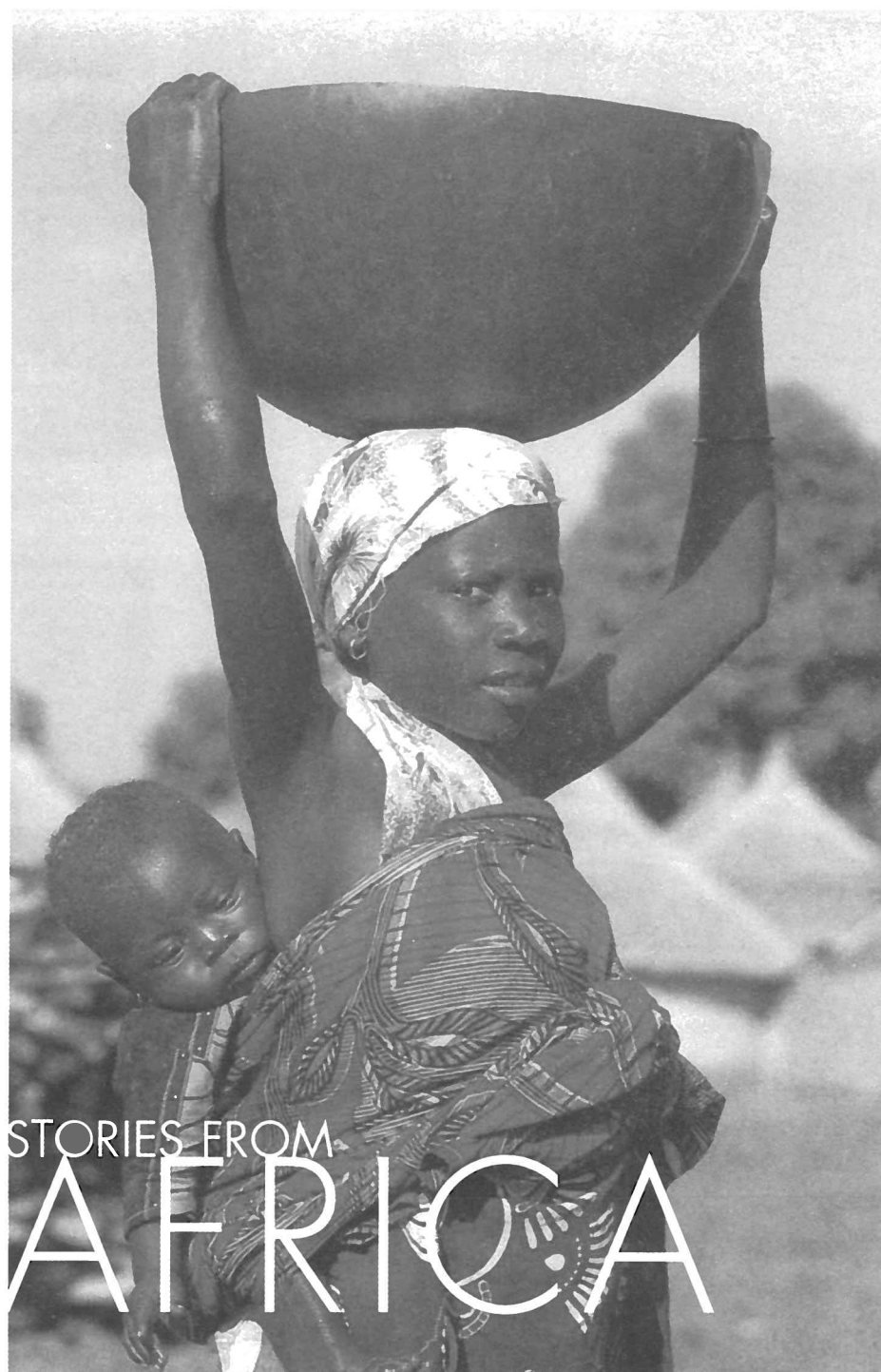


12/4

# SOPHIA

W I S D O M

*Say to Wisdom, "You are my sister." Proverbs 7:4a*



STORIES FROM  
AFRICA

VOLUME 12 ■ NUMBER 4 ■ WINTER 2002

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# SOPHIA

A Greek feminine noun associated with the biblical wisdom tradition, translated "wisdom" and personified in the book of Proverbs; equivalent in the New Testament to *logos*, the creative word that was with God in the beginning, creating and giving life to the world.

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### SOPHIA Mission Statement

*Sophia* offers a forum for Christian women to speak to one another about the joys and challenges of living faithfully in an uncertain, changing world. Its pages give voice to women's stories – their experiences in church and society, family and workplace, their aspirations and disappointments, their successes and failures. It invites expressions of joy and sorrow, concern and outrage. In doing so it hopes to affirm women in their quest for spiritual, emotional and physical wholeness and for the full expression of their gifts in all spheres of life.

*Sophia* was conceived and brought to birth by Mennonite Brethren women and celebrates Christian sisterhood. Its desire is to welcome differing voices. It hopes to challenge women and men of all ages as they live together in Christian community. The name SOPHIA (wisdom) expresses our desire to search and know the wisdom of God through the Scriptures and our experience as followers of Jesus Christ.

*Sophia* acknowledges the authority of God, the giver of wisdom, and of the sacred Scriptures, the story of God's dealings with women and men. "Oh the depths of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God!" (Romans 11:33).



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## Stories from Africa

by Jean Reimer and Lori Matties

During the seventeen years I lived among the Gangam people in Togo, a wish and a sorrow grew in me – the wish to *be* Gangam (for a short while anyway), and the sorrow that I never would be.

Jesus did do that – he transformed himself into a human. I wished I could be re-clothed with the lovely brown Gangam skin, know them from within that skin, see through their eyes, perceive the world from their vantage point, experience the lifeblood that defines their joys and sorrows, their laughter, their fears, their beliefs, their ideas of God.

I was then, and always will be, an alien – loving them and living among them was never sufficient to make me Gangam. I could only observe the surface, perhaps penetrate the first onion-skin layer of the profundity of their being. My great regret now is that I did not listen more, and listen earlier.

But today, in this December issue of *Sophia*, we have the great gift of several African sisters and brothers letting us inside their skin – letting us see their heart, letting us hear what are their passions for their people and their country. Let us seek the gift of listening, let us pray for the ears to hear their heartbeat.

Other articles (written by Westerners) expand our understanding of Africa – what children's lives are like in Ghana (Kathy Knowles) or the plight of women in Eastern Africa (Inger Olsen).

Many of these contributors are colleagues and/or friends; it thus gives me deep pleasure to welcome them to this issue: Joseph – a personal friend and mentor (living just north of the

Gangam area); Grace – a great model of godly leadership in Ghana and abroad; Mary – a long-time friend (she shared my Gangam life for a month); Inger – we struggled through French-language learning together; Charles and Delores – dear friends of many years.

I have been further enriched with the new acquaintances that this issue has brought to me – Judith Bawa, Kathy Knowles and Pastor Charly – and I welcome them with equal pleasure.

Thank you, each one, for your excellent contribution.

Jean Reimer



A couple of other writers have been waiting in the wings for their stories to be published. Lynette Derksen, a winner of one of our New Writer's contests, shares her experience of a trip to Namibia to teach in a school for deaf children. Hilda J. Born, a longtime reader of *Sophia*, recounts her visit to Namibia and Botswana with her husband to visit their children. And the Neufeld family talks about what it is like to return to Canada after many years of living in the Congo and Zambia. It is a pleasure to welcome new writers and new perspectives to our columns and feature articles, as it is also a pleasure to welcome back our regular "Voices from the Past" columnist Dora Dueck. And do take note of the announcement of what is becoming our biannual New Writer's Contest. If you haven't written for *Sophia* before, now is a great opportunity.

As the Christmas season is upon us, my thoughts are often drawn to Bethlehem,

the little town where Jesus was born. This year I began to wonder how often in the years since then we have really seen that little town lie still, much less in dreamless sleep. For the residents of Bethlehem, as in so many other towns and cities, dreams are troubled by the sounds of gunfire and the threat of war. Our dreams, too, are often troubled by many kinds of worry and sorrow, and it is for these that Jesus came into the world. I was touched recently, reading Sue Monk Kidd's book *When the Heart Waits*, to read her account of coming upon a monk during a visit to a monastery near Christmas and wishing him a merry Christmas. His reply to her, "May Christ be born in you," (p 181) reminded both the author and me that this is where the transformation from darkness to light begins. It is God, coming to us in vulnerable human form, who makes a way for the healing of a broken world to begin. As I allow Christ to be born in me again this year, I make a way for the star to shine again over Bethlehem and all the dark places of our troubled world. This is the hope to which we are called. And it is fitting, I think, that in this issue, as we think about Christ's coming, we also listen to the stories of our sisters and brothers in Africa. May this issue bring us closer, and may Christ be born in all of us.

.....  
Jean Reimer, a member of *Sophia's* editorial collective, works with Wycliffe Bible Translations (for 17 years she did language study, literacy and Bible translation among the Gangam people in Togo, West Africa). At present she lives in Steinbach, MB, continuing various aspects of the Gangam work from her home there.

