



Biography

Yennega

Yennega, an emblematic figure in Burkina Faso, is the mother of Ouedraogo, the first *Moaga** chieftain and founder of the dynasties of the *Moose** chieftains. She is thought to have lived between the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries.

Yennega was the daughter of the King of Gambaga, an area in the northern part of the present-day Republic of Ghana. One day, weary of the role of warrior chieftain in which her father had cast her, she decided to leave and rode off by horse into a forest, far away from her village, where she lost her way. She met a young elephant hunter, a lone figure from a different community from her own, whose name was Riale. They had a son, whom they called Ouedraogo ('male horse' in Moore, the language of the Moose), as a tribute to the horse that had brought Yennega to Riale.

'Moose' is the plural of 'Moaga' in Moore, one of the main languages spoken in Burkina Faso. Moose people account for a large part of the population in the country today.



Tree sculpture of Yennega, Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso. Photograph by Brenda Gael McSweeney, 2009.



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Ouedraogo and his sons founded the prestigious, centuries-old lineage of the Moose chieftains. Their descendants still to this day embody political power among the Moose in Burkina Faso. Yennega has become a legendary figure and a national emblem in the country. A personification of the female warrior and the independent woman, she is often portrayed defiantly on horseback as if nothing, neither society, tradition nor paternal authority, could stand in the way of her freedom of spirit.



In Burkina Faso, as in neighbouring countries, oral tradition (encompassing tales about origins dynastic timelines, etc.) is crucial to such transmission. As with archaeology, sociology and linguistics, it constitutes an essential source of knowledge about the history of peoples.