

The Phuo Worldview: people of southwestern Burkina Faso, West Africa

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The Puguli people number around 14,000, and are located in the southwest region of Burkina Faso, West Africa. The Phuguli migrated from Ghana. Toward the end of the 19th century, they left Ghana and came to settle in the northwest of Dano, the provincial capital of the Ioba province.

The Puguli call themselves “phuó”. They speak “phuién”, a language that is still active today. The name “phuó” means “small” or “slow in development”. The term “puguli” or “pougouli” is used by other ethnic groups.

The Phuo claim that they are related to the Lobi and to the Sissala ethnic groups. Their neighbors, the Buaba to the north and the Dagara to the south, on the other hand, do not seem to be related to them. Nevertheless, the Phuo and the Dagara have a cordial relationship. The Puguli intermarry with other ethnic groups, including the Dagara.

Once the Phuo are settled in a new area, they become subsistence farmers. When the government of Burkina Faso came to impose their education system in French, the Phuo accepted it, although not unanimously. Certain families did not put high importance on formal education, because they did not see immediate results. Most Phuo hold tightly to their religion beliefs and customs. Certain heads of families, for example, consider education from the whites, those who worked to destroy African society. These elders say that the ancestors are not in agreement with formal education because it comes from outside the society.

In this document we will discuss the perspectives and beliefs of the Phuo people of Burkina Faso. We would like to thank our informant Lucien Malo of the village of Bonzan Pougouli, who responded to our questions and set up interviews with others in the community. We present in this document as the result of our research on the main beliefs of the Phuo. We have analyzed the attitudes, the values, the motivations, and the views of this people group.

In Africa, the sub-Saharan ethnic groups share many beliefs, but there are some small differences. They share the importance of the family, especially the extended family, and the support of other ethnic groups.

In this document we will describe the beliefs of the Phuo. The set of beliefs held by a group serve to interpret what is happening in the world, including their locality. This constitutes their world view. When information arrives from outside the society, their belief system considers this piece of information. Because of their established beliefs, each member of the group perceives the new information in the same way. This explains the uniformity of the group as a whole.

This phenomenon of interpreting outside information according to their beliefs is shown throughout the stories of the Bible. For example, in the book of the Acts of the Apostles in chapter 14, when the apostle Paul and his assistant, Barnabas, arrived in the city of Lystra, they were received with joy after healing a paralytic. The citizens of Lystra perceived them as gods, and even called them Zeus and Hermes, according to their belief that explained that powerful gods were coming to help them. Their reaction showed that they processed these outsiders based on their beliefs.

In this document we will try to identify the principles that maintain or govern the Phuo culture. We realize that the beliefs of this ethnic group may contrast completely with the belief system of the researcher. In order to better understand the opinions and desires of the members of the Phuo society, we are going to examine the concepts and wisdom taught to their children by the elders. The proverbs and stories are considered profound sources for gathering this instruction of the elders of the ethnic group. We will organize the concepts and beliefs taught by the Phuo elders as they relate to those mentioned in a document on worldview written about two other African cultures. We have chosen to use the description found in the article entitled "The Foundation of Religious Belief: Key Aspects of the Chewa and Tongo Worldview," by Ernst R. Wendland.

In his article, Wendland describes the principal beliefs of two ethnic groups: the Chewa and the Tongo of the Central African Republic. He organized his research findings into seven divisions, and provided ample examples under each title. These seven categories were useful in classifying the beliefs based on attitudes, values and opinions within these ethnic groups.

We have chosen to organize this description of the Phuo based on the same seven categories and in the same order that Wendland used. Below is a brief explanation of each category.

1 Symbiosis – the tendency to set up a society with two principal divisions, with nature on the one hand and people on the other. They therefore, place a high value on each member of the society.

2 Dynamism – the existence of a supernatural outside force that guides the people and helps them to survive and to advance within the society.

3 Cultural Hierarchy – the hierarchical structure established by the society that classifies the individuals and supernatural beings on a scale according to the amount of power that each one exerts over the others.

4 Communalism – autonomous individuals living in the same territory and/or move together; though not within the same family. The relationships between individuals are limited to a synchronization of activities of the group (nutrition, rest, relocating, flight from danger). Habitually, the people isolate themselves for reproduction. They may or may not have passed the breeding stage of the offspring.

5 Experientialism – the importance of the correlation between age and wisdom that the population should have acquired over the years

6 Humanism – the perspective that man is the center of the universe, that everything depends on or is related to man.

7 Circumscription – everything that exists, such as resources, is not inexhaustible: the land, livestock, social relationships, health and love. These are all considered exhaustible or limited.

We realize that western society (first world countries such as those in Europe and America, and others) greatly differ in their worldview from that of the Phuo in many of those areas. For example, in theme #1 (Symbiosis) the emphasis that the Phuo place on symbiosis contrasts with an analytical approach of western thinking which involves categorizing things based on science

and ordering things based on importance to man. Western thinking includes deciding what is true and false, what is natural or what is supernatural and placing distinct boundaries between those “opposites”.

