craftsmen, women, and the elderly, were committed to carrying out the digging of wells, the planting of trees, the building of houses, and the elimination of the passive relationships with their lands.

Green spaces were encouraged in urban centers, and Sankara's government proposed the creation of a green belt surrounding the country. Citizens were encouraged to plant trees at every meaningful ceremony in the country. The Great Green Wall Project, currently supported by the African Union, came from Sankara's idea of the green belt (Wilkinson, 2021). In 1986 at the Silva Conference for the Protection of the Trees and Forest in Paris, he delivered a speech entitled: "Imperialism is the Arsonist of our Forests". In this speech,

He summarized his administration's efforts to regrow Burkina Faso forests and replenish the country's soils after the ecological devastation wrought upon his people's land by colonization and modern-day ignorance. Keenly aware of the locale and nationality of the attendees of the conference, he pointed out that his country bore the burdens of the Global North's indifference to climate change, which exacerbated many problems for Burkina Faso. (Wilkinson, 2021, para. 1)

Yacouba Sawadogo is the living success of President Thomas Sankara's revolution in all aspects, including self-reliance, integrity, Afrocentricity, and environmental justice. To tackle the severe droughts of the 1980s in Africa, Sankara was one of the first heads of state to launch a campaign against this problem involving the organization of his fellow citizens to plant several million trees. He denounced environmental predators, both foreign corporations and local deforesters in African countries. To encourage reforestation, the revolutionary slogan was "one

village, one grove,” meaning each village should care for one grove of trees. President Sankara denounced environmental predators, both foreign corporations and local deforesters. Strict measures were taken, including severe punishment for the random wandering of livestock, and prohibiting the unchecked cutting of trees. African wisdom was used to remind people of their duty to take care of Mother Earth. Yacouba Sawadogo’s vocation to plant trees and care for the environment emerged from this environmental policy. Unfortunately, Sankara did not live long to witness the realization of this green Saharan region dream.

This historical and geopolitical background was essential to understanding the context from which Sawadogo emerged and why his narrative matters to this research in Burkina Faso. Inspired by President Sankara’s revolutionary ideas, Sawadogo is one of the Burkinabè who chose to transform their lives through the transformation of their lands. Furthermore, in so doing, he experienced the fact that desertification is a human problem. Therefore, only humans can fix it.

### **Background and Positionality of the Researcher**

Articulating the positionality from which I stood to pursue this research was essential because the topic itself, my multiple identities, the context in which the research was done, and my relation to Sawadogo’s case were intertwined. Positionality is all about what makes a researcher unique. I am a Black African citizen who is a Jesuit priest. I grew up in the Northern part of Burkina Faso, and my research got me back to this milieu. It was a home context study. As an insider, I intended to be one of the critical thinkers of my region who helps people participate in the worldwide commitment to environmental justice.

Furthermore, Sawadogo reminds me of my own father's resilience. I was five years old when Sankara came to power. Although I was young, I witnessed my father's exuberance. Like

the other Burkinabè, he saw Sankara as a leader who had come to liberate Burkina Faso from colonial exploitation. The year Sankara was assassinated coincided with the year of my father's retirement from the army. I do not know if I should describe those two events as unfortunate coincidences or simply disappointment. I was too young to question my father, who had since become a farmer in a small village, to implement President Sankara's revolutionary ideals. I was only nine years old, but I was deeply affected by these events, at least in a way commensurate with my nine-year-old mind. From that time on, I promised to continue Sankara's dream. And Sawadogo's achievements represent the successful implementation of Sankara's vision. Researching and writing about him was paying tribute to resistance and resilience over colonialism.

Additionally, I represent a moral figure of the Church in this part of Northern Burkina Faso. Therefore, people trusted the value of my research because they trust the Church. And my research participated in the process of religious dialogue initiated in my country. Most people in my region are Muslims or believers in the African Traditional Religions. Therefore, regarding the different tensions in the country, leading research that values a person's commitment, knowing that that person is from another religion, was essential to dialogue between communities because Yacouba Sawadogo is a Muslim and Barwendé Sané, a Catholic whose ancestors were animists.

In fact, these past years, terrorist attacks led by extremist Muslims have undermined the Sahel region, including Burkina Faso. This context provoked suspicions and tensions opposing some categories of Christians and Muslims. As a result, the former tend to stigmatize the latter. Throughout this research, I contributed to witnessing the imperative of creating a dialogue between Christians and Muslims. Instead of conflict around the issue of religion, it is more

fruitful to battle together against desertification and environmental deprivation. I hope that my work to participate consistently in emphasizing the value of dialogue across religious communities in Northern Burkina Faso has been helpful.

Furthermore, my consecration to the priesthood requires a sustainable commitment to making this world a better place to live. And doing research consists of seeking knowledge for this passionate mission. I did not become a priest to lead people to heaven without caring for the earth or moralizing anybody. Instead, I have become a priest to help people create heaven on earth and make our living together enjoyable. After many years of living and working in African countries undermined by armed conflicts and violence, I found my way of contributing to positive change by voicing the achievements of the marginalized with communitarian approaches. And this research is the epitome of such commitment to promoting Afrocentric values which are essential to meeting the challenges of our world today.

Overall, researching and writing on Sawadogo's achievements was writing about myself, President Sankara, my father, the people of my region, my vision of the world, and my dream to promote environmental justice. African countries, including Burkina Faso, are still struggling to overcome development challenges, and witnessing the achievement of Yacouba Sawadogo is providing consolation and hope.

### **Theoretical Framework and Rationale**

I chose to use postcolonial and decolonial theories to guide my dissertation research alternatively. This approach is the best to understanding Sawadogo in the context of Burkina Faso and Africa. Postcolonial theory denounces the West's invasion and sidelining of non-Western categories, paradigms, and wisdoms. And decolonial theory reveals the existence of non-Western categories, paradigms, and wisdoms as standing by themselves and able to account



for their values without any reference to the West. Using postcolonial theories without decolonial thinking consists of critiquing the colonial master with his instruments without imagining new instruments of constructing a world encompassing the Global South's past, present, and future. If it is essential to repudiate the masters' mythologies, traditions, and epistemologies as universal norms, it is more fruitful to ignite categories of thinking, creating, and recreating the world from the Global South standing point. To the authors of these theories, the world we have in common is not understandable without relating to the history of colonialism and imperialism of the Global North over the Global South for many centuries.

The entire planet, with the exception of Western Europe and the United States, has one thing in common: they all have to confront invasion by Western Europe and the United States, whether diplomatic or war-related, beneficial or disastrous. At the same time, Western Europe and the United States have something in common: a history of five-hundred years of invasion, whether diplomatic or armed, of the rest of the world.

(Mignolo, 2011, p. 53)

Postcolonial theory and postcolonial studies grew out of the anti-colonial moment, which formally overthrew European colonial governments' dominion over their colonies. Postcolonial theorization was born out of the struggle of colonized people trying to capture their experiences of the legacy of European colonization. However, postcolonial theory cannot provide enough tools to understand, imagine, and frame non-Western cultures because any critique of this theory is always linked to colonialism (Mignolo, 2011). Postcolonial theory is not radical enough to subvert or shake the coconut trees of the macro structures, including capitalist systems that keep non-Western countries exploited. For that reason, some prefer the decolonial theory. The postcolonial theory emphasizes resistance to colonialism, while the decolonial approach

emphasizes creativity and imagination that encompass the precolonial era. Most importantly, I focused on postcolonial and decolonial theorists who framed categories of thinking which are helpful to understanding the philosophical and sociological aspects of ecologists from the Global South, including Sawadogo, who know how to use Afrocentric knowledge and wisdom to address climate change.

First, Boaventura de Sousa Santos's *Epistemologies of the South* (2014) guided my reflection on understanding the world beyond the Western lenses. Second, Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (2018) oriented the pedagogical purpose of my topic, which was enriched by the understanding of Franz Fanon's idea of transforming impoverished colonized people by changing their reality (Fanon, 1963).

### ***Epistemologies of the South, As a Critical Social Theory***

Epistemologies of the South is a critical social theory created by sociologist Boaventura de Sousa Santos to embody the knowledge and experience of the Global South. According to Santos (2014), Western-centric nations used political and economic solid foundations to reinforce their cultural hegemony over their colonies. To Santos (2014), when the people who are discriminated against reflect on the impact of capitalism, colonialism, and patriarchy, they find, “harmful lies” (p. 32). In fact,

It is a record of social regulation in the name of social emancipation, appropriation in the name of liberation, violence in the name of peace, the destruction of life in the name of the sanctity of life, violation of human rights in the name of human rights, societal fascism in the name of political democracy, illegal plundering in the name of the rule of law, assimilation in the name of diversity, individual vulnerability in the name of

individual autonomy, constitution of subhumanities in the name of humanity. (Santos, 2014, p. 32)

Epistemologies of the South are a metaphor denouncing the exclusion, silencing, and destruction of peoples and knowledges that are non-Western. On the other hand, there is the promoting the forms of knowledge that exceed the Western patterns and canons. In fact,

The understanding of the world by far exceeds the Western understanding of the world. Second, there is no global social justice without global cognitive justice. Third, the emancipatory transformations in the world may follow grammars and scripts other than those developed by Western-centric critical theory, and such diversity should be valorized. (Santos, 2014, p. 23)

Epistemologies of the South was the significant conceptual theory I used to provide an account and understanding of the causes of structural and cognitive domination over non-Westerners. I also used it to explain the potential human emancipation tools leaders could use, especially in exploring Afrocentric epistemologies and ontologies.

Santos framed the epistemologies of the South to counter the exclusion of non-Western knowledge. The concept “South” is not geographical. It represents everything that is outside the Western definition of reason. He suggested that all the wisdom, symbolic representations, knowledge, and imagination of native people must be recognized, valued, and celebrated as essential to safeguard and restore our humanity. Therefore, it is primordial to resist what he names “epistemicide,” that means the killing and eradication of epistemologies that come from the South (Santos, 2014). The epistemologies of the South I used as a theory refer to the victims of the exclusion that Santos is defending. The end goal was to achieve epistemic justice in the

global debate we face today. And to give voice to people like Yacouba Sawadogo who contributed their wisdom to the betterment of the world in using Afrocentric epistemologies.

Santos is not unique in using the concepts of epistemologies of the South. Rudolph C. Ryser (2021), who worked for more than fifty years with *Fourth World* peoples (Indigenous peoples) in the Americas, Africa, Pacific Region, Asia, and Europe, used the epistemologies of the South approach in his book *Biodiversity Wars, Coexistence or Biocultural Collapse in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* (2021), to address the ‘epistemicide’ of non-Western wisdoms. His reflection is connected to Santos's vision:

I describe the damaging actions of corporate states on diverse life-supporting ecosystems and Fourth World peoples. However, it isn't all grim. I propose concrete solutions that nations and states can achieve in the next few years when clear-minded Fourth World and corporate state thinkers and leaders step forward to establish new mechanisms that bolster cooperation and coexistence based on “self-interest.” (Ryser, 2021, p. 1)

Furthermore, the concept of epistemologies of the South is used by the Center for World Indigenous Studies (CWIS) created in 1994 to promote mindful leaders who use indigenous wisdom to care for the planet and its inhabitants (Ryser, 2021). The CWIS offers courses to explore indigenous knowledge systems, the benefits of wild plants for health and medicine, how to tackle climate change, and how to become an activist who shares the principles of indigenous ways of protecting and nourishing the environment.

Even if some publishers have celebrated the uniqueness of Yacouba Sawadogo and the successful teaching of these techniques around the Sahel region, they did not deepen the philosophy guiding his commitment. To understand the Sahel hero, one needs to situate his

approach within Afrocentric paradigms and align his work with the tradition of all epistemologists of the South. And that was what I did through the present research.

Santos and subsequent authors using his theory have published articles promoting forms of knowledge grounded in developing countries. They are right because indigenous and rural populations living outside Western cultures conceive relationships between communities and nature differently and develop knowledge, wisdom, and experience that cannot be reduced to Eurocentric conceptions. Additionally, time and space are perceived differently on both sides.

For instance, the definition of the identity of peoples in the non-Western world and of their collective rights tends to be strictly bound to a notion of 'territoriality' associated with responsibilities in relation to a territory, which is defined as a collective of spaces, human groups (including both the living and their ancestors), rivers, forests, animals, and plants. (Santos, 2014, xx-xxi)

Most importantly, to Santos, forests are not resources to be exploited but authentic organisms made of various living components we should relate to with respect. Inspired by the indigenous wisdom of the people of the Amazon Forest, he is convinced that when we abuse the environment, we abuse our typical living mother and, worst, our common soul. And to live without scrutiny and self-discipline toward mother nature is to live as enemies of the planet. We are part of her, and she is part of us (Santos, 2004).

Epistemologies of the South were an ideal lens that I applied to analyze the fundamental vision of the world by and the pedagogical leadership of Yacouba Sawadogo. This theory helped highlight the traditional methods of farming he has been using to make a difference. In looking through the lens of epistemologies of the South, I questioned the different aspects of Sawadogo's life that make him a successful Afrocentric ecologist. Furthermore, considering Sawadogo's

achievements under Santos's light helped me raise another pedagogical question: How Afrocentric ecologists' techniques and experiences could be transmitted to unborn generations?

***The Theory of Problem-posing Education from Paulo Freire's Pedagogy of the Oppressed***

I chose to use Freire's critical pedagogy in focusing on the problem-posing education he developed because this lens was helpful to understanding the methods used by Sawadogo. Sawadogo had deployed tangible patterns of problem-posing imagination over forty years in relating to a barren land that he has transformed into a fruitful land. He succeeded in inspiring disciples who followed in his footsteps. Unfortunately, researchers have not yet explored the belief systems, principles, and pedagogy justifying his ingenuity. While international recognition is essential to supporting leaders, using Freire's pedagogy to explore Sawadogo led to a deeper understanding of the Burkinabè Champion and enable the emergence of similar ecologists.

Problem-posing education has the advantage of forging social agents capable of using strategies to question and transform the world they live in. These transformation strategies become familiar and permit more connections with reality through conscientization that comes from inside. Journeying from a construct within the self to dialogue with others about how we think, know, and feel as a community contributes to massive transformations.

What makes Paulo Freire one of the founders of critical pedagogy is his education mission: awakening in people a crucial conscience that enables them to leave passive existence and embrace active existence. According to him, critical thinking was not about the task of simply reproducing the past and understanding the present. On the contrary, thinking critically offered a way of thinking beyond the present and the immediate confines of one's experiences (Freire, 2018). He has contributed to highlighting the very meaning of thinking:

Thinking is not the intellectual reproduction of what already exists anyway. As long as it doesn't break off, Thinking has a secure hold on possibility. Its insatiable aspect, its aversion to being quickly and easily satisfied, refuses the foolish wisdom of resignation. ... Open thinking points beyond itself. (Jarvis, 1998, pp. 291-292)

Only this consciousness of being capable of going beyond the self can motivate people to struggle for social change and realize their full potential because education is fundamentally a project of liberation. It is liberation from the bondage of dehumanization and liberation for the realization of the full potential in humans. A liberating vision of life can affirm the freedom and capacity of people to decide their destinies. It is a critical and active process through which the dogma of *status quo* silence is overcome and shaken up. Reality is not immutable, and existing conditions are not to be viewed as fatalistic. Accepting their roles as subjects capable of transforming the existing reality into a better reality is the primary vocation of being humans. Sawadogo dreamt to liberate his village from the bondage of desertification and the fear of natural obstacles.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of the present study was to reflect on the pedagogical aspects of knowledge, called epistemologies of the South, used by ecologists from the Global South, including Yacouba Sawadogo to address climate change. The term epistemologies of the South (Santos, 2014) echo indigenous non-Western wisdom including Afrocentric wisdom used by non-Westerners to care for the earth. My study was a narrative case study of Sawadogo's pedagogical leadership for environmental justice. Focusing on the sociological and philosophical aspects of the Sahel hero's achievement was instrumental to understanding him more profoundly and subsequently creating conditions for the emergence of leaders like him. I am convinced that my understanding of

Sawadogo's guiding values and my capacity to implement them will be helpful to my mission as an educator for the rest of my life.

In addition, it was an examination of how such knowledge and sciences from the Global South often encounter obstacles from their environment on the one hand and from policymakers and leaders who reject Afrocentric epistemologies on the other. The specific case study of Yacouba Sawadogo and his disciples helped ground the inquiry in the context of Burkina Faso.

As an educator, it is crucial to prioritize the cultivation of pedagogical approaches that actively foster a steadfast dedication to safeguarding humanity's boundless and ever-evolving potential. These approaches must resist any inclination to curtail or impede the ongoing exploration of human possibilities prematurely. By consistently promoting an environment of critical self-reflection within society, educators play a pivotal role in ensuring that the vital process of questioning remains perpetually dynamic and never succumbs to stagnation or premature closure.

Furthermore, essential to my research's purpose was to include participatory and collaborative modes of inquiry from grassroots leaders. This approach empowered the potential by which Sawadogo and his disciples are actively engaged as researchers of their conditions. I contributed to helping them gain more confidence through the analysis of their living situations. They learned to rely fundamentally on their capabilities and wisdom instead of only trusting external experts and theoretical scholars. My intention is to see this research contribute to critical thinking in Africa. I contend that instead of rewarding individuals for their achievements, it is better to develop pedagogical conditions from which communities that care for the environment emerge.



However, questioning the challenges and conditions that favor or counter the happening of such leaders remains an open non-ending field of inquiry, above all on the climate issue. Caring for the planet should appeal to more conversation between world leaders and epistemologists both from the South and the North. The international recognition of Sawadogo itself has already made way for this conversation. My goal in the present research consisted in deepening this collaborative conversation.

Understanding Sawadogo's principles, belief systems, foundations, values, and pedagogy could favor the creation of conditions from which heroic leadership flourishes, the barriers to remove, and the type of ideas to raise. Recognizing Sawadogo's achievement without working to develop conditions that favor people like him remains superficial, colonial, and cosmetic. What is essential in the Afrocentric philosophy is the celebration of communities' engagements for the common good. Genuine African lasting transformation does not focus on individuals but on structures that produce them.

### **Research Questions**

The following research questions guided the inquiry of this study:

- 1) What cultural beliefs and world views does Sawadogo use to understand and describe the phenomenon of climate change?
- 2) What is the foundation of Sawadogo's hope to tackle the oppression of desertification and the oppression of the first world dominant problem-solving methods?
- 3) What aspects of Yacouba Sawadogo's pedagogy have helped him form and become an Afrocentric ecologist who inspires other farmers capable of passing his pedagogy on to new generations?

The order of the questions respected a specific approach that consisted primarily in the first question, in scrutinizing the horizon of the problem itself, including the different actors engaged in the study. That means I was interested in describing the topic, including Sawadogo's understanding of climate change. The following step related to the second concerning the justification of Sawadogo's understanding of climate change and the solutions he created to resolve the problem. That means I focused on the foundations of Sawadogo's hope and ingenuity to question the problem and resolve it. In the final step regarding the last question, I was more interested in the progressive process used by Sawadogo to deploy his solutions to resolving the problem, including the different facets of the process that enabled me to define him as an Afrocentric ecologist whose legacy and heritage fostered new ecologists. That means I was interested in Sawadogo's heritage and legacy that is present in his pedagogy.

### **Delimitations/Limitations**

In this research, I did not intend to reflect on the fundamental challenges the world is facing on the climate change issue. Additionally, this was not research focused on the technical aspect of the climate change issue. Sawadogo's case study was an illustration of the fact that the understanding of global problems exceeds the Western-centric philosophy. Furthermore, it was vital to diversify the discourse on the issue of climate change. Because I intended to bring contributions from the Global South to the table of international conversation, my research focused on the pedagogical aspects of Sawadogo's knowledge, including its philosophical and sociological roots. I exploited narratives and focus group discussions on the data collection.

Up until now, research on Yacouba Sawadogo has been limited. And most publications on him are written in French and other African languages. For that reason, I had to translate first-hand information from Mooré and French into English in the data analysis. Mooré is Sawadogo's

native language, and French is primarily the most used language in the Burkina Faso administration. Another limitation to my data collection was the terrorist attacks happening in the Sahel region of Africa. Sawadogo is living in a village threatened by terrorist incursions. Advised by many, I did not travel beyond the village of Gourga to visit Sawadogo's disciples' farms.

### **Educational Significance**

As an educator who promotes human dignity, fairness, and equity and being aware that I have the privilege to study in a university whose mission is to “transform the world”, I intended this project to nourish pedagogical practices that keep unfulfilled our common human curiosity and critical thinking capacity. My research aimed at challenging colonial heritage and bringing to light Afrocentric contributions to the issue of the environment. Earth is our shared planet despite our differences. It is the only common good that is certain to ensure human existence. Therefore, instead of spending many resources exploring new viable worlds for future generations, we ought to take care of the one we have first. And Afrocentric ecologists like Sawadogo, whose undeniable wisdom is essential to environmental justice, should be studied by several researchers.

It is a matter of fairness, and USF fundamentally defends such a world vision, focused on caring for others. And my research adds to the notion of “others,” the environment. Moreover, there is no social justice without environmental justice. Poor people in developing countries pay a high price for climate change, even though they do not contribute significantly to climate change. This injustice should be addressed and solutions found and shared. I intended this intellectual journey to contribute to creating bridges capable of connecting grassroots to endure the consequences of climate change and policymakers.

The different dimensions of human problems are connected. Furthermore, any solution to these problems resolves the inflicted pain to the earth. For that purpose, Pope Francis used the term integral ecology (Francis, 2019) to refer to a holistic consideration of political, social, economic, and ecological problems. It is an approach highlighting that everything is intertwined and interrelated: “The cry of the earth is not different from the cry of the poor” (Francis, 2019). Both stem from the current capitalist, colonialist, and imperialist order established by the powerful, privileged nations over the rest of the world. Because social justice and ecological justice go hand in hand, reestablishing the earth's natural order will fundamentally alleviate the pain of those most vulnerable to climate change. And this research, supported by the University of San Francisco's outstanding professors, stood for this mission.

Furthermore, beyond Sawadogo's merit, understanding the context of the emergence of such leaders, including their challenges, pain, and consolation is paving the way to raise similar leaders who care for the earth. Ecological peacemakers are indispensable to the current challenges of our world. The recommendations I formulated at the end of the research from this research could contribute to promoting peacemaking trainers in West Africa and beyond. Because educating consists primarily of leading from what is harmful to what is healing and regenerating, creating bridges between cultures, and promoting fairness, Sawadogo's example could be presented to students as a new form of pedagogy, “the pedagogy of the earth”. And Mother Earth is desperately waiting for such pedagogy to be promoted.

Finally, it was relevant to mention that beyond Sawadogo's achievements in Burkina Faso, different people in other parts of Africa use Afrocentric techniques to contribute to positive change in the world. Therefore, in focusing on Sawadogo's achievement, my dream consisted of

enfleshing opportunities for further researchers interested in exploring African non-academic epistemologists, ontologists, scientists, and technicians.

## CHAPTER II: LITERATURE REVIEW

### Restatement of the Problem

The present research investigated the pedagogical aspects of the problem of Sawadogo's commitment to ecology, knowing that he had used Afrocentric knowledge and wisdom to address climate change in Burkina Faso. I studied the sociological and philosophical traits of Yacouba Sawadogo's commitment that grounded his achievement and how his pedagogy can help raise new ecologists.

The specific context of Burkina Faso in West Africa had inspired Sawadogo's achievement. In this part of the Global South, state leaders and ecologists consider climate change a significant problem. To address this issue, Sawadogo made a difference in using unpopular methods that turned out to be successful. As a result, the United Nations Environment Program rewarded Sawadogo as a successful farmer who knows how to tackle desertification in Africa. But unfortunately, the international organization did not lead researchers to investigate the Afrocentric methods Sawadogo has used to achieve his project. For that reason, this study is intended to ask the following questions: What are the philosophical and sociological traits of Sawadogo's achievement, and subsequently, what place these Afrocentric methods could claim in the debate on climate change? And what aspects of Sawadogo's pedagogy can serve to raise other potential ecologists?

Furthermore, unlike Western institutions, which are used more to rewarding individuals who make a difference, the African communitarian vision of life tends to celebrate social achievements from communities that care for the common good. Rewarding Sawadogo's success without questioning the pedagogical aspects of his achievement or the roots of his ingenuity

could be insufficient to promote the social conditions that allows the emergence of leaders like him.

The following research questions guided the inquiry. First, what cultural beliefs and world views does Sawadogo use to understand and describe the phenomenon of climate change? Second, what is the foundation of Sawadogo's hope to tackle the oppression of desertification and the oppression of the first world dominant problem-solving methods? Third, what aspects of Yacouba Sawadogo's pedagogy have helped him form and become an Afrocentric ecologist, who inspires other farmers capable of passing his pedagogy to new generations? However, before responding to these questions, I examined the different discourses surrounding the climate crisis. What is known, missing, and why does Sawadogo's case matter? These are my concerns in this chapter.

### **Overview of the Literature**

Reviewing the literature on the conditions that permitted Sawadogo to emerge, including the climate change discourse in the Global South, especially in Africa, is essential to the research. First, I will focus on the country of Burkina Faso and its revolutionary leader President Thomas Sankara, whose revolution impacted the Sahel hero. Second, I will reflect on the Conferences of the Parties (COPs), including their meaning and purpose for the continent because Africa is committed to implementing the international decisions made during these summits. Third, I will consider some critical engagements by African ecologists to address the climate crisis. Fourth, I will revisit some African principles that inform the debate on climate change.

### *The Context from which the Leader Sawadogo Emerged*

The understanding of the leader Yacouba Sawadogo including the conditions of his emergence was made possible through the knowledge of Burkina Faso, his country. Sawadogo's narrative comes from the history of Burkina Faso itself, and the history of Burkina Faso is rooted in the prominent figure of President Thomas Sankara. Because the core of the present research consists in tracing the historical context from which the Sahel hero emerged and applied Afrocentric methods to address the ecological crisis, it was essential to review the literature on Sankara and Burkina Faso. Who was Thomas Sankara, what was the situation in Burkina Faso before his political term, and what did he stand for?

#### **Who Was President Thomas Sankara?**

Thomas Isidore Noël Sankara (1949-1987) was a Burkinabè military officer, socialist and pan-Africanist who served as president of Burkina Faso from his coup in 1983 to his deposition and murder in 1987. His military career started in Burkina Faso before he was sent to Madagascar for officer training. He witnessed popular uprisings in 1971 and 1972 against the government of President Philibert Tsiranana (1912 – 1978). Consequently, in Madagascar, he started to read the works of Karl Marx, Vladimir Lenin, and Franz Fanon (Andriamirado, 1987). Marxism influenced his political views for the rest of his life. While some historians described Sankara as a Marxist or a communist anywhere, Sankara did not define himself as such. He has decided to give no allegiance to external messiahs without considering the context of his own country. The Burkinabè revolutionary was open to rich ideas, but he remained himself. His identity and Burkina Faso were intertwined.



### **What Was Burkina Faso Like Before Sankara's Political Term?**

The state of Burkina Faso in 1983 was the triggering cause of Sankara's revolution. One cannot understand the fundamental philosophy that inspired Sawadogo without getting back to this period. Many centuries before the brutal conquest of this part of West Africa by the French, Burkina Faso was historically known as the Mogho-Naba Empire, a highly organized and hierarchical empire (Delobsom, 1933). Then, the country was baptized Haute Volta (Upper Volta) by the colonizers, before being rebaptized Burkina Faso twenty-three years after its independence by President Sankara.

From 1960 to 1983, the country underwent many governmental changes. Four different presidents were in power. Unfortunately, twenty-three years after its official independence and before President Sankara's regime, the country was governed by leaders who failed to initiate sustainable changes capable of alleviating people's lives. The legacy of twenty-three years of independence was painful. The country was still exploited by local political and social leaders who foreign imperialists supported. One would describe them as French puppets, more concerned by plans written in Paris for Africa than their people's concerns. That means Upper Volta was theoretically independent, but the country's leaders were making decisions under the scrutiny of France's government. Sankara, the revolutionary president, argued: "driven only by their own selfish interests, they no longer hesitated at employing the most dishonest means, engaging in massive corruption, embezzlement of public funds and properties, influence-peddling and real estate speculation, and practicing favoritism and nepotism" (Simpson, 2007, p. 33).

The peasants were paying the highest price in such a situation. Burkinabè peasants were expropriated, imprisoned, and humiliated, even if their work was the means of creating wealth. Among them, the illiteracy rate was very high (Anderson, 2007). They were those who suffered

most from the lack of infrastructure, including the lack of sanitary facilities, particularly the women and the elderly. “To provide water for their families, peasant women made daily roundtrips on foot of as much as ten miles to reach the nearest well. Many still faced age-old forms of oppression such as forced marriages, the bride price, and female circumcision” (Anderson, 2007, ii-iii). Their children swelled the ranks of the unemployed after unfruitful years on the benches of colonial schools, which were not adapted to the changing realities of the country. President Sankara’s revolution happened to fight against this situation. His government set up major programs to build a new society free of the evils that had been preventing his country from getting out of misery and economic exploitation. His dream was to foster genuine self-reliance for his country.

#### **What did Sankara Stand for?**

The Burkina Faso President wanted to liberate his country and the whole continent from the legacy of slavery and colonization, initiate sustainable development for Burkina Faso, and promote Afrocentricity and universal peace. Many people discovered in Sankara a desire to make a difference in the envisioning of Africa by Africans themselves, an ambitious willingness to transform the continent, and a contagious passion for denouncing the shackles of domination and exploitation over the less privileged in the world.

#### ***Liberate Burkina Faso and Africa from the Legacy of Slavery and Colonization***

President Sankara chose primarily to liberate his country and Africa from the legacy of slavery and colonialization. His passion for liberation and justice did not happen accidentally. As himself explained, he came to become president in a similar way to someone who had suffered from a severe disease and who decided to lead vaccine research and become, ipso facto, an eminent scientist “in charge of a laboratory, or the head of a cutting-edge medical team” (Prairie, 2007, p.192). Because he had the opportunity to immerse himself in poor people’s reality, the Burkinabè revolutionary leader understood the truth of his people and committed to rescuing them.

There was a crisis in Burkina Faso. Unjust political structures were spreading everywhere. Within an exploited nation, corrupt leaders were exploiting their fellow citizens. Sankara himself had experienced injustice and decided to fight it because he was conscious and convinced of the interconnectedness of humankind. A specific narrative he shared could be the spring of his nonconformist attitude to injustice and imperialism. It is the narrative of a man from a remote village of Burkina Faso, who his peers sent to the capital city Ouagadougou to buy some food for several families. The country was in the middle of a period of drought. To avoid dying of famine, the families entrusted this man with the bit of money they collected up from their last reserves and sent him to the city. He traveled into the capital by bicycle. However, he had a horrible experience with people and the town. Unable to speak French, he failed to buy the expected millet for his people, watching many buyers arrive after him, jumping ahead of him and getting served. In the end, to make the situation worse for our traveler, his bike was stolen, and his money was stolen. Out of despair, he committed suicide. This unfortunate case did not raise the slightest compassion from the people of Ouagadougou. Meanwhile, far away in the village this man came from, dozens of people and families were waiting for the redemptive return of their savior to relieve their hunger, but he never came back. So then, Sankara asked this question: “Do we have the right to turn our backs on people like this?” (Prairie, 2007, pp.191-192). This shocking narrative and many others shaped Sankara’s mind about human dignity.

On October 4, 1984, President Sankara expressed to the United Nations the reasons for the revolt of all the Burkinabè. Very conscious that the *raison d’être* of the United Nations is to assure that people’s rights are being respected, he claimed, out of compassion:

I come here to bring you fraternal greetings from a country of 274,200 square kilometers whose seven million children, women, and men refuse to die of ignorance,

hunger, and thirst any longer. In their quarter century of existence as a sovereign state seated at the UN, they have been unable to really live. (Prairie, 2007, p.154)

He was speaking on behalf of his people who “[had] decided to henceforth assert themselves and accept their history, both its positive and negative-without the slightest complex” (Prairie, 2007, p.154). To the U.N. Security Council, Sankara articulated the violation of the rights of people in Burkina Faso. Beyond his country’s borders, he spoke on behalf of disinherited people worldwide out of concern for all humanity. Like Martin Luther King, Jr., Sankara was convinced that “injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere.” For all those whose survival is their most significant problem and death their closest destiny, the concerned president explained:

My only aspiration is twofold: first, to be able to speak on behalf of my people, the people of Burkina Faso, in simple words, words that are clear and factual. And second, in my own way to also speak on behalf of the ‘great disinherited people of the world,’ those who belong to the world so ironically christened the Third World. And to state, though I may not succeed in making them understood, the reasons for our revolt.