# Our Ancestors are Included!

by Grace Adjekum

*I*t was a workshop on "Ancestors and Christianity." Participants had come from several different language groups. The workshop involved the exposition of the biblical passage by the leader, then group discussions on selected questions. One of the questions was, "What special insight does the translation of the passage in your mother tongue provide?" It was interesting to watch the wide-opened eyes and the nodding of heads as participants scrutinized the translation in their language; comments arose, like, "Ahaa, now I understand; it really makes sense in my language"... "This figure of speech, this word, is very powerful"... "They used the right expression"...

Although we looked at many Scripture passages, the main book used was the epistle to the Colossians. In chapter 1:15-16 we read, "Christ is the visible likeness of the invisible God. He is the firstborn Son, superior to all created things. For through him God created everything in heaven and on earth, the seen and the unseen things, including spiritual powers, lords, rulers, and authorities. God created the whole universe through him and for him. Christ existed before all things, and in union with him all things have their proper place." The Twi translation of this passage gives incredible insight into the whole spiritual realm of the Akan culture.

Twi is the language spoken by some of the Akan people in Ghana, West Africa. The Akans have a very strong and powerful chieftaincy system. The power dwells in the "black stool." The throne or chair of a chief is called a "stool" (a wooden seat beautifully carved with clan designs and special motifs, and sometimes without a back or arms). A "black stool" is the royal chair or throne of the previous king/chief, blackened when he is considered an ancestor. Ancestors are greatly revered; the belief is that



because they have lived, and now, being dead, have become spirit, they know the issues of both worlds – the world of the living as well as the spiritual realm. The ancestors are the "living-dead," for even though eyes cannot see them, they are present in the affairs of their people. The living chiefs will not do anything without invoking the presence of the "living-dead."

The English translations read, "...the seen and the unseen things, including spiritual powers, lords, rulers, and authorities...." The Twi translation reads thus: "that which we see

and that which we do not see, the *nhennwa* (the black stools), *wuradie* (lords), *mpaninnie* (authorities), *tumidie* (powers)." The translators knew their cultural realities very well. You cannot talk of Christ as supreme over all things and leave out what the people believe to be the supreme power in the spiritual realm of the life of the people. Finding the *nhennwa* in the translation means that Christianity is not a foreign religion any longer. Our ancestors belong, too – God speaks about them in Holy Scripture. There is no realm in the Akan culture that the supremacy of Christ does not cover.

There is strong resistance to chiefs becoming Christians. Many people believe that one cannot be a chief and be a genuine Christ-

ian, because sitting on the black throne means his allegiance is to the ancestors, so he cannot then pay allegiance to Christ. Yet here, in black and white in the Bible, is *nhennwa*! God knew the Akan ancestors dwell in their black stools; in saying that all things were created through Christ and for Christ, the ancestors' thrones were included. Finding in Christ the proper place of the ancestors, chiefs can then dedicate their black thrones to God through Christ, and be freed to give their highest allegiance to

*Finding in Christ the proper place of the ancestors, chiefs can then dedicate their black thrones to God through Christ.*

Christ, who is their true and supreme mediator. It is a tremendous insight that frees all chiefs to choose to become Christian if they wish. If the passage is read only in English, this insight and understanding is completely lost.

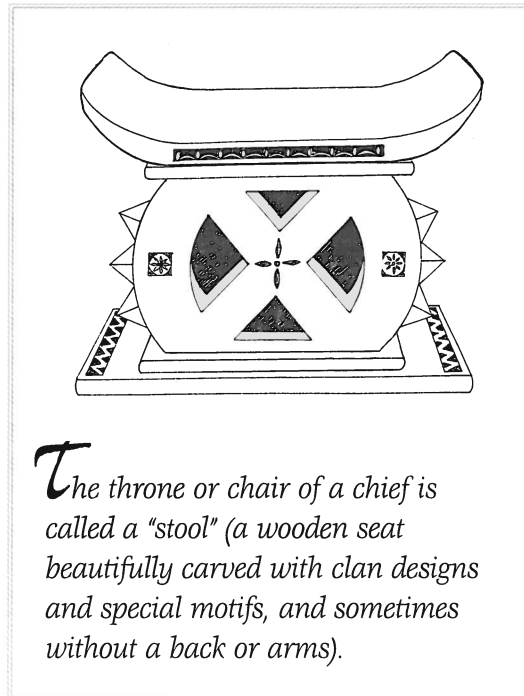
When we marvelled at the Colossian insight, it reminded me of the story of an elderly woman who had been to church almost all of her life. The early missionaries started in her town, so the church had been there that long. In this town there is an annual purification ceremony, *Odwira*. The verb *dwira* means "to wash sins clean, purify spiritually by the death of another, usually a sheep." Thus, the festival is performed to purify the community of all its sins; the individual also purifies her/himself, then comes the purification by the *nhennwa*, the spiritual stools. People are cleansed, all sins against the ancestors have been washed clean and there remains no animosity between the living and the "living-dead" (the ancestors). The old is washed clean, the new and purified is ushered in. When everyone and everything is spiritually washed clean, then there is the celebration in which the chief is carried through the streets of the town amidst drumming and dancing. It is a big thanksgiving occasion. The new yams, that have just been harvested, can now be eaten and enjoyed by everyone.

During a Bible study in a church, the believers were studying the book of Hebrews in their mother tongue, Twi. Hebrews 1:3 talks of Christ dying to achieve forgiveness for human sins. The translation of "cleansing us of sin through the death of Jesus" is "*ode ono ara ne ho dwiraa yen bone*" [he (Jesus) used himself (*dwira* - died) and his blood cleansed/purified us of our sins]. The woman sat and listened attentively, and after the pastor had finished reading that verse, she asked him to read it again. Then she asked, "Is it really true that Jesus died to achieve forgiveness for us? Does that mean if you are a Christian you do not need to secure forgiveness from the ancestors?" The pastor simply said, "That is what the Bible says."

Then the woman turned to the rest sitting there, saying, "My brothers and sisters and my children, if this is what the Bible says and we come to church all the time, what right do we have to purify ourselves in the blood of a sheep and go and wash in the stream every year in order to achieve forgiveness of the ancestors? What have we been

doing all these years in the church?"

The right word used in the translation made all the difference. This woman did not keep this insight from the Bible to herself. She now goes around the villages and towns in the area, telling people about the real *Odwira* through Jesus.



*The throne or chair of a chief is called a "stool" (a wooden seat beautifully carved with clan designs and special motifs, and sometimes without a back or arms).*

The importance of the mother tongue for a proper understanding of Scripture cannot be overemphasized. Where a Bible passage can directly address a cultural specific, then the right key word, the right metaphor or expression in the mother tongue is what makes the difference between "the Bible has no answer to this cultural issue," and "this is what the Word of God directly says to this issue in our culture." Jesus is God's translation to human beings of all cultures, and he wants all peoples in every nation, tribe and language to come to this understanding.

In the beginning of this year, Psalm 32:8 in my mother tongue made a great impact on me. The English says, "I will teach you the way you should go; I will instruct you and advise you." It is a great promise, coming to us from our loving God. But when I read it in my own language, it was extraordinary – "*I will open your mind, and I will show you the way you should take; my eyes are on you, and I will advise you.*" The Lord is not just going to teach me. God will open my mind, my understanding, and show me the way in which I should walk. I will be able to understand what God is telling me, so I will be able to obey it. Then, God's eyes are upon me, and God will advise me. If I had not been able to read this in my own language, I would have lost all these human touches of God's guidance.

There is nothing as sweet as the Word of God "from the source." God's Word in my mother tongue makes me aware of how the Akans were fully part of God's plan when God created human beings. Now, the ancestors can no longer be used to close our minds to the message God has for us in Jesus.

Grace Adjekum is Ghanaian, initially a translator with Wycliffe Bible Translators in Ghana, and later the Wycliffe director in Ghana. She now works with Wycliffe in the UK with Black Majority Churches. She has a BA in Linguistics and an MA in Missiology.



# Obeying God's Call

One beautiful July day in the Congo, a baby girl was born. Her father, a Congolese Mennonite pastor, viewed this child with deep disappointment. For months he had prayed with passionate fervour for a son, only to learn that he now had a second daughter. His wife, a far-seeing and enterprising woman, was undismayed and undaunted. "If American women missionaries can work in the Congo," she said to her husband, "then why can our daughter not do the same?" On that day this pastoral couple consecrated their new daughter to God as a missionary.

By age six, little Londa Lukala had grown into a lively and somewhat boisterous child, a true tomboy, earning the nickname "Charly" – a name she still enjoys. The hoyden met her match, however, one morning when she was twelve. She had been awakened for the usual 5:00 a.m. morning devotions, which she detested! But that morning, her father's message about Jesus' rendezvous with Nicodemus led to a spiritual watershed for Charly. Compelled by her profound experience, she requested baptism. While taken aback by her young age, nonetheless the church leaders recognized Charly's readiness for this step, marvelling at her knowledge of the Scriptures and at the remarkable changes so visible in her life.

In 1974, her life took a completely different direction. Marrying a young diplomat, Charly followed him around the world, from one cocktail reception to another. While in Senegal, she undertook studies in psycho-pathology at the University of Dakar, and joined the church choir. By now the couple had twins. Her father, however, had made a contract with Charly's husband that he allow her to achieve a university degree, so Charly's twins went to live with their grandparents. Then a strange set-back occurred. Although a brilliant student, Charly was accorded a "fail" her first term because of a professor enraged by her refusal of his advances. Depressed and revolted by this injustice, Charly decided to never set foot in church again.