Also in the western world, the idea of theme #4 communalism is not highly valued, as people desire to live in with more privacy and not with their parents.

Each of the seven categories or themes will be covered as they relate to the Phuo society.

1. Symbiosis

In the symbiosis theme, there are links between categories that unite them; humans, supernatural beings, and nature, all coexist and interact in meaningful ways. Symbiosis enables these various types of physical or supernatural beings to maintain unity.

Although other names are used to refer to this people group, the people call themselves “Phuo” and their language “Phuien”. These original names are still in use today. Another meaning for the term Phuo is nest. This makes us wonder if there was a link or relationship in the past for these terms.

In examining the Phuien language, we have found links among family relationships. Like other sub-Saharan ethnic groups, certain terms are less specific than for European languages. For example the words for brother *hyuo* or sister *hacuo* also extend to cousins. Similarly, the word for mother *naa* and father *nèe* apply to aunts and uncles. So, if there is a blood tie, such as between cousins, they are considered as closer linked, like brothers and sisters.

Another term is used for brother or sister-in-law *dualu*, where the blood tie is broken, but the link is made by marriage. Separate terms are used for nephew or niece *nio* and grandmother or grandfather *nèhěé*, and, like the brother or sister-in-law, without the gender distinction.

A more important distinction is made by the Phuo between maternal uncle *nèra* and paternal uncle *nàamu*. The important role of each of these uncles will be discussed later.

Unity is important in a symbiotic society like the Phuo. There is structure among the families so that cohesiveness is maintained. The Phuo are patrilinear; the clans are structured along kinship lines of the men of the family. There are eight clans in the Phuo society: *Phèkpua*, *Yeèno*, *Puluga*, *Niràa*, *Kuma*, *Jàama*, *Nàaná*, *Mùraa*.

According to Richard Kuba and Carola Lentz, who studied the migration of the Dagara of Burkina Faso and their interaction with neighboring ethnic groups, noted that the Phuo accept that members of other ethnic groups live alongside them, within their communities, and do not insist on their own autonomy.

When a new member is born into the Phuo society, choosing the appropriate name of the baby is essential. The head of the family will choose the surname of an ancestor from the father's family. Then, after the birth, the family waits for the moment when the child cries and is discontent. This is called the moment when the child is claiming his new name. The head of the family uses divination to determine what ancestor is seeking to manifest himself through the child, and thus, is given the name of that ancestor.

The role of the uncles is very important in a child's life. The paternal uncle has some of the same rights as the father of the child. The paternal uncle can help the father by paying the schooling of his children. If the father dies, his oldest brother takes responsibility for the child. On the other hand, if the child's uncle needs help, the child is obligated to assist him before helping his own father. So a man treats his nephews like his own sons.

In the Phuo society, there is a unique relationship between a son and his maternal uncles. Maternal uncles have an important role of defending their nephew when conflicts arise within the boy's family, especially with his father. Like the paternal uncle, the maternal uncle can also help the nephew with needs such as education and livestock. The nephew must also help his maternal uncle in his fields. It is necessary that the maternal uncle take the first step in offering help to his nephew. For example, he can offer a chicken to the nephew as a demonstration of assistance.

When a young man is of marrying age, it is normally his maternal uncle who seeks a bride from among his clan. In the eventuality that a man dies, it is the role of the maternal uncle to give permission to bury him, since they are the protectors throughout his life.

As the goal of symbiosis is to maintain unity, the societies that make use of this principle highly value each person, even the young. Each has value and a role. In the interviews, we learned that children indeed had important value. Adults expect children to help and serve them, and take care of them in their old age. Working for and with their parents, keeps their relationships stronger.

This importance of children in the Phuo society is expressed in the following proverb:

Cette estime des enfants est exprimée dans le proverbe:

N'ì lùlè dumɔ̀ ì hunɔ̀ rɛ, n'ì kpɔ̃ thɪ bɔ̃ ì thĩã.

«Même si tu accouches un serpent, tu l'enroules quand-même à tes reins.»

Even if you give birth to a snake, you tie it around your waist (kidneys).

The meaning of the proverb is that even if the child is undisciplined, you do not chase him away. The child is still important to his parents.

The symbiosis theme reveals the tendency of a society to hold on to visible and invisible elements and integrate them both into the life of the society. For the Phuo, as for other African ethnic groups, religious practices are integrated into each aspect of the culture - the family, politics, education, and the economy.

In the Phuo society, the land chief has the economic as well as religious authority. These two domains are tightly linked to his leadership. When there are border conflicts, the land chief convoques the elders of the village. He also organizes religious ceremonies such as planting rituals. He is responsible for holding sacrifices at the village altar *Thépálá*.

We mentioned earlier that the Phuo are patrilineal. Married or unmarried sons live in the same compound, or grouping as their father, though in different structures. In times past, the principal entry into the compound had a small structure where there were bones or horns of animals suspended from the ceiling to honor the ancestors *nèwaá*. This structure represented the ancestors' place of residence. The door of the structure could face any direction. The authority (spiritual power) of the ancestors was profoundly felt over the compound. Those who could enter were approved by the ancestors. Those who were not approved, could not enter.