(Prairie, 2007, p.155)

At the U.N. Sankara argued that the Burkina Faso revolution was focused on eradicating different forms of oppression and establishing self-reliance and human dignity. “It is a revolution directed not against other countries or peoples, but rather aimed at restoring the dignity of the Burkinabè, aimed at allowing the masses to achieve happiness as defined by their own criteria” (Anderson, 1988, p. 124).

Furthermore, the African Charter on Human and People’s Rights (ACHPR) inspired Sankara's concern. After the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) in 1948, a worldwide movement for human rights occurred. Thus, in many regions of the world, various

declarations were born inspired by the U.N. These declarations were based upon attributes of the human person. The third significant continental agreement that followed the U.N. declaration was the ACHPR, issued by members of the Organization of African Unity (O.A.U.) in 1981. The African Charter was issued:

To eradicate all forms of colonialism from Africa, to coordinate and intensify their cooperation and efforts to achieve a better life for the peoples of Africa and to promote international cooperation having due regard to the Charter of the United Nations and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. (Prairie, 2007, p.155)

Most importantly, the African Charter was focused on the right of development and the right of economic, social, and political liberty. The application of the universal rights and the African Charter in Burkina Faso was expressed through Sankara's commitment to claim his country's sovereignty, the inalienable right of his people to be free, and the social engagements of upright men and women to determine their future.

Because the U.N. is a place to claim rights for the disinherited, Sankara did not hesitate to denounce colonialism's legacy publicly. To him, the designation "Haute-Volta" (Upper Volta), the former name for Burkina Faso, was the highest expression of his country's intellectual, cultural, political, and economic alienation from an imperialist country called France. Such an injury to his country could no longer persist. To him, Upper Volta respected only the motivations of the former French colonizers, who believed themselves entitled to provide their colonies with names. Sankara stated: "In these stormy times, we cannot leave our enemies of yesterday and today with an exclusive monopoly over thought, imagination, and creativity" (Simpson, 2007, p. 63). Thus, he rebaptized his country Burkina Faso, which means the land of upright men and women. Overall, explained Sankara, France was not indispensable to the flourishing of the peoples in Burkina Faso

and Africa. Because the treatment of alienation was political, the president of upright men and women initiated political reforms to bringing solutions to his country.

Beyond Burkina Faso, liberating Africans from the psychological legacy of slavery and colonization was essential to Sankara. Slavery and colonization are the worst practices of direct violence against humans. Some would define these practices as the worst manifestation of evil that humans have imagined against other fellow humans. Fundamentally, enslaved, and colonized Africans were oppressed, impoverished, and exploited. Throughout history, they have experienced various forms of aggression directed at their identity. Enslaved Africans were regarded as Sub-humans by their masters and severely treated (Ki-Zerbo, 1978). For many, slavery from Africa to the Americas has been a heart-rending contradiction because it was run by people who considered themselves civilized and their nations founded on the principles that all men and women are created free and equal. For some, the infliction of inhuman treatment on Africans transformed their perpetrators into distorted and divided humans who failed to honor their own customs, religions, civilizations, and philosophies (Washington, 1986).

Surely, the practice of slavery existed in Africa before the 16<sup>th</sup> century. However, it did not have the same scope as the intercontinental trade initiated by Europeans, who exploited it for five centuries to build their countries, secure their economies, advance their scientific research by using slaves as guinea pigs (Schiebinger, 2017), and then proclaimed themselves an example of respect for human rights, the most enlightened, civilized, and religious humans on Earth (Ki-Zerbo, 1978). What irony! Africa was defined by the Europeans as a reservoir of raw materials to be exploited, including human beings.

Engelbert Mveng, an African scholar, refers to the expression “anthropological pauperization” to characterize the impoverishment of Africa during the centuries of slavery and

colonization. To Dr. King, the anthropological pauperization was on both sides. That means the enslavers impoverished their humanity and the enslaved people's humanity as well (Washington, 1986). Africa was stripped of its wealth, not only material but also human and spiritual, including its identity, its cultures, its historical landscape, and many expressions of its faith (Mveng, 1995, p. 32). In South Africa, under the regime of apartheid, Black was classified as "nonwhite," therefore as "nonpersons". According to Allan Boesak, "nonwhite points to a nonentity" (Boesak, 2012, p. 14).

Many postcolonial writers in the 1950s and 1960s developed outstanding essays and historical reflections on the effects of colonialism. In his book "Discourse on Colonialism" (Césaire, 2000), Aimé Césaire discusses how the impact of colonialism led to the depletion of societies' core, the suppression of cultures, the erosion of institutions, the seizure of lands, the destruction of religions, the annihilation of magnificent artistic creations, and the elimination of extraordinary possibilities. In fact, "colonization = thingification" (Césaire, 2000).

Another historian, Albert Memmi argued,

I was Tunisian, therefore colonized. I discovered that few aspects of my life and my personality were untouched by this fact. Not only my own thoughts, my passions, and my conduct, but also the conduct of others towards me was affected... The most serious blow suffered by the colonized is being removed from history and from the community. (Memmi, 1965, p. 91)

Most of all, self-division, denial, and psychological auto-destruction directly resulted from the enslaved person and colonialist subjugation. For psychiatrist Franz Fanon (1967), the psychosocial structure of slavery and colonialism has caused mental disorders in people. He used the term "colonial mentality" to describe people in whose soul an inferiority complex has been

created by the death and burial of their local cultural originality (Fanon, 1967, p. 18). Millions of Africans during the colonial era were injected with fear and a servitude mentality. For Fanon (1967), many Africans under colonial pressure have come to wear white masks to deserve white respect. They were obliged to deny their own identity to navigate the context. The effects were simply devastating. An atmosphere of violence maintained many colonized people under pressure and oppression. Various constant attacks of colonized psychology were purposely directed to create a complex of self-hatred and anthropological pauperization.

To Sankara, because such a violation of human dignity deserves an answer, it was appropriate and timely to seek and adopt good conduct in response.

To build a new society in Burkina Faso and Africa free from the violation of human rights was the revolutionary mission initiated by President Sankara. He wanted “a new society rid of social injustice and the age-old domination and exploitation by international imperialism” (Simpson, 2007, p. 30). New freedom, strong independence, and tangible prosperity were the expressions of Sankara’s hunger and everlasting dream. He stood for these values and sacrificed his life for his people and Africa.

### ***Initiate Sustainable development for Burkina Faso***

President Sankara’s commitment to his country fostered conditions for sustainable development for his compatriots. He initiated his revolution to achieve social and economic freedom for the entire nation. Sankara was the voice of all those “who refuse to accept the economic bondage of class society, and its consequences, including ecological devastation, social disintegration, racism, and the wars of conquest and plunder inevitably wrought by workings of capitalism itself” (Simpson, 2007, p.10). He knew that the suffering of the disinherited in his country was not a natural phenomenon but the effects of the imperialist world order. Therefore, he



rose against the unfair order of the world, in which the rich become increasingly more prosperous and the poor increasingly poorer (Simpson, 2007).

Sankara set up a revolutionary government to achieve his goals. He mobilized peasants, workers, craftsmen, women, youth, and the elderly to carry out a literacy campaign, an immunization drive, the digging of wells, the planting of trees, the creation of new housing, and the beginning of the elimination of the oppressive class relations on the land. Determined to make real change, education was one of his power tools. Denouncing French colonial schools, he relied on a good education as the key to development because colonial masters created schools to produce administrators capable of helping within their systems of exploitation instituted in the colonies. Educators' task consists in injecting revolutionary values into schools so that these new values contribute to creating new Burkinabè “capable of understanding ideas and functioning harmoniously and completely as an integral part of the movement and dynamic of our people” (Anderson, 1988, p. 137).

Without using Paulo Freire's terms (Freire, 2018), Sankara was denouncing the banking model of education through which students are containers into which educators must put knowledge fitting the necessary skills to becoming administrators of Western colonies. Instead, he exploited an African philosophy called Burkindlem to educate his people. The philosophy of Burkindlem is characterized by justice, honesty, and integrity. The country name Burkina Faso was derived from this philosophy. Being a Burkinabè means being informed by Burkindlem. That consists in being just and honest. It was a way for people in Burkina Faso to contribute to the common goal of being humans. Sankara's ultimate purpose was to achieve civil and political freedom, social and economic freedom, and peaceful relations with all nations. He intended to take the Burkinabè from the clutches of dependence to consciousness of themselves as free people. It is for this reason that

he used the revolutionary slogan “*tond tinga yinga, tond saka kuum*” (For our Homeland, we accept death to win) at the end of every public address he made. This slogan was also used for writing songs that farmers, used to sing when working on their farms. It helped develop dignity, courage, national and great virtues, including self-reliance and care for all living beings.

In addition to being a charismatic and dynamic president, Sankara was an educator. He was convinced that national culture should extol dignity, courage, nationalism, and great virtues. To give a new atmosphere to the Burkinabè culture, Sankara suggested drawing on the traditions which were positive in the past and foreign experiences. He appealed for the participation of all the people “to transform this country into a prosperous and radiant country, a country where the people will be the only masters of the nation’s material and spiritual wealth” (Simpson, 2007, p. 55). He succeeded in engaging the people of Burkina Faso in a good fight to give meaning to all the revolt of the frustrated. He stated: “we had to give an ideological soul to the just struggles of our popular masses as they mobilized against the monster of imperialism. The passing revolt, the simple brushfire, had to be replaced forever with the revolution, the permanent struggle against all forms of domination” (Simpson, 2007, p. 64). In fact, the poor in Africa aspire only “to eat their fill, quench their thirst, survive, and preserve their dignity” (Simpson, 2007, p. 64). For Sankara, “the poor man’s grain” should no longer fatten the rich man’s cow.

Moreover, Sankara’s economic and social aspiration was to create autonomy in Burkina Faso so that people could use their intelligence and hands to invent and create enough riches for themselves. Because trusting foreign nations for Burkina Faso’s development without discernment, can be detrimental, Burkina Faso preferred to charge itself. In voicing the concern of his compatriots in international relations, Sankara confessed: “We chose to look for forms of organization better suited to our civilization, flatly and definitively rejecting all forms of outside

[dictates], in order to lay the foundations for achieving a level of dignity equal to our ambitions” (Simpson, 2007, p. 64). He wanted his people to dare to invent their future. He translated his philosophy into transformative actions in taking his country out of its hardship. He prioritized providing healthcare and food to everyone, promoting environmental justice, and educating and housing people.

Determined to combat mental colonization and Afro-pessimism, he fleshed out his ideas by being a good example. He set up immense programs to tackle hunger and thirst. Rural communities were provided with the government’s needed technical and organizational assistance to move the country from food instability to self-sufficiency and food-producing power. Because farmers were facing difficult conditions, like poor soil and shortage of arable lands, he developed a technique to master the water problem by constructing innumerable dams. He also established a harmonious marriage between the livestock agro-food industries and cultivation methods. Engaged in creating agro-food initiatives in many cities, Sankara’s government facilitated the internal distribution and opened the country to export agriculture products outside Burkina Faso. The government used various tools to promote economic autonomy and independence, including mass education and revolutionary discourses. The slogan “consume Burkinabè” encouraged and boosted local production and nation patronage. Furthermore, Sankara launched the Faso Danfani (cloth of the republic), which is still current. Faso Danfani is a traditional uniform that every citizen, including public servants, peasants, and students, should wear instead of importing expensive garments. It is made from local cotton and dyed by local craftsmen and women.

To achieve the autonomy of Burkina Faso, Sankara emphasized austerity and various forms of sacrifice. Public servants were at the front line of these sacrifices. He argued: “If we want greater justice, each of us must recognize the real situation of the people and accept the sacrifices that each

individual must make for justice to be done” (Prairie, 2007, pp. 197-198). And natural autonomy was, to him, the way to genuine justice for all. He understood his mission as an opportunity to recondition his people to accept themselves without shame.

Subsequently, under the leadership of Sankara, Mercedes Benzes and other expensive cars used by official leaders in neighboring countries were taken away from public servants and replaced with cheaper cars in Burkina Faso. Government ministers were forbidden from flying first class when invited to international meetings. Everyone living in the country then was invited to the maximal strictness. No one, not even students, was allowed to write on only one side of a paper. Both sides were to be used with parsimony and scrutiny. Even domestic animals had to be restricted from consuming grass randomly or enjoying the water. Restrictions were placed on when and where livestock could feed. During the dry season, limits were placed on water used for growing trees. Everybody should tighten up in all areas, including humans, animals, and plants. The austerity of the Burkinabè was well-known overseas. Within international organizations, Sankara and his government members were not afraid to block discussions, to gain a reduction of one or two dollars in the dues or contributions countries must pay. God, ancestors, and spirits were not forgotten in the national sacrifices and noble aspirations during Sankara’s revolution. Their blessings and prayers were welcomed. In the churches, the mosques, the temples, and through traditional African religious practices, spiritual leaders were asked to include prayers for abundant rainy seasons. Most importantly, Sankara was himself the pinnacle of the national austerity. He imposed on public servants, state officials, and himself an obligation to contribute money to build schools and hospitals. He said, “Those living in the towns and taking advantage of their salaries should make sacrifices to enable the building of hospitals and schools for the poor. Otherwise, they

participate in the international complicity of men and women of good conscience” (Prairie, 2007, p. 198).

### ***Promote Afrocentricity and Universal Peace***

Sankara promoted Afrocentricity and universal peace. While the concept of Afrocentrism refers exclusively to an ideology focused on cultural aspects, including Africans’ customs, habits, traditions, and value systems, Molefi Kete Asante (2003) characterizes Afrocentricity as “a mode of thought and action in which the centrality of African interests, values, and perspectives predominate. In regard to theory, it is the placing of African people in the center of any analysis of African phenomena” (Asante, 2003, p. 2). Building an Afrocentric nation means positioning African agency and experiences at the core of erecting a continent wherein citizens are awakened to the idea of sharing common patriotic values.

Afrocentricity is a devotion to serving the cause of Africans with ethical behavior. Above all, Afrocentricity is a positive philosophy through which Africans who become the complete subjects of their history, narratives, and cultures do not exclude anybody but are open to all who respect their sovereignty. “Afrocentricity seeks to enshrine the idea that blackness itself is a trope of ethics. Thus, to be black is to be against all forms of oppression, racism, classism, homophobia, patriarchy, child abuse, pedophilia, and white racial domination” (Asante, 2003, p. 2).

Rooted in Asante’s definition of Afrocentricity, which states: “To be black is to be against all forms of oppression,” Sankara’s revolution featured an international aspect, marked by solidarity with all people who respect the dignity of the people of Burkina Faso and Africa. Because he was convinced that every nation can make a difference, the Burkina Faso leader wanted his words to embrace all people around the world whose dignity was poisoned by other men and women or by

any system crushing them (Prairie, 2007). Such a humanitarian concern for the less privileged outside the borders of Burkina Faso was inspired by the significance of the institution of the United Nations. According to Falk (2012), the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) was undeniably presented as a holistic representation of human dignity, with the expectation that each state would progressively strive towards it, considering their own pace and respecting their sovereignty. From article 28 to 30 the UDHR is concerned with the questions of collaboration among nations and human communities. Article 29.1 states: “Everyone has duties to the community in which alone the free and full development of his personality is possible” (Mahoney, 2007, p. 52).

President Thomas Sankara was in harmony with the UDHR and the recent revolutions worldwide. Indeed, the order of the world which ignores the poor must be destroyed and be replaced with a new order that makes humans more concerned for the disinherited. Therefore, the marginalized need to participate in discussions and decisions regarding international relation mechanisms (Simpson, 2007, p. 71). Furthermore, being a pan-Africanist, Sankara was concerned for the whole of Africa. He left a living testament to the continent a few months before his assassination: “We should undertake to live as Africans. It is the only way to live free and to live in dignity” (Prairie, 2007, p. 381). He was convinced that all peoples are entitled to be the shapers of their destinies and histories.

Development cannot be imported from outside. It is something people must do for themselves. Pan-Africanist like Kwame Nkrumah (1909- 1972), who spent his life proclaiming, “Africa must unite,” and Patrice Lumumba (1925-1961), who called Africans to reject Western imported ideas, Sankara wanted Africans to abandon their unfruitful conflicts, and move toward

genuine freedom and unity. He believed that, with everyone's support, Africans would be able to make peace at home (Prairie, 2007).

Sankara was also convinced that to develop, Africa must trust itself instead of imprisoning its freedom through aid from Bretton Woods institutions including the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF). Critical of international institutions, he denounced their oversight of a humanitarian mission to serve capitalists' interests. According to him, African leaders could use immense African resources to develop the continent, increase exchange, develop a continental market, create technology, and improve Africans' lives. Because he wanted Africans to be free from exploitation and oppression, he declared: "Let's make sure that the African market is a market for Africans. Let's produce in Africa, transform in Africa, consume in Africa. Produce what we need and consume what we produce, in place of importing it" (Prairie, 2007, p. 380).

Moreover, President Sankara could be considered a universal example of a head of state. Defender of the oppressed beyond Africa, he dreamt of relieving the exploited and oppressed, especially innocent children, women, and the elderly. To him, wrong decisions are made by leaders when money is taken from the education budget to build massive prisons. There is a problem when scientists abandon their prior vocation of using their intelligence to prevent humanity from distress and prefer creating dangerous viruses and unnecessary drugs. When doctors who pledged to take care of life transform themselves into death-givers through unjustified abortions, something is wrong. When the medical drug industry is neglected to the advantage of the arms industry, humanity is on the wrong side (Prairie, 2007). That was his vision of the world.

Since racism, apartheid, and segregation are unfair, and against Afrocentricity, the Burkinabè leader defended all Blacks suffering these problems in South Africa and the United States of America. He argued: "I speak on behalf of the millions of human beings who are in

ghettos because they have black skin or because they come from different cultures, and who enjoy a status barely above that of an animal” (Prairie, 2007, p. 162). In defending the oppressed, he was not indifferent to the situation of the Indigenous Peoples in the Americas

Who have been massacred, crushed, humiliated, and confined for centuries on reservations, in order to prevent them from aspiring to any rights, and to prevent them from enriching their culture through joyful union with other cultures, including the culture of the invader. (Prairie, 2007, p. 162)

Sankara did not need to have any acquaintance with a country before speaking on behalf of poor people living there. Concerned by the lack of peace in some countries he had never visited, he wanted peace everywhere. His prayer was, “I wish to stand on the side of the Afghan and Irish peoples, on the side of the peoples of Granada and East Timor, each of whom is searching for happiness based on their dignity and the laws of their own culture” (Prairie, 2007, p. 164).

Without neglecting the victims of the destruction of the earth, he said: “My thoughts go out to all of those affected by the destruction of nature, and to those 30 million who will die as they do each year, struck down by the formidable weapon of hunger” (Prairie, 2007, p. 163). Indeed, the revolution of the upright men and women was beyond the borders of Burkina Faso. To Sankara, all successful revolutions from everywhere should inspire African revolutions. However, the sovereignty of nations must be respected. He explained:

We draw the lessons of the American Revolution, the lessons of its victory over colonial domination and the consequences of that victory. We adopt as our own the affirmation of the Doctrine whereby Europeans must not intervene in American affairs, nor Americans in European affairs. Just as Monroe proclaimed, “America to the Americans” in 1823, we echo



this today by saying “Africa to the Africans,” “Burkina to the Burkinabè.” (Prairie, 2007, p. 165)

And:

To any human in need of a better world, Sankara left a piece of advice. He confessed:

You cannot carry out fundamental change without a certain amount of madness. In this case, it comes from nonconformity, the courage to turn your back on the old formulas, the courage to invent the future. It took the madmen of yesterday for us to be able to act with extreme clarity today. I want to be one of those madmen. We must dare to invent the future. (Prairie, 2007, p. 232)

Surely, Sankara was the voice of all those who reject poverty and its consequences, “including ecological devastation, social disintegration, racism, and the wars of conquest and plunder inevitably wrought by workings of capitalism itself” (Simpson, 2007, p. 10).

### ***The Conferences of the Parties (COPs) and their Impact on Climate Change in Africa***

The Conference of the Parties (COP) is the United Nations Climate Change Convention, set to make decisions regarding climate change and environmental justice. The COP is the supreme decision-making core of the Convention. All states that are parties to the Convention participate to the *Conferences of the Parties (COP)*, “at which they review the implementation of the Convention and any other legal instruments that the COP adopts and take decisions necessary to promote the effective implementation of the Convention” (United Nations Climate Change, 2021). During the COP, the parties review the national communications and make emission inventories submitted by the participants.

The COP leaders meet annually to assess the effects of the measures the parties are supposed to take. They also evaluate the progress or regress made in achieving the objectives or

failing to meet them. “The first COP meeting was held in Berlin, Germany, in March 1995. The COP meets in Bonn, the seat of the secretariat unless a Party offers to host the session” (United Nations Climate Change, 2021).

In 2015, the COP achieved significant work by adopting the Paris Agreement (P.A.). The P.A. is the chief treaty ever reached on climate change. Adopted in Paris on December 12th, 2015, by 196 Parties at COP21, the fundamental P.A. goal consisted in limiting global warming to well below 2°C, preferably to 1.5°C. “To achieve this long-term temperature goal, countries aim to reach global peaking of greenhouse gas emissions as soon as possible to achieve a climate-neutral world by mid-century” (United Nations Climate Change, 2021). Bringing all nations into a common purpose to undertake ambitious efforts to combat climate change is making the P.A. significant. The agreement is guided by equity, respect for difference, typical responsibilities, and the respective capabilities of its members. It recognizes the need for an effective and progressive response to the threat of climate change. It also acknowledges the specific needs of developing countries regarding funding and transfer of technology, especially those more vulnerable to climate change. Finally, it emphasizes that climate change actions contribute to equitable access to sustainable development and poverty eradication. Because climate change is a worldwide concern, the P.A. acknowledges that

Parties should, when taking action to address climate change, respect, promote and consider their respective obligations of human rights, the right to health, the rights of indigenous peoples, local communities, migrants, children, persons with disabilities and people in vulnerable situations and the right to development, as well as gender equality, empowerment of women and intergenerational equity. (The Paris Agreement, 2015, Preamble).

Between October and November 2021, the Convention of the Parties (COP) had its quinquennial meeting, COP26, in Glasgow (Scotland). COP26 was the most critical climate meeting since Paris. The delay was due to the Covid19 pandemic (Newburger, 2021). The summit ended with an agreement among the 200 nations to accelerate the fight against the climate crisis. Some significant accomplishments were made, including pledges “on methane gas pollution, deforestation, coal financing, as well as completion of long-awaited rules on carbon trading and a notable U.S.-China deal” (Newburger, 2021, para. 2). Furthermore, governments were invited to make more substantial pledges to avert more greenhouse gas emissions and support developing countries to develop without provoking more damage to the climate.

Since adopting the P.A., the world has observed a planetary mobilization from different horizons, targeting emissions reduction and promoting green energy. Youth activists organized or joined rising international movements from many countries, including Greta Thunberg, recognized as Time Magazine's 2019 “Person of the Year.” The coming back of the United States to the P.A. by President-elect Joe Biden after President Donald Trump's decision to withdraw the country is another significant move to tackle the issue. In addition, over 100 nations have joined the U.S. and E.U.-led coalition to cut 30 percent of methane gas emissions by 2030 from 2020 levels and implement long-term strategies to enhance the transition to net-zero emissions (Newburger, 2021).

However, this agreement is not binding on its members, and there is not an enforcement mechanism to keep the decisions being respected. Moreover, goodwill assumptions seem not to be enough. To some climate experts in Glasgow ended up with diplomatic promises without tangible decisions addressing the severity of the climate crisis (Newburger, 2021, para. 3).

Most importantly, all participants in the summit were aware that success would be measured by turning their promises into action by policymakers and state leaders. Industrialized countries are prompted to reduce their carbon emissions, use green energy, and address the consumerist ideology in the global North. Meanwhile, in the Global South, leaders appeal for more solidarity toward the poor because climate change affects poor economies and undermines their development.

Moreover, how people relate to the earth and its contents in the Global South is more valorizing sustainability and long-term change. Farmers living in the Global South, including indigenous people in Latin America and Africa, are expecting the developed countries to engage in more actions that contribute to environmental justice. Indigenous peoples' involvement in combating climate change is rarely considered in public discourse, despite their contributions. Their wisdom is unique according to Leonardo Boff (1997). One has to admire it, use it, or respect it. In *Cry of the Earth, Cry of the Poor* (1997), the theologian wrote:

If we want to be rich, accumulate power, and rule the earth, there is no point in asking the native peoples. But if we want to be happy, combine being human with being divine, integrate life and death, put the person in nature, connect work and leisure, and harmonize relations between generations, then let us listen to the indigenous peoples. They have wise lessons to impart to us. (Boff, 1997, 123)

Additionally, when native people relate to the earth, their terms are significant. Working the earth means collaborating with Mother Earth to provide for humans and other living beings. In fact,

She is bountiful and sustains and nourishes all. Nevertheless, human beings help her in her mission. Hence indigenous people work enough to supply their human needs and enjoy

life. Work is always a community activity and one of pleasure, the aim of which is not to produce profit but live well. (Boff, 1997, 125)

Despite the insignificant contribution to greenhouse emissions, climate change threatens millions of indigenous communities worldwide, including in African countries. It is essential to note that the indigenous community's lifestyle is vital and active to the multiple ecosystems inhabiting the planet. Therefore, helping these communities develop resilience, adaptation, and sustainability is key to our shared world. In addition, their traditional knowledge and wisdom can bring helpful solutions to the climate crisis. African leaders and ecologists are committed to this mission.

### ***How do African Leaders and Ecologists address the Climate Crisis?***

African leaders and ecologists are committed to addressing climate change because it is a global issue. State leaders on the continent participate in the international discussions, even if the continent of Africa does not significantly contribute to the changing climate due to small emissions. African countries are enduring the damage of climate change disproportionately. The African Ministerial Conference on the Environment (AMCEN) and the United Nations Environment Assembly (UNEA) are organizations that convey actions and reflections in many countries, including Côte d'Ivoire, Senegal, Ghana, and Morocco. Aligned with the Paris Agreement, African leaders are optimistic in their commitment. "There is strength and optimism under the skies of Africa - an old continent, from where our humanity emerged thousands of years ago" (Stone, 2016, para 19-20).

Among the African ecologists committed to driving climate actions capable of countering the phenomenon of desertification and pollution of oceans, there was Wangari Maathai, whose commitment to the environment was robust and rewarding. First African woman to win the Nobel

Peace Prize in 2004, Maathai founded the Green Belt Movement (GBM) in 1977 and published a lot on the issue of climate change and the environment. Planting trees and caring for the environment sprang from her experience with the grassroots in rural Kenya. She witnessed a significant occurrence of soil erosion and encountered numerous undernourished cattle, which starkly contrasted with the environment of her youth. Additionally, there was a growing prevalence of landslides, and the availability of clean drinking water sources posed a frequent challenge (Rakoczy, 2013).

According to Maathai, prompting African farmers to grow cash crops such as coffee, cocoa, tea, or cotton destined for exportation to the detriment of food crops such as millet, mays, or rice, usually intended for consumption, contribute to the malnutrition problem in the continent. Putting together this experience and her scientific awareness of the consequences of climate change, Maathai exploited the national slogan of President Jomo Kenyatta, “Harambee” (let us pull together) to mobilize women to her cause with her own slogan, “One person, one tree” (Maathai, *Unbowed*, 2008, p.134). The aim was to convince people that human flourishing depends on nature flourishing. Through workshops and education projects, she helped farmers to understand that their government is not always to be blamed. Instead, their responsibility is at staked to protect the environment. The beneficiaries of her movement realized that “they did not speak their minds about what was wrong and did not protect their land. For example, poor land use led to soil erosion” (Rakoczy, 2013, p. 79). She launched workshops and seminars to foster people's strong desire to protect their rights and the rights of the environment. She developed core values to protect the environment, including “love for the environment, gratitude and respect for the earth's resources, self-empowerment and self-betterment, the spirit of service and volunteerism” (Maathai, 2010 as cited by Rakoczy, 2013, p. 79). To en flesh these values, visible

actions were taken, including tree-planting, restoring landscapes and indigenous forests, planting vegetable gardens and halting soil erosion (Maathai, 2010).

When she was engaged in politics, Maathai contributed to educating farmers to care for one another in caring for their common good, i.e., their environment. She was convinced that when people's hearts are touched and their minds convinced, they transform themselves into sustainable agents for change (Maathai, 2004). Ecology and politics are connected “since often environmental problems are caused by political neglect, greed or corruption” (Rakoczy, 2013, p. 83). Working with rural women, she helped them decipher the links between poverty, environmental degradation, and the loss of culture. To her, “the rediscovery of culture was not something simply personal but a political and social necessity” (Maathai, 2009, p. 27). It is a call for a cultural waking up and revival that supports the efforts toward the protection of the environment because “learning from and living the cultural values that foster sustainability will, she stressed, lead people to a stronger self-identity, self-respect, morality, and spirituality” (Maathai, 2004, p. 8).

Moreover, Maathai’s engagement is unforgettable for African generations to come. However, the Kenyan ecologist did not challenge Western narrowed paradigms related to ecology neither promoted Afrocentric epistemologies that display another discourse at international summits. What is missing in Maathai's actions is the framing of authentic post-colonial theories capable of standing by themselves for mother earth. African native epistemologies should be brought to international summits and contribute to empowering dialogue for sustainable ecology.

### *Understanding Climate Change with African Epistemologies and Ontologies*

The climate change language in Africa reveals another understanding of the phenomenon itself. Goldman et al. (2018)'s research in Tanzania provides unique perspectives. The climate debate cannot be universalized nor generalized because each part of the earth experiences climate change differently. For example, while everyone identifies climate change as warming, in this part of East Africa, Maasai herders feel colder. "We feel cold. Long ago it used to be only July was cold. But now because of climate change, starting June through September, it is cold. This is climate change" (Goldman et al., 2018, p. 1). Another farmer from Tanzania had another experience. He stressed: "Now we plant foreign modern plants. You go to town and buy trees to plant, and this is increasing land and climate problems" (Goldman et al., 2018, p. 1). In the first quote, the interviewee's experience of climate change is related to the feeling of coldness. Moreover, that feeling is wholly opposed to the standard reference of warming as the standardized sensation. In the second quote, the interviewee shares a local adaptation technique adopted by Maasai farmers from the West. This apparent contradiction should lead climate experts to involve more non-Western-centric ecologists in the climate change debate.

To understand the understanding and description of climate change by herders and farmers in Africa, one should question the epistemologies and ontologies guiding the issues. Knowing the world is never disconnected from being in the world. One cannot separate epistemology (the science of knowledge) from ontology (the science of being). How different communities know the world, including climate change, is profoundly connected to what the world is for them with the awareness of the types of worlds they contribute to creating.

For Maasai villagers, climate change is often experienced as temperature and precipitation changes but also as changes in their ability to predict the weather, changes



in vegetation and animal behavior, and changes in their own livelihood practices of pastoralism/agropastoralism, which both impact local climatic patterns (such as drought) and are immediately impacted by such changes. (Goldman et al., 2015, p. 1)

For that reason, it is difficult to extract an assumed static indigenous knowledge on climate change: “Any discussion regarding climate change knowledge needs to pay equal attention to world making and knowledge making, materiality, and discourse, as well as the inseparable nature of knowledge production, application, and circulation” (Goldman, Nadasdy, & Turner, 2011, as cited in Goldman et al., 2015, p. 2).

According to Goldman et al. (2018), it is crucial to coproduce knowledge in engaging a plurality of perspectives. Despite the complexity of such an approach, this could make the debate richer. The term co-production in this context refers to interdependence and mutual constitutions of solutions between technocrats, scientists, and local communities. According to Barad (2003), co-production extends beyond the mere integration of epistemological responses to the problem. It necessitates a focus on both the practices of constructing the world and generating knowledge, while recognizing the inherent interconnectedness of ethics, epistemologies, and ontologies. Science and society are intertwined and participate in coproducing knowledge and attitudes necessary for adaptation.