A bizarre series of events now began to take place: Charly started hearing a voice. At varying times and places, she would hear a voice say, You must sing for the glory of God. Charly had no desire to do this, and besides, she was-

n't sure this was really God speaking to her. Then one morning she woke to find herself completely voiceless. Numerous sessions with a speech therapist achieved absolutely nothing. Much time passed before Charly recognized that she would not recover her voice until she obeyed that strange voice. She made an about-face, and embraced God's message with fervour, going on to direct a great mass choir of the evangelical churches in Dakar, and to compose hymns.

As well, she finished her studies, and went on to raise her family and work in an army hospital in Senegal. Then, the voice returned again: Occupy yourself with the Christian education of young girls. Shaken by this second extraordinary revelation, Charly spoke with her pastor, who encouraged her to obey the voice. Thus began the adventure of teaching the Bible to young girls, and of training those capable of taking up the torch from her hands.

Then, in 1989, she lost both her mother and her husband. It was as a grieving widow with five children that she received a third call: Intercede for the servants of God throughout the world. Small groups of intercessors were formed, meeting weekly to pray for God's servants world-



wide. From the small beginnings of these last two calls was launched what is known in the Congo and in France today as the African Missionary Association for the World, an organization with a double-edged mission: to announce the Word of God throughout the world, and to engage in caring for orphans, underprivileged girls, and young prostitutes in the Congo. AMAW encapsulated what would become the four thrusts of Charly's later ministries: evangelization, song, intercession and education.

That same year, Charly received an invitation from the University of Dakar to follow up her dissertation work with studies at the Sisters of Charity hospital in France. Entrusting her growing children to her sister, Charly travelled to France in 1990, hoping to complete her studies in three years, and to then return to her children and her life in the Congo. But, this was not to be. God sent a fourth call, and Charly was appalled: "During my training, God called me to live full-time for him, to become a pastor. I tried to explain to God that it was not possible. I fought terribly against it. This call is the one that caused me the most suffering."

She decided to complete her degree with the Sisters of Charity, but to couple it with courses at the Protestant Seminary in Paris (finding time to create a choir and a prayer group as well!). She finished her theological training with a Master's degree from the Evangelical Seminary at Vaux-Sur-Seine, and spent a further nine months in pastoral internship in Kinshasa and in Châtenay-Malabry, a Paris suburb.

The fact of being a woman never caused Charly to doubt God's call. "God calls whom he will, man or woman, and I simply obeyed." It was not that simple, however, for the evangelical church world: "Not long after arriving at the Seminary at Vaux-sur-Seine, I realized that the place of women in the church posed a real problem. How is it that one can accept women in the theology degree courses, yet not let them become pastors?" Born of the royal line (her maternal grandmother was one of the last Congolese queens), Charly had been raised with the assured certitude that competence is more important than gender. Now, however, her vocation of "woman pastor" (coupled with her "foreignness") raised ripples of opposition. And Charly's response? "God's sovereignty is so clearly established in me that I can't waste time on such futilities; they are simply adversities to be overcome. I am not here to dispute with these people, nor to compete with male pastors; I am here to serve the Lord. The rest has no importance."

Clearly, the opposition did not hinder God's ministries through Charly. Since November 1997 she has been serving as a pastor in the Châtenay-Malabry Mennonite Assembly. In August 2002 Pastor Londa Charly Lukala was ordained in her home church in the Congo, becoming the first

Mennonite woman to be ordained to the pastorate in both the Congo and in France.

In her church in France, Pastor Charly has four roles: preaching, directing the choir, parish visitation, and aid relations. The last, aid relations, has numerous arms beyond the church: for one, Pastor Charly works as chaplain in the Public Assistance hospitals in the Paris area.

Also, she continues to preside over the AMAW organization, and in connection with that work, has a seat in three commissions in UNESCO:

human rights and tolerance, women and the culture of peace and the education of young girls. She represents, in France, the Church of Christ of the Congo, networking between the French and Congolese churches as

*"If American women missionaries can work in the Congo, then why can our daughter not do the same?"*

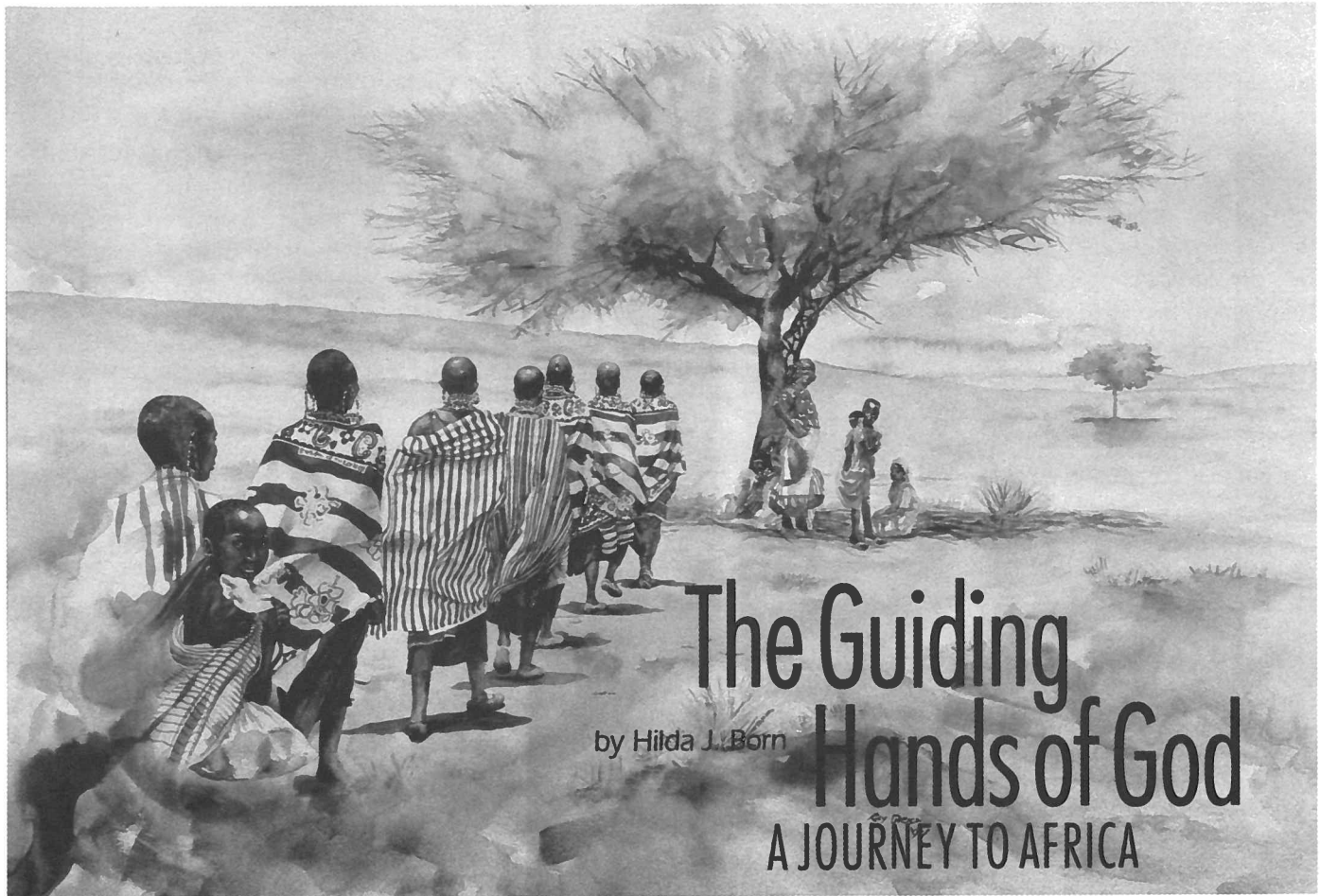
head of communications. As well, she liaisons with the Centre for Mennonite Studies in France.

When Pastor Charly lost her dear father and her oldest sister last year, she became head of the extended family, a great responsibility, which weighs heavily on her: "Fortunately God is faithful. And, without prayer, which has become as important for me as breathing, I would not be able to live."

Plainly, obeying God's calls has not been without its sorrows and struggles. "I would like to say first off that I have sought none of this. I have done nothing but obey God, and listen to God's people who discerned my capabilities and confirmed my calls. But there is a price to pay; great sacrifices are required for great purposes. I have experienced traumatic times, but I am still alive. I see my children only once a year, and I suffer terribly in being separated from them, in knowing them to be in a war-torn country with no recourse to bringing them to France. Bureaucratic interference has kept them from me for over ten years; I can but wait on divine grace. But I have great inner peace because I know that I am in the right place. And seeing God move through my work or reading emails of encouragement from my children fills me with joy and gives me new wings."

.....  
This article was based on excerpts from Pastor Charly's private correspondence with the author, and from an article featuring Pastor Charly in the August/September 2001 issue of the French journal *Concepts femme*.

The paintings here and on pages 10 and 11 are by Tibebe Terffa, who is one of Ethiopia's leading artists and father to two daughters, Lille and Marta. Terffa has recently suffered a heart attack and our prayers are coveted. He is a widower and his girls need their wonderful father.