In the Phuo society, there is a ceremony of initiation called *vùuró* sg., *vuuré* pl. for young men to receive the knowledge and power of divination. The power comes from another parent: maternal uncle, maternal uncle from the father's side, or another relative from the father's family, but most often the maternal uncle is chosen by the young man. But, according to the Phuo, it is actually the supernatural power who is calling to the young man. This power comes from an ancestor who would like to have a working relationship with the man.

To receive an initiation ceremony, the young man seeks a parent responsible for sacrifices. This person is called the chief of sacrifices *sìro thié*, or he who wields the knife. The chief of sacrifices announces the date of the ceremony to the other uncles who have power. During the ceremony, all the maternal uncles are present. These are the man's mother's brothers. Also this is a time when family and friends can be involved by affirming the man's loyalty. Women of the same clan prepare food. The man brings a great number of domestic animals: 20 chicks, some chickens, roosters, sheep and goats. and cowrie shells (payment) for the chief of sacrifices.

During the ceremony, that occurs at the home of the initiate, the chief of sacrifices takes care of performing the rituals at each place around the compound; either a sacrifice of animals or a place to scatter the shells. At a special moment, diviners each hide an object of magical power. Older women who are related to the man follow the diviners to watch where they hide the objects, then those same women go and find the items. The young man then searches for the objects that were not found. He will receive a bag made of skin holding some objects that hold magical power. In the house in which the man will consult supernatural powers, the chief of sacrifices will build small statues of dirt from a termite mound. After the ceremony the diviners sit together at a place of honor to eat, including the sacrificial meat, and to share the payment of cowrie shells that was offered.

In the Phuo society, the diviners possess the power to determine the cause of problems. According to the Phuo, the statues *kòò*, *koonié* placed in the consulting house hear important news and possess knowledge. These spirits of the statues are not violent. They dwell in the rivers *mú nǐ* or in the mountains. They are believed to decipher, explain, and offer solutions to problems. They do not give goods to the family, but serve as intermediaries between man and God, according to the Phuo.

The diviners use a piece of wood to interpret guidance from the spirits of the statues. To interpret information, according to the Phuo, the diviner holds the top of the stick vertically while the customer holds the bottom of the stick. When it moves, according to the diviner, he receives a response to the question given to the spirits.

Every Phuo man may construct statues in order to please the spirits which will, according to the Phuo, bless the family with health and blessing. The statues and these spirits are not linked to the ancestors. The spirits receive the same name as he who constructed the statue. For example, *múnǐwáá* means people of the river and *kámúnǐwáá* means people of the forest. If the man is married, his wife will offer a little water each day to the statues, which she will put in small bowls. Both the man and his wife give a portion of money from their earnings. They hope that that these offerings from the profit of their sales will cause the spirits to bless them with prosperity.

According to the Phuo, there are important laws regarding the conduct of a pregnant woman. A woman expecting a baby needs to follow certain constraints in order not to disturb the baby and cause it to desire not to be born. She may not steal or have sexual relations with any others besides her husband. Additionally, she needs to respect the customs of her family. Otherwise, misfortune might come to her. The unborn child *phòò* sg., *phòòge* pl. has power to bring harm to the mother.

The Phuo also follow certain health regulations. For example, Phuo women wash their babies with a mixture of boiled leaves from a plant called *sɔlé*. They allow some of the tea to enter the child's mouth. At each developmental stage, there are different plants used for washing babies to ensure proper growth.

Funeral ceremonies follow strict rules. When a man or woman dies, if the body is not too deteriorated, it will be positioned up on a wooden frame for the men, and on a stool below a frame for women. If the state of the body necessitated being buried immediately, a basket called a *cĩe* is placed on or under the frame, where a body would have been. For men, the basket is protected by a large gown and covered by a special bonnet, and for the women, the basket is surrounded by a *pagne* (a piece of cloth two yards long) and covered at the top by a scarf.

Stories abound in this culture. The characters in Phuo folktales are often small animals or insects such as hyenas, taupe, camelian, and spiders. The spider often appears in stories and is crafty. Like the others, the spider is personified and lives in the forest as well as among man. The hyena is portrayed as evil. In one of the stories, the hyena plays the role of a gravedigger managing the bodies, but not burying them.

Some other basic natural objects, such as the land, sand, wood and carbon have value to the Phuo. These help in the construction of homes. They build rectangular shaped dwellings with flat roofs. Wood beams are used to hold up the roof of their homes. They cover the surface of the roof with termite mound mud to prevent insects from boring through.

2. Dynamism

Certain ethnic groups believe that they are strengthened by a supernatural power which comes from beyond themselves. Furthermore, certain peoples believe that their initial steps, their prosperity and all their progress depends on the spiritual power that is intervening in their life.