Building up integrated knowledge by considering epistemology and ontology consists in creating effective solutions that reconcile nature with humanity. “Climate change is, of course, a quintessential case in which maintaining a binary frame that situates nature outside of humanity is dubious at best, and worse—dangerous and misleading (Ghosh, 2016; Veland, 2017; Goldman et al., 2018, p. 9.).

Challenges created by climate change require synthesis work and discourse that unite and include different knowledge. No viewpoint of climate change does exhaust the understanding of the issue. When many views are brought together strategically to address the same issue, there is more chance of success in fixing it. Including African indigenous knowledge in the global climate change discussion is not an act of charity. Life started in Africa, and wisdom has never left the continent, the cradle of humanity. When lessons from indigenous people are combined with modern science, the marginalization of non-Westerners is challenged, and new ideas emerge to benefit everyone. The contribution of Indigenous Knowledge (I.K.) to climate change deserves more consideration. In fact, “there is a growing body of scholarly literature that shows how I.K.s complement Western science and enhance our understanding of local impacts and adaptation. Yet, the inclusion of I.K.s in climate science and politics has been uneven” (Smith et al., 2012, p. 473). Important lessons could be learned from the I.K.s.

However, for others, African Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK), a component of the I.K.s, stands by itself, and utilizing Western standards to integrate TEK into the climate debate reduces their uniqueness. For example, in *Indigenous Climate Knowledges* (Smith et al., 2012), Smith denounces Western standards and categories to measure the effectiveness of African traditional ecological knowledge. “This is especially evident when explanations of environmental or behavioral conditions are expressed in terms of spiritual intervention or phenomenon” (Smith et al., 2012, p. 449).

Using Western standards to measure traditional ecological knowledge in Africa is disastrous because the selection criteria are based on Western sciences and philosophies. If African farmers who used local techniques to address climate change could benefit from international funding without being forced to adapt their strategies to a Western-centric vision,

they would have brought efficient and original solutions. Unfortunately, when African ecologists participate in international summits where climate change discussions are displayed, they limit their participation to receiving instructions, like empty recipients. Then they try to adapt their policy to international standards that do not consider local challenges. Paying more attention to African-specific principles related to the welfare of humanity is essential for environmental justice.

### ***Understanding Climate Change with Traditional African Principles***

In many African countries, people believe nature is animated and spirits are everywhere, including in the air and the environment. In this context, the understanding of caring for others makes the “others” richer because it includes nature, animals, plants, rivers, and mountains. This common-sense goes without debate. “Animals are not only animals; trees are not only trees, and rivers are not only rivers. They are living beings because they are very habited by living spirits.” Their well-being depends on our well-being as humans and vice versa. This spiritually centered approach to the principle of others is fundamental to addressing climate change. According to postcolonial theorist, Achille Mbembe (2016), to overcome human extinction, we need to reopen the planet to all who inhabit it, including nature, animals, and forests. It can help develop a sustainable and consistent existence. Instead of considering the earth as our property, this philosophy calls to transform our possessive mentality into a more integrative one with more responsibility. The earth does not belong to us. However, we do belong to the earth.

Moreover, certain principles if considered, could contribute to enriching the debate on climate change:

#### **The Principle of I am Because We Are**

At the center of African ethics is human life. Life is fundamentally sacred. To protect and foster their living, humans live in families and communities. Furthermore, these families are large.

It includes children, parents, grandparents, uncles, aunts, brothers and sisters, departed relatives, and the unborn members who are still in the loins of the ancestors. According to John Mbiti (1969), in *African Religion and Philosophy* individual life gets its meaning through the community, and the community exists thanks to the individuals. For that reason, relationships are essential for caring for one another. Living with harmony consists of understanding that each person has a vital flow, which enables solidarity with God, the living, the dead, the not-yet-born, animals, and nature. Mbiti (1969) maintained, “Whatever happens to the individual happens to the whole group, and whatever happens to the whole group happens to the individual. The individual can only say: ‘I am because we are and since we are, therefore, I am’” (Mbiti, 1969, pp. 108-109). Therefore, cooperation is indispensable to protect our common good, the earth. Starting from a communitarian philosophy appeals for more dialogue between cultures instead of competition. Magesa in *African Spirituality* (2013) reflected on this worldview by affirming:

The African sense of belonging is inexorably connected to the soil (land), which in many ways serves as the ‘umbilical cord’ that links the past, present, and future; the spiritual and mundane; the individual and the community; the earth and the world above and the underworld. (Magesa, 2013, 122)

Another common African approach to life related to the principle *I am because we are*, consists in viewing life through its three dimensions. The “Living living people constitute the first dimension”. That relates to the current population of the earth. The second dimension is constituted by “the Passed living people.” That relates to all those who have passed away. They are not dead; they are living in another dimension—the dimension of the ancestors. The “Unborn living people” constitute the third dimension. That relates to unborn generations yet to come. Africans believe they live with their ancestors waiting for the right moment to descend into our

world. The “Living living people” should take responsibility for safeguarding a sustainable environment for the “Unborn living people.” And the more they take responsibility, the better they will inherit the ancestors' blessing when they become “Passed living people.” We should take care of one another (Mbiti, 1969). Being aware of such relationships is fundamentally relevant to building human and environmental justice.

### **The Principle of Ujamaa**

Ujamaa is a Kiswahili concept expressing unity, solidarity, and mutual support. Ujamaa is the best expression of African socialism proposed by Julius Nyerere in Tanzania during the post-colonial period (Nyerere, 1971). The objective of his philosophy in the United Republic of Tanzania was to build a society in which all members have equal opportunities. In this society, exploitation and competition should not exist. Ujamaa, if implemented, enables freedom, respect, care, and solidarity among all living beings, including the components of the environment.

### **The Principle of Ubuntu**

Ubuntu is an invitation to promote human rights, impartial political authority, honest relationships among nations, and the common good. Since the end of apartheid in South Africa, Ubuntu has been promoted to build peace, reconciliation, and solidarity among people. It is another expression of Ujamaa. Ubuntu consists in caring for others and being in harmony with all creation. Its objective is to promote cooperation between individuals, cultures, and the cosmos.

According to philosopher Michael Eze (2018), “humanism, as understood in this context, means that our claim to humanity is a disposition for unconditional acceptance of other people” (Eze, 2018, 22). Therefore, their well-being enlarges our well-being, and their diminution decreases our well-being. In the same vein, Desmond Tutu (1999), one the best framers of the Ubuntu philosophy, declared:

Ubuntu . . . speaks to the very essence of being human . . . [when] we say “Yu, u nobuntu”; “Hey, so-and-so has ubuntu.” Then you are generous, you are hospitable. . . caring and compassionate . . . It is to say, “My humanity is caught up, is inextricably bound up, in yours.” We belong in a bundle of life . . . It is not, “I think therefore I am.” It says rather: “I am human because I belong. I participate, I share.” A person with ubuntu is open and available to others, affirming of others, does not feel threatened that others are able and good . . . he or she [is] humiliated or diminished, when others are tortured or oppressed (Tutu, 1999, 35).

Understanding and integrating African philosophies and principles in the climate change conversation is essential to promote environmental justice. People participate in modifying the ecosystems around them through cultural practices, values, and visions of the world. Their activities depend on how they exploit natural spaces and resources. And how they exploit natural spaces and resources depends on how they understand them. And every context entails specific inspiration and leadership.

## CHAPTER III: METHODOLOGY

### Restatement of the Purpose of the Study

The purpose of the study was the country of Burkina Faso and the pedagogical aspects of Yacouba Sawadogo's leadership and commitment to ecology, using epistemologies of the South to address climate change in Africa. Knowing that Sawadogo's achievement happened within a contextualized community whose members impacted him, I was interested in exploring the different aspects, the cultural belief systems and the foundations of his achievement.

The pedagogy used by Sawadogo enabled him to develop a specific relationship with the earth and its components. His successful transformation of the land attracted disciples who learned from him. Studying this pedagogy was essential to framing techniques and conditions from which potential successful ecologists could emerge from Burkina Faso and the Global South. My primary purpose was to immerse myself in the village of Gourga to interview Sawadogo and his disciples and exchange with them about their realization.

This study was qualitative research using a narrative case study methodology. The findings will help educators prepare the conditions from which we can raise ecologists like Sawadogo. Grounded in a critical consideration of knowledge with the epistemologies of the South tools, I approached Sawadogo and his disciples with the curiosity of someone respectful of their Afrocentric understanding and interpretation of the world. When I interacted with Sawadogo and his people, I ignited in them the desire to recall their universe's philosophies, epistemologies, and sociologies as far as possible as human memory can tap. We explored the precolonial era with passion. I did not consider them illiterate because they do not speak English or French, as many tend to do when studying indigenous people. To me, they are scholars of African traditions. They were my instructors and masters. Interviews and focus group sessions

were in Mooré, the national language of Burkina Faso. Producers of knowledge from indigenous perspectives, these farmers have a lot to give to the world. I penetrated their universe by wearing their lenses.

Moreover, I drank their water and breathed their air, as we used to say in Burkina Faso. These expressions mean developing a deep connection with people you encounter. Water and air are the elementary God-given graces that unite humans, according to our traditions. Therefore, instead of only relying on previous publications on Sawadogo's achievement, I was part of his community for a while to learn from him and his people.

Additionally, what makes decolonial thinking creative is researchers' capabilities of framing their ways of connecting to knowledge and native wisdoms as they collaborate with participants in their research. Each narrative case study is unique and unrepeated. No one has ever studied Sawadogo as I did. Therefore, my analysis was new, even following postcolonial theory and the decolonial thinking approach. Methods used by previous researchers in narrative case studies inspired my study, but I preferred trusting what Sawadogo's terrain provided regarding ways of proceeding. I was inventive, creative, and open to the newness of the case study, yet objective and rigorous.

### **Research Design**

The present research was a qualitative study using a narrative case study methodology. I followed the significant characteristics of narrative research as described by Creswell and Guetterman (2019). Participants' stories and narratives were the data. I gathered it through interviews, informal conversations, focus group sessions, and observations of participants' realizations. Narrative research has many implications. The preamble to narrative research was the existence of individuals willing to tell their stories and the desire of the researcher to report



them. In establishing close relationships with these individuals, the researcher conducts the research to make the study more participative. “This may help reduce a commonly held perception by practitioners in the field that research is distinct from practice and has little direct application” (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019, p. 513). When participating in a study, participants who can share their stories develop a sense of respect and the feeling of celebrating their achievements. In addition, telling their stories helps them better understand themselves, improve their techniques, strengthen their relationships with what could look previously strange, and gain more self-confidence. The researcher's role involves organizing the collected data in a specific and consistent direction. Because the framework of qualitative methods has many approaches, I selected a narrative case study to scrutinize Sawadogo's case. Stories and narratives illuminate individual experiences and build knowledge from below.

In using an Afrocentric lens to explore the authenticity of Sawadogo and his disciples, I tried to understand the development of their knowledge within their context by relying upon the originality of their narratives, world views, and cosmic perspectives. Undoubtedly, narrative stories are always located and situated in specific contexts and terrains. They make knowledge contextualized and more precise. Using different strategies, including interviews, the researcher aligns themselves with the past, present, and future of the individuals he is dialoguing with. Narrative research fits most research exploring individuals' lives, realizations, or specific events in which testimonies are essential. However, narrative inquiry beyond individuals valorizes and shapes the social, cultural, and institutional narratives from which individuals' experiences are enacted (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019). Studying Sawadogo was studying his community and ecology, as well.

In the data gathering, I also used epistemological analysis to analyze the stories and narratives I collected (Coffey & Atkinson,1996). If stories and narratives are vital in shaping experiences, their interpretation matters more. They participate in the collective memory of any society for education, healing, reconciliation, and envisioning of life in general. The researcher's role involves getting the meaning and the motives of the experiences. I asked specific questions to understand the purpose and reasons for stories and narratives. Another critical question I applied to my research was the meaning of the data: When can we say the data is significant? (Coffey & Atkinson,1996). Because knowledge is the result of cooperation and attention, data is meaningful when the researcher pays attention to what is said and how it is said. The role of metaphors and symbols is essential in this process. Because I am a qualitative researcher, these experiences helped me collect information and data from Sawadogo and his disciples.

### **Research Questions**

1. What cultural beliefs and world views does Sawadogo use to understand and describe the phenomenon of climate change?
2. What is the foundation of Sawadogo's hope to tackle the oppression of desertification and the oppression of the first world dominant problem-solving methods?
3. What aspects of Yacouba Sawadogo's pedagogy have helped him form and become an Afrocentric ecologist, who inspires other farmers capable of passing his pedagogy to new generations?

### **Data Collection Process**

In qualitative inquiry, the intent is not to generalize a population but to develop an in-depth exploration of a central phenomenon. Thus, to best understand this phenomenon, qualitative researchers purposefully and intentionally select individuals and sites for data

collection (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019, p. 206). I went to Burkina Faso in July 2022 and met Yacouba Sawadogo and the farmers who learned from his methods during these past ten years. If Sawadogo initiated his project in the 1980s, it was only during these past ten years that many people started to pay attention to him, visit him, or learn from him. I made the data collection as collaborative as possible with participants in respecting the five steps described by Creswell and Guetterman (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019, pp. 204-234). These steps are interrelated and appeal to one another. First, I identified participants and their locations. Second, I committed to obtaining permission to have them participate in the study. Third, I considered the type of information that could best answer my research questions. Fourth, I designed instruments (protocols) for collecting and recording the information. Finally, fifth, I was attentive to potential ethical issues related to participants' narratives in collecting data.

### ***Selection of Participants and Sites***

I recruited the most representative population for the study by following criteria relevant to my research questions. In addition to Yacouba Sawadogo, the leading participant in my study, I selected nine farmers according to their capacity to provide multiple information through their narratives and experiences with Sawadogo and the implementation of his pedagogy on their farms. In terms of strategies, I selected them before data collection began and made sure they fitted my expectations. They came from different villages. The more diverse participants in narrative research are, the better their narratives can be. In terms of age and gender, I selected adults (aged 28-78), including seven males and two females, in addition to Sawadogo, the main co-researcher. I was focused on farmers living in neighboring villages willing to participate in the interviews. They were selected according to their capacity to provide helpful information,

share the lessons they have learned from Sawadogo, and be capable of giving voice to “silenced” people.

### ***Permission Required to Gain Access***

I got the approval of the University of San Francisco review board before undertaking this study to protect the rights of participants. And I have attached as an appendix the approval letter of the Institutional Review Board (IRB) and the process involved in securing permissions. “These steps include seeking permission from the board, developing a description of the project, designing an informed consent form, and having the project reviewed” (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019, p. 210). I provided details of the procedures, to the USF review board.

Regarding the identity of the participants, even if they agreed to have their names unmasked, I decided to protect their identity by identifying them with pseudonyms for security reasons, except Yacouba Sawadogo. Furthermore, I was helped by a gatekeeper. “In qualitative research, you often need to seek and obtain permissions from individuals and sites at many levels. Because of the in-depth nature of extensive and multiple interviews with participants, it might be helpful for you to identify and make use of a gatekeeper” (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019, p. 211).

A friend of mine, Paul Ouedraogo, volunteered to be my gatekeeper. He helped me gain access to the sites and locate the participants. Paul is a fellow priest living in Ouahigouya and familiar to people in the area. He had an insider status, and that was helpful to the research. However, to avoid any biased participation in the study, I requested that Paul not select participants from his parish or people attending his services and consider him their priest. He took care of additional procedures, including preparing my housing and renting a car for our various trips. Sawadogo’s village, Gourga, is situated five km from the city of Ouahigouya. And

from Ouahigouya, I planned the different interviews with Sawadogo and the other farmers in Gourga. I spent six weeks between Ouahigouya and Gourga. First, I spent two weeks focused on interviewing Sawadogo twice. Then, I spent two other weeks interviewing the nine farmers who learned from him. Finally, I spent the rest of my time checking the validity of the data.

### ***The Typee of Qualitative Data I Collected***

The narrative case study I did followed the form of interview. “A qualitative interview occurs when researchers ask one or more participants, open-ended questions and record their answers. The researcher then transcribes and types the data into a computer file for analysis” (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019, p. 213). I gathered the data in conducting open-ended interviews and took interview notes. I made an audio recording of the one-on-one interviews I had with Sawadago and transcribed them. Then, I conducted two focus group interviews and one-on-one interviews of nine farmers, and made an audio record of the interviews and transcribe them too.

I used open-ended questions for many reasons.

In qualitative research, you ask open-ended questions so that the participants can best voice their experiences unconstrained by any perspectives of the researcher or past research findings. An open-ended response to a question allows the participants to create the options for responding (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019, p. 218).

When one leads an open-ended qualitative interviewing, it asks specific questions but allows responders to go beyond a Yes or No answer. Allowing them to make comments and explanations primarily is very recommended. Furthermore, when inquiries are open-ended, there is no unique way of responding. Instead, there are many ways of responding to the questions, and the responder has the liberty of reformulating the questions to make them more articulate and fit his mental universe. This approach is crucial in an Afrocentric context when interviewing

Africans whose framework is based on oral tradition. In an oral tradition, you ask questions to initiate conversation instead of expecting at once adequate answers. And when you ask questions, you let the interviewees take the floor and lead the discussion as they please. It is only by following this process that you can collect rich information. It requires patience, respect, and attention when listening, without fixing people in the eyes when they speak. Otherwise, you miss the flow of the conversation and break the familiarity. When interviewees feel free to share their narratives without being imprisoned within irremovable and articulate questions, you can learn a lot from them. I did use these lessons wisely.

### ***Conducting a One-on-one Interview with Yacouba Sawadogo***

With Yacouba Sawadogo, I conducted a one-on-one interview. “The one-on-one interview is a data collection procession in which the researcher asks questions to and records answers from only one participant in the study at a time” (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019, p. 218). I interviewed Sawadogo twice. For each interview, I spent almost one hour. Academic research always sounds weird to people who did not attend Western schools. Because Sawadogo does not speak English or French, we spoke Mooré, our native language. I created trust, confidence, and friendship throughout these interviews, which are essential to a narrative case study. I interviewed Sawadogo with great respect as we do with the elderly in Africa. That means listening more than interrupting him with theoretical questions. It was a “son interviewing his father.” Sawadogo was the father, and Barwendé was the son who listened to him to learn from his wisdom and teach others. In introducing myself to Sawadogo, I shared the purpose of my visit and explained why it was so important to have this interview with him.

Furthermore, I congratulated him and mentioned how significant his achievement is for future generations and why it was essential to record him and write about his story with his

permission. Then, I asked him to tell me how the idea of planting trees emerged in his mind, what the helpful factors were, what the obstacles were, and how he was teaching his methods to future generations. I also questioned him on the principles guiding his practices, the origin and inspiration of his initiative, and how he evaluated his pedagogy.

My focus was to understand Sawadogo's narrative, how it connected to his past and present experiences, and how these connections contributed to sharpening his disciples' future adventures within a specific pedagogy. "In narrative research, the inquirer often studies a single individual. Narrative researchers focus on the experiences of one or more individuals. Although less frequent, researchers may study more than one individual" (Kirkpatrick & Byrne, 2009, as cited in Creswell & Guetterman, 2019, p. 218). After interviewing Sawadogo, I secured and protected the interview protocol in an exercise book. Then, I registered the recorded contents on a laptop computer.

### ***Conducting focus Group and One-on-one Interviews with Nine Farmers***

After the interviews with Sawadogo, I organized two focus group interviews and one-on-one interviews with nine farmers who learned from him in the village of Gourga. "A focus group interview is the process of collecting data through interviews with a group of people" (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019, p. 518). In these focus group interviews, I encouraged all participants to talk and take their turns speaking in respecting their peers. What makes focus group interviews rich is the open and free discussion the strategy offers to interviewees. Therefore, I made the meeting interactive and encouraged participants to discuss their thoughts freely with one another.

Participating in speaking to one another and reflecting and building upon each other's thoughts gained many advantages for these farmers. First, they understood that knowledge gaining is a continual process. One does not finish learning. Second, they learned to value their

peers' experiences as well as their own experiences. Instead of considering knowledge as a matter of selfish accumulation, they understood more the connection between community and knowledge acquisition. Third, they learned to expand their solitary views of Sawadogo's pedagogy and grew in connecting their skills with others. Finally, they understood that knowledge grows when shared with others. Indeed, the farmers listening to one another contributed to improving their techniques and improving connections and relationships in their villages.

During the first focus group interview, I explained to the participants the purpose of the session and why they needed to share their experiences with me. And then, I collected their questions related to the process. During the second focus group interview, I asked them to share their experiences attending to Sawadogo's teaching, including what was inspirational in his methods and pedagogy. Then, I asked them to reflect on and share what they heard from other participants and feel free to ask questions and express agreements and disagreements with what they heard.

Most importantly, after the focus group discussions, I organized one-on-one interviews with each of the nine farmers to collect information related to personal narratives, experiences, and future visions. For example, how they encountered Sawadogo, why his methods were essential to their agricultural initiatives, and if they could name some pedagogical aspects, they learned that help them improve their techniques. In addition, I asked them how they were passing down this knowledge and experience to new generations and how these generations are receiving them.

One-on-one interviews are essential to collect information that people are comfortable sharing. It gives a certain sense of respect to each experience's uniqueness and provides



opportunities for participants to share stories they would not feel comfortable sharing in public. While in focus-group discussions, participants relating their opinions to what other participants share can miss being original and authentic. In one-on-one interviews, I gained personal information and quotable stories with life experiences.

In focus-group discussions, I gained collective information that helped to understand the public perception of Sawadogo as a public figure in his entourage. It was essential to collect a general perception of Sawadogo to create conditions that permit the emergence of ecologists acting as he did. And focus-group discussions made that possible. In one-on-one interviews, I gained personal information and quotable stories with life experiences. In both cases, I was able to collect accurate data. The nine farmers' experiences were as crucial as Sawadogo's one. I used the same language, Mooré, to lead the sessions with the same recorder. And I also took notes during the interviews. For each session, I spent around sixty minutes. And in each one-on-one interview, I spent twenty minutes. My focus in interviewing the nine farmers was to understand their personal experiences attending Sawadogo's teaching and mentorship and how his pedagogical leadership helped them improve their agricultural techniques and how their families and communities were benefiting from their improvement. I also questioned how their experience will serve in the future to raise multiple ecologists who care for environmental justice.

### ***Faire Corps – Becoming One Body with Participants***

When rereading my experience, I understood that the participants in my research wanted me to “faire corps” primarily with their daily reality and experiences. What I did with passion. That means they wanted me to become one body with the sufferings they endured during this period of their lives. They wanted me “to smell their smell” before uncovering the motives of my

research. To smell ‘someone smell’ is an expression of empathy that means feeling someone’s emotions and attempting to understand how they feel. Throughout this process that demanded patience, they helped me grow from a self-centered researcher to a self-effacing researcher. A self-centered researcher is focused on their research questions and is preoccupied with collecting the necessary information to fill their inquiry. It is all about their goals. In contrast, a self-effacing researcher is more altruistic, benevolent, and team oriented. Their primary concern is to immerse themselves in the context of their co-researchers, the participants, and *faire corps* with them in smelling their smell. Where a self-centered researcher collects superficial information, a self-effacing researcher collects accurate and profound information. In conversing with Sawadogo and his disciples through self-effacing lenses, I created more trust in them. By sharing with me their concerns about the violence that impacted their social cohesion, habits, and traditions, they succeeded in creating in me more empathy, sympathy, and compassion for them. I was empathetic in feeling their pain and fear. I became sympathetic in understanding their feelings. And I became compassionate in developing a willingness to contribute to relieving their suffering.

### ***Procedures for Recording Data***

Recording data is crucial in qualitative research. I had an audio recording of the questions and responses to conduct the interviews. I “used adequate recording procedures, such as lapel microphone equipment (small microphones that are hooked onto a shirt or collar) for one-on-one interviewing and a suitable directional microphone (one that picks up sounds in all directions for focus group interviewing (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019, p. 221). I interviewed Sawadogo amidst his forest. For the focus group discussions and one-on-one interviews of the farmers we

were also in the forest. During all interviews and focus group discussions, I recorded the narratives and took notes in an exercise book.

In addition to have the questions ready to be asked, I had an interview protocol to structuring the interviews and taking notes. “An interview protocol serves the purpose of reminding you of the questions and provides a means for recording notes” (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019, p. 226). My interview protocol contained a header to record essential information about the interviews and statements about the purpose of the study. In handwritten notes, I wrote dates, places, my name, and interviewees’ names.

I followed the five brief open-ended questions procedures described by Creswell and Guetterman (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019, pp. 226-227). My first questions helped relax the interviewees and motivate them to talk. The second, third, and fourth questions addressed the central research questions in the study. And the final question helped locate potential additional people to interview. To elicit the research questions, I made them easy to understand for the interviewees. In the traditions of my participants, it is necessary to keep reformulating the questions and repeating yourself to get them to talk with easiness. In oral traditions, repetition is vital to keeping the interview dynamic and participative.

Initially I intended to visit the participants’ farms but because of the terrorist attacks in the region, I could not make these visits. However, I visited some of the farms close to Sawadogo’s. Paying a visit to someone's work means crediting their efforts and consolidating collaboration and friendship, which is key to a narrative case study. Besides I was open to collecting any improvised narrative capable of enriching my study. In fact, “Collaboration often calls for a good working relationship between participants and researchers, an idealized situation that takes time to develop” (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019, p. 522).

This study incorporated Creswell's (2014) suggestions for keeping data and other material secure. All audio recordings of the interviews were stored in an encrypted folder with different files and be protected on a cloud-based platform. I secured the findings I collected within an HP computer laptop. And written interview notes were stored in a locked bag. To maximize the security of my data, I installed an antivirus software in my computer and made the screen not accessible to passerby. I created a password for this purpose. The password respected the average required length (8-12 characters) and it contained a combination of uppercase and lowercase letters, numbers, and special characters.

### ***Ethical issues I anticipated***

According to Creswell and Guetterman (2019), “because qualitative research involves going to the research sites of the participants, staying a considerable time, and asking detailed questions, ethical issues are likely to arise that need to be anticipated.” (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019, p. 229). To anticipate some fields issues, I contacted the gatekeeper two months before the beginning of the study. To facilitate his access to the participants and preparation of the terrain, I provided him with a small financial incentive. I followed his recommendations to arrange the best moments for the interviews.

### **Data Analysis Process**

Analyzing the qualitative data that I collected consisted of understanding how to make sense of the different interviews to form answers to my research questions. “Qualitative researchers first collect data and then prepare those data for analysis. This analysis initially consists of developing a general sense of the data and then coding the description and coding the themes about the central phenomenon” (Creswell and Guetterman, 2019, p. 237). I essentially used a deductive coding method. Then, I made some inductive coding from the thematic coding

to enrich the analysis. First, I organized and prepared the data for analysis. Second, I explored all the data. Third, I coded all the data and put them in different categories. Fourth, I interconnected the different categories. Fifth, I wrote on the different themes. And finally, sixth I verified the accuracy of the writing.

### ***Organizing and Preparing the Data for Analysis***

“Qualitative researchers analyze their data by reading it several times and conducting an analysis each time” (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019, p. 238). The first important step I made was listening to all the collected data and reading the notes I took during the interviews. Second, I converted all the audio recordings into text data by transcribing them and typing them into a computer file from the personal computer I prepared. When I finished transcribing all the data, I printed it, discussed and assessed their content, and compared it with my notes. In addition, I proceeded to merge the transcriptions and edit them.

### ***Exploring and Coding the Data***

The next step in the process consisted in exploring, coding, and making preliminary analysis of the data. The first step in data analysis is to explore the data. A preliminary exploratory analysis in qualitative research consists of exploring the data to obtain a general sense of the data, transmitting ideas in memo form, thinking about the organization of the data, and considering whether you need more data. (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019, p. 243). In this exercise, I read the transcripts in their entirety several times, immersed myself in the details, tried to get a sense of the interviews before breaking them into parts. In doing that, I asked myself these questions: What general ideas were interviewees saying? What was the tone of the ideas they were expressing? What was the impression of the overall depth, credibility, and use of the information? (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019). Then, I analyzed the data by hand. “The hand

analysis of qualitative data means that researchers read the data, mark it by hand, and divide it into parts” (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019, p. 240). I understood coding as the process of segmenting and labeling written or recorded texts. Then, labeled texts helped form descriptions and broad themes in the data.

### *Coding the Data with Narrative Deductive Codes*

Coding involves taking transcribed data and making sense of them. The importance of coding is without debate. Coding helps reduce time and makes information more precise and understandable data. The challenge in coding consists in summarizing the data without losing their essence. A code is a “word or short phrase that symbolically assigns a summative, salient, essence-capturing, and/or evocative attribute for a portion of language-based or visual data” (Saldana, 2016, p. 4). Attribution of a code to a piece of information, a picture or a movie critically establishes a link between a data and a purpose-designed by the researcher. When I interviewed Sawadogo and the beneficiaries of his methods, coding allowed me to summarize the data and be capable of labeling them into themes.

I utilized the language and terminology used by the participants themselves to frame the codes. And I did it manually since the number of participants was small. There are many advantages of using the participants' words. It helps capture living experiences, emotions, and personal values. For that reason, my codes were in Mooré, the native language of the participants that I used to interview them. The translation followed later.

Then, I aggregated together similar codes to form major ideas in the database. In qualitative analysis, the researcher has to pay close attention to data as following from the specific to the general. The data I gathered were segmented into categories. “Narrative researchers may code the data of the stories into themes or categories” (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019, p. 522).

I coded the narratives using a deductive reasoning, since I used narrative methodologies. Six categories helped me capture the frame of the narratives and retell the stories. These categories helped me move from general and theoretical ideas that I formulated to capture the content of the narratives to specific and concrete information I gathered in listening to the interviewees. The categories I framed contributed to answering the research questions.

*First, the setting.* The setting was the first category (Ollerenshaw, 1998, cited in Creswell & Guetterman, 2019, p. 521). The setting was the specific situation of narratives, illustrated by such factors as time, locale, or year. In this category, I was interested in the context of the Sahel Region, the description of the desertification phenomenon, the impacts of desertification in people's lives, and the socio-political context of Burkina Faso in the 1980s. The setting was essential to my coding because my study was intended to give credit to a specific contextualized experience. The context from which Sawadogo heard his call to act differently was crucial. This category provided an overview of the context of Burkina Faso. The description of the context was the preliminary step to understanding Sawadogo's Afrocentricity, leadership, pedagogy, belief systems and visions. In this context, I was also able to respond to the first question: What cultural beliefs and world views does Sawadogo use to understand and describe the phenomenon of climate change?

*Second, the characters.* The characters were the second category (Ollerenshaw, 1998, cited in Creswell & Guetterman, 2019, p. 521). Sawadogo's perception of desertification, the source of his imagination, the role models who inspired him before he initiated his work, personality, and style was the significant codes for labeling information in this category. According to Creswell and Guetterman (2019), the researcher may discuss characters in a story as archetypes or portray them through their personalities, behaviors, styles, or patterns. Usually,

the willingness to contribute to change comes from observation and perception. In this category, I captured the aspects of Sawadogo's perception by paying close attention to what was making his approach Afrocentric. This category provided partial answers to my first question related to Sawadogo's belief systems and worldviews.

*Third, the actions.* The actions were the third category (Ollerenshaw, 1998, cited in Creswell & Guetterman, 2019, p. 521). The actions are the individuals' movements in the narrative, such as their specific thinking or behavior during the story. This category concerned Sawadogo's actions that made a difference, including his pedagogy, his relationships with other farmers, how he shared his knowledge and experience, his relationships with trees, animals, and the other elements of the cosmos. In this category, I was focused on the interaction between the leading actor (Sawadogo) and his entourage (disciples, animals, trees.). From this category, I had the information responding to my second question: What is the foundation of Sawadogo's hope to tackle the oppression of desertification and the oppression of the first world dominant problem-solving methods?

*Fourth, the problem.* The problem was the fourth category (Ollerenshaw, 1998 as cited in Creswell & Guetterman, 2019, p. 521). The problem represents the questions or concerns that arise during the story or the phenomena that need to be described or explained. In this theme, I was interested in labelling the information related to the different obstacles Sawadogo encountered, barriers from nature itself, and barriers from other farmers in the region. In this category, I found information necessary to answer the undertone question that inspired the second question: What was the foundation of Sawadogo's hope to tackle the oppression of desertification and the oppression of the first world dominant problem-solving methods? Because Sawadogo had hope and resources to meeting the challenges and oppressions



related to desertification and the first world problem-solving method, it was essential to enumerate the elements of these challenges and oppressions.

