

April 2011, *Equipping* #115

## Under the Baobab

They gather in the shade of a baobab, about 20 men and women of all ages, some with babies on their laps. They are here to learn how to read Siamou, their mother-tongue. Moussa, the teacher and a member of the Siamou translation committee, guides them through a series of pronunciations and leads them into words that eventually create a story about a man and a woman who are caring for their sheep.

The sentence structure and progression reminds me of the “Dick and Jane” stories that I learned to read with, but the activities in this material directly connect with life in Orodara, Burkina Faso. The subject matter creates immediate interest among the students and they are eager to learn.

Lillian Nicolson, a Mennonite Church Canada Witness worker in Burkina Faso has spent a number of years studying the tonal nature of Siamou and creating orthography for it. She developed the lesson books that Moussa is using. With the help of Souleymane Traoré (Solo) – a gifted Siamou linguist, Moussa and others, Lillian belongs to a translation team that is translating some Biblical books into Siamou so that the Siamou can read about God in their “heart language.”

In this particular class, the process of learning to read is not easy for a number of reasons. The students have never read before in any language and the concept of symbols on a page to represent the world around them is a new one. Some students are distracted from their studies by their babies, whom they carry on their backs, or by their other young children, who play in the background and creep nearer, presumably to get closer to the small group of foreigners, a handful of participants in the Burkina Faso Learning Tour who have come to observe.

In addition, there is a wedding celebration less than 100 meters away. Drums, a balaphone - similar to a xylophone constructed from gourds and carefully carved wood slats - and the sounds of laughter and happy chatter almost drown out Moussa’s voice.



But the class continues under the shade. When it is time for Learning Tour participants to “ask for the road” – permission to leave – we are bid farewell with hearty handshakes and gratitude for our interest.

I am inspired by the dedication of these students and feel a renewed awe for the importance of literacy. Each word learned brings these students one step closer to the greatest Word of all; the Word of God.

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*We invite you to share with your congregation this story from Deborah Froese, a participant in Mennonite Church Canada’s Learning Tour to Burkina Faso, Feb. 17-28, 2011. The story should take no more than 2 minutes to read aloud. You might also wish to include it in your church newsletter.*