The Phuo believe in a god who created them, but that this god delegated guidance of man to other supernatural beings which would to rule the world.

We have done two interviews with older Phuo members - one man and one woman - in order to obtain responses from several questions. One of the questions was "Where does daily strength come from." Both of them said that strength comes from God. The man, who is a Christian, said simply that power comes from God. But the woman, who is not a Christian, said that God has given authority to Satan to help men with their needs. This woman used the term *nambara*, a Jula word, meaning slanderer or deceiver.

The Phuo have a historical account of the creation of man that gives a glimpse into their beliefs. This account was told by the land chief of Bonzan. He elaborates on the role of intermediaries during creation. The role of God in creation is minimal in this account. We also see nature's role, specifically the fruit, that takes part in the creation of Man. Here is the Phuo account of the creation of the world:

The history of the creation of the world (Land Chief of Bonzan 2001)

God created the world and everything else. God exists and acts through intermediaries of objects that he has placed in the world, which are fetiches. God created the world and everything else, and then he brought man to life by a miraculous power. This is the process:

First God created a miraculous power. Then God gave a fruit to this miraculous power. The power swallowed the fruit. Then the fruit was transformed into a fetus, from which the first man was born.

This same process was repeated. The miraculous power ate fruit which became a fetus which was transformed into a woman. The man and woman married and multiplied their offspring.

God exists and interacts via intermediaries which he has placed between him and all people. These intermediaries are very powerful and are linked to fetiches, through which man expresses his needs to God and through which God talks to man.

Une histoire de la création de l'homme a révélé certaines de ces croyances. Cette histoire a été racontée par le chef de terre de Bonzan. Le rôle des intermédiaires dans la création y est élaboré. Il semble que Dieu arrange la création du monde sans être trop engagé lui-même. Nous notons aussi le rôle de la nature, plus précisément le fruit, dans la création de l'Homme. Voici l'histoire sur la création du monde:

L'histoire de la création du monde (Chef de Terre de Bonzan 2001)

"C'est Dieu qui a créé le monde et toutes choses. Dieu existe et il agit par l'intermédiaire des objets qu'il a placés sur la terre, c'est-à-dire, les fétiches.

"C'est Dieu qui a créé le monde et toutes choses, et puis, il a fait naître le premier homme par une puissance miraculeuse. Ce processus est comme suit :

"D'abord Dieu a créé une puissance miraculeuse. Ensuite Dieu a donné un fruit à cette puissance miraculeuse. Elle l'a avalé. Puis, le fruit s'est transformé en une grossesse, d'où est né le premier homme.

"Ce même mystère s'est répété, alors, la première femme est née. Elle s'est ensuite mariée à l'homme et ils se multiplièrent.

"En plus, Dieu existe, et agit par les intermédiaires qu'il a placés entre lui et l'Homme. Ces intermédiaires sont très puissants et liés aux fétiches, par lesquels l'Homme passe pour exprimer ses besoins à Dieu, ou par lesquels Dieu passe pour lui parler."

In this story we see the importance of intermediaries in the Phuo society to communicate between God and man. We also see the role of nature in the creation processes.

Another question we asked during the interviews is, "If someone in the family earned less or more than the others, what would be the reason." The old woman we interviewed responded "It is God who gave the amount. Even if the people plant together, everyone will not earn the same amount. She added that it is necessary to give to those who do not have enough, and if you give, God will give you more.

The phuo believe that the loss of strength is caused by evil spiritual beings. According to their worldview, the soul of each person is eternal. They believe that the soul *dùma* sg., *dùbe* pl. exists forever. However, there are powers that can diminish the strength of men or women. The Phuo believe that sorcerers can chase the soul from a person's body, causing them to lose health and eventually die. Additionally the sorcerer is able to catch a person's soul and eat it.

According to our informant, sorcerers can also transition someone from a state of wealth to a position of poverty. Another role - the diviners - have the power to reverse these results and reestablish the original state of the victims.

3. Cultural hierarchy

The concept of cultural hierarchy means that there exists a known and accepted rank for the society which explains the order of importance of different beings. Mr. Wendland remarked that this hierarchy is not a system that is included in public discussion, but that the people consider that mentioning the topic as taboo.

The hierarchy for the Phuo society (see Table 1) includes invisible beings as well as visible beings. The beings are listed according to their importance, the one which is listed in the first position is the most powerful, while the lowest person listed is the weakest.

We see in Table 1 that the Phuo honor their ancestors more than relatives still living. Chiefs and blacksmiths are also highly honored because of their superior spiritual powers.

The spirits of the ancestors *lalu* sg., *lalu* pl. are the most highly honored, over all other spiritual and physical being. They are considered as the intermediaries between God and man. Their role is to administer justice between God and Man. They manifest their power over the people of their clan. These ancestral spirits dwell in the eternal abode of the ancestors *lalu bua* and among the Phuo community. Within the compound a specific hut is reserved for the ancestors called *àkpoó* (sg) et *zàkpooné* (pl). These spirits accept the sacrifices that are offered there.