# The Guiding Hands of God

## A JOURNEY TO AFRICA

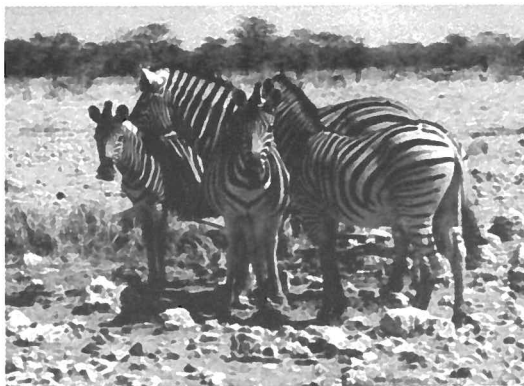
by Hilda J. Born

**OFTEN** we say, "I believe that the prayers of God's people and the guiding hands of God's angels escort me daily." But do we really mean it? On our recent journey to Africa, via Europe, God's presence was undeniable.

My trepidation and downright fear of this trip was evident, though I tried to stifle it. I knew well that not every grandmother, especially after she has passed her seventieth birthday, is invited to join her children on their vacation. But this was no ordinary holiday; it was a call to the wilds of Namibia! Still, we accepted.

Before going to Africa, my doctor gave me a Cortisone knee injection. While doing so, he remarked, "They say Africa is beautiful." This I wanted to see.

Although we went primarily to visit our children who work there, we also caught glimpses of life on the thirsty continent. Long stretches of landscape seem desolate and forsaken. But geologists and prospectors enjoy the variety of outcrop-



pings, kopjes and hazy purple mountains. The wind twirls red dust devils and sweeps sand from the plains dotted with mapane trees, aloes and stunted grey brush. Finally the sand forms great dunes on the Atlantic shore at Swakopmund. After a strenuous climb up the dunes, we enjoyed sandboarding down with our grandchildren.

Like Canada, Namibia attracts tourists to its wildlife and wide open spaces. Despite the military skirmishes at the northern Angola border, adventurers are attracted to Etosha Game Park. Germans are especially eager to come. They colonized West Africa before World War I and laid the industrial groundwork. This is still evident in architecture and street names.

Examples of early missionary influence are seen in some fine churches and in the Herero dress. Women in wide skirts and conspicuous broad hats adopted the style current in the 1800s. They still wear this costume.

Travelling the highways, a casual observer cannot escape the bleak countryside and may miss the sweet perfume of the thorn tree blossoms. Our son Bryan, a keen theologian and avid botanist, specializes in tropical succu-



lents. Wherever we went, he was on the lookout for native plants.

Their friends Frank and Margaret Taylor chose to help the Batswana and other indigenous people utilize their plants and artistic skills to become self supporting. Similarly, Bryan and Teresa teach leaders in biblical literacy and HIV/AIDS prevention and counselling.

Most heart wrenching was a visit to the orphan feeding program. Gwen Reimer and other local knitters gave us soft huggable teddy bears to take to some of these lovable children. Surviving relatives are hard pressed to provide for them as well as their own families.

On the way to Gabarone, capital city of Botswana, my faith in God's guiding care was put to the test. We left as early as possible. Two border inspections didn't cause any problems. After only about six kilometres we were stopped for a thorough police check of vital papers and trailer contents. This seemed highly redundant when we were still almost in sight of the Botswana border.

We were anxious to make time because on the Kalahari road motels and service stations are non-existent. However, these irritating delays continued. Five more times we were stopped and waited in line until the travellers ahead of us had their papers examined, coolers, packages and even purses searched. Each time Bryan greeted the officers in Setswana and asked about the motive for the search. Answers were never given, but we did see a woman hand over a plastic bag of bullets. Bryan also asked if fuel was available nearby. Once they directed us to a village. We took the detour only to discover that the supply had run out. Then we knew that here gasoline could not be bought at any price. Nevertheless, Bryan drove on, confident that our fuel would be enough.

On and on we drove through the scrubby desert, hoping to reach

the city before nightfall. Eventually we did, but by then the stars and southern cross were overhead. Like the widow's oil in Elisha's time, (see 1 Kings 4:1-7) our petrol, as they call it there, kept flowing until we arrived home in Gaborone!

Following our emotional stay in Africa, we flew back via Germany. We wanted to meet our cousins who'd left Russia in 1994. Before leaving Canada we had communicated our intentions and arrival date. However, our newly purchased telephone card failed to connect. Frustrated, we stood at the Ingelheim Bahnhof.

A brawny, tattooed taxi-driver offered to help us. He'd learned to speak English in Thailand and gladly carried my suitcase to a hotel. Moreover, he connected us with our anxiously waiting relatives.

I'd never seen a tattooed angel before, but our children are convinced that God can use anybody, even if he has nose rings and ear studs.

Between train stops we were confused as to which station or track to take. Just as we stepped out of the coach, a long-legged young man in jeans approached and said, "Follow me." Quickly we ran up and down flights of stairs because he said, "The next train leaves in thirteen minutes." By the time I caught my breath, he had disappeared.

Before a businessman stepped into his commuter train, he came over to tell us where to stand on the platform in order to catch our train. I tried to wave a "Thank you" to him before he slid from view, but he never looked up from his newspaper.

My seatmate on the final leg of the trip was an Iranian student who cheerfully said, "That is my regular stop. Come with me."

Once more I thought of petite Dorothy, who sat beside me on the first leg of our journey. She had just come through a personal crisis and

*Continued on page 11 ➤*

## CONTEST

*Sophia* is pleased to announce our fourth New Writers Contest. Contestants must not have written for *Sophia* before. Submissions should be a maximum of 800 words, typed. Please include Name, title of article, address and phone number on a separate piece of paper. Do not put name on article. Submissions will not be returned. DEADLINE FOR SUBMISSIONS IS FEBRUARY 1, 2003.

A \$50 prize will be awarded for each of the four best entries, which will be published in a future issue of *Sophia*. Runners-up may also be invited to have their submissions published. Writing should be in one of the following categories:

1. Life Writing. A thoughtful account of a personal experience, a biographical story about a woman you know, or a life's experience recounted through letters or in diary/journal format. Note: articles of historical interest are preferred over tributes.
2. A Reflection from Scripture. Of particular interest is interpretation of Scriptures about female characters or from a female perspective.
3. My Experience As a Christian Woman at the beginning of the Twenty-first Century. A reflection on how you see your life and experience (or a particular facet of your experience) as a woman and a Christian in the present age; how this relates to your past and/or your future; what you see as the most important issues facing you in your daily life or your future. This can include a scholarly reflection or an opinion piece.
4. A Theme suitable for one of the Columns of *Sophia*, eg., "Unspeakable Issues," "Images of God" or a book review for "Shelf Life."
5. A Short Story.

Address your submissions to *Sophia*:  
P.O. Box 28062, R.P.O. North Kildonan,  
Winnipeg, MB, R2G 4E9.

# The Storytelling Tree

by Jean Reimer

Kathy, a Canadian, had come to Ghana with her children and her husband, John, a chartered accountant for a mining company. It didn't take long for her to recognize that the Ghanaian children around her had no experience of storybooks – neither reading stories nor having stories read to them. Their oral culture was rich with history, folk-

tale, song, legend, proverb and riddle, but their school experience was impoverished, with few books in their schools (mostly worn-out textbooks) and certainly no libraries. Each garden idyll with 'Madam Kathy' ushered these children into worlds far beyond their Ghanaian life – the "book" stories brought them not only adventure, charming fables or laughter but more importantly introduced them to other peoples, other thoughts, an expansion of imagination, a wider understanding of their world, ...and thus to a better understanding of themselves.

That "story-time" circle grew too large for the garden. It grew first into a small library in Kathy's garage, then to a shipping container refurbished into the bright, organized Osu Library. But it didn't stop there. In the ten succeeding years, it has grown into more than one hundred (yes, 100!) libraries all

over Ghana – some of them large, imposing city libraries, some a circle of children on mats under a village tree, some a small room in a house or school or community centre. All of them have one driving passion: to invite Ghanaian children into the enjoyment and celebration of reading and to use books as windows of discovery and learning. Kathy, and all the librarians, volunteers and teachers involved in these community libraries, believe what Orville Prescott said in *A Parent Reads to His Children*: "Few children learn to love books by themselves. Someone has to lure them into the wonderful world of the written word; someone has to show them the way."

Consequently "story time" – reading aloud to the children – is considered a daily library requirement. Aiding a child's own reading (especially aloud) is stressed, reaping great dividends: one Primary Five student who achieved an exceptionally high reading score credits it to her having been able to visit the library every day after school to listen to stories and read (there were no books in her home). One 16-year-old boy from a struggling single parent home confides that Charles Dickens is his favourite author. A headmistress attributes to Kathy's libraries a phenomenal

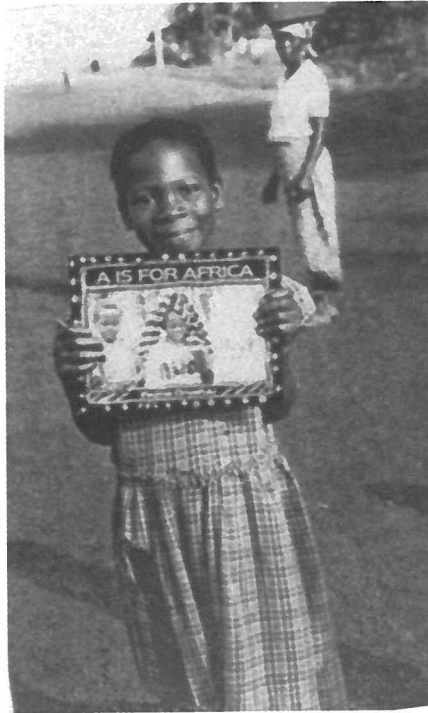
*It* was like a medieval storybook illustration – the afternoon sun glowed on the new paint, glanced like diamonds off the bright windows, kissed the waving green fronds in the small garden, turned the hot pink bougainvillea bush into a blaze of glory. *Like jewels*, Rebecca thought, *it is like a sparkle of jewels in a fairytale story.*

She walked into the jewelled picture, into the new Osu Library. Ran her hand along the shelves lined with books – many of these she could now read on her own. Sighed with pleasure at the hangings and drawings on the walls. Nodded approvingly at the place by the door for sandals, and at the washbasin with soap and towels. Smiled at the children sitting in a circle listening to a story being read to them.