*Fifth, the resolution.* The resolution was be the fifth category (Ollerenshaw, 1998, cited in Creswell & Guetterman, 2019, p. 521). The resolution is the outcome of addressing the problem: the answer to a question or the conclusion reached in the story. It may involve explaining what caused the character to change in the story. (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019, p. 521). In this, I put together, Sawadogo's answers to the obstacles and barriers, the source of his resilience, the strategies he used to overcome challenges, his vision of the future, and his strategy to pass the baton to new generations, and his disciples' maturation. The content of this category provided answers to the second question.

*Sixth, the legacy and the heritage.* In this category, I considered Sawadogo's evolution and experience sharing. I consider both concepts a unique category in this context. I also categorized his disciples' experiences, including their motives of fascination, their personal investments, and their strategies to implementing and sharing the lessons their received from their mentor. In a narrative case study, understanding individuals' journeys throughout time are essential, especially in Africa, where understanding time involves a continual vision and unique perspective. The past is never passed for many people, and the future is not unknown. Living consists in inventing in the present life informed by “what happened yesterday and what may happen tomorrow” (Mbiti, 1969). The past, present, and future are very often intertwined.

Narrative researchers analyze and report a chronology of individuals' experiences. When researchers focus on understanding the experiences, they elicit information about a participant's past, present, and future. Chronology in narrative designs means that the

researcher analyzes and writes about an individual life using a time sequence or chronology of events. (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019, p. 519)

Since my research on Sawadogo was related to his achievement, belief systems, pedagogy, and how other farmers can now learn from him, I looked for information about the beginning of his experience, current self-evaluation, and future goals aspirations, and ambitions for the future. The elements of this category helped find answers related to the second part of the third question. In this second part of the question, I was interested in excavating both Sawadogo's pedagogy and his disciples' experiences.

### ***Thematic Deductive Coding***

According to Creswell and Guetterman (2019), qualitative researchers build their categories and themes from the bottom up by organizing their data into increasingly more abstract units capable of providing the information they search for to resolve their research problem. In this section, I thematized the different codes in reading the texts with renewed attention. These themes contributed additionally to responding to the three research questions.

I used a visual model like the one described by Creswell and Guetterman (2019, p. 244) in this process. First, I read through the many pages of the text data. Second, I divided the text into segments of information. That provided many segments of text. Third, I labelled the segments of information with codes. I had forty codes. Fourth, I reduced the overlap and redundancy of codes. They were reduced to twenty. Finally, fifth, I collapsed codes into themes. The codes were reduced to six themes.

*First, the framing of the climate crisis.* In this category, I gathered the coded transcripts related to how the interviewees articulate climate change as an issue threatening their lives and

the future of their descendants. The aggregation of coded texts in this category provided information to my first question related to Sawadogo's belief systems and worldviews.

*Second, the perception of the earth: an object or a subject?* In this category, I gathered the coded transcripts that express the relationships the interviewees have developed with the earth. Did they define it as an object or a subject? In extension, I paid attention to the description of their relationships with trees, animals, spirits, and their ancestors. Responses to this category also helped the understanding of the first question.

*Third, how does African Traditional Religions impact the understanding of nature?* African Traditional Religions are always inviting themselves into conversations in Africa. Believing in God, deities, and spirits is natural. In this category, I summarized the interviewees' beliefs and cultural perceptions of the world related to the first question.

*Fourth, President Thomas Sankara's influence.* Sankara's revolution played an important role in people's lives in Burkina Faso and inspired their self-determination and philosophy of life. Through this theme I obtained elements from the interviewees' narratives that justified their commitment to transforming their lands thanks to Sankara's ideas. Transcripts from this theme provided answers to my second question related to the foundations of Sawadogo's audacity.

*Fifth, the strategies deployed to counter desertification.* In this category, my interest was focused on the methods Sawadogo, and his disciples deployed to tackle desertification. In this category, coded texts helped respond to the third question.

*Sixth, a specific pedagogy of the earth?* In this category, I examined the possibility of framing a specific pedagogy of the earth in listening to the interviewees. During the six weeks with the farmers of Gouga, I was able to imagine with their terms a specific pedagogy of the earth. And that was determinant for the third question and the significance of the study itself.

When I finished coding the texts using a deductive approach, I proceeded to make another form of coding using inductive reasoning. This exercise was possible by reading and rereading the previously coded data. Inductive reasoning, which is creative and innovative in framing new knowledge, requires openness, flexibility, curiosity, and imagination. Additionally, it demands working back and forth between the categories and the database. This exercise consisted in moving from the specific interviewees ‘narratives to framing general ideas’. I succeeded in framing insightful ideas that I inserted in the findings.

### ***Interconnecting the Different Categories***

Interconnecting categories or themes means that the researcher connects the categories or the themes “to display a chronology or sequence of events, such as when qualitative researchers generate a theoretical and conceptual model” (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019, p. 254). In this step, I made connections between the categories I had enumerated previously in the various coding forms. Because I intended to find common ground space to accommodate with accuracy and fidelity the farmers' narratives and responses to my questions, I interacted between narrative analysis and thematic analysis. This type of analysis fitted my study for many reasons, including that it was a narrative case study, and the result was finding interconnected themes extractable from the different interviews.

### ***Reporting an Interpretation of Findings***

Writing about the connections between the different themes was writing to answer the research questions (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019). And answering the research questions led to finding solutions to the problem of the study. This section's central work consisted of writing a story about the participants' stories and narratives (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019, p. 526). I had to put in tandem analysis and interpretation to achieve this challenging task. While analysis

appeals to objectivity, an interpretation related to hermeneutic (sense-making) appeals to subjectivity. Fortunately, I was able to find a balance there. Meaning is never tangible nor easily graspable.

Using the first-person pronoun “I” to refer to myself, I situated my writing between their narratives and my understanding of them. It was a synthetic production of their thesis (personal experiences) and my antithesis (an accurate recapitulation of what I listened to). As a narrative researcher, I used strategies to retell the stories and narratives I listened, in focusing on making meaning of events and experiences. From participants' statements, I sought the essential elements and used them to answer my questions. First, I paid attention to the unity and coherence in their narratives. Then, I reconstructed what they told me and give an orientation to their statements in following the dynamics of my research questions. Finally, my report consisted in making a narrative from their told narratives.

In a narrative case study, theming appeals to the researcher's capacity to summarize the data with creative fidelity. That means being faithful to the narratives yet finding the most comprehensible language for the audience and the readers. It includes “A review of the major findings and how the research questions were answered, personal reflections of the researcher about the meaning of the data; personal views compared or contracted with the literature; limitations of the study and suggestions for future research” (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019, p. 259).

### ***Validating the Accuracy of the Findings***

“Validating findings means that the researcher determines the accuracy or credibility of the findings through strategies such as member checking or triangulation” (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019, p. 259). Because I was leading a narrative case study, I used the technique of

member checking to compare my understanding of what the interviewees said and meant with the interpretation I made of the findings. I spent the last two weeks of my stay in Ouahigouya, checking with the participants to the study the accuracy of their narratives. This technique I used helped me improve the accuracy, credibility, validity, and applicability of the study.

### ***The Internal Logic Guiding the Presentation of the Research Questions and the Findings***

The order of the three questions presented in the previous sections respected a specific approach that consisted primarily in scrutinizing the horizon of the problem itself, including the different actors engaged in the study. Therefore, the internal logic directing the first question related to Sawadogo's cultural beliefs and world views on the phenomenon of climate change was focused on the central figure of the research itself. This means I was interested in describing the topic, including Sawadogo's understanding of climate change. The following step concerned the justification of Sawadogo's understanding of climate change and the solutions he created to resolve the problem. Accordingly, the internal logic guiding the second question related to the foundation of Sawadogo's hope was guided by the root causes and justifications of his achievement. Here I focused on the foundations of Sawadogo's hope and ingenuity to question and resolve the problem. In the final step, regarding the last question related to the aspects of Sawadogo's pedagogy, I was more interested in the progressive process used by Sawadogo to deploy his solutions to resolving the problem, including the different facets of the operation that enabled me to define him as an Afrocentric ecologist whose legacy and heritage fostered new ecologists. Thus, the internal logic leading to the third question was oriented by my willingness to focus on the perpetuation and reproduction of Sawadogo's solutions. I was interested in the Sahel hero's heritage and legacy that is present in his pedagogy.

Most importantly, the findings of the three questions that led to resolving the problem also respected a specific order that followed the same internal logic previously described. However, the findings are presented by following the categories and the themes. The framing of these categories and themes was inspired by deductive reasoning that respected a logical approach progressing from general ideas to specific conclusions. It was top-down reasoning. Additionally, I used inductive reasoning to enrich the categories and the themes. This was a bottom-up approach requiring creativity, imagination, and flexibility. The chronological presentation of the categories and the themes were made possible through the common ground I found in listening to the participants' narratives, my perception, observation, and discernment. To answer the first question regarding the problem that brought me to Sawadogo, I used the categories of *the setting* and *the characters* because these categories concern the description of the context that enabled the emergence of Sawadogo. I also used the themes of *Sawadogo's framing of the climate crisis, his perception of the Earth, and the impact of African Traditional Religions on his understanding of nature* to describe his definition of the problem, his relations to the Earth, and his African traditions.

To answer the second question regarding the justification of Sawadogo's achievement, I used the categories of *the action, the problem, and the resolution* because these categories concern the foundations of Sawadogo's hope and strategies that helped him forge a personality capable of overcoming the different trials he experienced. I also used the theme of *President Thomas Sankara's influences on Sawadogo* to justify the source of Sawadogo's determination and hope. Finally, to answer the third question related as to how Sawadogo overcame his challenges, laid down a pedagogy, and raised disciples,

I used the themes of *the strategies deployed to counter desertification* and a *specific pedagogy of the Earth* to explain the different aspects of Sawadogo's pedagogy that helped him become an Afrocentric ecologist who begot heirs, ready to implement his lessons and foster new ecologists. I also used the categories of *legacy and heritage* to describe how Sawadogo's disciples learned from him and how they passed the baton to new generations.

### **Ethical Considerations**

Ethically my research was the celebration of an achievement. The achievement of Yacouba Sawadogo was the central motive of my study. The Afrocentric wisdom he used to care for Mother Earth was a reminder that genuine leadership is fundamentally about the common good, human dignity, and the environment. How do we commit to protecting, nurturing, and healing our planet does matter. I want my research to credit all Africans who use Afrocentric values to promote environmental justice, peace, and equity.

Before undertaking this study, I requested the permission of the Institutional Review Board (IRB) and the participants' permission, i.e., Yacouba Sawadogo and the nine farmers who learned from his pedagogy. I got the IRB approval through appropriate ways of proceeding and fulfilling USF requirements. Besides, “narrative inquiry involves engaging with participants and working together closely to develop a narrative. That relationship is voluntary and protecting the rights of participants” (Creswell & Getterman, 2019, p. 523). In this research, the protection of human subjects was respected the standard set by the American Psychological Association. I requested approval to conduct the study from the University of San Francisco Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects. Furthermore, I interviewed the participants with their permission.



Most interestingly, the present research led me to a place I belong. As an insider, I got privileges to study in the United States, and now is the time for me to contribute to my community. I am one of the rare people in my region to attend higher education and be capable of leading research. Being fair to my people consist in helping them trust their capacities of contributing to positive change in the world, especially regarding climate change.

Moreover, as an ambassador of a university that promotes justice, equity, and care for others, my positionality made me a person who can transform his milieu. I am convinced that there is no social justice or human dignity without environmental justice. Despite their insignificant pollution, farmers, and poor people, including those living in Burkina Faso, pay the highest price for the climate crisis. Researchers and people of goodwill should come together to address such a violation of human dignity and find solutions.

In addition, being a Jesuit priest contributes rich symbolism to my vision of the world and forges and shapes my understanding of this research mission. Being a Jesuit priest means being a member of the Society of Jesus, or Jesuits. The Jesuits are an apostolic religious congregation founded in 1540 by Spanish St Ignatius of Loyola (1491-1556). Ignatius's original plan was that the Jesuits be traveling missionaries who would preach and administer the sacraments wherever there was the hope of accomplishing the greater good. He committed Jesuits to help others find God in their lives, serve faith, and promote justice. Very soon after the foundation of the Society, it became clear to Jesuits that schools offered the most excellent possible service to the church by moral and religious instruction, by making devotional life accessible to the young and teaching Jesus's message of service to others. From that conviction, many schools and universities began to emerge. As a proud Jesuit, I revere Ignatius's values.

Grounded in Jesuit education and promotor of Jesuit values, I always inform my vision of the world, research, and educational projects with what characterizes Jesuit education. First, I share Ignatius's vision of the world, faith, and culture. For him, God is the absolute Creator, and all other reality comes from God and has value only insofar as it leads humans to him. Present in our lives and laboring with us, God can be discovered in nature, cultures, and human works. Being Jesuit educated means being value-oriented. Science is joined to virtue. Students who attend Jesuit schools are encouraged to develop a practical knowledge of the world in which we live despite its imperfection. They should have a love for God's creatures and acceptance of themselves, including natural orientation, choices, and preferences. I am convinced that God is present in the epistemologies of the Global South because these forms of knowledge and wisdom display his invisible yet active presence in the world. Having led the current research as a God believer made another significant difference. I approached people by considering them God's beloved creatures and heirs of his wisdom. Such a disposition was essential to the process of learning.

Second, Jesuit schools' curriculum focuses on the person rather than the material. The relationship between professors and students is characterized by "cura personalis", which means care for the person. Because Jesuit education promotes individual care and concern for each person, I developed a respectful collaboration with the participants in the research. Each participant was a co-searcher of truth. I had no pretension of imposing over participants my apprehension nor comprehension of reality. Instead, we (them and I) sought together. Furthermore, the research aimed to enhance the personal initiatives of people whose efforts are not known enough. Since any human effort counts, my research participated in valorizing grassroots efforts. Open to continual life-long growth, I learned from participants and myself throughout the journey. Third, the world view of Ignatius is centered on the historical person of Jesus Christ. To Ignatius, Jesus is the model

for human life because of his complete response to God's love in serving others, incredibly the less privileged. Jesus shared our human nature and taught his disciples to become men and women for others. Members of various faiths and cultures are welcomed in Jesuit universities without the intention to be converted to Christianity by their instructors or attempt to reverse others to their belief systems. Instead, as preparation for active commitment in life, Jesuit education is intended to serve students' faith so that they may be able to use that faith to do justice. "In order to promote an awareness of 'others', Jesuit education stresses community values such as equality of opportunity for all, the principles of distributive and social justice, and the attitude of mind that sees service of others as more self-fulfilling than success or prosperity" (The Characteristic of Jesuit Education, 1986, n°83).

Acting as a priest with Jesus as a role model involves working as "Alter Christus," which means as another Christ. My continual dream is to act as Jesus did. Jesus did not live for himself but for the sake of his disciples and humanity. I did not lead this research to promote my intellectual capabilities but to contribute to a conversation on one of the most appealing challenges of our century: climate change. I was convinced that solutions to the climate crisis could come from the Global South. My satisfaction emerged from being capable of translating into articulate understanding forms of knowledge and wisdom from Burkina Faso and Africa.

Fourth, Jesuit education is centered on the "magis", the more or excellence. Students must pursue academic excellence in their works, research, and commitment. However, excellence is not sought for itself but to respond to the community's needs and the people we are committed to serving. In prohibiting selfish knowledge, Jesuit education uses discernment to select strategies that best help Society's needs. And in considering the circumstance of time, space, and persons, those who follow Ignatius's pattern seek continually to adapt their methods to circumstances,

improve their tools and innovate with uncharted possibilities. The fact that I traveled back to Northern Burkina Faso, where I was born in the remote village of Gourga, symbolized my hunger as a truth seeker who is aware that connecting with one's roots is the beginning of wisdom.

Most importantly, my research was informed by the “Universal Apostolic Preferences” of the Society of Jesus (Jesuits Global, 2019). In 2019, the Society of Jesus promulgated vital pillars that will guide the process of discernment in the Society for the coming ten years. They consist in “showing the way to God; walking with the excluded; journeying with the youth; and caring for our common home.” These pillars serve as guidelines, horizons, and inspiration for all Jesuits. They provide a point of reference for the entire society of the Jesuits. They capture our history, rejuvenate our experience, nurture our imagination, and ignite our desires for a common mission despite our diversities. Leading research on Sawadogo's case consisted in studying the pedagogy of someone who cares for our common home, Mother Earth. Additionally, I intended to exploit Sawadogo and his disciples' pedagogy for younger generations. Finally, collaborating with the sage of Gourga and his people to excavate their wisdom led me to walk with some of the most excluded people in our world, whose contribution could show a way to God.

## CHAPTER IV: FINDINGS

### The Story of a Champion of Ecology who Became a Pedagogue

#### *Prologue*

Everybody in Northern Burkina Faso knows Yacouba Sawadogo. In West Africa and beyond Burkina Faso's borders, many have heard about him in the news, watched documentaries, and read books on him. However, few have encountered him or immersed themselves in his universe, and *smelled his smell*. I did. I discovered a Champion who won a championship against desertification in applying Afrocentric philosophy. I spent time with him, and I called him my father in sacred knowledge. I learned from his wisdom and became one of his *karambiissi* (disciples). In following my intellectual curiosity and journeying back to where I was born, I did encounter the roots of my own identity, the nourishing water of my cells, and the sparkling lights of what is making me a researcher in the epistemologies of the South.

Born and raised in the village of Gourga, Yacouba Sawadogo, in his 80s, is an outstanding farmer. He was declared the winner of the United Nations Environment Program's 2020 Champions of the Earth Award for Inspiration and Action in December 2020 (Dodd, 2021). He did not attend a modern school but successfully utilized traditional cultivation techniques, called the *Zaï* and the stone cordon, to improve agricultural practices and transform his barren land into a forest of forty hectares. Instead of continuing with standard methods used by neighboring farmers to improve their farming, he introduced new techniques with more benefits than his previous farming techniques. Thanks to his relentless efforts, Sawadogo became a role model in the Northern part of Burkina Faso, attracting numerous other farmers who learned from him and became impactful farmers in their turn. Despite the international recognition of Sawadogo, few have contextualized his contribution within the historical-political context of Burkina Faso or

Africa. Those who rewarded Sawadogo did not capture the profound philosophy guiding his efforts; that was a problem. Sawadogo's achievement happened within a community that contributed to forging his success. The role of community is significant in Africa. Rewarding only Sawadogo without studying the community-based values, traditions, and belief systems that participated in his life resembles promoting individuals without communities and celebrating superficial leadership.

Dissatisfied with the descriptive approach of those who documented research upon the Champion of the Earth without digging deeper, I decided to lead my own research in using my own lenses that got cleansed, shaped, and articulated by my mentors of the University of San Francisco School of Education. However, I do not have the pretension of removing from the table everything written and published on Sawadogo before me. Instead, I owe to those who encountered him and wrote on him a lot in terms of literature. The present story could be considered as a bit of sand in the narrative of the Sahel hero. Most importantly, I am very grateful to my professors who prepared me to encounter my hero. But I had to modify the Western-centric approach of researching and reporting findings to fit the Afrocentric context. Therefore, I shifted from a Western-centric methodology to plunge within Afrocentric methodology because I am coming from there and will return there at the end of everything.

Indeed, my experience with Sawadogo allowed me to excavate from the deep self of the sage man of Gourga sacred knowledge, including practices, methods, belief systems, a fundamental vision of life, and a pedagogy. First, I investigated the sociological and philosophical traits of the Burkinabe farmer's commitment that laid the foundation of his accomplishment. Then, in examining his pedagogy, I found essential lessons that could contribute to uplifting new Afrocentric ecologists. Informed by three questions that I transformed into three themes, this

experience was pedagogically instructive and life changing. The first motive of my curiosity was related to the cultural beliefs and world views that Sawadogo uses to understand and describe the climate change phenomenon. Therefore, I interviewed Sawadogo, observed his milieu, and considered the different aspects of his characters, imagination, and vision. The second theme of my interest in Sawadogo was focused on the foundation of his hope to tackle the oppression of desertification and the oppression of the first-world dominant problem-solving methods. In listening to his childhood experience, trials, and tribulations, I got the answer to that quest. The third reason of my visit to the inhabitants of Gourga concerned the aspects of Sawadogo's pedagogy that have helped him form and become an Afrocentric ecologist and pedagogue who inspired other farmers capable of passing their mentor's pedagogy to new generations.

Welcomed by Sawadogo's disciples, I learned a lot in listening to their narratives alongside their mentor. The concept of disciples in the present context refers to those who attended with discipline, rigor, and perseverance Sawadogo's lessons, considering him a provider of sacred knowledge, which means their mentor. They called themselves in Mooré "Karambiissi," which means those who followed knowledge with discipline. They were nine people, including seven males and two females. I selected them thanks to their willingness to share their narratives. All of them had respect for their peers. They had the feeling that my encounter with them would contribute to celebrating their achievements, promoting their experience, and attracting others to follow their example in becoming other disciples. They are Alizeta Ouedraogo (32-year-old female), Mane Sawadogo (28-year-old male), Amina Kindo (63-year-old female), Sanoussa Ouermi (68-year-old male), Karim Zango (48-year-old male), Boureima Simpore (45-year-old male) Aboubakar Sore (48-year-old male) Koudbi Kologo (50-year-old male), and Serge Yameogo (78-year-old male). Despite their agreement to have their names unmasked, I protected

all participants' identities by identifying them with pseudonyms, except Yacouba Sawadogo, for security reasons.

### ***How I Was Introduced to My Father in Sacred Knowledge***

My fundamental curiosity about Yacouba Sawadogo was guided by the willingness to immerse myself in his universe. The context is vital to recognize the conditions that favor the emergence of heroic achievers.

### **“Falling in Admiration” with the Sahel Hero**

Traveling from the capital city Ouagadougou to Ouahigouya, then to the village of Gourga, was a hard trip. When I arrived in Gourga, I was exhausted but excited to meet my hero. I was expecting to be received at Sawadogo's house but that was not the case. Instead, accompanied by Paul, my gatekeeper, we were told by people we encountered first, that Sawadogo was waiting for us in his forest. In ancient Africa, young people were systematically schooled in the initiation rites of their communities in forests. So, when asked to join the sage of Gourga in his forest, I imagined myself being taken back to the past to catch up with ancestral traditions and mysteries. I was not at all deceived.

When I met Sawadogo face to face, I spontaneously felt serenity, courage, and hope on his face. Interested in interviewing him, I was first fascinated by his persona, meaning his aura. Even if Sawadogo knew the reason for my visit, he asked me to explain to him what brought me there. In shaking my hand, he asked me with a big smile: “My son tell me what brought you here?” I replied: “Father, I have come to learn under the tree of your wisdom.” Learning under the tree of wisdom of somebody is an expression used in West Africa to relate to the sacredness, greatness, and grandeur of a sage person from whom you expect to acquire knowledge. This inquiry is an excellent symbol of respect. The USF School of Education student was interviewed



by the one he was sent to interview. Therefore, I explained to him that I had heard about his achievements and had come to learn from him to perpetuate his wisdom. Then, I detailed to him my origins, my identity, the meaning of leading this research, and why it was important to me to meet him and have this conversation.

Listening to, questioning, and conversing with the sage man of Gourga was like attending a school of African ancestral wisdom that was bestowed, digested, and served by the ancestors. I was literally swallowing Sawadogo's words with sparkling eyes. Pauses marked his sentences. His gestures were majestic, and his look was very empowering. Usually, in Africa, older people are not talkative, which makes their single words and phrases captivating and attractive. To explain the mysteries of the universe, they use stories and myths because knowledge is sacred. One does not talk about the sacredness of the universe by using common words. We were sitting on the ground amid his forest, surrounded by trees, birds, and insects. It was very peaceful. I could hear the breezing air of nature moving the leaves. While he was talking to me, Sawadogo touched my shoulders and arms from time to time. These gestures are symbols of confidence and trust. Facial expressions punctuated his sentences. I could read in his eyes his passion for nature and his concern for the future. My first meeting with Sawadogo was characterized by personal admiration for his grandeur and contentment while listening to him. Even before entering the core of my hunger to embrace his wisdom, my spirit was already excited at his presence.

### ***The Climate Crisis is a Complex Phenomenon***

When I asked Sawadogo to tell me about his understanding of the climate crisis, he started by gazing at everything around him, before releasing with a sad voice: “Our world is spoiled.” To speak about the world, he used the concept of *Zamane* instead of *Dunia*. Both words mean the same, but *Dunia* is the most common one and means literally the creation, while

*Zamane* means many creatures connected and relating to one another. In using the concept of *Zamane*, Sawadogo means that our connectedness has become problematic. To him, the climate crisis is a complicated problem with many causes. First, it comes from the natural impoverishment of the soil. It is evident to Sawadogo that the different elements composing the soil are losing their tenure due to the increasing number of people populating the earth. For more clarity, he argued:

The more we exploit the soil's nutrients through agricultural work, cutting trees for firewood, and constructing our cities, the more we are tiring the soil. Because the population in the world is increasing our needs are also increasing. Especially when new generations are instructed to exploit the gifts of nature without being educated to care for it, it is normal to have soils getting continually impoverished.

Therefore, to Sawadogo, the climate crisis is partially due to the overexploitation of the soils for agriculture and the creation of new cities. The crisis will continue to worsen if young generations are not educated to care for nature.

Second, the crisis undermining the climate is provoked by the harmful behavior of human beings. If the increase in the planet's inhabitants contributes to provoking the climate crisis, according to Sawadogo, our contemporaries' bad attitudes and behaviors are accelerating this phenomenon. When people cut trees for different reasons, they destroy nature and participate in climate change. Most importantly, Sawadogo tried to explain how modernization, including the creation of new machines, generates more and more heat for the planet. He used the example of air conditioners to explain why it is better to have fresh air generated by trees instead of trying to cool hot air with air conditioners. These were his terms:

In cities like Ouagadougou, rich people have air conditioners in their offices and rooms to cool the air, while poor people have nothing. But unfortunately, rich people forget that when air conditioners blow cool air for them, it automatically generates heat in the atmosphere for everybody, including the poor. If they had enough solidarity for everyone, they would have planted trees instead because fresh air generated by trees has no negative consequences for the earth.

Here Sawadogo was blaming the rich people whose solutions against global warming benefit them alone but undermine poor people. I completely understand and share his vision. Air conditioners are partial solutions to the problem and could even prevent those who can afford them from generating sustainable and standard solutions for everybody. Sawadogo is conscious that modernization and industrialization without ethical attitudes cause much damage to the planet. However, without using modern scientific concepts and paradigms, he convinced me that the best solutions to the climate crisis could be found in planting more trees and protecting the existing forests.

Third, humans have lost the memory of their identity. There is the climate crisis because there is the human crisis. That is Sawadogo's conviction. The older man is convinced that humans have forgotten their original connection with nature. In his terms, he denounced humans' anthropological pauperization, the fact that our humanity is getting poorer and poorer. He affirmed:

They (humans) have forgotten that we all are Mother Earth's children. We return to her womb at the end of our lives. Her well-being and ours are intertwined, but we need her more than she needs us. She can continue to live and flourish even if we disappear. The

more we care for her, the better we receive from her. Nevertheless, her capability of regenerating without us is beyond our imagination.

What surprised me in Sawadogo's terms was his understanding of what mainstream scientists were describing many years ago, knowing he did not attend Western schools. Sawadogo explained that even if climate change is destroying our earth, the capacity of the earth to survive humans' disappearance is evident because she is older and more powerful than humans. He wants to see humans decentering themselves from the earth and stop viewing themselves as missioned to dominate nature. To him, it is possible to develop harmonious relations with the components of nature. In front of the grandeur of the creation, all creatures, including humans, are insignificant. In listening to this enigmatic approach to our connection to the earth, I felt contradictory emotions. We, humans, can participate in regenerating the earth, which is our mother, but if we fail to act in that direction, she will fix the problem on her own without us. However, the natural process of cleansing will remove humans like dirt. I had the impression that the more we are destroying the earth with our harmful industries and gigantism, the more we could be compared to useless and dangerous beings whose disappearance could bring relief to the earth.

Moreover, when Sawadogo connected the climate crisis to a human crisis, he helped me understand that humans are destroying the earth because their inner vitality or inner natural force that connects them to their creator has weakened and is out of spiritual energy. Recovering our most genuine identity, which consists of understanding our connectedness with God, the earth, and all the creation could be instrumental in ameliorating the climate.

### *The Earth is Ed Ma Tenga*

Upon my understanding of Sawadogo's description of the complexity of the ecological crisis and our connection to the earth, I guided the conversation on why he perceived the earth as a subject, instead of an object. For Sawadogo, there is a mystery in the cosmos. Earth is not merely a commodity, a means of production or possession to be possessed and secured with contracts or laws. It is an extension of Life itself. Life with a capital 'L' relates to the universal Life that encompasses humans, animals, and plants. It is "Ed Ma Tenga," our Mother Earth. The mystery of the cosmos comes from the beautifully arranged system that entails complexities and marvels. Mother Earth is the God-provided provider of Life to human beings and their fellow non-human brothers and sisters, the other children of our common mother (rivers, mountains, plants, animals...). Sawadogo was talking about the brotherhood and the sisterhood existing between humans and the rest of the creation with evident terms. I told him this is not something we can take for granted, especially in "developed countries." When I asked him to explain to me how he felt that he is related to Mother Earth, he said:

The umbilical relationship I have with her is visible to my spiritual eyes. Whenever I feel misunderstood, discouraged, or tired, I compose myself, isolate myself in my forest, and stay silent. And that is helpful. It is like returning to my source. Everyone should understand that the earth is our mother and our source of energy and inspiration. The elements of our traditions sprout from her. The food and the water our animals and we enjoy, come from her. The vitality that is nourishing our cells comes from her.

One can only listen to Sawadogo by imagining that the man is a mystic. I define a mystical person as someone who has attained a high level of understanding of Life, possessing knowledge, wisdom, and beliefs ordinary people cannot explain. Sawadogo transcends the

ordinary capability of communicating. I had the impression that he could communicate with divine beings or intuitively apprehend their "modus vivendi," their way of living.

Later, when I interviewed his disciples, including Sanoussa, he told me that Sawadogo enjoys sitting amid his forest like someone surrounding themselves with friends. Furthermore, when I asked Sawadogo to tell me more about his connection to his trees, he said, "When you spend time with them, you can feel that they are grateful." He was indirectly inviting me to spend more time, sitting in the forest to feel what he could feel. He was right because the short period I spent with him was prosperous. Sitting on the soil itself provides some positive energy I cannot articulate in English. One has to experience it. The air I was breathing was fresh. The singing of the birds was poetic. The songs produced by the branches of the trees were moving my imagination. Moreover, even looking at the insects moving from leaf to leaf was nourishing. I wish I could stay there forever. Very willing to capture the benefits of staying in silence in the forest, I continued asking Sawadogo to say more. More and more excited, he said:

You can learn a lot by asking questions. Moreover, listening to my answers could help you. But if you have enough patience to keep coming to visit me, sitting under the trees, you could capture a certain wisdom. Look, there is untapped wisdom and infinite knowledge accumulated by nature that any patient person could receive by just spending time with nature.

It is clear to Sawadogo that there is accumulated wisdom hidden in nature that only patient and contemplative researchers could capture. Humans should not treat plants like commodities but as partners with whom they could learn a lot. In Sawadogo's mind, only people who have forgotten their relationship with the earth could define her as an object to be exploited, used, or sold, that means mad people. However, spending time conversing with him helped me

understand that everybody can convert their mind to consider the earth a subject to protect and a better mother to care for. Oriented education on subjects related to humans' connectedness with nature could help achieve this purpose. In some of his responses to my questions, Sawadogo kept repeating the value of education and conscientization as being the best solution to dispel ignorance and lead people to the light of caring for one another. In listening to Sawadogo, I understood that his religion and spirituality guided his world vision. Therefore, I decided to question the impact of African Traditional Religions on his understanding of nature.

### ***African Traditional Religions and Spiritualities Impacted Sawadogo's Understanding of Nature***

African Traditional Religions, despite their diversity, could be described under the umbrella of African spirituality. Religion and spirituality have similarities because both relate to the transcendent and involve believers. However, they have significant differences. Religion refers to specific institutionalized beliefs, practices, and dogmas observed by organized communities or groups. Spirituality is an individual practice connecting a person to the divine or transcendental forces from whom he or she develops a sense of peace and purpose. A spiritual person does not necessarily belong to any religion because spirituality transcends religions.