The customary leaders occupy the next two levels in the Phuo cultural hierarchy. Each village has a land chief (second place) as well as a chiefs of the forests and rivers (third place). These chiefs are highly respected. The chieftainship for the land and the forests passes from one brother to another in the same family.

The land chief *theróthié* sg., *theróthina* pl. is responsible for religious ceremonies associated with the land. He also gathers elders together when resolving problems related to land ownership.

The chief of the forest *kamuthié* sg., *kamuthina* pl.) watches over the forests associated with the village, while the chief of the waters *a muwaáthié* sg., *a muwaáthina* pl.) watches over the rivers, the streams, and backwater near the village, each one taking care of their own area of responsibility.

In the Phuo society there is an entire clan that focuses on blacksmith duties. The ancestors chose the persons who can become blacksmiths and grant them special power for the work. The blacksmiths have the abilities to make:

Il existe dans la société pougouli un clan de forgerons. Les ancêtres choisissent des personnes pour devenir forgerons et leur accordent un pouvoir. Les forgerons savent fabriquer :

- the knives for religious ceremonies
- the objects that represent the spirits for certain persons in the Phuo society.

Another important clan from Puguli society provides music for ceremonies such as funerals. This clan, called the musicians' clan, or "griots", play the balafon and drums and sing during the ceremonies. The musicians clan is considered fifth in the hierarchy of spiritual power. In order to prepare for a funeral or other ceremony, someone will go to the presiding leader of the musicians' clan to secure their permission to hold the ceremony on a certain date. This clan is an important part of the religious system, and receive reimbursement for their services. For example, if a hunter kills wild game, the hunter owes the neck of the animal to the "griot".

The supernatural powers of the clan chiefs hold sixth place on the Phuo spiritual hierarchy. The powers give honor to the chief that possess them. According to the Phuo, the ancestors watch

over their clan to assure that the laws are followed. In case of an infraction of the law, a family must take care of restoring the wrongdoing. The supernatural powers make sure that the ancestors are appeased. Each member of the Phuo society is obligated to keep the clan laws.

The laws of each clan are a set of taboos. These taboos include being prohibited from killing or eating certain wild animals or keeping certain objects, like gold or diamonds. The clan may require certain initiation rites. There may also be intermarriage restrictions.

The seventh level of the hierarchy is held by the traditional healers (*vanjó*) because of their power. They are respected. If a person has a health issue, the traditional healers can offer something to treat it. According to Phuo beliefs, the cause of the sickness is always a spiritual problem, from offending the spirits.

The souls (*dùma*) of living human beings hold the eighth place on the hierarchy of authority. These spirits are invisible and serve to guide their human beings, helping them to avoid dangers such as sorcerers who might attack them with problems. Souls will help their humans with all aspects of their lives.

The Phuo believe that a god created each of them and accorded them the land and all resources. This is their conception of a creator god. The god they believe in is distant and does not speak directly with men or women. He does not hear them and lives out of reach. He has delegated the task to direct people to intermediaries which are spirits that demonstrate supernatural power over men and take care of them. When the people petition God for something, they believe that the intermediaries will speak to this god about their needs. Because of its limited power, they place this god at the ninth level on the hierarchy.

The older men of the village, i.e. village elders, hold tenth place on the hierarchy. They are respected by all the villagers. This group of men holds the authority of the village, next to the land chief. When a difficult problem needs to be resolved, the land chief will call upon the elders to discuss the problem and come to consensus.

In certain ethnic groups in Africa, when the elders gather to discuss certain topics, there is a manner of dealing with the decisions in secret. This is the case in Phuo society. Sometimes children take part and are being trained to keep secrets. But, if the child who knows a secret reveals it, it is believed that a misfortune will come upon them. The secrets can involve family, initiation, ritual, role, magic, the dead, or monsters.

Diviners hold the eleventh place in Phuo society. Young men of each clan aspire to be diviners who are well respected and whose role is to resolve problems by getting to the cause. To become a diviner, an ancestor calls a young man to become his friend and receive this special power. The diviners number about three out of every ten men of the society, and are well respected for their work.

The twelfth place on the hierarchy is occupied by those who are responsible for burying the dead. These gravediggers have sole permission to touch dead bodies and are responsible for preparing a cadaver for burial. According to the Phuo, the cadaver has the power of causing serious affliction on those who touch it. The gravedigger will perform a special ceremony to appease this force of calamity. Only the gravediggers are aware of the use of the black medicine, made from a tree, that one sucks or chews, and puts on the cadaver to ward off evil spirits. Gravediggers must pass through a process of initiation, bringing a chicken to the chief gravedigger to sacrifice, and then passes through the initiation. The gravediggers are present at the initial parts of funeral ceremonies.

In the Phuo society, unborn babies are at the next level on the hierarchy. They hold a unique power that needs to be honored. There is a rule that the people must speak respectfully about the baby or retribution will be made. The baby may decide not to be born if negative words are spoken against him/her. Also, according to the Phuo, the baby can bring harm to the health of the mother, or he/she can decide to die and be born from the womb of another woman. The people say that “the unborn are capable of anything”; for these reasons, the unborn baby ranks 13 on the Phuo hierarchy.