This marvel was *their* library – their own Osu Avenue neighbourhood library – opened just today, the 13th of November, 1992. Rebecca was awed: *Who would ever have guessed it would grow to this?*

It had all started more than two years earlier under the "storytelling tree" – that flaming red flamboyant tree in Madam Kathy's garden on Osu Avenue in Accra, Ghana. In the coolness under its wide-spreading branches, Kathy Knowles would sit, a basket of books beside her, a book open on her knee, and read aloud to a circle of neighbourhood children. Rebecca remembered the shiver of excitement when, for the first time, she saw Madam Kathy open a story book, saw the bright picture she held up for all to see, heard those soul-satisfying first words of a tale read aloud: "Once upon a time..."

Thus began these Ghanaian children's delicious journey into the land of literature, into the land of fairytales – *Curious George*, Charles Dickens, *Aesop's Fables*, or their own African writers. Neither Kathy nor Rebecca had any inkling on that first hot May afternoon under the flamboyant tree that a tiny seed had been planted that would grow into a great tree branching out into all of Ghana, bringing a rich, new literary world to thousands of Ghanaian children.



Each garden idyll with  
 'Madam Kathy' ushered  
 these children into worlds far  
 beyond their Ghanaian life.

increase in children's abilities to shoot to the top of their class.

But, does only reading go on here? Why, no! There are games and locally-made wooden

puzzles, artwork, creative writing, music and singing, outings, stamp-collecting, dramas, guest speakers (perhaps a doctor speaking about health). One large library promotes a wildlife club, a choir and two football teams (one team is called "Joy of Reading"! ). Another library teaches sign language to the deaf. Two years ago, a handsome new library was opened in Akropong in the School for the Blind.

The mission statement of these libraries – "sharing the joy of reading with the Ghanaian child" – has wide ramifications, particularly in the two domains of librarian training and literacy. Librarian training is a priority focus: each area desiring a library must send a literate person (often a school teacher) to a three-week training course in basic library management and book care, in the importance of treating each child with respect and in how to teach the children to care for their library and for each other. The impact on both teachers and students is great.

Literacy instruction, for any age, also plays an important role. Mothers, grandmothers, school dropouts, unschooled village children can now come to the library to learn to read and write English. Imagine the triumph of a woman *writing her name* for the first time on a bank form rather than using her usual thumb print – and the fun she has seeing the unbelieving look on the bank official's face!

How has all this been accomplished? Kathy set up the Osu Children's Library Fund – a registered Canadian charitable organization established to support literacy and outreach programs in community and school libraries throughout Ghana by providing books, educational materials, training and at times financial aid. In her small upstairs office in Winnipeg, she keeps her finger on the hub of the operation with a computer and drawers full of files, letters from children and monthly reports sent in by each library. Used books are garnered from all over, with volunteers gathering in her dining room to sort, clean and pack them up for Kathy to take with her on her semi-annual trips to Ghana. CIDA, Canadian Crossroads International and the University of Winnipeg's International Development Studies program send students and volunteers to Ghana to assist these libraries.

The crux lies, however, in the Ghanaian people themselves, in their capacity to care for the ideal of literacy and to sacrifice to be involved in something bigger than themselves. In Ghana, the Osu Library Fund is a reg-

istered Ghanaian charity. Ghanaian businessmen, government agencies and community centres all help in underwriting the financial and practical needs such libraries require. Heads of schools, teachers and local leaders become directors and fundraisers. A partnership has been formed with Sub-Saharan Publishers in Accra for the development of early reading materials in English and Ghanaian languages. Small businesses are run by each library team (selling cement, phone cards, etc.), aided by the Fund with a small start-up grant of US\$100, in order to help foster independence in the library's financial needs and to provide some income for the team. Some libraries become community centres; some provide food, bathing facilities, scholarships.

For Kathy, the bottom line is love – loving what she does, loving the opportunity to give; she counts herself "blessed every second of the day" to be a part of a process of seeing people and communities grow and thrive. That blessedness became an even greater reality when she returned to Ghana this November to celebrate, with Rebecca and her other Osu Avenue friends, the tenth anniversary of the opening of the Osu Library.

#### Notes:

- 1) To date, three libraries are named after Kathy Knowles, including the Osu Library (renamed "The Kathy Knowles Community Library" in 1994).
- 2) Kathy's work in establishing these libraries was featured in the March 2001 Reader's Digest, "The Gift of Literacy."
- 3) For further information, write to Kathy Knowles, Osu Children's Library Fund, 188 Montrose St., Winnipeg, MB R3M 3M7, or call (204) 488-6633.

### The Guiding Hands of God

*Continued from page 9*

was eager to give me a gift of Scripture. "Look at Isaiah 59:1," she said. Her version was: "Come on, Hilda, the Lord is not weak to save you, and he is not becoming deaf. He can hear you when you call."

En route we called on the Lord again and again. And always, God heard. It is clearly evident that everywhere we are equidistant from God, so why would God leave us stranded?

*Hilda J. Born is a former teacher and farmer who lives in Abbotsford, B.C. She and her husband of nearly fifty years have travelled extensively, often to visit their children. Hilda clings to God and church, and enjoys photo-journalism, gardening and crewel embroidery.*

# God Among the Kassennas of Northern Ghana

by Judith Asibi Kania Bawa

*"Among the Gods, who is like you? You are glorious in Holiness, fearful in Praise, doing Wonders. Alleluia."* This is the refrain of a very popular praise and worship song in Ghana, in honour of the Almighty God.

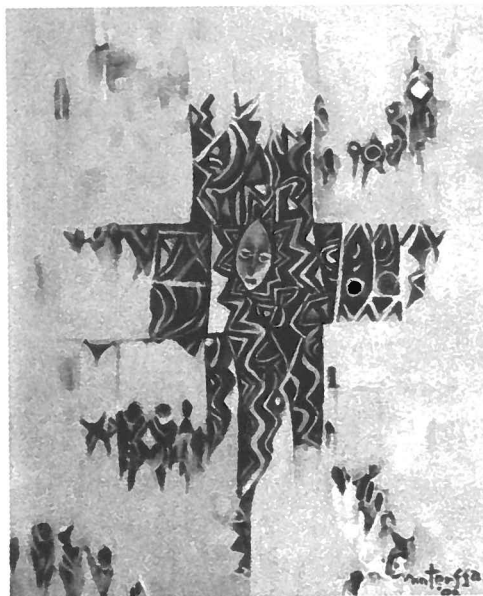
Many cultures of the world share common concepts about God, such as *Creator God, Mighty God, Wonderful God, Omnipresent God, God the Provider, God the Sustainer, God the Healer*, etc. Yet, each language of the world also describes God from the unique perspective of their culture, with wonderfully descriptive phrases that express how they perceive and appreciate God.

In this article, I would like to present to you the images of God of the Kassena nation of Northern Ghana, how these images portray God and are translated into the way the Kassennas live.

The Kassennas acknowledge the existence of a supreme being, *We*, who is the embodiment of their whole being and an integral part of their life. God is their creator (*kero*) and owner (*tero*), their saviour (*virino*), their shepherd (*yirino*). To the needy, "God will open the door, provide" (*We wo pure chonga*). To the sick, "God will cure" (*We wo pa yezura*). When someone dies, a Kassena wants to know if it is God's will, or if someone caused the death. Thus God is acknowledged in joy, in sorrow, in need, and in bounty.

Kassena names are normally shortened sentences or phrases, often reflecting the place of God in the lives of the people. This godliness, or God-orientedness, is manifest, for example, in names given to their offspring, such as *Awedoba* ('my God is greater/bigger than theirs'), *Awedaga* ('my God is enough'), *Awedana* ('my God is able'), *Wemuye* ('It is God who knows') and *Awewole* ('my God has helped/enabled').

With the title *kero* (creator), the Kassennas acknowledge that God created them, and everything else – the good and the bad, the beautiful and the ugly, the weak and the strong. God gives them everything, and takes away from them, too. By this they see themselves as helpless



beings whose destiny is controlled by the supreme God.

If *We* is their *kero*, then *We* is their *tero* (owner) as well, who decides their fates. *Tero* denotes ownership. For example, a husband can say of his wife, "*A mo mo tem*" ('I own you'), denoting not a master/slave relationship but rather 'taking responsibility for.'

The image of God as *virino* (saviour), while now more of a Christian translation than a cultural concept, nonetheless embodies the

idea of God saving them from any unpleasant situation.

They see God as their *yirino* (shepherd), signifying how the shepherd cares for and protects the animals, defending them with his life. Growing up as a shepherdess, I remember how much we loved our animals. We gave them names, and knew them by name. We fought with any other shepherds who allowed their cattle to bully ours. When animals from the herd were sold because they were old or because money was needed for some urgent commitments, we became sad and mourned because we knew they would be killed for meat. To us they were not just animals but our friends, our charges.