In some cases, institutionalized religions can obstruct the richness of spirituality. From birth, all humans are spiritual. Unfortunately, the process of socialization and continual interaction with one another without moments of contemplation and meditation contribute to altering spirituality in people. Sawadogo and some of his disciples have preserved and saved their spirituality from these dangers. Listening to them, I could perfectly capture their African spirituality related to their desire to protect the environment.

African spirituality is characterized by believing in the fact that nature is animated. God created everything and diffused his spirit within all his creatures. Therefore, he is present in everything. Consequently, people should behave by respecting his presence. Performing good and avoiding evil is the ultimate commandment. Therefore, taking care of one another is sacred. The notion of "other" includes nature, animals, plants, rivers, and mountains. This common sense goes without debate in Sawadogo's mind. "Animals are not only animals; trees are not only trees, and rivers are not only rivers. They are living beings because living spirits habit them. The same spirits in humans are called souls." Therefore, their well-being depends on our well-being as humans and vice versa.

Sawadogo is profoundly rooted in this spirituality. His wisdom comes from observing the universe and listening to the earth, as a student observes their professor working in a laboratory and listening to their discourse. The silence Yacouba observes before responding to my questions, combined with his looking, breathing, and contemplating, means a lot in the African context. When sages look attentively around themselves before answering any question, they are not trying to escape their inquiries. Instead, they call upon the support of the component of their universe. It is a gesture of humility. When they contemplate the mountains or the rivers when talking to their kind or visitors, they point to the mightiness that is more important than themselves. It is another gesture of humility. Moreover, when they breathe the air profoundly or stamp on the ground, they unite with the universe's energy. That is another expression of humility.

Fundamentally, Sawadogo is all of that. Despite his knowledge and wisdom, he displays humility. Humility is an excellent virtue in African spirituality. Throughout these gestures, Sawadogo tried to help me understand that his answers could satisfy my curiosity, but I have to



keep in mind that the most trustworthy answers come from the universe itself. One cannot possess such a fundamental worldview without being a committed custodian of nature. That is the case for Sawadogo. Understanding that nature is more than him, yet nature needs his commitment, makes him an ecologist who serves the environment for the sake of the environment. Such a beautiful worldview is desperately needed in today's world, where the materialistic description of everything tends to be detrimental to human flourishing.

Because Sawadogo's heroism did not descend from the sky, it was capital to record his justification of the wisdom he witnessed. However, understanding the belief system and the worldviews that characterized Sawadogo is essential but not enough to learn from him. For that reason, I took the conversation to another level with a specific interest in the foundation of his hope to tackle the oppression of desertification and the oppression of the first-world dominant problem-solving methods. This inquiry allowed me to understand the challenges and problems Sawadogo went through and how he addressed these problems, including the uncertainties he is still facing today.

### ***How Yacouba Zai Became a Champion***

Yacouba Sawadogo's nickname in the village is Yacouba Zai. People identified him to his techniques. The foundation of his hope to tackle the oppression of desertification and the oppression of the first-world dominant problem-solving methods is crucial to understand his achievement. With the first-world dominant problem-solving approach, searching for solutions to address the climate crisis, consists of working within determined patterns. Since the industrial revolution in developed countries, nature is defined as an object to be conquered, tamed, and exploited to advance human expansion, prosperity, and curiosity. When scientists and searchers exploit systems, concepts, and symbols to suggest solutions to climate change, their *a priori* are

utterly different from those who suggest solutions from an Afrocentric perspective. That means the assumptions they use to advance their theories differ from those used in the African context. Taking for granted that humans are the only rational animals goes without debate in many circles. Considering technoscientific tools as the sole instruments to decrypt our complex universe is evident for many scientists. Being capable of producing measurable knowledge and using metrics to assess the best strategies to fix problems is what many consider the best way of proceeding to avert the climate crisis. Unlike this approach, Non-Western centric seekers of solutions, including Afrocentric ecologists, value community-based approaches and a holistic comprehension of reality. When I approached Sawadogo and his disciples, I understood that their foundational conception of the world differed from the conception of Western-centric ecologists. As already developed in the first question, the idea of the earth being a subject is evident in this milieu. Moreover, knowing how to dialogue with nature's components is the key to sustainable solutions. Understanding how to negotiate with trees, and animals, including termites, is capital to finding solutions for the climate crisis.

### **Blessed by God, His Ancestors, and Nature, Sawadogo Became a Blessing**

First, Sawadogo has a deep sense of being blessed. He is convinced that he received a special blessing from God through his koranic mentor, his parents, and nature itself. Sawadogo did not attend formal education. Instead, he received an Arab-Islamic education. He went to a koranic school in neighboring Mali. A koranic school is where the principles of the Koran are taught to students. This form of education appeared in Sub-Saharan Africa during the 11th century, at the same time as Islam was disseminated.

In West Africa, Arab-Islamic education was initiated by Arab-Berber merchants before being spread by religious brotherhoods in the 19th century. Students attending these schools

usually are taught commandments bestowed to humans by God and virtues like humility, self-control, and gratitude toward life. They develop a heartfelt connection to God (Allah) and a profound sense of belonging to a community (Ummah); their community first and then the entire community of Muslims. Furthermore, acquiring these competencies is made possible under the scrutiny of a mentor. Sawadogo is convinced that traveling to Mali and attending a koranic school was, for him a great blessing. For him, achieving success like his could fundamentally be justified by his blessing from Allah through his koranic mentor.

Unfortunately, despite the conviction of being blessed for attending Arab-Islamic education, Sawadogo graduated differently than his peers. After many years of mentorship, he could not interpret the Koran, despite his utter commitment. However, he could take his mentor's esteem for granted. He was very appreciative of his perseverance. His mentor blessed him before releasing him, saying, "Go back to your village with my blessing. Your perseverance is outstanding. I bless you! Whatever you will initiate under this sky will succeed, and you will become prosperous." Sawadogo recalled these words with clarity and was still grateful to his mentor. This blessing became valid through his heroic transformation of a desertic land into a forest. Failing to read and teach the Koran to others, Sawadogo succeeded in reading and transforming the earth before becoming capable of teaching its pedagogy to others. Instead of only developing spiritual skills, he developed ecological skills for the betterment of his village.

Once he returned to his village, still in his twenties, Sawadogo did not start planting trees immediately. Instead, he initiated business and became a very prosperous merchant, traveling from village to village and city to city, trading with countless people. Life was a real blessing for Sawadogo's family until the day that everything turned upside down. Following a poor rainy season, a famine occurred in the region. Everyone decided to leave the village of Gourga in

search of more fertile regions, except a few people, including Sawadogo and his family members. Even if the benefits of his trading were sufficient to allow him to continue taking care of his family, he decided to get involved in agricultural work to counterattack the shared willingness to leave the village. This is how he justified his decision: "I was thinking something was wrong with everybody leaving the village instead of trying to transform the land and make it work for them." Sawadogo revolted against people's defeatism and decided to launch new agricultural methods. He stopped trading and decided to invest his accumulated benefits into farming. That was a foolish decision for many in his entourage, including his family members. Nevertheless, Sawadogo persevered in his project. He was like someone listening to an inner voice guiding his mind.

The idea of planting trees to make the soil fertile followed the successful farming he initiated. Thanks to the Zaï technique, he transformed barren land into fertile land, as already explained in the first chapter. In Burkina Faso, when people witnessed the benefits of farming, they used to say, "the earth does not lie." Indeed, the earth did not lie to Sawadogo when he devoted energy to transforming it. When they noticed his successful initiative, those who left the village of Gourga returned from their exile and started learning from him.

### **Trials and Tribulations Modeled Sawadogo's Personality**

In listening to the sage man of Gourga, I understood that problems sometimes contribute to fostering solid characters and building outstanding people. Most problems come with their solutions, and the process of finding these solutions participate to people's imagination and creativity. Sawadogo encountered numerous obstacles and barriers but did not forfeit. He is like a magnet of courage and untapped solutions. He had inner resources to meet challenges and recalibrate his commitment. Failing to succeed at the koranic school, he did not allow failure to

take over his determination. Instead, he trusted the blessing he received from his mentor and enacted his power through tangible initiatives. Sawadogo explained to me how it was painful to him not to achieve his desire of becoming a koranic mentor, capable of leading his community in Allah's commandments. However, his consolation came from his mentor, who saw in him outstanding determination to succeed. This quality followed Sawadogo's ulterior projects and transformed him into a mentor for farmers and people of goodwill who want to take care of the earth.

Besides, when the entire village faced famine, Sawadogo trusted his ability to reverse the situation. Fortunately, his perseverance paid off. He passed from growing millet to planting trees. Even if the Zaï technique existed in the region, it was unpopular. People did not trust it and thought it was useless. Additionally, convincing his family members to stay instead of leaving, then investing his resources into farming seemed a wrong decision in the eyes of many. He had to face hilarious judgments, mockeries, and incomprehension.

On top of that, when Sawadogo's forest grew and attracted admiration, some people became hostile to his success. They went from admiration to jealousy, then to hatred and hostility. The forest was burnt twice. He received threats from unknown enemies. That was another episode of pain for Sawadogo. He could not understand why people were so evil. He said to me: "They hated me when they failed to convince me to adopt their defeatist mentality. In the beginning, I received congratulations from everybody. Later, it turned out to be jealousy and hatred. However, I was convinced that one day they would change." He was partially correct. Some of his enemies became his disciples, others left the village without repentance, and others continued to be jealous of his success.

Another problem arose with the urbanization of the city of Ouahigouha. Ouahigouha is the principal city in northern Burkina Faso, five km from Sawadogo's village, Gourga. With the city's expansion, some citizens in need of unoccupied zones started to claim Sawadogo's forest as their ancestors' land. They used corruption and bribery to snatch some portions of land from his forest. However, his friends helped him secure the most significant part of the forest. The ultimate solution made by the government to prevent predators from sabotaging his initiative was to build a wall protecting the entire forest. To Sawadogo, this decision was a necessary evil. While the forest is protected against predators, it is prevented from expanding, and wild animals like mammals can no longer access the forest.

In listening to Sawadogo sharing the beginning of his public life with me, with its ups and downs, I concluded that God blessed this man. He knew how to transform failure, fear, hostility, and uncertainty into successful projects. Sawadogo was not primarily an ecologist who decided to care for the earth but a resilient person who rejected defeatism, desperation, and discouragement. He embraced hope. The root cause of his hope was God. In trusting God, he grew in trusting himself. In trusting himself, he trusted the earth. And in trusting the earth, he succeeded in transforming its ungrateful lands into grateful lands. Therefore, he was rewarded by the earth who made him an ecologist who made a difference.

He expressed his journey by using these words: "Every person can flourish where God has placed them because all conditions are transformable." To his disciples, he continually repeated, "Work to make the soil flourish, and it will reward you with unpredictable graces." To him, the best solution to alleviate climate change is to work to make the earth flourish instead of being willing to leave the planet. He is right. Changing attitude instead of a planet is less costly and possible for everyone. I am convinced that if Sawadogo would have had to participate in a

divine council gathered by God and the ancestors to consider a request sent by the habitants of planet earth to be granted another planet, he would have rejected their request and sent them back to fix the problems they created on earth and clean the dirt they created first, before any request for additional planets.

Moreover, Sawadogo explained the source of his continual inner trust in God, himself, people, and the earth. He used to pray a lot and meditate when he felt discouraged. To him, "only prosperous trees bearing desirable fruits are stoned by a passerby." With this proverb, he was trying to explicate why his success attracted some people's hostility. Like desirable fruits, his success attracts people of bad will determined to hurt him.

Most importantly, his tenacity was grounded in another conviction. Like the Greek philosopher Socrates, Sawadogo is convinced that those who sabotage his project act out of ignorance. He explained: "They are slow to grasp the benefits of planting trees and being devoted to the community. As a result, we have lost these ancestral qualities. One day, they will understand that they destroy themselves in trying to destroy Yacouba." I was profoundly moved by these words. First, the sage man of Gourga remains positive and optimistic when facing attacks. He did not hate his enemies, nor imagine any revenge against them. Second, he identified his forest with himself: "In trying to destroy Yacouba...". Third, evildoers will perish by trying to destroy others: "...they destroy themselves".

In my opinion, Sawadogo is not only addressing climate change, but he is also addressing human moral decay with an optimistic lens. Moreover, when I asked him if there were additional mentors who impacted his capability of dreaming big dreams for his village, he took me to President Sankara's revolution.

### **President Thomas Sankara Influenced Sawadogo**

Sawadogo's determination to plant trees, protect the forest, and change the mentality of this fellow entourage was nourished by Sankara's environmental policy. He owes him the madness that guided his project, the audacity of defying his peers' prejudices and rejections, and the trust in the earth. President Sankara's revolution was a genuine motive for hope, self-reliance, and audacity for many Burkinabe and Africans. Committed to addressing the oppressive colonial situation in his country, he wanted to build a new society wholly liberated from exploitation, oppression, and the need for mendicancy. He succeeded in voicing those who rejected society's economic burden of class stratification. He combatted ecological devastation by involving his compatriots in planting trees. He denounced racism, exclusion, and violent methods used to exploit the poor. He taught farmers to rely on themselves to transform their lands instead of counting on foreign aid, which degraded their Burkindlem, which means, their integrity.

Resilient farmers, including Sawadogo, benefited from government programs to tackle hunger and thirst in rural areas. Innovative techniques to conquer fertile soils and master the water problem were initiated. In addition, farmers were taught to resolve conflicts from opposing herders and farmers. Within four years, under Sankara's short-term power, Burkina Faso achieved food self-sufficiency and was even an exporter of green beans and potatoes.

While Sawadogo was detailing the impact of Sankara's revolution on him, I noticed that his description matched accurately with what I had previously written about Sankara. Nevertheless, I have noticed that even if entire Burkina Faso was charmed by the revolutionary leader, only a few were committed to implementing his revolution. Because Sankara was too demanding to people, many liked listening to him without engaging themselves to work out his ideas. Fortunately, farmers were among the best implementers of the revolution. To Sawadogo,



Sankara's relationships with farmers were invigorating and empowering. He echoed what people used to say about the revolutionary: "Even if your stomach was empty, listening to his charismatic talks was providing a certain kind of satiety." When he was talking about Sankara, I noticed a particular joy on his face. After listening to Sawadogo sharing on the foundations of his relentless devotion to the earth, I wanted to explore his pedagogy more, the transmission of his methods, and his legacy and heritage. Like Sankara his hero, Sawadogo also succeeded in attracting multiple followers and disciples who are ready to pass the baton to new generations.

***From Champion to Pedagogue of Disciplined Karambiissi***

The aspects of Yacouba Sawadogo's pedagogy that have helped him form and become an Afrocentric ecologist who inspires other farmers capable of passing his pedagogy to new generations are the condition sine qua non to raise multiple disciples for Mother Earth. An Afrocentric ecologist studies the interaction between the different components of nature in basing their approach on the philosophy of Afrocentricity. The philosophy of Afrocentricity is "a mode of thought and action in which the centrality of African interests, values, and perspectives predominate. In regard to theory, it is the placing of African people in the center of any analysis of African phenomena" (Asante, 2003, p. 2). The excellence of African traditions and cultures is the fundamental source of this philosophy. Therefore, seeking to unveil the aspects of Sawadogo's teaching that inform his Afrocentricity consists in presenting the knowledge he is teaching that comes from African traditions and cultures. Being capable of exploiting African wisdom to address climate change is what Sawadogo did in the village of Gourga. From a young age, he experienced challenging situations, learning from different masters, and succeeded in developing skills he could now teach to other farmers. Aware that unshared knowledge is lost knowledge, I oriented the conversation with Sawadogo on the aspects and the long-lasting

impacts he created through his commitment to addressing desertification. Utterly devoted to stopping the desert and witnessing human capabilities to transform ungrateful lands into flourishing lands, Sawadogo laid down a rich heritage for countless generations. His entire life is pedagogical, and his experience will belong to the present and the future.

### ***The Strategies Sawadogo Deployed to Counter Desertification***

Sawadogo has developed unique strategies to stop desertification. The concepts he used to describe these strategies have aroused admiration. Culturally grounded in immovable values, the sage of Gourga based his methods on the conviction that the earth is a living mother who cares for her children and expects from them in return to care for her. He successfully implemented the *Zaï* and the stone cordon techniques. He developed a procedure to negotiate with the earth. He knew how to attract and keep animals in his forest. Finally, Sawadogo is convinced that there is a pedagogy from the earth.

### **Implementing the *Zaï* and the Stone Cordon Techniques to stop the**

#### **Desert**

The *Zaï* and the stone cordon techniques are traditional farming techniques used by farmers in the Sahel Region to restore degraded drylands and increase soil fertility. Sawadogo did not invent the *Zaï* technique. It originated in Mali in the Dogon community. After the 1980s drought, the technique was adopted by farmers in northern Burkina Faso. However, Sawadogo was one of the earliest and most successful adopters of the *Zaï* technique. He applied it to recover barren land of 40 hectares. The technique consists of a planting pit with a diameter of 20 – 40 cm and a depth of 10 – 20 cm. Usually, pits are dug during the dry season from November until May. Per hectare, the number of *Zaï* pits ranges from 12,000 to 25,000. After digging the pits, composted organic is added to create a chemical process necessary to fertilize the soil. After

the first rainfalls, the manure attracts termites, whose tunnels break up the soil, making the holes bigger and capable of containing water and fertile organism for a while. When seeds are placed inside, they overgrow. According to technicians, there are substantial advantages to applying the Zaï technique.

It helps captures rain and surface/run-off water; protects seeds and organic matter against being washed away; concentrates nutrient and water availability at the beginning of the rainy season; increases yields; and reactivates biological activities in the soil and eventually leads to an improvement in soil structure. The application of the Zaï technique can reportedly increase production by about 500% if properly executed (*Essama, 2005*).

Zaï means "starting earlier." While the rainy season starts in June, farmers who apply the Zaï must start digging their holes eight months earlier and work on them until the first rainfalls. It is very demanding. His peers ridiculed Sawadogo in the village because people did not know the advantage of the technique he was using. He was called the village idiot because it seems abnormal for one to be seen sweating, trying to break the solid earth to make holes under a temperature of over 100 degrees. However, when Sawadogo's fields started to provide better crops, the mockers realized he was right.

Alongside the Zaï technique, Sawadogo relied on the stone cordon technique to stock more water in his fields. The technique consists in making thin lines of fist-sized stones laid across his fields, purposed to form a watershed. When rains fall, the watershed pushes the accumulated slit across the soil's surface, which piles up against the stone cordon. Little by little, the stone cordon slowing down the flow of water provides it more time to immerse into the earth. The accumulation of slits develops fertile spots for seeds and plants to germinate. The

germinating plants decelerate the water speed even further, and their roots crack the compacted soil. By such means, these plants help make it easier for more water to be absorbed.

Progressively, Sawadogo noticing the advantages of applying his techniques over the seasons, started to plant trees to exploit the same techniques. When I asked him why he introduced tree planting to his farming, he replied:

When I grow sorghum and millet, I can feed my family. But when I plant trees, I feed the soil and contribute to regenerating it for everybody. Trees are indispensable for fertilizing the soil, attracting animals, and cooling the air. Especially when they are medicinal trees, their benefits are visible. If everybody was doing like me, I am sure we could make this country green and improve our living.

Sawadogo's adoption and appropriation of these techniques required many sacrifices from him and his family. Even so, working hard on these new techniques, he took them to another level. While the primary initiators of the Zaï were exploiting it only for farming, he was the first to apply it for reforestation. He defied the status quo in his village and endured incomprehension without giving up because he was determined.

When Sawadogo was talking about this episode of his life, I felt a personal passion in his voice. His face was full of shining determination. His right fingers drew lines on the ground, and his eyes were sparkling. These gestures in the context of West Africa mean that the person considers the soil as witnessing what they are saying. It is a symbol of utter honesty. Listening to him was like being elevated back in his past. Anyone who does not speak Mooré would have been capable of feeling the sincerity and deepness in his narrative at that moment.

On top of that, most trees in Sawadogo's forest are medicinal trees. Instead of planting trees capable of producing fruits, he preferred planting medicinal trees to heal sick people. While

fruits are essential, medicinal trees are more important. In his village, there is no hospital. Therefore, many rely on herbal medicine to treat themselves. Sawadogo wanted to supplement this lack and participate in the well-being of his fellows. This humanistic philosophy is highly appreciated in African cultures. We used to say, "When your tree can be a remedy for the community, you nourish your fellow kind twice". Because Sawadogo chose to grow medicinal trees, he chose to nourish his community more than anyone else.

When I asked him to explain how he knew the medicinal virtues of plants, he said: "There is no plant without a medicinal power. I learned the secret of plants from my parents when I was a child. Nevertheless, every day, I am still learning." Then, I asked him to elucidate the process that led him to evolve from applying the Zaï and the stone cordon techniques to the exploitation of the medicinal secrets of plants for healing people. I wanted to know if he knew where he was going since his acquaintance with nature began. Sawadogo admitted that nothing was planned and projected till the end. However, his vision was clear. He framed it with clarity in advancing: "Everywhere on the earth, you can flourish if you know how to relate to your environment. I wanted to ameliorate the productivity of my farms, which led me to plant trees, which are now a forest." He added, "At the end of each process, I received a new insight for the next one."

Initially determined to prove to himself and to the people of Gourga that with fertilizing techniques it was possible to improve farming, he succeeded in creating a forest that contributed to stopping desertification, and he became capable of exploiting the virtues of the plants to heal people. The lesson I recorded from Sawadogo's explanation is that when one commits to contribute to the betterment of one's community, nature participates in facilitating the project.

In listening to Sawadogo with the desire to connect the different steps in his narrative, I recognized that he made this forty-year journey with a sagacious serendipity. *Serendipity* is defined as an unexpected lucky discovery. In the Sahel hero's case, the different steps of his progression sequentially fitted a strong vision. Furthermore, this is how I describe Sawadogo's vision: desertification is a human problem, not a fatality to scare. Humans can stop it. Furthermore, in trying to stop it they will plunge into infinite possibilities. I wish Sawadogo, in his eighties, could live longer to make this creative journey unstoppable and everlasting.

### **Sawadogo Knew How to Negotiate with the Earth**

Usually, the concept of negotiation is used in conflict resolution or the transformation of disputes. In listening to Sawadogo spelling out the methods he used to fertilize the soil, including the wisdom he deployed to grow numerous trees, I cannot help but use the concept of negotiating with the earth to qualify my understanding of his approaches. Negotiating consists of building dialogue between at least two conflicting parties in seeking common ground beneficial to all parties. It requires preparation, information exchange, bargaining, accommodation, agreement, and execution. Sawadogo's way of proceeding with the earth is like negotiating with her. His approach is not egocentric nor unilaterally beneficial to him alone. Instead, he is like considering himself equal to the components of the soil, including termites, scrupulously unwilling to hurt them. At each step, he wants to ensure both sides would benefit from the action. This is how I describe Sawadogo's negotiation with the earth in my terms. Preparing for the negotiation consists in digging the pits. Exchanging information consists in developing a clear understanding of the differences between the types of soils. Each soil is treated with attention responding to its singularity. Bargaining with the earth consists in feeding it with manure; Accommodating the earth consists in removing useless stones from the soil. The agreement is achieved when termites

appear from the pits. Termites are the positive response of the earth, rewarding the deployed effort. Termites are known as animals whose capacities to fertilize soils are evident. Executing and concluding the process consists in planting the seeds inside the holes fertilized by the termites. The rest is evident.

Sawadogo is convinced that if you know how to negotiate with every type of soil, you can domesticate it. The concept of domesticating expresses what I witnessed in Sawadogo's journey. Domesticate comes from the Latin word *domus*, which means home. To domesticate means making something or some being belong to the home. Therefore, negotiating with the components of the earth means making them belong to our home. Therefore, one cannot say Sawadogo is exploiting the soil. It is more appropriate to say he is making it belong to his home. The lesson I drew from this step is as follows: understanding the process of negotiating with the earth, which leads to domesticating its components, yields deep respect and consideration of the environment.

Sawadogo is also convinced that when you initiate the process of transforming the soil, it opens itself and starts captivating additional nutrients you did not imagine initially. He affirmed:

If you succeed in fertilizing any soil, you attract nutrients indispensable to its growth.

Then, sleeping seeds will reappear and grow. Even extinct species reappear as if they had buried themselves in the depths of the earth, waiting for a generous attentive person to help them resurrect themselves. On earth, one will always find soil capable of bearing a plant. Therefore, one has to know how to negotiate with the earth, listen to its language, provide for its needs, and choose the fitting seed, and the result will follow.

Then, he added with an impressive conviction, "There is no soil that cannot bear a tree. One has to know which tree fits which soil and what is required to accommodate both."

Sawadogo's insisting convictions are inspiring and encouraging.

### **Sawadogo Knew How to Attract Animals and Keep Them in His Forest**

"Providing water to animals attracts them inside my forest," said Sawadogo. Another special care that Sawadogo used to provide to animals attending his forest surprised me. Accommodating nature with respect could be the best description of his endeavor. While he was detailing how he domesticated the different living beings in his forest, I noticed that he was spreading grains of millet on the soil. Thereupon, I asked him if he was planting these seeds randomly. He smiled and replied: "I am spreading these seeds to feed the ants crawling here to keep them present in my forest. No animal that enters this forest should leave hungry or thirsty."

Later, when he was walking me in his forest, I noticed half-broken jugs suspended on some trees. At first glance, I thought it was for decoration purposes. But he told me that these jugs contain water because the smell of water attracts thirsty animals. It was my first time learning that water yields a particular smell capable of attracting thirsty animals. I also discovered small dams in the forest. Remarking my admiration, he said,

Behold, I made these dams to attract mammals in my forest. They have the same utility as the jugs. When animals drink your water and eat your food, they always reward your generosity by dropping scats before departing. The benefits of their scats are evident. It fertilizes your soil and regenerates your environment. It also contains seeds. After a certain period, you will observe new plants growing without your contribution. Some of the plants in the forest were not planted by me, nor my children.



Then, he reminded me why the building of the wall to protect the forest was really a necessary evil. Finally, he confirmed my inquiry: "In willing to prevent my enemies from sabotaging my efforts with predatory actions, my benefactors prevented mammals from coming and enjoying the free water I am serving." By digging small dams to retain water and placing jugs in the trees, Sawadogo is inviting animals into his forest. By involving them in his enterprise, he is situating himself as an authentic steward of the environment. To him, everyone can participate in creating or recreating natural species everywhere on earth. In acting likewise, Sawadogo enlarges his generosity to the entire cosmos. The best way to be a grateful ecologist is to feed the hungry and the thirsty, from ants to humans, without discrimination. Every creature reminds us that accommodating one another is not an act of charity but a responsibility. Knowing and teaching this truth is vital.

### **There is a Pedagogy Coming from the Earth**

A pedagogue teaches and brings knowledge to people who consider them a teacher. Understanding the earth's pedagogy and attendance to its lessons are made possible only to those who consider her a living pedagogue like a mother. The initial condition for acknowledging the pedagogy of the earth is to accept her humanism. The sage man of Gourga is a living testimony of one of mother earth's students. In listening to Sawadogo carefully, observing his gestures when he was elaborating on his achievement and contemplating the trees in his forest being cradled with chanting birds, I got convinced that there is a pedagogy coming from the earth. Sawadogo was taught by the earth herself in different ways. I consider him a conscientious and open mediator between the earth and the rest of humanity. The following themes could be defined as principal lessons the Sahel hero learned from the earth. First, the earth is a creating created living mother whose well-being is beneficiary to humans' well-being. Second, devoting

the best of yourself to feeding the living components of the earth is an act of responsibility.

Third, cosmopolitan citizenship can be understood by those who share the consciousness of our interconnectedness. And finally, fourth, the curriculum of the earth is affordable and available to all humankind.

*First, the earth is a creating created living mother whose well-being is beneficiary to humans' well-being.* The earth was created by God, the almighty creator who created everything. She did not create herself. Creation and life were bestowed on her by God. She evolved gradually and generated various living things, including human beings. Humans come from her and return to her at the end of their lives. The entire existing components on the surface of the earth are umbilically related to her. Sawadogo learned from the earth herself how living she is.

Most importantly, calling the earth "Ed Ma Tenga" Our Mother Earth, is very significant to Sawadogo. In most of the languages spoken in West Africa, the expression Our Mother Earth is used to affirm people's communitarian relationship with her. One cannot say "My Mother Earth." It makes no sense. People would say, "You speak like a child." Rather, when one calls the earth Our Mother Earth, it entails a sense of community, togetherness, responsibility, duty, and wisdom. It means that one understands that all humans come from the earth's womb and will return there. Moreover, being a good child of Mother Earth means behaving with dignity and care.

*Second, devoting the best of yourself to feeding the living components of the earth is an act of responsibility.* Sawadogo said to me: "When you devote yourself to serving the earth, she leads you to unpredictable and unimaginable infinite discoveries." This conviction echoed what I qualified earlier as a continual serendipitous journey punctuated by surprising understanding moments. The earth's teaching process consists of speaking a form of language to be interpreted.

She tells us, "Be generous to me, and I will be generous to you." The teaching coming from the earth is a reminder that we humans are loved by a good mother. She is faithfully creative and constantly capable of reinventing herself. Above all, she is very grateful. This is how Sawadogo explained it:

When I imagine this forest was dryland, which was repulsive to humans forty years ago, I can't but admit that I was rewarded with a power beyond humans' understanding. Where I once deployed human efforts, I received in return rewards. This expression of gratitude confirms my understanding of life's presence on and *within* the earth.

Acknowledging the earth's generosity is necessary to develop generosity toward the different components of our planet.

*Third, cosmopolitan citizenship can be understood by those who share the consciousness of our interconnectedness.* Cosmopolitan citizenship is a form of citizenship that transcends the frontiers and the borders established between nations to connect the entire world as one community with diverse members. Cosmopolitan citizens value their equality and common dignity. They support each other, promote intercultural exchange, and equitable ways of trading. Living in the same world and aware of their interdependence, cosmopolitan citizens know how to care for their most fundamental common good, the earth. Listening to Sawadogo articulating his vision of humanity was like listening to a philosopher taking me back to the cosmopolitan philosophy developed by German philosopher Emmanuel Kant during the eighteenth century (Kant, 1795). Cosmopolitanism defends the idea that all humans living on earth abide to equal rights and duties and live in a global community.

The climate catastrophes plaguing the world remind us that our interdependence and interconnectedness should be considered more seriously. When people living in Africa or Latin

America endure the consequences of industrialization provoked by the West, injustice exists. People in industrialized countries should care about those in developing countries who pay the heavy price of pollution. They should not be considered useless burdens to be supported but fellow humans and collaborators to live with or die with. Knowing that the "lungs of the earth" are in the Congo Forest and the Forest of the Amazonia, two regions of the world where people are living under the level of poverty, should shake the conscience of world leaders. Suppose the earth cannot live without her lungs. How do we protect these lungs to keep her alive? Such a question should continually torment the tranquility of those who want to live at the expense of others, only focused on the god of consumerism.

When I deeply questioned Sawadogo's vision regarding human interdependence, he formulated a dream I promised to carry and advertise. Despite his incapacity to read and discuss scientific discoveries concerning our planet, he argued:

The leaders of developed countries should learn to involve everyone in their discussions regarding our common earth. They have to come down and implicate everyone's contribution to rethinking the ongoing of the world. We could reframe the new direction to follow by integrating all people into their decision-making processes.

As if he was sending Barwendé to speak at the United Nations, Sawadogo added: "My son, tell them to come back home, the home of the beginning, and together, we shall design a common journey to undertake together." Undoubtedly, the university of the earth taught Sawadogo the genuine meaning of being a cosmopolitan citizen. He invited the world to promote cooperation, solidarity, and fraternity on a global scale. He is convinced that interdependence develops growth for everyone. Even if Sawadogo did not articulate in his terms the danger of anthropocentrism, I have to use these terms to describe his denunciation of the willingness of

humankind to concentrate everything within humans' hands without any openness to the Transcendent.