Just below the level of unborn babies in the hierarchy are the newborn babies, who, according to the Phuo, also hold certain power. They are ranked 14th on the hierarchy of authority. Adult Phuo attribute power to newborns and show them respect. Adults fear that a newborn can, if provoked, bring the calamity on them. The newborn babies are even considered to have the power to be sorcerers.

Wild animals rank 15th on the hierarchy, below the newborn. According to the Phuo, certain wild animals are very dangerous because they possess supernatural power which they can use to defend themselves. The Phuo especially fear the “phùcùu”, which is like a wild donkey. In most of the clans, it is prohibited to hunt them. The skilled hunters in the society may kill this animal if they follow the rules of the forest. But if the regular hunters bring this animal, they will suffer harm due to the fur falling into the food that they eat.

According to the Phuo, other wild animals that possess supernatural power are the hyena (gbòloó), the elephant (thũó), and the buffalo (ṛòò). As mentioned before, only the skilled hunters may kill this animal. The fetiches of the forest ought not to be offended. These prohibitions are among those that should not be transgressed.

When a skilled hunter has not returned with any game, the spirits of the hunt can help him. The hunter can ask the spirit to transform an object such as a tree into an animal. When he shoots at the object, it becomes a fallen animal. He will bring the animal home for the family to prepare and eat, but he himself may not eat it. Each year the spirits require a sacrifice, either a goat, sheep or chicken to assure protection and help to those hunters who seek that from the spirits.

There are important trees that rank 16th on the hierarchy. According to the Phuo, there are two species of trees that house beings among their branches. There is the “hólómó” which is a large tree in the region and the “sulã” (tamarisk). If someone is climbing one of these trees, the beings living in the tree are capable of pushing him/her out, causing harm. There is a rule about not climbing those trees because harm will come to anyone who climbs, picks their fruit, or cuts down the tree. The Phuo leave these trees standing when they build a home nearby or plow a new field. A fetiche is thought to live at the base of the tree to protect the field that is being prepared.

The 17th rank in the hierarchy is held by “kpone” (phantoms). The Phuo believe that when a person is at death’s door, the soul of the person can indwell a phantom which they consider a supernatural being that goes to and fro in the village. Certain people among the Phuo are thought to have the ability to recognize these phantoms; and see where they are going and who they are planning to mistreat. Phantom will go to the room of a friend or family member and torment them by putting force on his/her body. If someone recognizes the phantom, the family can consult a diviner in order to persuade the soul to return to the person from whom it originated.

At the 18th level of the hierarchy are the family groups according to their surname. The name Malo (*Mãlo*) is dominant and the majority of the four surname groups. Next comes the name Zingué (*ZèṅḂ*), then Nouma (*Numa*) and finally Soma (*Sɔma*). During a funeral, the musicians play the music associated with the surname of the deceased. The people of the village are seated according to how they related to the family the deceased.

The above hierarchy gives a summary of the authority level of people or spiritual beings in the Phuo system of beliefs.

Within the Phuo society the men exercise authority. We mentioned that the souls of men hold power and are ranked at level 8 on the hierarchy of authority. Besides this power within the souls

of the men, each head of a family holds authority and receives respect from his wife and children. This authority is important in making decisions regarding the family.

The head of an extended family head is normally the oldest brother. He directs the family and makes decisions regarding them. His brothers show him respect and ask his advice for decisions. For example, they will ask their oldest brother for permission to travel and to marry.

When there are serious problems to solve, the brothers will ask help from their oldest brother, the family head. If the matter is significant they will go to the land chief, after first consulting their oldest brother.

We have observed that the Phuien society is gerontocratic, that is, ruled by the eldest members. It may also be patriarchal, from what we have also seen. In each Phuien village, the land chief is installed for life. After his death, the position passes to his sons.

When a problem needs to be resolved in a village, the land chief gathers the male elders, that is, the extended family heads, to discuss the problem and come to a consensus. Other matters that are dealt with by the land chief and family heads include distribution of land for cultivation.

The land chief position is considered a "priest" over the land, as the land chief has the duty of performing spiritual activities, or rituals, over the arable land. The Phuien have engaged in a ritual at planting time to ensure that new crops produce well.

Men take part in various roles and rituals of the society. Women and older children, on the other hand, while considered valuable to the Phuien society have no power. Wives and children are expected to be respectful and obedient to the head of the family. We mentioned that the unborn babies rank 13th while newborns rank 14th on the hierarchy of authority. Children lose this power and authority around the age of three years old. This is the time when they begin to talk, and their power is lost.

Men, women, and children must also show respect to outsiders, especially administrative authorities such as prefects and police officers. It is a sign of respect to shake the right hand of visitors and people in authority positions of the government. A greater sign of respect while greeting someone is to place the left hand under the right arm. Women also show respect by bending at the knee and squatting slightly.