As can be said of many African groups, the Kassennas are a very religious people, integrating God into every aspect of their daily lives. Invoking God's name for blessing in everything they do is essential: when a new house is built, God's name is

invoked to grant the landlord and his family peace, protection, and blessings. With a marriage, the name of God is invoked to make the woman fertile to bear many children. To prove one's innocence, or truthfulness, a Kassena will invoke the name of Almighty God to bear witness to what he/she is saying or doing. The Kassennas value their integrity more than wealth or fame, and will not do anything to compromise it or bring it into question, no matter how poor materially they may be. One Kassena proverb

*The Kassennas are a very religious people, integrating God into every aspect of their daily lives*

states, *"a good name is better than riches."* It explains the morally pure society they had, traditionally scorning (shunning, isolating) anyone who fell foul of the norms of the group with such acts as stealing, rape, witchcraft, employing inappropriate means to acquire wealth, etc.

As the Kassenas are basically farmers, their religiosity is much evidenced in this domain. Sacrifices are offered with the blood of fowls, goats, sheep or cattle, and with millet flour. Harvest plays a very important part in their lives and worship. At the time of the Harvest Festival (*Fao Kuri*), when the main crop of millet is ready for harvest, and before anyone is allowed to eat of it, an offering (sacrifice) is made to God through the ancestors. Each clan landchief (*Tigatu*) [spiritual head of the ancestral land of a clan] will take flour from some ears of millet, mix it with red pepper and shea butter, and offer it as a sacrifice of thanksgiving to God for the harvest. This mixture is traditionally recognized as "food" or "water" and is what is offered to a visitor in a traditional Kassena home as a sign of welcome. The church has adapted this harvest festival, celebrating it as Thanksgiving Sunday after the main harvest, and bringing as a "thanks offering" whatever God has blessed them with – millet, rice, groundnuts [peanuts], beans, even fowl or animals.

Prayer and sacrifice to the ancestors does not mean worship of the ancestors. Rather, the Kassenas feel that God is too awesome for simple mortals to understand or approach idly, so they approach God through their ancestors. The ancestors are qualified to mediate on their behalf, because they have lived their lives here on earth and know about human problems; and, now that they have departed to the spirit world, they can deal with the spiritual issues of the living. The Kassenas thus feel they can make whatever request they have of God through their ancestors. When offering sacrifices, for example, they will say, "my father, take this offering to your father, so that he will take it to his father, and on to his father, so that he will take it to God."

There is the erroneous impression among many that all traditional worshipers necessarily practice or use *juju* or sorcery (soliciting the

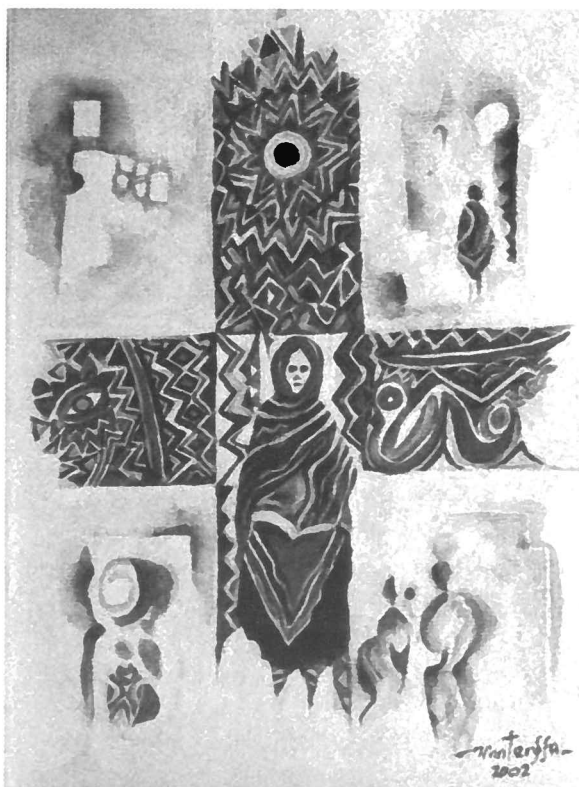
powers of the supernatural for private purposes), but that is not so – there are many who refuse to have anything to do with the dark employment of supernatural powers. In fact, witches and wizards are expelled in some societies. In Kassenaland, if a witch is not actually expelled, she will be psychologically isolated, with no one befriending her.

This comprehensive "daily-life" religion of the Africans, with its own way of worshipping the Creator, was unfortunately misunderstood by the early missionaries, who saw everything African as heathen or satanic, be it drumming, dancing or mourning the dead. The gospel thus immediately became a stumbling block – either creating a resistance in the African who saw it as something foreign, or else creating confusion in those who accepted the faith. The believers were confused about what to do now about all the aspects of life that the ancestors had dealt with before, and since the gospel (in the way it was presented) did not address any of these life issues, these believers often slid back into the traditional way of worship, or else mixed the two.

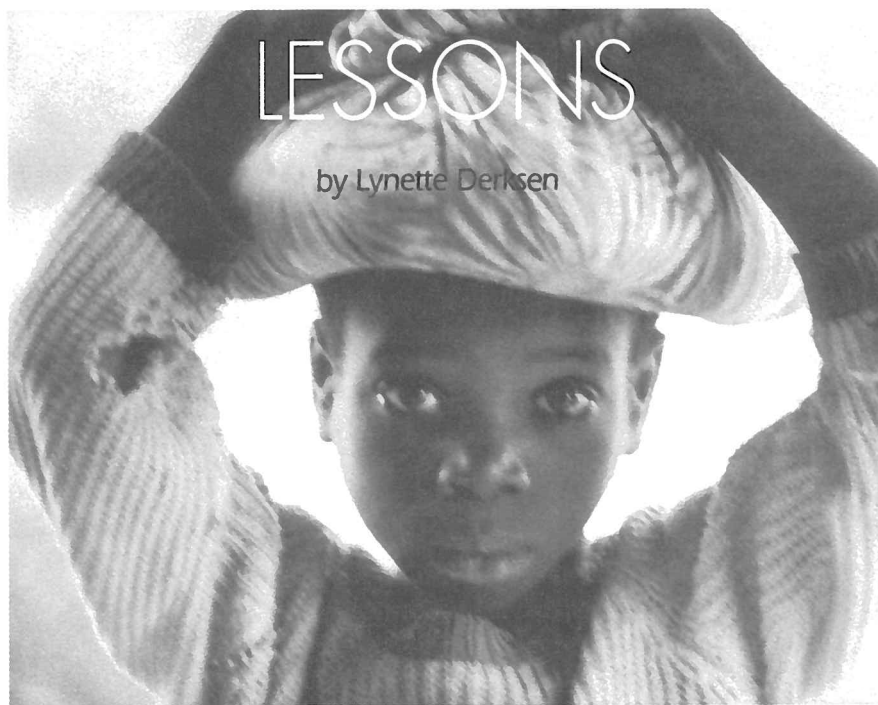
The Christians (including me) were forced to see God through the lens of a different and unfamiliar Western culture. After several decades of embracing the Christian faith, is it any wonder that many Africans are still confused when confronted with unexplained difficulties, and many simply slip back into what they understand better? Don Richardson, in his book *Peace Child*, describes the frustrating years he spent among the Sawi people of Papua New Guinea, until his deeper understanding of their way of life, their language, customs, values and beliefs, brought the breakthrough. I believe that if the Word of God and the gospel of faith in Christ were brought to us without an accompanying Western culture and thought, many more Africans would be Christians.

.....

*Judith Bawa, a Kassena of Ghana, took her under-graduate education in Ghana in agriculture, and has just completed her Masters degree in Reading, England, in Social Development and Sustainable Development. She returned to Ghana November 1st, to continue work with the Ghana Institute of Linguistics, Literacy and Bible Translation (GILLBT) as coordinator for their Women in Literacy and Development (WILD) domain. She plans also to do research into the role of "Culture in Women's Development" in the Kassena area, as well as help Kassena pastors better see the links between their culture and the Word of God.*







# LESSONS

by Lynette Derksen

The boy entered, his body a mere shadow projected by a hot early morning sun against a concrete classroom wall, still chilled by the African night air. The other seven children stopped their free play for a split second. A second of silence, without motor noises or grunts. A second of bewilderment. Deaf children recognizing the clues of interruption. There was a second of recognition. Our last student had finally arrived, one week late: Dominique, a six-year-old boy in a three-year-old frame.

Dominique looked sheepishly across the room and hung to its perimeter. He watched the children play for what seemed like an eternity of silent glances. I reached out to touch him on the shoulder in greeting. He flinched. I beckoned him with my finger, then hand, and then arms to come closer to see my face. He seemed puzzled, uncomfortable at the warm embrace it portrayed. Unexpectedly, his glance shifted to his shoes – part of a complete, unofficial school uniform. He wore shiny black leather lace-up shoes, with socks; two-sizes-too-big grey flannel pants, a flimsy grey short-sleeved shirt and thick polyester pullover – red – for all to see. I patted him on the shoulder. My hand lingered in encouragement as I motioned for him to join the others.