Listening over and over to Sawadogo's narrative and anecdotes helped me decipher the pedagogy he developed in attending mother earth. Very convinced that plants and animals communicate and contribute to healing humans, Sawadogo was at the same time arguing that when humans refuse to decentralize themselves from their possessive ideas, they tend to become threats to the rest of creation while thinking they are its saviors. The wise man of the village of Gourga is 'inviting his contemporaries to reflect upon their existence with a cosmopolitan critical mindset. They should think globally and act locally with consciousness.' It is essential to mention that Sawadogo did not use my philosophical terms. That was my interpretation and translation of his ideas.

*Fourth, there is a curriculum by the pedagogue Ed Ma Tenga.* Ed Ma Tenga's curriculum is straightforward. Primarily, there is enough place for everyone on earth. For that reason, making the earth home to all living is possible. Secondly, the earth's abundant resources are sufficient to feed all human beings. Sharing these resources is an act of maturity while concentrating these resources in the hand of a few people is dangerously egocentric. It undermines the core of humanity.

Looking at Sawadogo spreading grains of millet for ants or watching his suspended jugs and dams purposed to quench the thirst of animals are gestures that I compared to the gestures of a studious student writing their papers to demonstrate their comprehension and appropriation of why it is crucial to be generous and accommodate all living beings. Because everything will return to the earth's womb in the end, educating people to grow toward solidarity and interconnectedness is a commitment that deserves continual study.

In considering Sawadogo's immediate and nonacademic comprehension of what it means to be a cosmopolitan citizen and an ecologist who cares about the greater good, I was convinced that the more one devotes oneself to caring for and serving the earth, the more one receives enlightenment and illumination directly surging from the womb of the earth herself and God and the ancestors. At this level, exhibiting degrees or diplomas is useless. One only needs attentive ears and critical reflectors to bring this wisdom to the table of humanity. "Be generous to the earth, and the earth will be generous to you" is an eternal truth to be taught to countless generations.

### ***Sawadogo's Expectations of His Achievement***

Sawadogo's outstanding comprehension of the climate crisis and his sincere willingness to regreen the desert far exceeds his present achievement and his disciples' accomplishments. The sage man of the village of Gourga has big dreams he wants to see come true. Sawadogo wants to expand his forest unlimitedly. He wants his country Burkina Faso and the international community to use his techniques to create innumerable forests worldwide. Moreover, he wants his country to educate young generations to become innovative ecologists. To him, the sustainable existence of humanity depends on planting and caring for trees. His initial dream was more extensive than his present realization. Moreover, when I asked him how unlimited forests could be possible when human beings are willing to have spaces for their accommodation, he replied: "Plants and humans can cohabit together. We just have to become more creative, tolerant, and charitable." Listening to such an ambitious vision while sitting in the forest helped me imagine that Sawadogo's dream was possible. He was right. Building infrastructures for human accommodations in forests is possible without destroying trees.

Next, I asked him: “Did your project made you wealthier? “He replied: "If I wanted to become rich, I would have continued in business. Financially, I am not rich. Nevertheless, I am rich in helping humanity to preserve its relationship with nature." Therefore, I understood that Sawadogo's ambitious desire to expand his forest unlimitedly was a symbolic expression of an ecologist who assimilates the benefits of caring for ecology with his spiritual growth. To him, being rich means witnessing many people caring for forests as he did. Moreover, Sawadogo is convinced that his techniques could be exploited and even improved to fertilize the desert. He expects the government of his country to exploit his techniques and develop many forests. Then, I asked him if he was ready to hand his forest over to the government or to cooperate with the ministry in charge of the forest. He responded:

I am ready, but we need to establish an agreement. I do not want people in the government to make my forest an opportunity to gain money. I want them to help me take care of the trees I planted. I want the government to protect and secure my forest without preventing its expansion. It is something I initiated for everyone's benefit.

Sawadogo wants his work to be something other than an object of business. He argued: “I want my forest to serve people with medicinal virtues, not for money. I want to build a hospital to provide health care to people with my plants' virtues. Each plant has its importance which is beyond money. Every plant is unique.” When I questioned him about the rewards he received and his expectations from the international community, he explained:

Yes, I did receive international recognition with rewards from organizations. However, I need help understanding their purpose. Everything could be more transparent to me. They are not ready to implement my techniques and reflect upon the world as I did. They nominated me as Champion of the Earth, but they do not relate to the world as I do.

Additionally, some come with questions and expect my answers to fill their expectations. They are not ready to learn. They are not free enough to embrace what seems strange to them.

In this aspect, Sawadogo touched on my curiosity concerning the long-term benefit of international rewards and recognition for communitarian and Afrocentric farmers like him. However, unfortunately, those who rewarded the Sahel hero need to prepare to investigate the foundation of his inspiration, as I did during this research. Then I asked him: “The UN declared you Champion of the Earth. What message could have for the developed countries’ leaders who used to organize international summits on climate change?” He replied:

I want them to involve everyone, including people like us who may not be able to articulate their words but could contribute to the common good. I want world leaders to open conversations with everyone. We should develop more cooperation and fraternal conversation based on our common wisdom, not on competition.

Most importantly, Sawadogo wants his wisdom to contribute to raise innovative ecologists. “What do you expect from young people and educators?” I asked. He responded after marking a pause:

Young people are more and more listening to me now. I am excited to see more and more young people visiting my forest and asking questions. Indeed, I want them to emulate my work. I achieved my purpose. My mission is almost completed. I want new generations to learn from my accomplishments and continue the project. I want to see my ideas spread as much as possible around the world, especially among young people. I want my achievement to arouse positive emulation among them. I want to see them become more involved in protecting the environment. The government should encourage the youth to



take action in playing their role. They should consider environmental preservation as a collective effort. If they want to compete, they should be helped to make it positive.

Young people should not compete against one another. Instead, they ought to compete with one another against deforestation. They ought to compete in the preservation of endangered species. Let them compete for the greater good. They should be innovative in shaping a sustainable future.

Sawadogo's insistence on positive competition helped me understand that he is aware that we are living in a competitive world. Instead of conflicting with young people who consider competition their way of succeeding, educators should transform their competitive energy into mutual support and collaboration for the greater good. According to the sage man of Gourga, young people, including students, should be educated to become innovative ecologists. That means protectors of the environment. They should know how to exploit the present technology to implement sustainable living methods with forests and animals.

Regarding the expansion of his belief system and worldview, he wants people to learn from his experiences. He argued:

Many people think taking care of the environment is the government's responsibility, but it is our common responsibility. I was born with the natural intelligence and wisdom to care for nature. So today, this forest could help humanity. Furthermore, everyone can become a protector of the environment."

With gratitude, he made recommendations for me: "Do your best to expand my vision. I want everybody to take care of forests, not only with ideas but with concrete actions. I have initiated this project but want it to bear universal benefits." Then he blessed me before I left. Beyond the academic reasons for the present research, I would fulfill Sawadogo's

recommendations in teaching his philosophy to young generations and in becoming an authentic custodian for Mother Earth.

When I finished interviewing Sawadogo, Paul, my gatekeeper took me to his disciples who were waiting for this moment. They helped me understand Sawadogo's legacy and heritage. Legacy and heritage are what someone is passing and transmitting to their posterity. Sawadogo's legacy refers to the lasting impact and influences he passed down to those who followed his example, while his heritage refers to preserving the rich lessons, recommendations, and pedagogy he leaves to humanity as a resource to be perpetuated. In analyzing Sawadogo's narratives and his disciples, I have discovered that the sage ecologist who 'stopped the desert' has a rich legacy and a universal heritage to contribute to the greater good of humanity.

### ***Sawadogo's Legacy and Heritage***

Over forty years of relentless commitment, Sawadogo built a consistent experience that attracts many people who want to learn from him. I call them Sawadogo's disciples and followers. They are the appointed conservators of his wisdom and knowledge. His heirs are those who inherited his legacy to perpetuate his methodologies for the benefit of the environment. Interviewing some of them helped me better understand the aspects of Sawadogo's pedagogy that make him an Afrocentric ecologist. They were nine people, including seven males and two females. I started by explaining the purpose of the discussion and why it was important to share their experiences with me. Then, I helped them understand the importance of divulging Sawadogo's achievements alongside theirs. They reacted positively to my introduction, appreciated that I was interested in their experiences, and wanted to make these experiences known to the public. It is essential to mention that narrating the disciples' experiences after Sawadogo's instead of mixing both experiences is vital. It means the central figure in the study

remains Sawadogo. The disciples became disciples because once upon a time, a mentor bestowed on them his knowledge.

### **They Came Under Sawadogo's Tree and Never Departed from His Wisdom**

All the disciples agreed that Sawadogo did not call them to imitate him. Instead, they were self-attracted by the wonders of his realization. They came spontaneously to follow him and immerse themselves in his work. That was a symbol of wisdom. Their spontaneity reminded me of an African proverb: "In every village, there is always at least one wise old man sitting under a tree in contemplation. Those who come to him learn from his wisdom, and those who turn away do not know what they lose. Actually, the old one sitting sees farther than the young one standing up." Unlike those who became jealous of him, those who committed to attending Sawadogo's lessons made a good choice. They understood that coming under his tree of wisdom is like attending a sacred class. Sanoussa, who seemed to be the most experienced of the group, volunteered to explain how he encountered Sawadogo. He said:

I have known Sawadogo for a long time as a successful trader. Most people who grew up with him are familiar with the business he was doing. During the great famine, he chose to become a farmer, refusing to leave the village as everybody was doing. He was so successful that the people who left the village returned from exile. We nicknamed him 'Yacouba Zaï.' I have to say it, my son. I am convinced that Yacouba received several forms of blessings: from God, his parents, his koranic master, the land, and the trees he planted. Furthermore, he is very wise. He likes sharing his challenges with me.

Then, I asked him to tell me the trigger element that made people start admiring Sawadogo. He replied: "People were astonished when they noticed that only in five years the

clearings and sandy soils, they rejected years ago began to grow grass and regreen. The rebirth of the neglected soils was visible to everyone."

When Sanoussa finished sharing his experience, Aboubakar took the floor with a large smile. He declared:

In the beginning, everybody called Sawadogo a crazy person. But, nevertheless, when he did his first harvest, he regained the respect of everybody because he harvested more than everybody did. His work was really transforming the soil. Concerned about water, he dug a well for the village's inhabitants. With him, we learned to collect trees of all kinds.

Then, I asked him to elaborate more on his future as a farmer. He argued:

I joyfully learned a lot from Sawadogo. He is happy to teach his methods. However, we, his followers, need more agricultural tools to create similar forests. From now we are doing our best to improve our farming and have groves. However, we need carts, wheelbarrows, and spaces to exploit. We need support to continue expanding Sawadogo's experience.

Later, I asked Koudbi to share his personal experience with Sawadogo. He said:

I describe Sawadogo as a man of integrity. In shifting from trading to exploiting the Zai techniques for agriculture, he laid down a good example we learned from him. In accepting to explain to people his secret, he knew that there is more strength when you can gather people for your project. Some people have tried to take credit for his success to receive rewards. But they failed.

Boureima who spoke after Koudbi, started by valuing the importance of trees. He declared that he was attracted by Sawadogo when he noticed his passion for protecting the environment. Then, he told me he has a grove in which he has planted various plants. Boureima did not rely on

agriculture as his primary job, but he liked planting trees and the lessons he learned from his mentor are helpful. He concluded by saying: "Even the terrorists know the value of the forest. They need forests to hide in. In this matter, they have something in common with us." Then, he continued: "Sawadogo received a lot of decorations and rewards, but there needs to be a follow-up. People made promises but we see nothing. We do not know if benefactors send support and somebody, somewhere, is blocking it." Boureima was deeply affected by Sawadogo's enemies' malevolence. He argued: "driven by jealousy, some people burnt the forest twice. Sawadogo has the ambition of making several forests in different places but did not have enough space and substantial support."

Karim, another disciple added his testimony on how he got attracted by Sawadogo. First, he commented on the connection of President Thomas Sankara's revolution and Sawadogo's achievement. Then, he explained how he saw in Sawadogo a person who was committed to transforming his village through agriculture, as Sankara was expecting from all Burkinabe. Next, he added:

Since my early childhood, I have seen the work of Sawadogo. I observed his relentless efforts. I felt his heart was close to what he was doing. I used his technique in my farming. I am convinced that trees provide intelligence to those who care for them. The President would have been happy to visit Sawadogo's achievement.

When Karim finished his sharing, I turned to Alizeta and asked her to tell me about her own experience under Sawadogo's tree. First, she agreed with the idea that Sawadogo's techniques are making a difference. She came to meet him like everybody in the group who heard about him and felt attracted. She came to Sawadogo for the first time with her husband.

She argued: "When Sawadogo noticed the interest people have in coming to learn his lessons, he started to respond positively to the invitations of farmers from different villages who solicited him for mentorship." She helped me understand that Sawadogo did not only stay in the village of Gourga, but he traveled to different places to teach his techniques to people who solicited his services. Indeed, Sawadogo is a servant transformative leader. I mean, instead of staying under his tree where people around could benefit from his knowledge, he accepted to go to people who invite him to spread his techniques. He did not want to keep secret the benefits of his achievements.

***Sawadogo's Disciples Learned the Zaï and Stone Cordon Techniques on the Job***

"What did you learn under Sawadogo's tree?" I asked the group. Promptly, Serge volunteered to respond. Serge heard about Sawadogo recently and was particularly interested in learning how to grow medicinal trees. When he listened to him, he was satisfied. He told me:

All of us learned from him the Zaï and stone cordon techniques. We learned on the job.

There was no specific curriculum, timetable, or exam to take. You stay with him, as long as you want. He likes sharing his knowledge with other people. He feels comfort and esteem in providing details of his realizations. In helping him do his daily work, you receive instructions, and you can ask some questions too.

*Koudbi*, another disciple, added:

Serge is right. Everyone learns how they please. Moreover, Yacouba knows how to accommodate his guests. I have come from Namissiguima to meet him. From our first meeting, I knew immediately that I could learn much from him and improve my agricultural work. So, I kept coming again and again until I acquired enough knowledge of the Zaï technique.

Then, Boureima, mentioned that some people in neighboring villages tried to imitate Sawadogo but failed because "their intentions were not good. They wanted to compete against him. So instead of coming to learn from him, they went on their own and failed. Too bad." Additionally, Boureima denounced the evil mindset of those who tried to sabotage Sawadogo's work. Upon his testimony, Sanoussa added a crucial detail that he mentioned earlier: "Most people did not know that God was with Sawadogo. When you see him working, you witness the passion and love enacting in someone who is convinced that he is doing something good, and he will succeed."

At these words, all the participants acquiesced with authentic smiling and finger clicking. In West Africa, people used to approve of the truth in somebody's testimony by clicking their fingers. So, when I noticed this familiar gesture, I knew I had to move on to another question because everybody agreed with the oldest participant's words. Sawadogo's disciples learned his techniques with passion. Furthermore, this is what *Sanoussa* said: "The year Sawadogo implemented the Zaï technique in his farms was a very successful year for him. He harvested four-times more than everyone else. The fruits of his investment convinced us. For that reason, we came to request his knowledge." Then, he argued that most of those who got initiated into the Zaï technique experimented with the lessons under Sawadogo's scrutiny before returning to their village.

When I asked them the period it took to learn from him, *Koudbi* replied: "There is no specific time of learning. Since I was already a farmer, I used to attend Sawadogo many times to ask questions and watch his teaching method before returning to my own farm." Therefore, I understood that Sawadogo did not set up a school to instruct his followers. He used to receive them on the job, train them, and let them go. Then, I questioned them on the cost of Sawadogo's

instruction. I learned that he did not receive any financial compensation from his disciples. However, after every harvest, the disciples who learned from him used to pay him back with sorghum or millet. They were in general grateful to their mentor.

### **The Benefits of Applying Sawadogo's Techniques**

Most importantly, I asked the disciples to explain how they learned from Sawadogo to combine farming with planting trees to fight desertification in their villages. It was important to me to know if they used their mentor's instructions only for growing crops or if they used them with the same purpose Sawadogo had. I wanted to know how they accommodated themselves to their mentor's demands. Unanimously all of them provided details with exclamative words explaining that anyone witnessing Sawadogo working is automatically charmed by his devoted determination. Alizeta argued: "He was very convinced that the soil is working for him as he was working on it, and it will yield something good in the end."

Afterwards, Karim said: "Sawadogo's devotion to the trees itself is what is making his grandeur." While expecting Karim to detail the benefits of applying Sawadogo's techniques, I heard him instead elaborating on the benefits of attending the Champion of the Earth. In insisting on the fascinating personality of Sawadogo, Karim and his friends helped me understand how great their mentor is. In their understanding their mentor's techniques encompass his charisma, leadership, and attraction. The essential lesson they learned from him was his perseverant trust in the earth. His leadership is convincing because his actions are marked with trust, magnanimity, and a deep desire to serve. They are convinced that only selfish people do not share their knowledge.

To keep the conversation flowing, I commented on each intervention and let some of them add their comments. Sanoussa was particularly happy in noticing how the testimonies



coming from everyone were confirming what he knew about Sawadogo. Then I asked them how they combine simple farming of crops, food, and planting trees to address desertification. The answers were diverse. Some use Sawadogo's techniques every year to improve their farming. Even if they have planted trees, their main preoccupation consists in making these trees help them retain water when it is raining. Others who were more consistent with their mentor's logic had invested in farming crops to take care of their family and planted medicinal trees. Some others visibly more successful have their groves. Serge, who specialized in planting moringa plants, was proud to talk about the benefits of this plant. He told me: "Look, I am growing moringa in my fields, and selling the product I am making out of it is providing me with some income." The benefits of implementing Sawadogo's lessons were evident to all participants. They experienced the advantages of attending an ecologist mentor to observe the significant changes in their farming. They could harvest better. They know how to retain water and use it to their advantage, and they know how to fertilize the soil. Overall, all Sawadogo's disciples agreed on the benefits of implementing his lessons. However, they would have done better if they had more support from the government or NGOs and if terrorist attacks did not assault their region.

### **How Terrorist Attacks Threat Sawadogo and His Disciples' Lives and Projects**

In addition to their need for more resources like agricultural tools and machinery to improve their works, farmers in Gourga are constantly threatened by terrorist incursions in their region. Until 2015, Burkina Faso was spared from inter-communal conflicts, terrorist attacks, and jihadism; while in the Sahel, the signs of these problems were present in neighboring countries, including Mali, Niger, and Nigeria. Attacks and violence started to occur in the northern regions leading to instability. In recent years the situation has been exacerbated by the increase of communities attacking one another and herder-farmer conflicts over scarce land

resources. Semi-nomadic farmers clashing with sedentary farmers created opportunities for jihadists and extremists to perpetrate violence with religious motives. The most vulnerable areas to terrorist attacks are the poorest and the most marginalized regions where youth unemployment is high, opportunities rare, and vital natural resources like water are insufficient. However, the phenomenon is more complex and affects everybody in the region.

When I was listening to Sawadogo and his disciples, I noticed that the framing of their narratives was deeply affected by both desertification and terrorist attacks. Their psychology was profoundly influenced by the current challenges that the entire country is facing. Terrorist attacks in northern Burkina Faso are a significant variable that impacts all populations living in the region. Thousands of people were killed, and over two million others were displaced from their villages. It has altered social cohesion, people's belief systems, and relationships with their lands, forests, and traditions. More prepared to collect information related to Sawadogo's achievement than to listen to people sharing about the impacts of violence on their lives; I was moved by listening to people sharing their pain with me.

Although my research was not related to how Sawadogo's region is affected by terrorist attacks, it was crucial to describe the impact of violence on people in that region. In any conversation one initiates with people living in northern Burkina Faso, the topic of terrorist attacks, including the pain of displaced families, the loss of relatives, and the uncertainty in the future, invites itself. I considered the conversation on the terrorist attacks as an unexpected finding. Terrorism represents an existential threat to humanity overall. However, the inhabitants of the Sahel region are affected more deeply than anybody else. To them, this threat is worse than the ecological crisis itself. The process of desertification exacerbates the terrorist attacks. Communities of pastoralists in search of pasture for their herds are in constant conflict with

communities of sedentary peasants. Breeders and farmers live together with difficulty in this region of Burkina Faso. While pastoralists need abundant pasture and water for their herds, farmers need the same natural resources to farm. The advance of the desert makes these resources scarce, and the violence is predictable.

Moreover, the terrorist groups which recruit their fighters among the herders use latent conflicts to justify their terror. The problem remains complex. However, my immersion in Gourga during this research allowed me to understand that the ecological crisis could be described as the cause and the consequence of terrorist attacks in northern Burkina Faso. On the one hand, the populations are fighting for natural resources in continual decline. On the other hand, the instability of the people constantly shaken by the attacks is an obstacle to the efforts to re-green the Sahel. One of them, Boukary, stated: "The rural exodus of youth severely prevents our desire to fight desertification in our region. Many of them prefer leaving the village for the city of Ouhiyouya, which is more secure. We don't know what the future will look like". These words touched me. To Boukary, to fight desertification, it is essential to have young people who devote themselves to agriculture and tree planting. Unfortunately, the threat of terrorist attacks chasing them from their villages makes this impossible. Even if Sawadogo and his disciples are aware that the perpetuation of their experience is indispensable to a sustainable transformation of their region, unless solutions to terrorist attacks are found, this dream will never come true.

### **Sawadogo's disciples are ready to pass the baton to new generations**

Even if the farmers who became Sawadogo's disciples still define themselves as his advisees, followers, and disciples, I was curious to know if they were already attracting other farmers or if they started to initiate new people to their lessons. I asked: "How do you perpetuate your mentor's lessons and what do you do to involve younger generations to your agricultural methods?" On this question I received unanimous affirmations. To them, it is evident that when

you receive knowledge that benefits you, the next step is to expand it around you to perpetuate the wisdom and increase your own knowledge. Boureima mentioned: "Only egoistic people refuse to share what benefits them. Since these techniques are advantageous to me, I am spreading them around me." Karim added: "I have not yet reached Sawadogo's level, but I am already sharing what I have acquired."

Then, Amina the second female disciple explained how she came to encounter Sawadogo:

He is my father-in-law. Before *I married their family*, I heard about his successful techniques. On my farm, I am exploiting the techniques I have learned with him. There is a visible difference between those who implement the Zaï technique and those who do not. I hope this technique can be expanded to the benefit of many people. I initiated all my kids to the Zaï technique. During their vacations, we work together in the family farms.

Moreover, concerning the benefits of Sawadogo's forest, she added: "This forest is helpful to everybody. If you are sick and you come to this forest, you can easily find some leaves for remedies. Sawadogo is generous and does not make any difference between people." I was expecting them to articulate more formal ways of transmitting their mentor's lessons, but that was different. I was convinced that since some of them went to modern schools, they could formalize their knowledge-sharing.

The major contribution on this question came from Mane, the youngest son of Sawadogo. He relied on him the most to become the principal heir of his property, wisdom, and pedagogy. Even if the forest is a family property, Mane will be its main heir. I appreciated his wisdom. Despite his young age (28), I have noticed remarkable wisdom in his words. He was delighted to

explain to me why his father's achievement makes everyone happy in the family. I asked him how he learned farming with his father. He affirmed: "I grew up watching my elder brothers being instructed by our father. I just had to follow them and learn. And that was what I did."

Then, I asked him to describe his father's achievements. He declared:

My father has sacrificed our youth to pursue his dream. We did not have a chance to attend formal schools and be educated as our peers, nor enjoy our childhood. Everything around us was about digging holes, planting trees, and caring for the forest. He invested his money to engage some people to help us in digging dams and compost holes. It was only when I grew up that I understood my father's vision correctly. He preferred the common good of the village to the good of his family.

Mane was testifying to a truth I noticed in interviewing Sawadogo himself. In him, you can feel someone for whom the common good that benefits the community is highly considered better than the individuals' possessions. He invested himself, including his income, into caring for the forest because he knew the advantages would benefit the entire village. Moreover, the young Mane was telling me that the sacrifice of Sawadogo impacted his family members, including himself.

Then he added: "However, today we have no regret for what he did. On the contrary, we are proud to be his children and will do our best to walk in his footsteps." Mane's engaging experience helped me understand that some leaders may be misunderstood by relatives and entourage in their beginnings, especially when their leadership demands self-sacrifice and devotion to the community at their own expense. Nevertheless, their achievements always speak for them and show them right.

Besides, Mane built on our conversation to connect his father's wisdom with his personal life. He confessed:

I am personally grateful to the government of Burkina Faso, which recruited me and trained me to become a water and forest official. They did this because of the successful realization of my father. I am schooled in modern instruction, and I am rooted in the traditions and the methods I learned from my father too. The training I received compensated for my lack of instruction when I was younger. Combining both forms of knowledge makes me a harmonious farmer, capable of preserving and improving my father's legacy.

This testimony convinced me that harmonious farmers and grateful ecologists are what Africa needs to challenge globalization and succeed in its industrialization. Leaders capable of conjugating modern learning tools with Afrocentric worldviews and belief systems will be the most influential leaders in the continent's future. Implementing sustainable education that teaches young Africans how to combine the best of their ancestral heritage with technology is indispensable for growth in Africa.

Additionally, to listening to their narratives, I visited some farms and groves created by some of the disciples, near Sawadogo's forest. I have noticed the benefits of implementing Sawadogo's methods by his disciples. Unfortunately, because of the threats due to potential terrorist attacks, it was not recommended that I travel to all the villages of the participants to visit their initiatives. However, I promised to come back when peace returns in the region.

Mane walked me to visit his achievements next to his father's. In addition, to participate in his father's common forest work, he created his own grove with specific trees, which many people demanded. Moreover, he concluded with another testimony:

The more I witness my father's forest growing, the more I discover new species of birds appearing on top of the trees. I had only heard about their existence in the news or legends. These birds are inviting themselves to enrich our work. Alternatively, they may be coming back to a place they were familiar with a long time ago.

These concluding words from Mane echoed Sawadogo's testimony on why it is essential to take care of the components of nature by providing water to animals. At this moment, I realized the great confirmation of the narratives I had been listening to. Mane's narrative confirmed his father's narrative, and both narratives reflected what the rest of the group was detailing in different tones. At the end of the discussion with Sawadogo's disciples, they asked me to pray with them, despite most of them being Muslim, while I am a Catholic priest. The words in their prayer were profound. They requested from God, Prophet Mohamed, and ancestors, peace for Burkina Faso, blessing upon the earth, their farms, and my research. In return, I invoked God's blessings upon each of them, their mentor Sawadogo, their families, and the country.

### ***Epilogue***

Ultimately, reporting my encounter and experience with the ecologist leader of the Sahel contributed to widening my understanding of the applying of qualitative research with narrative case study methodology. Creating favorable conditions that participate in raising Afrocentric ecologists like Sawadogo is the primary goal of the present experience. In analyzing the Champion of the Earth's narrative alongside his disciples' narratives, I understood that it was more important to investigate his foundational cultural belief systems, worldviews, and cosmopolitan ambitions than celebrate his achievement as an isolated event.

To multiply Sawadogo's experience, it is vital to recalibrate the consideration of the Earth as an object. Earth is a mother. Additionally, the interpretation of African traditions regarding

humans' connectedness with the environment should be promoted. Young people should be encouraged to harmonize their modern education with traditional values. Moreover, each narrative counts. Helping people to grow more confident when facing challenges like the climate crisis is capital. Humans are endowed by God and Mother Earth to find solutions to their problems. Above all, legacy and heritage only count when transmitted, nourished, improved, and vulgarized. Sawadogo's disciples are the heirs of his wisdom. Their projects should draw attention and support.



## CHAPTER V: DISCUSSION, COMMENTS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

### Comments on the Findings and Surprises

Very committed to contributing his experience to address climate change, the Sahel hero's understanding of the crisis is instructive. The foundation of his determination and hope comes from his belief in God. Furthermore, his pedagogy is straightforward. Sawadogo's definition of the climate crisis, his perception of the earth, and his understanding of African spirituality were the major themes I used to record his beliefs and worldviews. Being welcomed by him amid his forest opened my imagination to another dimension: communing with the wisdom of someone capable of reading the language of nature. I appreciated Sawadogo's curiosity about my research. He first interviewed me and asked questions about my visit's motives. I was not expecting his questions when I was picturing my methodology before landing in Gourga. But I welcomed them as a symbol of respect, like a father questioning his son. Before viewing him as an Afrocentric ecologist, I perceived him as a sage, imbued with African wisdom and ready to learn from me. The sage man of Gourga is characterized by a positive aura and is surrounded by a harmonious atmosphere. However, his uniqueness is not dissociated from his connection with his achievement and nature. I surprisingly discovered in him the interconnection of many rich values: tenderness toward nature, wisdom in collaborating with its elements, and joy to share his experience.

To him, the climate crisis comes from the impoverishment of the soil, the overexploitation of the earth's resources, and the misconduct of humans (Sawadogo, 2022). The phenomenon is aggravated by the critical loss of humans' most actual identity. The phenomenon will continue to worsen unless new generations become self-aware of their responsibility toward the earth. If exploiting the resources provided by nature is indispensable to human lives, it is vital to ensure the

availability of these resources in becoming more responsible and solid. Instead of generating mechanical air coolers to stop heat, it is better to rely on natural solutions. Planting more trees is the best solution to alleviate climate change. Convinced that development without ethics damages the planet and humans, Sawadogo trusts education to participate in the mentality change (Sawadogo, 2022).

Sawadogo's understanding of the climate crisis with the human crisis raised controversial emotions in me. I was surprised by the connection he made between the climate crisis and the human crisis. Instead of only justifying climate degradation with natural causes, he helped me understand the relationship between nature and humans. Losing the memory of their identity (their original source), humans opened Pandora's box. Their anthropological impoverishment generated several complicated problems due to their unwise attitudes. They forgot to consider the earth their mother and the entire creation 'her begotten children.' As a result, humans are the most harmful creatures on the earth. According to Sawadogo, the failure of humans to accommodate other living species, the destruction of forests, the overexploitation of the components of nature, and the invention of new machines generate harmful consequences for the earth.

However, I do not think Sawadogo is opposed to modernity. On the contrary, he seems opposed to modernity without ethics and development without dialogue with nature. Humans should grow wiser. Because their well-being and the earth's well-being are intertwined, they should recalibrate their exploitative mentality and orient it toward a positive relationship with the entire cosmos. Nonetheless, even if humans fail to care more about the earth, she (their mother) will survive after their disappearance. Worse, they could be erased from the planet like dirt, and everything could be all right. In framing this vision when listening to Sawadogo, I felt modesty

and littleness. Understanding our connectedness with God, the earth as our mother, and the entire creation could help us regenerate solutions to the climate problem.

Above all, considering the earth, *Ed Ma Tenga*, our Mother Earth, was evident to Sawadogo. The earth is the mother of all creation. She provides for humans' needs as well as for animals' and plants' needs. She is not an object nor a resource to be exploited. Instead, she is a subject to relate with and the source of everything to connect with. Life comes from her, and all lives return to her womb. It is only when humans become aware of the grateful generosity of the earth that she can respond positively to them. Additionally, I described Sawadogo as a mystic because he has attained a high understanding of the mystery present in nature. His capacity to conjugate servant leadership, humility, and trust is remarkable.

Undoubtedly, African traditional religions impacted Sawadogo's understanding of nature. However, beyond any specific religion, African spirituality could better be used to describe his belief system. Additionally, being a Muslim contributed to deepening his spirituality. For him, nature's components are living beings, including mountains, rivers, plants, animals, and humans. There is an animating principle that maintains life in nature. Committed to protecting the environment, Sawadogo draws his energy from believing that there are spirits in nature. Moreover, knowing how to relate to them peacefully is vital to becoming an Afrocentric ecologist. He developed this spirituality by listening to nature, serving its components, and feeling as part of this nature.

The foundation of Sawadogo's hope to tackle the oppression of desertification and the oppression of the first-world dominant problem-solving methods is rooted in his faith and the mentorship he benefited from his koranic mentor and President Sankara. His actions are full of a deep sense of being blessed. He grounded his hope in God. Revolted by his peers' defeatism, he

espoused the revolutionary ideas of Sankara to become an influential ecologist capable of raising and transforming similar farmers and ecologists.

Even if I knew that President Sankara inspired Sawadogo, I was not expecting to discover remarkable traits of similarities between the two heroes. In my opinion, Sawadogo could be considered one of Sankara's best students who matched successful revolt against ungrateful lands and engagement in transforming desperate situations into hopeful situations. Invigorated by Sankara, he exploited his philosophy to defy nature and overcome its obstacles. Even if he did not personally encounter his idol, Sawadogo is convinced that if Sankara had lived longer, he would have paid a visit to his forest.