When speaking a greeting in the Phuien language, there is a polite form of you to use for showing respect. Also one will lower his/her voice and speak more quietly with less words. When visiting with those in authority, the Phuien will show respect by lowering their head below the level of

the visitors. The Phuien will also not make eye contact but look below the level of the other face, while maintaining focus and listening intently to the visitor's message.

4. Daily life in community

A strong desire to live close together in community is very common in African cultures. The Phuien share this same perspective. Family dwellings are linked together or very close in proximity. Likewise, extended family dwellings are as close as possible, but allow travel by carts between them.

Traditionally, Phuien brothers live within the extended family compound as their father. If for some reason, there is a conflict between a father and son, the son may choose to establish his own compound, or join the compound of one of his maternal uncles.

Phuien society is polygamous. A man who is wealthy can marry up to eight wives. It is common for Phuien men to have only two wives. A few men remain unmarried.

Phuien society is exogamous in that the preference for marriage is to choose someone outside of their clan, and sometimes even outside the ethnic group. The man brings his bride to live in his extended family compound. His bride will serve his mother by helping her tedious tasks such as chopping and carrying wood, bringing water from the well, and pounding grain. Each new wife replaces the previous in serving the mother-in-law.

A wife will integrate into her husband's family, while still keep in contact with her original family, and make visits. When a funeral ceremony occurs, she will return to her family to help with the preparation and serving of food.

In the Phuien society, as we have mentioned earlier, the eldest son, who is the head of the extended family, directs his brothers. In the past, this included productivity such as hunting, raising livestock, storage, distribution and sale of grains harvested by family members. Today, this economic arrangement no longer functions in all families. Each immediate family head takes charge of his own management.

The Phuien are subsistence farmers, living on what the crops they produce, and selling what is left over. In order maintain large fields, the Phuien work together by gender in informal coops in the fields of one another on different days. They organize into these groups to plant and harvest, sharing the produce with each other. The oldest women of a group who is capable of working is the one who will direct the group. She will take charge by calling the women in order to help with the planting and harvesting of all their fields.

In the Phien society the people make decisions based on the needs of the group, not on the goals of the individual. Decisions are usually made by a group of members of the society. There is a folktale that involves a coop made by a spider and a cameleon. In the story the two partners trick each other.

Family and other grouping in community Life

In the Phuo society, the head of the family manages the business of his younger brothers and sisters. Economically, the head of the family, traditionally managed three areas of livelihood: hunting, animal husbandry and customs. He was in charge of the storage, distribution, and sale of grains harvested by all members of the family. Today, this system no longer exists. The husband directs the affairs of his own family.

In order to do field work, the Phuo organize into gender groups called cultural associations and work together on the the fields of each member. They organize themselves and share the benefits. The goals of the group are more important than that of individual members. Decisions are made as a group. There is a folktale that describes the association formed between a spider and a chameleon. In this folktale the two trick each other.

The oldest woman of the community who can still work directs all the other women during the times of planting and harvest. She organizes the women to go to the field with her.

The following Phuien proverbs emphasize the importance of community life:

A mìmùre sɪ a tì zù wɛ̀ fàja. “Les fourmis disent que l’union fait la force.” “The ant says that unity creates power.”

Néé dudumi thǎ̀ pà mɛ̀ma. “Une seule main ne peut pas ramasser de la farine.”
Cela implique qu’une seule personne n’est pas capable de résoudre tous les problèmes.” “One hand cannot harvest flour.” This means that “one person is not able to resolve problems.”

A dv dvan kɛ̀ ɔ̀gì thé. “L’entraide fait développer le village.” “Autrement dit, l’union fait la force.” Helping one another makes the village develop. Unity creates power.

In a Phuo household, children participate in all daily work. Fathers and mothers expect that their children learn to do all the domestic and field tasks according to their gender. Furthermore, children are expected to take care of aging parents.

Parents train their children to behave well and integrate into the society by respecting others, not arguing, attending and helping with funerals.

One of the questions asked in an interview was “If you notice someone who earns more money than you, what will happen? Our informant responded from the point of view of men: If you do not hate people, God will bless you, and you will gain more than others. But, if you do hate others, on the other hand, God will retain what is meant for you and give it to your enemies.

An elderly Phuo man shared this proverb: *A gbeeni beregià hũ kě hărằmì ò ìlìma*. C'est en trompant la lionne qu'on arrive à la traire. C'est-à-dire, c'est par la négociation que l'on parvient à une réconciliation. The literal translation is "If you deceive a lioness, you can benefit from the milking." This means that if you use negotiation, you can come to a reconciliation. According to that man, it is useless to overcome your enemies by force, but, it is by discussion that we resolve conflict.

5. Experientialism and wisdom

According to the Phuo, the age of a person is important in the society. While it is through experiences that one gains wisdom, the age of a person merits respect from others. The Phuo train their children to respect older people and to seek their advice. One of their proverbs states: "Before beginning a task, you must ask for advice."