The first lesson that day was a gestural rendition of the book, *The Hungry Caterpillar*. As I quizzed the children on vocabulary, they attempted to answer with hopeful gestures, imitation and finally hand-over-hand success. Dominique shrugged at his turn. The children flooded him

with gestural excitement, signing answers, leaning in and nodding heads in encouragement. Dominique slipped his hands out of his pockets and quickly mimed the model of others. His exposed hands found their protective hovel once again.

At circle-time, Dominique found the yellow chair with his name on it. Hilma abruptly grabbed Dominique's chair, which resembled her own, unaware that his presence marked his ownership of it. Seeing me signal her mistake, Hilma studied both chairs. Realizing she had mistakenly grabbed Dominique's chair instead of her own, she laughed uproariously, slapping her knee and pointing elaborately at the names on the backs of each chair. Amid the outburst of hilarity, a trickle of infectious giggles erupted. I turned to capture its source. Dominique? Faces alight with amusement, they completed the circle with their pair of yellow chairs.

The school term progressed, Dominique's health and hygiene digressed. His black shoes became as scuffed as the rest of his appearance. The previously patent exterior was scuffed beyond recognition. The shoelaces were torn. They no longer protected Dominique's feet but exacerbated his sores. The sound of shuffling feet became an increasingly common sound when Dominique was nearby.

At recess, Dominique stood sockless in his tired shoes, preferring to rest in the sun rather than race around with the other children. His slumped shoulders, like the

humps on the Hungry Caterpillar, carried the weight of neglect. Cared-for classmates recognized his state with their screwed-up noses and stay-away stares. "He smells, he has no lunch, he can't walk," were the complaints of the children. For the

five hours of the day Dominique was in my care, a feeling of helplessness flooded me, as I attempted to relieve his pain of neglect.

I bathed him, gave doses of vitamin C and offered hugs, which, despite his sorry state, he refused. One day, after his bath, I offered him a set of substitute clothing to wear while his own threadbare flannel pants and flimsy shirt were laundered. Among the clothing was a pair of new shoes. Dominique almost leapt outside to watch his classmates play. The children's clear, pure laughter pierced

*Continued on page 17 ►*

*The school term progressed, Dominique's health and hygiene digressed. His black shoes became as scuffed as the rest of his appearance.*

A quarter of a million Africans die of AIDS every year. In a continent of eight hundred million, 250,000 die of AIDS annually. HIV/AIDS is public enemy number one in Botswana, the global leader in AIDS population. Swaziland is next in line, followed by Zimbabwe, Lesotho, Zambia, South Africa and then Namibia as seventh in the percentage of people on their way to their death, with no prospect of intervention from anywhere under the sun. All the countries of southern Africa are veritable graves.

How do we appeal to the West about what is a crisis, about what should be a priority, when they are pouring their resources into issues that revolve around themselves? How can we lovingly convey to you, our North American sisters and brothers, the burning issues that are destroying homes in the countries of southern Africa?

There is a great need for competent and compassionate medical staff, for individuals who are ready to sacrifice their own comfort and ease, their self-absorption, for the sake of others. There are urgent needs for basic medical supplies such as medicine and pain killers.

Yet, as overwhelming and devastating as the pandemic in Africa is, there is a deeper crisis, a more desperate underlying need – that of obedience to Christlike living. Look at Zimbabwe: there the life expectancy is 46; a quarter of the population is doomed to die without a cure for the virus. Yet that country has more evangelistic initiatives than Canada. What a paradox, that a country with such a high percentage of believers is being wiped out by AIDS. Evangelistic crusades draw hundreds of thousands to the altar at the front of a tent. Whole African villages are accepting Christianity. So, how does one explain the high number of AIDS sufferers? Swaziland, where we have been pastoring since 1980, has enjoyed gospel outreach for over one hundred years, yet Swaziland is the second highest AIDS-infected area in the world.

*How does one explain the lack of Christian principles in this area of sexual behaviour? What form of historic New Testament church is this, that sees no contradiction between saying, "Jesus is Lord," and living as if one's sexuality were not under the lordship of Christ? Why do we insist on calling ourselves believers? What do we really believe, if the Word does not influence our behaviour? What are we teaching, if the content of the message is nowhere relevant to our sexual lifestyle? Is one's faith integrated into life? How so?*

Our understanding of the plight is that this southern African region does not have *de facto* marriage and home ministries – but evangelism is hot. Services are thrilling,

# PUBLIC ENEMY NUMBER ONE

by Charles and  
Delores Mahlangu

crusades are miracle-filled, youth meetings are exciting, but men's or women's ministries, marriage enrichment courses, and youth training programs are few. Youth ministries and camps are commonplace, yet our young people are dying by the thousands each year with little or no orientation in Christian living.

This is the crisis of never-ending repercussions. Breath-taking, catchy crusades and brief introductions to Jesus Christ are not enough. The staggering reality is that the normal, vigorous development of saints is still a rare phenomenon. The truth is that many churches have a fatal deficiency. One has to look far and wide for a church active

in the preparation of the saints for purity and Christlike living. Local initiatives are desperately needed to effect the maturing of a severely under-developed church.

The cure for AIDS will not be found in the laboratories of Massachusetts. The solution is not in the distribution of free condoms. The answer is not in lessons on safe sex.

The solution to the devastating decimation by AIDS can only be found in the principles of sexuality found in Holy Scripture. Only when the Word of God is comprehended and lived will there be a protection from HIV. That is not accomplished in an instant at the front of a tent. It is taught, learned and lived little by little. The greatest need is for people to integrate the Word with routine living. Public enemy number one is surely the chasm between believing and living.

How can you help breach this chasm? Come to Africa and live your faith. Show what your relationship to Jesus does in you. Pass on the truths from God's Word, simply and compellingly.

Can't come? There are trained, committed believers – Africans – who are passionately willing and ready to bring people into maturity in Christ, through much-needed full-time ministries with men, women and youth, but they can't because of lack of financial support. You could support these, who already know the language, culture and traditions.

Come alongside your African sisters and brothers. Let us coordinate our efforts toward having the Good News infiltrate every area of life.

.....  
*Charles (Zulu from South Africa) and Delores (Canadian) Mahlangu have been working as a pastoral team in Swaziland and South Africa since 1980. Their focus is on family and marriage relationships, and on training men and women in leadership, teaching, counselling and studying the Word of God. They have two children, Bo and Lindy, and are based in Swaziland.*

## Four Fragments

by Dora Dueck

*In* my study of women's writing in the early decades of the *Zionsbote*, the first Mennonite Brethren periodical, I have found that most women wrote only once. They set down their conversion or a testimony of God's help, and that was it. A few women, however, appeared in the paper more frequently. Perhaps they received affirmation from others after their first attempt. At any rate, they were not unwilling to share their lives in this medium again.

I would like to introduce one such woman, Katharina Georg, who wrote for the *Zionsbote* four times.

In her first writing, in 1895, Katharina describes her conversion. She was a woman of Lutheran background living near (or perhaps, in) the Russian Mennonite settlement of Sagraadowka. She tells a story of alternately seeking and fleeing God, until she reaches a breakthrough to "light in my heart" and assurance of sins' forgiveness through the ministry of some visiting "brothers." Her spiritual search is very much interwoven, however, with the cyclical gloom of her young marriage as year after year she gives birth and then loses that child to death. "God's hand was heavy on me," she says. There was one believing couple in their village, and this "sister" also influenced her toward conversion, she says, for she "often comforted me [in my losses] with the Word of God."

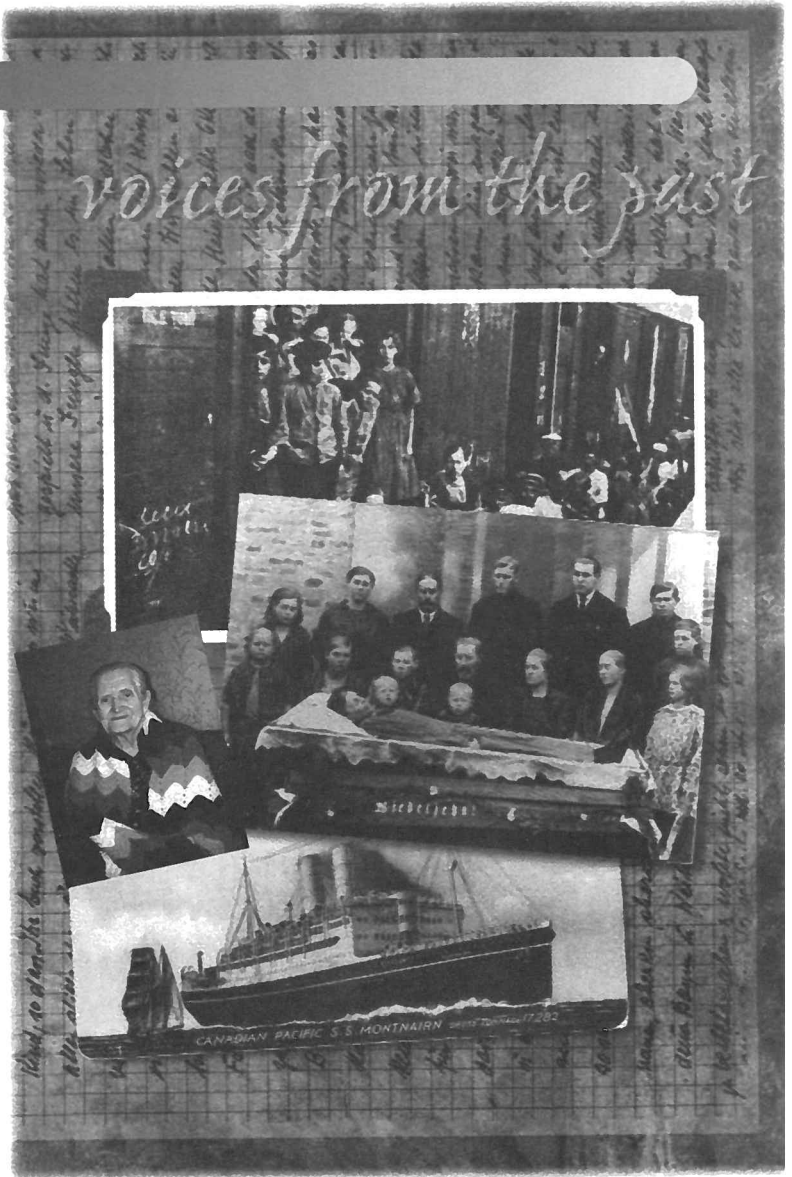
In 1896, Katharina wrote to the *Zionsbote* because she had promised God she would do so if a particular prayer of hers was answered. It was hard for her to follow through on this vow, however. (Did her joy feel too fragile after all her disappointments, perhaps, to entrust it to paper?) But she found no peace until she was obedient and "wrote it down." Here is an excerpt.