Additionally, I was surprised in remarking Sawadogo's insistence on the advantages of being a person of faith and why believing in God's power could be a fundamental pillar to support understanding and creativity. Sawadogo's experience helped me understand that influential and impactful persons generate known and unknown followers during their lifetime or after passing. What matters is self-reliance, conviction, and audacity to invent the nonexistent. President Sankara played a crucial role in his life alongside his koranic mentor. Sawadogo's pedagogy is rooted in his Afrocentric understanding of life, nature, and relationships. To him, the well-being of his village, its values, and traditions are predominant. Therefore, he used wisdom from his education to address climate change. His entire life could be considered a pedagogy.

Moreover, he used new strategies and techniques to counter desertification in his village. He successfully implemented the agricultural techniques known as Zaï and the stone cordon techniques. He was a pioneer in these techniques in his village. These techniques came from neighboring Mali, but he took them to another level, the level of reforestation, thanks to remarkable sacrifices. Innovation is a step someone can make after mastery. Sawadogo mastered the imported

techniques from Mali, and in using them, he succeeded in improving their utility and implementing them with creative innovation.

Another admirable observation related to his mastery and innovation talents that I made was the philosophy justifying his transition from simple farming to planting medicinal trees. He wanted to supplement the lack of a hospital in his village by providing herbal drugs to his people. Through these contributions, he participated in the well-being of his people. His humanistic philosophy is highly appreciated in the context of Africa. He became a community healer with the conviction that plants contain medicinal powers, capable of healing people.

Initially determined to use innovative techniques to improve his farming, he succeeded in creating a forest that contributed to stopping land degradation. Then he became capable of exploiting the virtues of the plants to heal people. As a visionary leader, Sawadogo relied on the awesomeness of his discoveries to keep imagining the best for his village. I think the Sahel hero considered desertification a human problem, not a fatality to scare. He was convinced that humans could stop it. Furthermore, in trying to stop desertification, he plunged into infinite possibilities and became a mystic. Indeed, in devoting himself to stopping the phenomenon by which previously fertile land becomes barren, Sawadogo became capable of communicating with nature and perceiving its mysteries.

I want to clarify that Sawadogo is not a philosopher in modern terms nor a scientist who fulfilled the categories and norms of Western criteria. However, I called him an Afrocentric philosopher and scientist whose understanding of reality by far exceeds improved modern scholars' knowledge. Being able to call Sawadogo an Afrocentric philosopher is one of my major surprises.

Furthermore, it is significant to mention that Sawadogo speaks a heavy *Mooré* mixed with a local dialect called *Yadre*. That means his concepts have deep meanings and provide profound significance. I succeeded in understanding him thanks to my background in the philosophy of language. I studied and taught philosophy for eight years. Being capable of conversing in *Mooré* and *Yadre* with Sawadogo and understanding him by recalling my lessons in philosophy amazed me. Before interviewing the Sahel hero, I did not expect my philosophical background to be so helpful.

I was also surprised that Sawadogo knows how to negotiate with the components of the soil, including termites. He succeeded in building relationships with the earth with respect and care. He developed patient relationships with termites to have them fertilize his lands. He knew how to treat each type of soil with specific techniques. He domesticated the components of the earth to serve his purpose. In providing water to animals, he also succeeded in domesticating them. None can rightly affirm that Sawadogo exploited the soil. However, he succeeded in making it belong to his habits and traditions. The concepts of negotiating and domestication fit in his case. I did not find better terms to articulate his strategies that were new to me.

Sawadogo's wisdom aggrandized my imagination. I can affirm that there is a pedagogy coming from the earth. He was taught by the earth while devoting himself to serving it with his faithful disciples. He acquired many lessons that he shared with me. While expecting to record specific information describing Sawadogo's pedagogy only through his action, I was surprised to perceive that his whole life is a pedagogy. Moreover, his vision of the future is engaging. He invites young generations to compete against desertification, individualism, and materialism. His comprehension of competition is a form of emulation for achieving good. In general, competition is opposed to the communitarian approach to life. However, from him, I learned that competing

against evil by applying humanistic virtues is an excellent quality. He also invites educators to educate young people to become innovative ecologists. Very aware of the importance of education, he values the commitment of educators. Even if interviewing Sawadogo helped me understand his experience and how he interpreted the process of desertification, I relied on his heritage and legacy to collect more information from his disciples. The sage ecologist who stopped the desert in his region has a rich legacy and a universal heritage to contribute to humanity. Moreover, his disciples already use his impacts, influences, and recommendations. Discussing with them helped me become capable of declaring that Sawadogo's future is already made present through disciplined and devoted farmers who apply his techniques with pride and gratitude.

Regarding the benefits of implementing Sawadogo's lessons, it was evident to all his disciples that they made progress thanks to him. Learning from the Sahel hero was fundamentally fruitful to them. They experienced the advantages of using their mentor's techniques on their farms. They also explained that they are already committed to passing the baton to young generations. Their common challenges are the need for agricultural tools, machinery, free lands, and funds to improve their projects. Praying with these farmers at their request at the end of my conversation confirmed my conviction that Sawadogo's achievement is rooted in God's blessing since his disciples strongly believe in God too. To them, the sacredness of knowledge is evident. Furthermore, our discussions were characterized by their consideration of religion as indispensable to anyone willing to care for the environment. This is because faith develops a significant respect for the Earth in people who are believers.

During the one-on-one interviews, I collected rich personal narratives. The most significant were Sanoussa's, Serge's, and Mane's narratives. Sanoussa confirmed Sawadogo's convictions,

including the special blessing he received from God and the Earth. Serge demonstrated vividly that Sawadogo's heritage is already enacted in the Sahel region villages, showing the fruits of his commitment to implementing his mentor's lessons. Moreover, Mane's sincerity, vision, and ambitions were remarkable. He is convinced that his father sacrificed his family's well-being on the altar of the village's well-being. He is grateful to the government of Burkina Faso, which helped him become a harmonious farmer capable of combining ancient and modern techniques. He witnessed the regeneration of nature through the coming back of new species of birds. His farm and grove convinced me he is the authentic heir of the Champion of the Earth.

Beyond his capability of creating direct and indirect disciples, Sawadogo's commitment to the Earth yielded a rich heritage. Overall, his dreams are significant, and his desires are provocative. He wants to see his forest expand significantly. To him, it is possible for humans to live amid forests or to create forests in their cities. Very major to Sawadogo is that he did not initiate his project to become rich. Instead, he considers the multiplication of his achievements the best enrichment possible. I recorded this rare quality as a richness to teach in the future, mentioning Sawadogo's self-sacrifice leadership. Because knowledge is not a commercial commodity, the Sahel hero is ready to continue spreading this wisdom with gratitude.

Furthermore, he expects his country's leaders to vulgarize his techniques, protect his forest, and support his disciples. While still grateful to the UN, which rewarded him, his expectations still need to be fulfilled. Finally, he wants the international community to value his techniques and involve his philosophy in solving the climate crisis. I had never encountered someone who received international recognition without being fully satisfied. Sawadogo is connected to higher dimensions of rewarding heroes: sharing knowledge with gratitude and



contributing to improving life without expecting material compensation. In him, through him, and for him the sacredness of knowledge is recognized, valued, and celebrated.

### **Contribution to Existing Research**

Connecting my research findings with the literature review was an exciting exercise that questioned the epistemological localization of my reflection in the field of climate change, Afrocentric philosophies, and Sawadogo, the pedagogue himself, including the communitarian foundations of his achievements, and his legacy and heritage. I intended this part of my research to negotiate a place to align Sawadogo's uniqueness within the ecologists' world.

As previously developed, the Sahel hero did not create his project from an empty sky. His community, his mentors, and the northern part of Burkina Faso traditions contributed several aspects to his authenticity. However, his uniqueness remains untouched. Since the purpose of my research was to generate the fruitful conditions that could enable the outspring of multiple Champions of the Earth, my investigation led me to contextualize Sawadogo, read him throughout the ongoing challenges in the Sahel region, justify his achievements with his own words and meaningful gestures, and value his disciples' present and future initiatives. Indeed, he does belong more to the future than to the present in terms of research. I wish my modest contribution was more a provocative reflection on the universe of a mystical ecologist than an attempt to summarize a profound and spiritually wise man who is beyond doctoral dissertations.

### ***The Context from which the Leader Sawadogo Emerged***

Leaders like Sawadogo can occur only if society favors grassroots leadership. President Sankara created the conditions for the emergence of leaders like Sawadogo. Sankara combined positive elements from traditional practices with modern foreign techniques to provide a new dimension to his nation's identity, culture, and participation in the world. His leadership was the

Context from which Yacouba Sawadogo's leadership emerged. A famous documentary by Mark Dodd was issued in 2010 on Sawadogo's narrative (Dodd, 2010). However, this documentary did not develop the connection between Sankara's revolution and Sawadogo's initiative.

Furthermore, when I consider Sawadogo's achievement and his disciples' appreciation of him, I can declare that he is an outstanding "Burkimbila," which means someone who successfully embraced Sankara's philosophy of honesty, integrity, and devotion to others, including humans, animals, and nature. The virtue of "Burkindlem" refers to Burkina Faso's purpose as a nation (Sama, 2016), found in Sawadogo a disciplined and generous receiver. Furthermore, the communitarian calling of the earth "Ed Ma Tenga," comes from the philosophy of Burkindlem. Only authentic Burkimbi (the plural of Bukimbila) can acknowledge that all humans belong to the earth.

Unfortunately, today, Burkina Faso is more affected by climate change than in the 1980s. However, farmers like Sawadogo could be described as resilient people who contributed to fostering resistance and resilience in their localities. Moreover, through their commitment, they successfully reversed this phenomenon at a certain level. Nevertheless, Sawadogo's region is marked by desertification. Desertification is the main characteristic of the Sahel region. Burkina Faso is seriously affected by desertification. 80% of the 20 million inhabitants rely on farming. However, 1/3 of the national territory (274 000 Km) is degraded. The UN estimates that over 9 million hectares of productive land have been lost. Furthermore, every year, 360 000 hectares become unusable. Additionally, a 15% decrease in rainfall was noticed between 2000 and 2009, and a 0.8-degree increase in average temperatures from 1970 to today. Many are at the mercy of water scarcity, soil degradation, and humanitarian crises in the northern part of Burkina Faso. The sandy or hard soil cannot be used for agriculture. Except for some rare bushes, fertile lands,

and isolated trees, the horizon is arid, dusty, and incandescent. People are fighting for their land with fear, courage, and hope. Sawadogo is one of them. Unfortunately, recent terrorist attacks in Burkina Faso contributed to worsening farmers' lives in the region.

### ***The Conferences of the Parties (Cops) and their Impact on Climate Change in Africa***

I considered the Conferences of the Parties (COPs) and their impactful resonance on the climate change debate as essential components of literature developed on the issue. Additionally, several ecologists and leaders worldwide, including Pope Francis, contributed reflections that echoed Sawadogo's approach to climate change, even if they did not meet one another.

Sawadogo, who did not participate in COP 21, would have supported policies encouraging the planting of trees and caring for them by considering nature a partner and not an object. His comprehension of the climate crisis and his sincere willingness to regreen the desert exceed his present achievement and his disciples' accomplishments. To him, the sustainable existence of humanity depends on planting and caring relentlessly for trees. He wants his forest to expand unlimitedly because he understands that humans and plants can accommodate one another.

Furthermore, he wants people to create innumerable forests. To the international community, he requested more consideration of Non-Western centric ecologists. To Sawadogo, the members of the U.N. who nominated him as Champion of the Earth do not relate to the world as he does. Furthermore, they should be more ready to learn or be open to integrating his philosophy. He wants to see the leaders of the COPs integrate more Afrocentric ecologists into their meetings. When I questioned him on the impacts of his nomination, his response was clear. He wants world leaders to open conversations with everyone and develop more cooperation and fraternal exchange on capital issues like the climate crisis.

Indeed, Sawadogo's desire to be involved in the climate debate echoed Goldman's vision (2018). It is vital to engage a plurality of perspectives. Goldman uses the concept of co-production of knowledge to invite searchers to develop interdependence and mutual constitutions of solutions. It demands a harmonious conjugation of ethics, epistemologies, and ontologies (Barad, 2003, p. 8). Building integrated knowledge that calls on all contributions will help create effective solutions that reconcile nature with humanity. The challenges of climate change require a work of synthesis and discourse that federates and integrates different approaches. When many approaches are strategically brought together to solve the same problem, there is a better chance of successfully solving it. Integrating the knowledge of African ecologists like Sawadogo into the discussion on climate change would not be an act of charity but rather an act of responsibility and openness to those who think differently but wisely.

In reflecting on Smith's perspective (2012) through Sawadogo's lenses, I confirm that African farmers who use ancestral techniques to address the climate crisis could benefit from international support, consideration, and funding, without being judged by Western standards nor being forced to adapt their techniques to a Western-centric vision. They could bring efficacious and original solutions.

Overall, reflecting on Sawadogo's original conception of the earth, I connected my analysis with theologian Leonardo Boff's conversations with indigenous people in his native Brazil (1995). To him, wisdom emanating from indigenous people is incommensurable. That means comparing it with other forms of wisdom leads to mistakes. Despite the distance separating the indigenous peoples of Brazil from native peoples in Burkina Faso, including Sawadogo and his disciples, I have noticed similarities between both sides. For Amazonians, the earth is Pacha Mama, which

means Great Mother who gives birth, feels, and envelops all creatures. For Burkinabe, the earth is Ed Ma Tenga, our Mother Earth.

More powerfully, when native Brazilians use the expression "working the earth," they articulate standard terms to relate to a more meaningful reality. "Working the earth" or simply working is not only a human effort to produce goods. Rather it is collaborating with the earth (Boff, 1995). Working the earth means collaborating with Mother Earth to provide for humans and other living beings.

Besides, when I interviewed Sawadogo, I could not help but imagine that he met with Pope Francis before the writing of *Laudato Si* (2015). Actually, he did not. To Francis, there is a deep connection between ecological and social crises. There is a spiritual wound or "sin" within the complex economic, social, cultural, and political factors that contribute to the ecological crisis. Modern people have forgotten that we belong to the earth, that our bodies are made of her elements, and that we breathe her air and receive life and refreshment from her waters (L.S., 2015, p. 2). Without having read Francis or met him, Sawadogo defined the climate crisis as a human crisis.

For both Francis and Sawadogo, there is a distorted anthropocentrism that shapes modern forms of production and consumption. Consumerism places human beings at the center of the entire world and leads them to consider "everything as irrelevant unless it serves one's own immediate interests" (L.S., 2015, p. 122). This is not only a wrong perception of life but also a voracious aspiration of being willing to get everything to serve humans. It is catastrophic.

More fundamentally, to Francis, a just understanding of the biblical tradition suggests "that human life is grounded in three fundamental and closely intertwined relationships: with God, with our neighbor, and with the earth itself" (L.S., 2015, p. 66). For that reason, addressing the ecological crisis requires a spiritual conversion. Sawadogo did not argue differently when he asked

me to invite the world leaders to come back home for a more integrative dialogue. However, to the concept of conversion, the Sahel hero added "conversation." First, we must convert to better relationships with one another, nature, and the Transcendent. Second, realizing this dream requires multiple conversations and inclusion between humans from different parts of the world and the other components of nature.

Instead of seeking urgent, partial, and superficial responses to fix the climate crisis, it is crucial to develop an "ecological culture" (Francis, 2015), that could help humanity to reshape its way of thinking, design policies, and educate new generations. The technocratic and materialistic rush to find quick solutions can be dangerous. In fact,

Even the best ecological initiatives can be caught up in the same globalized logic. To seek only a technical remedy to each environmental problem that comes up is to separate what is interconnected and mask the genuine and most profound problems of the global system. (L.S., 2015, 111)

Connecting Sawadogo's beliefs and worldviews to the existing literature developed through the climate question was helpful to better understand the Sahel hero in both the contexts of Burkina Faso and Africa and the world. He encouraged reflections focused on humanizing the earth, improving our interconnectedness, and opening ourselves to the Transcendent.

### ***How do African Leaders and Ecologists address the Climate Crisis?***

Because Sawadogo aligned his achievement with Sankara's revolution, he also participated indirectly in Maathai's (2004) dream. The dream Maathai dreamt through the Green Belt Movement since 1977. Her community-based philosophy of Harambe (pull together) is similar to Sawadogo's understanding of African life. President Sankara was a great environmentalist who prompted his people to plant and care for trees. Sawadogo did not meet Maathai. However, reading

her and my conversation with the Sahel hero gave me reasons to think their ideas defend the same truth. Indeed, good spirits always encounter beyond spaces and times.

When the Kenyan hero encouraged her compatriots to plant trees with the slogan “One person, one tree” (Maathai, *Unbowed*, 1993, p.134), Sawadogo echoed this cheerful invitation in creating a forest and attracting countless disciples and followers to walk in his footsteps, without any contact with Maathai. Sawadogo loves trees, and he is convinced that they have a form of language as well as Maathai imagined. She, too, testified to the fact that trees speak a form of language. To her, the sacredness of nature is the very essence of life itself. There is always more than what humans can see in nature. “A tree, as Wangari Maathai notes, is not merely a source of food, medicine, and building material, but a place of healing consolation, and connection – with other human beings and with the divine” (Katongole, 2022, p. 141).

Beyond her understanding of the sacredness of nature, the Noble Peace Prize recipient wanted to have sustainable protectors of the environment and ecologists capable of trusting Africans’ ancestral cultural richness (Maathai, 2004). She launched training programs to raise Afrocentric ecologists capable of learning from their cultures and living their cultural values to foster sustainable willpower to nurture, protect, and keep forests in their midst. Combining self-identity, self-respect, ethical values, spirituality, and sciences, these ecologists could contribute much to climate change (Maathai, 2004). In my opinion, Sawadogo expanded Maathai’s philosophy and contributed to concretizing her actions within the context of Burkina Faso without knowing that she did exist.

### ***Understanding Climate Change with African Epistemologies and Ontologies***

In listening to Sawadogo defining the climate crisis with rich and profound considerations, I can testify to the truth of Stone’s research (2022). Where some Western researchers situate the

climate crisis either within natural causes interpretation, or human causes justifications, Sawadogo provided a more resounding response. To him, the human crisis is the fundamental cause of the climate crisis. Undoubtedly, the impoverishment of the earth's nutrients is aggravated by the unconscious behaviors of modern consumerist men and women. And the worsening of the situation comes from the continual distancing journey that modern people are making from their inner identity and their common good, the earth. The Sahel hero's arguments encompass the modern justifications for the climate crisis but take the debate to a more substantial level. Where modern and western scientists are only focused on scientific and anthropological reasons for the climate crisis, the sage man of Gourga provided arguments from a metaphysical standing point. I am using the concept of metaphysics to describe and explain Sawadogo's comprehension without pretending that he used the term. To him, we cannot better understand the earth's degradation unless we integrate metaphysics into our reflection. Metaphysics is the mother of all sciences, including philosophy, epistemology, physics, and anthropology. Integrating metaphysics into a question like the one on the climate crisis means being open to conciliating the physical aspects of the question and the ontological aspects of the same inquiry.

The physical components of the earth are related to invisible spirits that animate their existence. Unless we develop more dialogue with these elements, solutions to climate change will remain superficial and momentary. The objectivation of the earth is a simple approach to a more complex reality while considering it a subject could yield more space for dialogue. To Sawadogo, the earth is not an object to be exploited but a living mother whose well-being depends on humans' well-being. Nevertheless, like any mother, she has the last word regarding the umbilical connection we have with her. The day she decides to end her connection with us, she will be able to perform



it like a mother who can get rid of a baby from her womb. Humans must become humbler and wiser to avoid such a catastrophe.

### ***Understanding Climate Change with Traditional African Principles***

Unlike Western-Centric researchers, Non-Western centric seekers of solutions to address the climate crisis, including Afrocentric ecologists, value community-based approaches and holistic comprehension of the problem. Calling the earth, a mother and knowing how to negotiate with and domesticate trees and animals characterize Sawadogo's approach, who is convinced of being blessed by God and nature.

Several African traditional principles confirm Sawadogo's beliefs and worldviews. Because she is a mother to humans, the earth does not belong to humans. Rather humans belong to her. When postcolonial scholar Mbembe invites his contemporaries to reopen our planet to all who inhabit it, including animals, and forests (Mbembe, 2016), his vision could be compared to Sawadogo's recommendations to the government of Burkina Faso to educate young people to accommodate trees with tolerance and responsibility.

Most importantly, being a member of a community threatened by land degradation, Sawadogo who was inspired by a deep sense of belonging, decided to use innovative techniques to reshape his community's relationships with the earth. He interpreted his initiative as a message to the members of his community. His existence is related to their existence.

When I reflect on Sawadogo's commitment to negotiate with the earth to redeem his people from famine, I situate his comprehension of belonging to a community within the different layers of life in its complexities. His relation to the earth is deep. It provides him with a meaningful identity through a sense of belonging to a community and the Earth.

When Sawadogo decided to plant medicinal trees, he was animated by the desire to be a community healer. He confirmed an African proverb, "A person is another person's remedy." That means a devoted person to humanity is always ready to contribute to the well-being of other people by considering themselves a remedy, which means a provider of solutions. Sawadogo's attitudes confirmed the communitarian and egalitarian description of society by many communities in Africa through the principles of Ujamaa, Ubuntu, "I am because we are."

In addition, reflecting on the South African principle of Ubuntu, I can affirm that Sawadogo embraced it totally, even without mentioning the concept in his sharing with me. This principle encourages mutual support, love for humanity, and positive interdependence. Within Ubuntu, wise Africanists acknowledge that "A person is a person through other persons". The Sahel hero became successful through other persons, especially his mentors. Furthermore, in teaching other farmers, he is also making other persons through his person. His humanism is positively contagious. Sawadogo understood that humanity is not a solitary gift bestowed on individuals but a divine gift we all share in common and something we should bestow generously on one another, generation after generation.

### **Discussion and Contribution to Theory**

Encountering and interviewing Sawadogo and his disciples, collecting their narratives and discussing with them, and analyzing and thematizing their experiences were possible thanks to the theoretical framework I used to reflect on them. Theories serve like lamps to enlighten the unknown and provide guiding expressions to elaborate on new phenomena. I led the research in the village of Gourga, a village I knew before. However, I succeeded in transforming the familiar context into an unfamiliar one, before being able to get essential information. I used positive curiosity to question the participants and get their deep knowledge and wisdom.

The findings of the three guiding questions are pedagogically enriching and empowering. The literature of postcolonial and decolonial theories and studies fundamentally guided me. In fact, these theories and studies help interconnect the "present and the past," "the local and the global," "the vernacular and the cosmopolitan," and the "postcolonial and the postmodern" (Venn, 2006). Through this approach, I related to Sawadogo and the other farmers to participate in creating bridges between different viewpoints.

I was focused on understanding Sawadogo's belief systems, worldviews, and definition of the climate crisis. Because observation and perception helped him describe the phenomenon of climate change, I initiated my research by observing and perceiving Sawadogo and his milieu attentively because I wanted to wear his glasses. And when I interviewed him and visited his forest, I penetrated his universe using postcolonial and decolonial approaches.

What makes postcolonial and decolonial theorists convincing is that for the theorists of these theories, the world we have in common is only understandable with relating to the history of colonialism and imperialism of the Global North over the Global South for many centuries. Slavery (1468-1868) and colonization (1868-1968) contributed to shaping the present world we are living in.

Using legitimized ideologies to justify the inferiority of colonized nations, the West imposed its dominance over the rest of the world. Despite their political independence, countries in the Global South remained economically and ideologically under the burden of Western countries. However, many in the dominated world retained their original belief systems and worldviews, including Sawadogo, who situated the climate crisis within our contemporaries' total loss of sense and meaning. Even if, in defining the climate crisis, he admitted that the natural impoverishment of the earth and the degradation of the soil due to the overexploitation of the

resources are the leading causes, Sawadogo insisted on mentioning the fact that many people have distanced themselves from their own identity. Critically superficial in their understanding, they have forgotten that they come from the earth's womb and will return there at the end of their lives.

One of the capital purposes of my research was to address the minimization of non-Western knowledge and wisdom in Africa. In valuing and celebrating Western-centric knowledge at the expense of African knowledge and wisdom, the leaders of colonialism and neocolonialism tried to silence Africans' contribution to science. Universalizing the Western cultures and civilizations and presenting them as the best in the world contribute to judging other civilizations and cultures as inferior.

While studying and uplifting Sawadogo's narrative, my research participated in valorizing postcolonial and decolonial theories. I aimed to encourage colonized people to find their identity by claiming the richness of their past with Fanon (1967), for whom native Africans must learn, accept, and appreciate their history to be reborn. Instead of devaluating their past, people in Africa must separate themselves from the imposed ideologies governed by Europeans. Sawadogo's achievement could be situated between postcolonial theorists' approaches and decolonial theorists' approaches to knowledge and science.

First, according to postcolonial theorists, colonization has ended, and formerly colonized communities can reject Western-centric models and invent their models to liberate themselves from oppression (Mignolo, 2011). The originality of Sawadogo's *Zaï* and stones cordon methods is sufficient proof that there are people in Africa who chose to reject Western-centric models and use their own models to succeed. Additionally, Sawadogo did not attend a Western education nor implement Western methods to transform his deserts into a forest. Instead, he implemented

ancestral techniques and succeeded perfectly. Therefore, postcolonial theorists would have found reasons to trust his approach.

Second, the decolonial theorists, unlike the postcolonial thinkers, acknowledge that the ongoing system of colonization and recolonization is evident in developing countries and prevent these countries from systematically emancipating (Mignolo, 2011). Rewarding Sawadogo solely, without questioning the community-based philosophy and worldviews that justified his achievement, is another form of colonialism. The rewarders colonized his success. They have imprisoned him and his achievement within western categories that isolate individuals to reward them at the expense of their communities or inspirational leaders. The instrumental inspiration that guided Sawadogo came from the revolutionary Sankara, who was assassinated by Western-centric African leaders who feared his Afrocentric ideas and charisma (Prairie, 2007).

When I interviewed Sawadogo, I remarked that he was dissatisfied with the system that rewarded him. The sage ecologist was clear enough in expressing his discontent. He said, "I did receive international recognition with rewards from organizations. However, I need help understanding their purpose." Therefore, Sawadogo's negative appreciation of his celebration by the West gives a right to the decolonial theorists. In asking about his definition of climate change and collecting his strategies to stop the desert, I was convinced that the Sahel hero could be rightly defined as the upcoming of what the decolonial theorists have been waiting for.

When decolonial thinkers think from a decolonial ground, they are convinced that to reduce the burden and harmful aspects of ongoing colonialism, the solution is to raise self-reliant and determined thinkers capable of inventing the future with their frames, structures, and lights (Mignolo, 2011). Sawadogo's wisdom comes from his ancestors, and his understanding of climate challenges is rooted in his experience. Despite not attending modern philosophical and

sociological debates on colonial, postcolonial, and decolonial theories, Sawadogo is one of the best examples of Afrocentric leaders who understood these theories in their negativity and positivity. Inspired by the anti-colonialist Sankara, he relied on this land's transformation to transform his own life. Convinced and empowered by his ancestors' millennial wisdom, he understood the climate crisis more than many people.

By listening to Sawadogo's narrative through Afrocentric lenses I understood the foundation of his hope to address desertification and the oppression of Western-centric solutions. When I reflect on the responses I collected, I am tempted to call Sawadogo a "decolonial philosopher, rooted in postcolonial practices." Nevertheless, again, Sawadogo did not pronounce these concepts on his own. I am the one who decided to define him with these concepts for the sake of the present reflection. The paradigms he used to deplore the 21st-century people's problems fit Mignolo's description of what makes the Global Southerners unique in their world vision (2011).

Moreover, Sawadogo was concerned with human dignity when he told me the consequences of relying on materialistic goods to create happiness. Even though we did not talk about human rights, through his reflection, I could understand that for him, we had better be talking about human duties and responsibilities since our common home is in danger. When Sawadogo was describing to me the source of his determination to overcome the tremendous obstacles he went through, I had the impression he read Santos's mind (2014), for whom "the understanding of the world by far exceeds the Western understanding of the world" (Santos, 2014, p. 23). Sawadogo convincingly explained the advantages of being blessed by his koranic mentor in Mali. He was convinced that God blessed him through his mentor, the earth, and the trees. The foundation of his hope to fight desertification and resist the Western models is the

divine blessings he received. Some in the West may doubt the power of being blessed, but to the Sahel hero, the grace of the blessing is still alive and at work.

To Santos, "the emancipatory transformations in the world may follow grammars and scripts other than those developed by Western-centric critical theory, and such diversity should be valorized" (Santos, 2014, p. 23). Knowing how to negotiate with termites or provide drink and food to wild animals because they are animated by living spirit is a form of language that follow grammars and scripts strange to Western-centric materialist philosophers. In my opinion, the best way to be cognitively just (Santos, 2014) toward Sawadogo is to give credit to his techniques and support his philosophy.

Besides, when Sawadogo defined the earth as a mother to protect instead of an object to be exploited, he significantly shifted from the Western possessive mentality to the African communitarian spirit, even without naming the concepts. To him, Mother Earth is not full of resources to extract. Instead, she is the source from which everything came into existence. Therefore, we should protect her and collaborate with her to benefit from her generosity. Without using their terms, the Sahel hero deconstructed and repudiated the Western mythologies, traditions, and epistemologies as universal norms. Instead, he succeeded in valorizing his ancestral customs by founding his vision within the categories of thinking, creating, and innovating from his context.

Most importantly, Sawadogo's worldviews matched the indigenous peoples' worldviews from the Amazonian Forest. To Santos (2014), the foundation of the hope animating people living in the Global South comes from their natural comprehension of nature as a partner and their consideration of the earth as a mother. Forests are not commodities to be exploited but authentic organisms made of various living elements we should relate to responsibly. Inspired by

the indigenous wisdom of the Amazon Forest, he is convinced that, when we abuse the environment, we abuse our typical living mother and, worst, our common soul. Furthermore, to live without scrutiny and self-discipline toward mother nature is to live as enemies of the planet. We are part of her, and she is part of us (Santos, 2004; Santos, 2016; Barreto, 2014; Dalea & Robertson, 2004). The same worldview informs Sawadogo's understanding of African spirituality.

For Santos, it is vital to resist what he calls "epistemicide," the killing and eradication of forms of knowledge and wisdom from the South (Santos, 2014). I used the epistemologies of the South as a theory referring to the victims of the exclusion that Santos is defending, including Sawadogo, even if he did not name him. The aspects and practices of Sawadogo's pedagogy that helped him form and become an Afrocentric ecologist who inspires other farmers capable of passing his pedagogy to new generations are related to Paulo Freire's theories. According to Freire in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (2018), there are many advantages to using problem-posing education. First, it helps forge social agents capable of applying strategies to question and transform their world. Second, grassroots people grow in self-conscientization through their commitment to transforming their lives. Third, massive and contagious positive transformation emerges from the process by itself.

Sawadogo had deployed tangible categories of problem-posing imagination for over forty years to build his leadership and become an Afrocentric ecologist. Instead of fleeing his village to escape the famine, he methodically posed the problem, questioned it, fostered solutions to it, then implemented successful solutions to fix it. He self-sacrificed his comfortable trading benefits to demonstrate to his people that desertification is not a fatality but a human problem



that humans could fix. His success attracted disciples who followed in his footsteps with discipline and determination, like their mentor.

In analyzing Sawadogo's achievements, I had the impression that Paulo Freire, in framing his theories, knew that someone, somewhere in Burkina Faso, would exploit and successfully implement them. The Sahel hero's belief systems and worldviews echo Freire's critical pedagogy. In refusing to permit desertification to define him as a person who fled natural problems, he learned through his efforts that farmers who stand to transform their sorrowful conditions into a more prosperous life will always win victories.

Additionally, Sawadogo embraced in his ways, Freire's critical thinking without knowing him. Instead of remaining passive, he became active because he understood that being a human means being capable of genuine thinking that consists in departing from "the intellectual reproduction of what already exists" (Jarvis, 1998, p. 291) to embrace the non-yet existing. Indeed, "as long as it doesn't break off, thinking has a secure hold on possibility. Its insatiable aspect, its aversion to being quickly and easily satisfied, refuses the foolish wisdom of resignation. ... Open thinking points beyond itself" (Jarvis, 1998, pp. 291-292).