Here is another one of their proverbs:

Dõdõŋ lalàgù cèlě bĩlìre. "Celui qui doit voyager loin se prépare bien avant son jour de départ."
He who plans to travel must prepare several days before the departure day.

The fables of the Phuo society help teach attitudes and cultural values to children. The folktales, likewise, contain humorous lessons for children. For example, one of their folktales, called the Spider and the Mole, teaches how to act according to one's abilities or they will be consequences.

The story is about a mole who invites a spider home to eat. The mole is jumps in a fry pan to grease the pan to help his wife. The oil from the mole protects him from burning. The spider sees this and gets the same idea for himself. Hopping in a fry pan, the spider begins to burn. In desperation he jumps out and hides in a hole in the wall in embarrassment. The story helps children learn to be prudent when faced with a decision.

Respect toward older people, as we mentioned before, is one of the most important qualities of the Phuo society. Good behavior is characterized by obedience to authority.

The following proverb shows this important quality:

Sã-gbela ẽẽ thã sùlìmì dvan. "Deux canaris de mêmes gabarits ne se posent pas l'un dans l'autre de façon convenable." C'est-à-dire qu'il faut de l'ordre, il faut reconnaître l'autorité.

It literally states, "two canaries of the same mold cannot be placed one on the other easily." This means that two people cannot function without one person being in authority. This will result in order and productivity.

Sã-gbela ẽẽ thã sùlìmì dvan. « Deux canaris de mêmes gabarits ne se posent pas l'un dans l'autre de façon convenable. » C'est-à-dire qu'il faut de l'ordre, il faut reconnaître l'autorité.

There is also an accepted belief among the Phuo that children must respectfully take on responsibility, doing exactly what they are told to do by the person in authority. We see this in the following proverb:

Nì ì he sèè vògá, ì gε sà vòla rε. “Si tu acceptes qu'on t'attache, tu dois aussi accepter de marcher là où on te dirige.” Literally it states, “if you accept being tied, you must also accept going wherever you are directed.

If the land chief of the village-wide problem to resolve, he will gather a group of “elders” (family heads) of the village, who will discuss the problem. This group of men are very important for making decisions of importance. More ideas are available to arrive at a viable decisions, and the consensus attained keeps the village unified.

We asked a Phuo informant who he goes to to resolve interpersonal conflicts. He replied that he goes to an aged person to ask advice for his problems.

If, however, the problem does not diminish by visiting with an aged person, there is another option. The other option is called a joking relative. The Phuo have a system of conflict resolution in which each clan has another clan which is designated to help them solve conflicts. The person seeking help goes to the special clan to seek help. He will be given one or more people who will come and judge his case. After a decision is made regarding the problem, it cannot be changed. The pairing of clans for conflict-resolution provides a way to keep disputes under control. Members of clans respect one another in order not to spoil this system.

In each family, the children learn the skills and occupations of their parents. The man we interviewed stated that he learned farming, animal husbandry and hunting from his father. An older woman we interviewed stated that she was taught by her parents good behaviors such as how to respect people and not harm them in any way. She also learned pottery-making and the process of brewing millet beer from her mother.

A proverb which is based on the theme of knowledge states:

lɔ si ì-buèro hũ binu binu rε. “L'antilope dit que la sagesse augmente au fil des années” ou autrement dit, “Chaque année on devient plus sage.” “The antelope says that knowledge expands over the years.”, in other words, “each year you become wiser”

According to the Phuo, learning skills in the home from parents and others, especially older people, is the best method of learning. The man we interviewed stated that education outside family units is not as valuable as that learned within the family. According to the Phuo elders, formal education is not as valuable and does not help the Phuo society.

6. Humanism

Humanism is the perspective that sees mankind as the center of all life. According to our interviewee, Phuo men are honored by the belief of being created by God. They all feel that they are special compared to other men. Phuo see other ethnic groups as also being created by God, and each has the same privileges given by God.

The main purpose of each Phuo family is to have many children; this is the only way to ensure posterity. According to the Phuo, children are the highest value of the society. Families with many children feel blessed to have many material and physical blessings. Children are considered essential in order to take care of their parents when they get feeble.

In conclusion, it is apparent that the highest power in the Phwo society is held by the ancestral spirits. According to the Phwo, these spirits of the ancestors actually rank higher in authority than God. The Phwo consider those relationships with spiritual beings very important. This is a fundamental aspect of the Phwo worldview and the events that affect their lives. The Phwo often choose to submit to their ancestral spirits than to God.

There are certain taboos regarding the dead body which reveal their beliefs regarding supernatural beings. For example, if someone is struck by lightning, no one should touch the body due to the power that comes to indwell it. Only the person with the power over storms will be able to prepare the powder from charred wood and scatter it over the dead body in order to chase away the evil spirit. Then the gravediggers are able to move the body. Before the funeral ceremonies, the members of the family of the deceased, especially the brothers and children, disguise themselves in order to not be recognized by the deceased and, thus, receive a curse.