In reading Sawadogo's achievements through the lens of Freire (2018), I found the inspiring factors of his achievement that prompted his efforts to defeat the obstacles. What was important in Sawadogo's life was not his failure to graduate like his comrades at the koranic school or the mockeries of people but what he could do from these painful experiences. More importantly, he became a pedagogue by listening to his own experience before being a pedagogue to others. The pedagogy of the earth, including what Mother Earth taught him, the graces he received from the multiple blessings, his mentors, and the desert itself were his masters. They taught him the relevance of adequately posing and reflecting on problems,

investigating their causes, comparing potential solutions, and trying innovative projects. Sawadogo's negotiating process with the earth could be described as embracing life with a problem-posing vision. He knew how to manage his decisions and implement strategies to obtain positive results. The forest of Gourga is a living testimony of this successful vision.

Moreover, when I interviewed Sawadogo about his enemies who twice burnt his forest, I noticed that he was a patient and optimistic pedagogue. He relied on conscientization and education to eliminate misunderstandings around his project. He did not condemn his enemies. Instead, he considered that they were animated by ignorance and lack of wisdom. He knew conscientization and dialogue were the best equipment to transform society.

Conscientization leads to self-confidence and willingness to act for positive transformation. This process was the strategy he used to teach his disciples, who appreciated his patience and willingness to teach them. They were first attracted by his charisma and exemplifying qualities before being attracted by his teaching. His good examples were speaking more than his pedagogy at first glance.

In reflecting on Sawadogo's heritage and legacy through Freire's lenses, I understood why the lessons developed in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (2018) are instrumental in fostering authentic leaders to transform the continent of Africa. The Sahel hero and his disciples testified that reality does not change by accident or by superficial and isolated heroism. It is to be built collectively with sustainability. Sawadogo's community-based achievement can be defined as a community-based success. Only community-based successes are significant in contributing to community transformation.

According to Freire, consistent and lasting social change should come from the masses, not from isolated individuals. In Freire's philosophy, rewarding Sawadogo and presenting him as

a solitary price winner could be interpreted as a form of false and superficial generosity and solidarity with the poor (Freire, 1968). In analyzing Sawadogo's heritage and legacy, I can confirm that he wants his achievement to serve as an example to new generations. He expects the government of Burkina Faso to provide more protection of his forest against predators, he wants young generations to care for the environment, and he wants his forest to be enlarged.

Another aspect of Freire's pedagogy I discovered in Sawadogo, in interviewing and discussing with him, was his desire to liberate his people from dependence and poverty. He planted medicinal trees to supplement the lack of a hospital in the village. He also combated the defeatist mentality of people by demonstrating to them how relentless commitment to accommodate trees and animals pays off. Freire would have called these gestures and philosophy true generosity. If false generosity contributes to keeping people under dependence, true generosity transforms the subdued's hands into "human hands which work and, working, transform the world" (Freire, 2018, p. 45).

Beyond Freire's philosophy of liberation substantially focused on the capabilities of the dominated people to free themselves through self-reliance, confidence, and trust in conscientization, Sawadogo's pedagogy entails liberating oneself in attending the earth, knowing how to negotiate with her, and caring for animals and plants. With him, liberation is not only obtained through humans dialoguing with one another, educating themselves, and empowering themselves; instead, it is also obtained from the earth through honest relationships with 'her children' without any exclusion.

Overall, Sawadogo could be considered an authentic disciple of Mother Earth who implemented lessons that pedagogues like Freire would have presented as role models in Africa.

His knowledge and wisdom inspired farmers in several places, who now consider him their liberator. His pedagogy generated resilient, self-reliant, and hopeful disciples and followers.

### **The Helpful Benefits of My Research in Practice**

The research I made on the application of the epistemologies of the South to address the ecological crisis was focused on the narrative case study of Burkina Faso and the leader Yacouba Sawadogo. The Champion of the Earth, nicknamed Yacouba Zaï by the members of the village of Gourga, made a significant difference in his people's lives. My study of his beliefs, worldviews, and pedagogy helped me understand his leadership. He is a servant leader. The Afrocentricity of his experience, the foundations of his determination, and the pedagogical aspects of his achievements are the lessons new generations could benefit from.

The real help my research provides for practice is the self-reliance and confidence I created in Sawadogo and his disciples. Even if the Sahel hero is self-reliant and confident, the study I made, including the interviews and discussions I had with him and his disciples, added value to his confidence. The publication of my research will contribute to helping students be more interested in Sawadogo's experience. They will also be able to learn from my experience in terms of methods and methodology.

Moreover, my research will contribute to challenging colonial heritage in Africa, address the new forms of recolonization on the continent, and bring to light the significance of Afrocentric contributions to climate change. Beyond Sawadogo's merit, understanding the context of the emergence of such leaders, including their challenges, pain, and consolation, will pave the way to raise similar leaders who care for the earth. Ecological peacemakers are indispensable to the current challenges of our world. My research will also contribute to creating

bridges capable of connecting grassroots in Africa who endure the consequences of climate change and policymakers worldwide.

### **Lessons for De-Colonial Methodologies**

I approached Sawadogo with a positive curiosity to look for the traits of problem-posing leadership related to environmental justice. In fact, people can develop the power to discern how they exist and find themselves in problem-posing education. In this process, they see the world not as an immovable and static reality but as a dynamic reality, in a permanent transformation.

Although the dialectical relations of women and men with the world exist independently of how these relations are perceived (or whether or not they are perceived at all), it is also true that the form of action they adopt is to a large extent a function of how they perceive them-selves in the world. (Freire, 2018, p. 83)

Instead of developing a fact based education which is focused on training people to become only suitable for restituting and executing unquestionable decisions and projects, a problem-position education is a method of making learners subjects of their destinies. In reading Sawadogo's achievements through the lenses of Freire, I found the inspiring factors of his achievement that promote efforts to tackling the oppression of desertification and the oppression of the first world dominant problem-solving methods. I am convinced that what does matter in authentic and transformative leaders is not what history or social conditions did to them but what they can make from them. Sawadogo and his people did not allow their social conditions to define them. Rather their stood to transform them. The inner guiding principles that helped Sawadogo change his milieu were my study's aims.

Another relevance of the problem-posing vision of life is based on creating conditions from which one can investigate reality, compare potential solutions, and develop innovative

projects. Instead of subordinating people to predetermined needs where they do not participate in creating, problem-posing imagination that prepares for a self-managed life. Self-management of life happens when people can develop self-reflection of knowing themselves and their milieu, which is an understanding of the world in which they live, i.e., its social fabric, economy, politics, and psychological dimensions. This awareness of the forces that rule their lives and shape their consciousness is indispensable for social change. My examination of Sawadogo's pedagogy consisted of searching these specific aspects, including his perception and description of the desertification phenomenon, the relationships he has established with the elements of nature and the tools he used to transform his milieu.

Furthermore, decrypting the fabric of any achievement with Freire's approach contributes to enhancing critical thinking in oneself. In addition, it fosters criteria to differentiate superficial transformation from profound transformation, false solidarity from sincere solidarity (Freire, 2018, 83). According to Freire, conscientization and dialogue are the best equipment to transform society. Conscientization leads to self-confidence and willingness to act for positive transformation.

During my research, I interviewed Sawadogo's disciples to try excavating the educational methods used by Sawadogo to teach them and share his wisdom. And I explored their capacity to pass the baton of wisdom they inherited from Sawadogo to others because education is fundamentally about receiving, digesting, caring for, nurturing, and sharing the excellency of what is valuing humanity. My focus on Sawadogo's heritage and heirs was rooted in my conviction in reading Freire, that reality does not change by chance or by individual heroism, and change does not come over time. It is to be built collectively with sustainability. Committed human beings have constructed the world within which we live. Only determined human beings

will change it if they are willing to. “If humankind produce social reality (which in the “inversion of the praxis” turns back upon them and conditions them), then transforming that reality is an historical task, a task for humanity” (Freire, 2018).

Above all, Freire's pedagogy is a thesis affirming that consistent and lasting social change should come from the masses and not from isolated individuals. Rewarding Sawadogo and presenting him as a hero could be interpreted in Freire's philosophy as a form of false and superficial solidarity with the poor (Freire, 2018). True and lasting solidarity with the oppressed is built through praxis. Unlike international organizations preoccupied with rewarding and praising the sole Sawadogo, I used my research to question the type of pedagogy appropriate to Burkina Faso and Africa that can forge the emergence of critical ecologists like Sawadogo in future generations. Freire's critical pedagogy is helpful to achieve this goal.

Overall, the narrative case study approach I used to study Sawadogo led to a more profound comprehension of Sawadogo's pedagogy. I was fortunate to explore the critical relation he created with the components of the earth, including the wisdom he acquired through the process itself. Sawadogo not only gave himself to transform a barren land, but he was also receiving from the land wisdom and insights. In dreaming of the world anew, he understood the earth's language. Reading the earth with his lenses for education was one the central motives of the research.

Therefore, the pedagogical component of the study investigated two aspects. First, the process through which Sawadogo learned to transform his barren land into abundant land using the Zaï and stone cordon methods. Second, the study investigated how Sawadogo is transmitting his techniques to other farmers and how they receive them. In using Freire's pedagogy, I studied

the aspects of Sawadogo's pedagogy that bring liberation and lead to a fundamental transformation of his community. That consisted in witnessing true generosity in him.

False generosity, as developed previously, contributes to maintaining the subdued under the burden of dependence, while true generosity helps the subdued become more responsible. True generosity transforms the subdued's hands into "human hands which work and, working transform the world" (Freire, p. 45). Celebrating Sawadogo's achievement without involving his context and his community contributes to maintaining him dependent on international recognition instead of making him a transformation agent of his context. It can only make him feel good without leading to the transformation of his society. Within a communitarian society, such forms of harmful charity can become poisoning because they tend to place individuals above their communities. Instead, studying the aspects of Sawadogo's pedagogy, investigating his belief system, and interrogating the foundation of his hope could lead to accurate and dignifying charity within Afrocentric contexts.

I called accurate and dignifying charity, in Sawadogo's case, the possibility of excavating the specific aspects of his ingenuity by the exploration of his work, conversation with his disciples, and observing their achievements. It also means the presentification (the process of connecting a specific experience within the time it occurs) of his philosophy and sociology that has inspired his village and led to a more potential humane resolution of the climate crisis.

Additionally, true generosity toward Sawadogo and his community consists in exploiting the pattern of his commitment and developing conditions from which multiple Afrocentric ecologists could emerge. That was the challenge of this study. I am convinced that long-lasting transformation does not focus on individuals but on structures that produce them. Only by these structures can they *invent their future* and contribute to the betterment of the world.



Most importantly, Sawadogo is committed to transforming the oppression of desertification and the pressure of the first-world dominant problem-solving methods into favorable conditions for growth. As a result, he has developed connections with the earth, plants, animals, and other elements of nature. What did he learn from this commitment? Most importantly he developed a pedagogy one could call the pedagogy of the earth.

In his praxis, Sawadogo has exploited knowledge and wisdom that inspired farmers in his entourage, who considered him their liberator. His pedagogy participates in developing resilience, patience, and hope within his community. By cooperating with the earth and other farmers, he had forged new approaches to the environmental crisis. Sawadogo's pedagogy has contributed to transform the members of his village into genuine providers of solutions, ready to defy their problems. Knowing that when one becomes a solution to his problems, one's entire humanity participates in creating more life and authenticity, I consider Sawadogo's disciples real solutions to the Sahel challenges. The concept of disciples I used in this research refers to those who attended with discipline, rigor, and perseverance Sawadogo's lessons, considering him the provider of knowledge, i.e., their mentor. They called themselves in Moore "Karambiissi." That means those who follow knowledge. In the context of the present research disciples designate the nine farmers who followed Sawadogo with discipline and learned from him.

Another pedagogical component of this research aligned with postcolonial and decolonial theories, came from the philosophy of Afrocentricity. Viewing Africans as subjects rather than objects in history is the blueprint of this philosophy (Asante, 2003). It seeks to question the fundamental definition of Africans by Africans, their essence, ethos, and above all, their participation in the world's modeling. As developed by African historians, European slavery and colonization have decentered Africans from their own identity. The continent is evoked

fundamentally for the purpose of relation to the West rather than for its own reasons, purposes, and world visions. Westerners have defined Africans as objects of their history, vision, and philosophies.

Seeking solutions to tackle climate change could only be substantial and effective in Africa when researchers admit the importance of Afrocentricity as a prerequisite. Searching to understand African relation to the environment outside the core of Afrocentricity cannot yield fruitful results. Thus, Afrocentricity serves as a theoretical idea that African people must view the world from the standpoint of Africans being subjects of their historical narratives.

Part of Afrocentricity as a theoretical idea is that for every phenomenon we examine, we must interrogate that phenomenon with the question of what the role of the centrality of African people in this adventure is. Thinking with Afrocentric lenses is thinking with decolonial lenses without complexity. And that approach is very much mine throughout this study.

In studying Sawadogo within his context, listening to him in his language and witnessing the transformation of his community, I succeeded in extracting “The man who transformed the desert” from the Western way of celebrating solitary individuals individualistically at the expense of communities and situated him within the African context. From that primary step, I moved to read Sawadogo with Afrocentric lenses. First, I looked for elements that participated in making him a real subject who decided to tackle climate change. Second, I sought the values that characterize his connection to the earth. In African philosophy, humans belong to the earth. Nature and its components are not property; instead, it is a living being from which all living beings have life. I saw that Sawadogo shares the same approach. Third, Afrocentricity values diversity and extends bridges to different aspects and dimensions of life. Ancestors are still alive and invisible and unborn babies are already active despite being unanimated. Animals and plants

should cooperate to make life flourish. In listening to and interviewing Sawadogo I was pleased to find this foundational richness.

The role of pedagogy in my research is prominent. The primary role of pedagogy as a teaching method consists of using styles, beliefs, and cultures to transmit knowledge to others. In addition, pedagogy helps students comprehend subjects and objects of studies and lead to applying those elements in their daily lives. Studying Sawadogo's case had two functions in the research. First, I explored how Sawadogo learned for himself thanks to his connection with nature, animals, plants, and phenomena, including his personal worldviews and beliefs. Second, I studied the methods he used to teach his disciples and how they became teachers in their turn.

The Afrocentric methods I exploited during the research involved symbols, attitudes, and emotional communications. When I went to encounter Sawadogo and his disciples I was vested with Faso Danfani. In my culture, dressing with Faso Danfani symbolizes a positive message to people. In vesting like ordinary people, you indirectly tell them that you are one of them and do not consider yourself a superior being. When I met him, I automatically removed my shoes and put my two arms together to greet him. That means he is father to me, and I am son to him.

During the conversation (interview), I scrupulously avoided eye contact because I did not have enough wisdom to look an older person like him in the eyes. We had nice conversations and discussions with the sage man of Gourga and his disciples. The concept of conversation fit the best way to express the interviews I had during the research. At the end of the interview, I granted him a thanksgiving gift.

### **The Limitation of the Research: Structural Limitations and Cognitive Limitations**

I distinguish two forms of limitations I encountered in elaborating the present research. First, I call structural limitations my incapacity to travel to the villages of all the farmers I

interviewed to visit their farms. Second, I used the term epistemological limitations to relate to my inability to match Sawadogo's experience fully and perfectly with my methodology.

### ***The Structural Limitations***

Due to the terrorist attacks in the Sahel region, I was advised not to travel to specific villages, constantly threatened by terrorist incursions. Visiting farmers' projects would have been appreciated. However, in visiting other farms, including Mane's one, I succeeded in touching base with the continuation of Sawadogo's heritage. This limitation did not affect the present research.

### ***The Epistemological Limitations***

*Epistemological limitations* are limitations related to the knowledge and understanding researchers have concerning their subjects or phenomena of research. They arise from the incapacity to be exposed to important information and perceptions or integrate data within specific scientific patterns. In my case, I call epistemological limitations the difficulties in faithfully and perfectly translating Sawadogo's words from Mooré and Yadre into English.

Another more general limitation I encountered is what I described as the metaphor of the elephant and the researcher's room. I compared Sawadogo to an elephant, my research to a room, and the efforts to report Sawadogo's experience within the present research to efforts to have the elephant enter my room. Metaphorically I traveled from the USF School of Education to the village of Gourga, with my tiny room built from scientific methods to invite the "elephant Sawadogo" to accommodate inside. It seems an audacious mission. I mean the extensive and massive wisdom I have recorded from the Champion of the Earth cannot be perfectly accommodated within the present dissertation. However, knowing and accepting that increases my humility and nourishes my thirst to continue learning.

## Recommendations

Since the fundamental purpose of this research is to reflect on the pedagogical aspects of the Afrocentric ecologist Yacouba Sawadogo, in focusing on the sociological and philosophical aspects of his achievement to understand him more profoundly and subsequently create conditions for the emergence of leaders like him, I formulated six recommendations to fulfill this dream. If properly applied and implemented, several Afrocentric ecologists could emerge from Africa and the rest of the world for more flourishing communities that participate in alleviating climate degradation. The guiding inspiration that helped me foster these recommendations is my unwavering belief that instead of rewarding individuals for their achievements, it is better to develop pedagogical conditions from which communities that care for the environment emerge.

First, I recommend revalorizing President Sankara's revolutionary ideas, including his environmental policies. Second, I recommend the Burkina Faso government support Sawadogo's achievement and his disciples. Third, the community of ecological researchers should initiate more quantitative and qualitative research in Africa to unveil and promote potential hidden Afrocentric ecologists like Sawadogo. Fourth, I recommend the organization of a Conference of the Parties (COP) only focused on the epistemologists of the South. Fifth, I recommend that industrialized countries support the green industrialization of developing countries, including African countries. Finally, sixth, I recommend the USF School of Education students explore more African traditions and cultures.

### ***First, Revalorizing President Sankara's Revolutionary Ideas, Including His Environmental Policies***

From the revolutionary President Sankara, Sawadogo received real inspiration and motivation to initiate innovative techniques that transformed him into a successful ecologist. To

raise Afrocentric ecologists like Sawadogo, I recommend the integration of Sankara's philosophy of self-reliance, integrity, Afrocentricity, and environmental justice in the education system in Burkina Faso. The Burkinabe leader was a great Pan-Africanist who remains present in the memory of many Africans, but his revolutionary ideas are not yet taught. Without a methodological teaching of Sankara, people in Burkina Faso cannot implement his philosophy.

Sankara revolted against the inhuman conditions of colonialism. He devoted his life to fighting injustice and systemic and systematic exploitation of Africa. Even though his revolution committed blunders and did not fulfill all his promises, Sankara succeeded in four years during his term of power in engaging his country on the boulevard of political freedom, economic autonomy, and respectful solidarity with other nations. More importantly, he helped farmers obtain clean water and sufficient food, good health to enjoy, efficient education to learn, decent housing, and the audacity to invent better days through their efforts.

Moreover, he addressed his country's ecological devastation by teaching farmers, including Sawadogo, to reverse the desert instead of running away. To help them face challenging conditions, such as poor soils and scarcity of arable land, he developed techniques to control the exploitation of water by building countless dams. It also establishes a harmonious marriage between agro-alimentary breeding industries and farming methods.

From primary schools to universities, educators should teach students the critical ideas of Sankara, including the capacity to know how to match positive elements from traditional practices with modern and foreign techniques to strengthen their identity, culture, and participation in the world. Education should be decolonized, and students initiated to critical thinking, and integral discernment. Most importantly, they should be motivated to plant trees,

fight deforestation, create groves, dream big, and participate in the African Union Great Green Wall Project.

***Second, Have the Burkina Faso Government Support Sawadogo's Achievement and His Disciples***

In listening to the Sahel hero and his disciples, I noticed their crucial concern was the need for agricultural machinery, funds, and free lands to fulfill their dreams of creating several forests in Burkina Faso. Sawadogo was also concerned with the constant threats to his forest despite the protective wall surrounding his property. The government should deploy more means to support and promote the projects of Sawadogo and his disciples.

Beyond Burkina Faso, I wish the International Community could provide more funds and support to non-Western-centric ecologists in their research without trying to colonize their methods. In providing more funds and support to developing countries' ecologists in their research, the International Community would promote diversity and inclusiveness in ecological research and participate in a more comprehensive understanding of the environment and ecological systems.

***Third, Witness the Community of Ecological Researchers Initiate More Quantitative and Qualitative Research in Africa to Unveil and Promote Potential Hidden Afrocentric Ecologists Like Sawadogo***

In studying Sawadogo and his disciples, I understood the significance of his belief systems and worldviews. His definition of the climate crisis and the solutions he used to stop the progress of the desert in his lands by creating a forest contributed to increasing my interest in Afrocentric leaders in general. I am convinced that beyond Sawadogo, several original leaders can use Afrocentric lenses to innovate in various domains. In this recommendation, I wish the

community of ecological researchers could initiate more research in African countries to unveil and promote potential hidden "Sawadogos."

Researchers could identify and enhance individuals like the Champion of the Earth by conducting quantitative and qualitative research to understand traditional and cultural knowledge, practices, rites, liturgies, and ceremonies. Undoubtedly, many innovators could make a real difference in their domain. However, instead of expecting them to succeed like Sawadogo before rewarding them, I suggest that researchers initiate research to collect, study, and use the potential of people who could contribute their best to our world's challenges, including the climate crisis.

In local communities of Africa, the rich diversity of practices is a favorable field of discoveries. Research could help build an essential appreciation of local initiatives and encourage the integration of these perspectives into more exhaustive scientific research and policymaking. The African continent is a very fertile ground for research on several levels. However, unfortunately, the educational systems inherited from colonization need more audacity to explore purely and properly African domains to give meaning to existing efforts. Conscientization could help with that. Moreover, African youth's dynamism reflects potentialities that need to be sufficiently exploited. In addition to their modern education inspired by the West, African youth contains a purely African genius that should be used positively.

***Fourth, Organizing a Conference of the Parties (COP) Only focused on the Epistemologists of the South***

The Conferences of the Parties (COPs) are great opportunities for world leaders to convey reflections, enact fundamental decisions, and contribute to positive change in the climate crisis. So far, even if all countries can participate in the summits, the debate is Western-oriented,



and developed countries' policymakers always drive the outcomes. Leaders from the Global South attending the discussions usually receive instructions more than getting their positions listened to and respected by Western-centric ecologists.

Organizing a particular COP focused on the importance of the epistemologies of the South could make a difference. Bringing climate experts, civil leaders, and influencers from the Global South to reflect on and discuss their knowledge, experiences, and challenges would enrich the debate on climate change. Ecologists like Sawadogo, whose perspectives, production, and belief systems are grounded in traditional and indigenous knowledge and wisdom, when valued, could transform and reshape modern epistemologies and discourses on the sciences. In gaining visibility and recognition of their work, Southern epistemologists would contribute original solutions. Furthermore, the world will grow better in terms of inclusion and diversity.

***Fifth, Have the Industrialized Countries Support the green Industrialization of Developing Countries, Including African Countries***

What the different Conferences of the Parties have in common is their continual recommendations regarding reducing greenhouse gas emissions. The continent of Africa is on the move toward industrialization. Unfortunately, many countries consider Western countries' industrial development a model. Therefore, it could be vital to help developing countries integrate more sustainable development into their projects. Furthermore, green industrialization could be a good solution to many problems related to construction.

Green industrialization is a process of economic and holistic growth that enhances environmental sustainability and reduces the harmful impacts of industrial activities on natural ecosystems. This process values integrating environmental considerations into industrial processes and productions in using environmental justice principles toward the most vulnerable

communities and areas. In reducing greenhouse gas emissions, this approach conserves natural resources and minimizes pollution and waste.

***Sixth, Encourage the USF School of Education Students to Explore More African Traditions and Cultures***

In reflecting on my experience at the University of San Francisco, I encourage the Jesuit university to develop more partnerships and collaboration with African institutions to help students attending USF to explore African cultures and traditions. The gain will be impactful in their lives. Using the USF School of Education portfolio, including the research methodology, I learned a lot in immersing myself in my context through my research on Yacouba Sawadogo. There are several reasons for this recommendation.

Since USF's tagline is "Change the world from here," it would be meaningful to work on broadening students' perspectives beyond the Western world. One must explore different cultures and traditions to change the world from its context. Additionally, the continent of Africa could be an exciting destiny. Students' world comprehension is transformed when they are exposed to different cultures and traditions. It helps challenge their cultural stereotypes and biases.

Most importantly, many students need to learn more about African cultures to contribute equity, fairness, and inclusion. Academic growth could be another reason to encourage a cultural encounter with African countries. To support diversity and inclusion, students should be exposed to the unfamiliar and strange. Studying African cultures and traditions could also help USF students enhance their intercultural competencies and ability to interact with people from different backgrounds within the United States and beyond.

Finally, Jesuit education aims at training and developing critical thinkers capable of being people for others in promoting justice. USF will promote more essential capabilities of thinking

in students when professors help their advisees explore new horizons beyond their habits and comfort zones. Santos (2019) was right: "The understanding of the world by far exceeds the Western understanding of the world." The beauty of the world is within our diversity.

### **Conclusion**

Upon consideration and reflection, I acknowledge that the narrative case study of Burkina Faso and ecologist leader Yacouba Sawadogo remains an open-ended research topic. Sawadogo made a difference in applying Afrocentric knowledge and wisdom, categorized as epistemologies of the South, to address the ecological crisis in his country. In December 2020, he was declared the winner of the United Nations Environment Program's 2020 Champions of the Earth award for Inspiration and Action (Dodd, 2021) for successfully utilizing traditional cultivation techniques, called the Zai and the stone cordon, to improve agricultural practice and transform his barren land into a forest of forty hectares rather than continuing with standard methods used by neighboring farmers to improve their farming. Without rejecting the motivational reward to the Burkinabe leader and being aware that recognition always contributes to encouraging people who make a difference, I criticized in this study the absence of involvement of Sawadogo's community in his achievement by the organizations who rewarded him. Knowing that individuals in Africa belong to communities that forge their personalities and communities are built by distinct individuals, I situated Sawadogo's heroism within the cultural context of Burkina Faso. I am convinced that celebrating Sawadogo without studying his pedagogical leadership, including his context and community values and challenges, promotes superficial leadership without roots. In studying Sawadogo, I found four fundamental components justifying his achievement.

Firstly, I found that to the Sahel hero, the ecological crisis comes from the human crisis, which means the distance humans created between their authentic identity and the current state of being human. If the planet's inhabitants recalibrate their consumerist and exploitative mentality in accepting to relate to the earth as a mother, they could change and become better. In so acting, they could find solutions to addressing the ecological crisis.

Secondly, Sawadogo's hope, and determination are grounded in his faith in God and the mentorship he benefited from his koranic mentor and the revolutionary President Thomas Sankara. Thirdly, Sawadogo is a genuine Afrocentric pedagogue who was taught by his own experience and the earth herself. Fourthly, his pedagogy was adopted by his disciples, who are committed to passing the baton to new generations.

To raise Afrocentric ecologists like Sawadogo, it is essential to revitalize the Pan-Africanist ideas of Sankara, his environmental policies, and most importantly, his dream of an autonomous Africa made by self-reliant leaders who know how to apply the best of their values, customs, and traditions to bring African solutions to the rest of the world, including original solutions to the ecological crisis. Moreover, to create the conditions that favor Afrocentric ecologists, educators, and leaders should decolonize education in Africa, raise critical thinkers, and enhance innovative inventors who know how to build bridges between diverse cultures. Since leaders emerge from solid institutions and organizations that support them, this research is a plea to international institutions and organizations, inviting them to invest funds, attention, and value in the African institutions that educate Afrocentric ecologists. *Cognitive justice* consists of developing fairness towards all forms of knowledge and wisdom. It is the living seed for social justice, the liberation of *those standing with their backs against the wall*, and Mother Earth's promotion.

### **My Own Final Reflections**

Definitely, my experience in Sawadogo's universe left my hunger for understanding the application of the epistemologies of the South to address the ecological crisis abyssal. My ignorance on decrypting and perfectly explaining these forms of science and wisdom remains intact. The present contribution would be remembered as a tiny window opened in a field of research that is immense. However, it could have the merit of revealing to both Afrocentric and Western-centric researchers their limits, including the uncharted horizons ahead of them. The task of being capable of understanding Afrocentric ecologists and sages and bringing their ingenuity to the table of the global conversation on the climate is a gigantic mission to dream for. I was fascinated by the sacredness of the Sahel hero, whose science and wisdom echo his mystical approach to nature. Reviewing myself sitting amidst a forest reminded me that knowledge is fundamentally sacred and should be used for sacred purposes. I landed in the village of Gourga to study the practices of an Afrocentric ecologist, and I ended up questioning more the man behind these practices than the practices themselves. Among many questions, I ponder how Islam, Sawadogo's main religion, has helped him connect to his African roots, religion, spirituality, and customs—knowing that he spent his adolescence in a koranic school. Indeed, he was blessed by his mentor, but in what specific way was Islam helpful to him? I would have been more curious about the vision of Islam on nature, how the Coran educated Sawadogo on nature, and how he combined the recommendations of Islam with the traditions of his community.

Additionally, as a Catholic priest, I value Christianity and preach the greatness of Jesus. However, my encounter with the Muslim and "Animist" Sawadogo raised significant concerns and questions in me. My religion and identity have epistemological limitations and could not

satisfy my quest for truth regarding solutions to the climate issue. But I am not alone. Catholic theologians and bioethicists are still struggling to interpret Genesis 1, 28 adequately, which states: "... Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over every living thing that moves on the earth." How could we subdue the earth and have dominion over every living without abusing our power? I also speculate how Christianity could quench humanity's thirst for meaning and harmony with nature without compromising its authenticity. How could I remain faithful to my Catholic faith yet continue to celebrate the contributions of African religions to environmental justice? How could African Christians accommodate Christianity and the belief systems of African spirituality that require sacrifices to nature?

Another surprise that captured me when I was conversing with the Sage man of Gourga was the adequacy of large portions of his knowledge with mainstream scientists' discoveries and insights. Without attending modern school, Sawadogo's comprehension of nature and the techniques he applied are astonishing. For example, he is convinced that plants communicate and have emotions, including fear, nervousity, sympathy, and even compassion. His disciples share the same conviction. Even if the idea itself is not new to the world of scientists, I wonder how villagers from Gourga knew that. Maybe Sawadogo, in inviting me to spend more time sitting in his forest, wanted to teach me about this phenomenon. I left my hero without asking a certain number of questions related to that matter, including: What do plants say to one another? How could we capture their language? What could we learn from them? What do they say about us humans? Responses to these questions could help resolve some of the problems related to the climate crisis, water scarcity, and some plant pathologies.

Most importantly, I should have inquired about the nature of consciousness between Sawadogo and his plants, despite the harmony I remarked between both. Sawadogo is peaceful, serene, and composed amidst his forest. Humans have brains that they use to generate thoughts, habits, and inventions. Plants do not. However, Sawadogo is convinced that they communicate. I missed exploring his awareness of plants which are grateful to him, as he told me. Overall, the man who devoted his life to stopping the desert is still to be studied, and his research domain to be explored. I define these unanswered questions as my epistemologies within the epistemologies of the South that will keep my intellectual journey awakened and continually searching for the truth with humility and wonder.

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**Attachments:**

- Expedited Review Approved by Chair - IRB ID: 1771.pdf



*IRBPHS - Approval Notification*

To: Barwende Sane  
From: Richard Gregory Johnson III, IRB Chair  
Subject: Protocol #1771  
Date: 06/22/2022

The Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects (IRBPHS) at the University of San Francisco (USF) has reviewed your request for human subjects approval regarding your study.

Your research (IRB Protocol #1771) with the project title **Application of the Epistemologies of the South to address the ecological crisis: a narrative case study of Burkina Faso and the leader Yacouba Sawadogo** has been approved by the IRB Chair under the rules for expedited review on **06/22/2022**.

Any modifications, adverse reactions or complications must be reported using a modification application to the IRBPHS within ten (10) working days.

If you have any questions, please contact the IRBPHS via email at [IRBPHS@usfca.edu](mailto:IRBPHS@usfca.edu). Please include the Protocol number assigned to your application in your correspondence.

On behalf of the IRBPHS committee, I wish you much success in your research.

Sincerely,

Dr. Richard Gregory Johnson III  
Professor & Chair, Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects  
University of San Francisco  
[irbphs@usfca.edu](mailto:irbphs@usfca.edu)  
[IRBPHS Website](#)