*The Lord gave us nine children and always took them all back to Himself so that we were always without children; that was very painful for us. I have often felt myself the unhappiest of people, and often thought, I am completely forgotten by God ... but the Lord loved us and we were converted through these experiences. At the time of the ninth death ... Brother Isaak Regehr was at the funeral and he spoke to me, saying I should do as Hannah had done, I should call upon the Lord with all my heart that He give us a son and that I would raise him ... to work in His vineyard. This did not immediately comfort me, but when he was gone I took my Testament, opened it and my eyes fell on the verse, "Whatever you ask in my name, shall be*

*done." That was a Word for my grieving heart.... After some time the Lord sent us a son, but he right away got sick. Occasionally my faith was small, but when I thought of that hour, I was able to believe again.... My child got better and so far is ruddy and strong and already six months old, to God be the glory....*

It was four years before Katharina wrote for the *Zionsbote* again. There is no word of her child. (Is he still alive? we wish to know, like King Darius, who rushed to the lion's den where Daniel spent the night.) This time she tells of an experience of fellowship with believers that filled her with joy. She had been feeling downcast, "the eyes of my faith clouded," because she was separated from her parents and siblings and furthermore, they "are against me for the Saviour's sake." When "the brothers Tbews and Neufeld," doing house visitation, came onto the yard, she was "overcome with such joy and blessedness."

*[I]t was so important to me, we were Lutherans and they Mennonites and now the Lord has provided that they must come to us.... Brother Neufeld took the testament, read*



*My eyes fell on the verse,  
"Whatever you ask in my  
name, shall be done."  
That was a Word for my  
grieving heart.*

*Ephesians 2 ... when he came to verse 18 where it says, "through him we both have access to the Father through the Spirit" ... it was like balm for my wounded heart. I was able firmly to believe anew that the Lord does not distinguish by race or gender[,] it was so meaningful to me that ... I from another people and language was united with these brothers through one Spirit in prayer. Oh how clear it was to me, as the Saviour once said, "Who is my mother and my brothers? Those who hear my words and do it." I was able to freshly, firmly believe that the dear Saviour has become father and mother and brother to me....*

Katharina's last testimony in the periodical appears in 1902. This time she describes a desperate situation in which she, along with two other women and three children, lightly clothed, were travelling home from a neighbouring village in a horse-drawn covered wagon and got lost in a snow-storm.

*It was evening and we could not go any further, for one of the horses was unable to continue. While we were still driving a man from our village passed us and said he was completely lost but his horses were not yet tired. He drove past us but we had no idea if he reached the village. Yes dear brothers and sisters, now we were in trouble ... we were thinking of the long night that still lay ahead of us .... The children called out and we called, as long as we could, but nobody heard us. Then our fear was very great, for ... we thought ... we will freeze to death. We said, Lord you are compassionate and all-powerful, please bring that man back to the village and then move his heart to send people to*

*look for us .... We had been in the storm some 5 hours and were beginning to freeze; the children especially were very chilled .... We cried out again, Lord have compassion on us, we are not worthy, but help us for the sake of these innocent children, for you hold the weather in your hand, you can keep us from freezing.*

Katharina recounts their desperation in some detail, including the sense that they would soon "stand before God." This awareness reminded them of their failures, "guilt piling upon guilt." Facing death, they pleaded for grace.

*Suddenly we heard something and then the riders who were looking for us were already at the wagon, for I believe the Lord showed them the way ... I cannot describe to you how great our joy as we saw the riders, but I will not forget it as long as I live. It was as if someone had said to me, there are the envoys of God, praise and honour and thanks and glory be to the Lord in all eternity for his wonderful help.*

Katharina Georg offered four

## Lessons

*Continued from page 14*

my thoughts like the burst of flavour from a new piece of chewing gum. "God brought you here for this," my ever-watchful African assistant softly said. The echo of Dominique's high-pitched giggles suspended like sunshine over the schoolyard, validating her words. Suddenly, a crowd of frantically signing children pressed in. "Come, take a picture of us. Take a picture of Dominique's shoes. He can run. Look at his face."

We established an indoor obstacle course. Two by two, the children used newly learned sign language and carried out the instructions in our makeshift game: "In, out, through, under." It was Dominique's turn. With hands deep in pockets, he followed his

accounts of significant events or insights in her life: conversion; the gift of a living child; the realization that God's kingdom offers an alternate place of belonging without regard for race or gender; a rescue from death. Four stories that fulfilled an obligation she felt to God and others.

Even a century later they may convey something of their original impetus and give us encouragement. They also tantalize us with all we are not told. How did Katharina's life continue? And the son she would raise as a Samuel? How did they fare during World War I, the Russian Revolution, the terrible, ravages of bandit mobs in the Sagradowka area in 1919? All we have, in this particular archive at least, are these four fragments.

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*Dora Dueck is a regular columnist for Sophia. If you wish to discuss with her this or others of her columns she may be reached by e-mail at hddueck@shaw.ca.*

partner's directions. The physical exercise, which required deep breaths of air, resulted in explosions of laughter. Classmates saw his infectious smile and laughed along. A cheer of hands waved applause as he crossed the finish line. His face glowed as he recognized the affirmation of his classmates. Taking his seat beside me, his hopeful hand sought refuge in mine, finally ready to accept the love offered there.

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*Lynette Derksen was a volunteer with Africa Inland Mission in Namibia during the summer of 2001. She is now involved with AIM locally and keeps in touch with the children she taught in Namibia. She is looking forward to getting married next spring.*

# Female Circumcision

by Inger Olsen

*Though you may find this article difficult to read, as Inger Olsen reminds us, the subject is one that demands wisdom, compassion and understanding.*

**F**emale circumcision (FMC) is removal of part or all of the female genitalia. It is mainly practised in Africa but is also carried out in Asia, the Middle East and South America. Not surprisingly, we now hear of it being performed in Western countries where some of these people groups have settled.

The different types of FMC are classified as: Type I) excision of the prepuce with or without excision of part or all of the clitoris; Type II) excision of the prepuce and clitoris together with partial or total excision of the labia minor; Type III) excision of part or all of the external genitalia and stitching/narrowing of the vaginal opening (infibulation); Type IV) unclassified (varying lesser degrees of mutilation of the female genitalia).

As a midwife working in East Africa for several years, I often delivered women on whom Type II or III were carried out. In the worst cases, FMC can cause death through severe hemorrhaging, which happened in a few deliveries I knew of. Abscesses and benign tumors of the nerve endings might develop, causing severe pain. Also chronic urinary tract infections, kidney damage, stones in the bladder and urethra, as well as reproductive tract infections, can result from obstructed urinary and menstrual flow. Some of my work included helping small girls fearful of passing urine, treating bad infections after FMC and stopping severe bleeding.

One young woman in labour with her first baby had a bulging perineum when I arrived, as the baby's head was pressing on it. At first I could see no opening at all! As I looked closely however, I saw a couple of hairs from the baby protruding from a pinpoint sized opening. There were no genitalia at all. She was successfully delivered, but she and her mother begged me not to sew her up after delivery. She had been infibulated as a child, and a long thorn had been used to keep the edges together after the cut, leaving only a tiny opening. It had caused much pain and

difficulty for her to pass urine and menstrual blood, as it could only come out in drips.

In cases like this, the first act of sexual intercourse can only take place after cutting. One of my African friends told me she was lucky to get an older woman, a traditional birth attendant, to cut her on her wedding night. If you are not so lucky, the bridegroom brings two male friends with him to his bride, and while they hold her down, he uses his finger or knife or anything available to rip her open before he has intercourse with her. She might heal up again after each intercourse, causing her great pain till her first baby is born. This practice also increases the risk of HIV infection.

An older woman, often the traditional birth attendant, normally performs the circumcision, although I have heard that in some countries it may occasionally be performed in a clinic or hospital. It is often considered a very important event for the girl, as it may signify that she is a "real" girl or woman. Marriage may be out of question if a girl is not circumcised, so it is often the women who make sure it is done. No males are allowed during the ritual. I know of men who did not want their daughters circumcised, but the women in the family did it anyway.

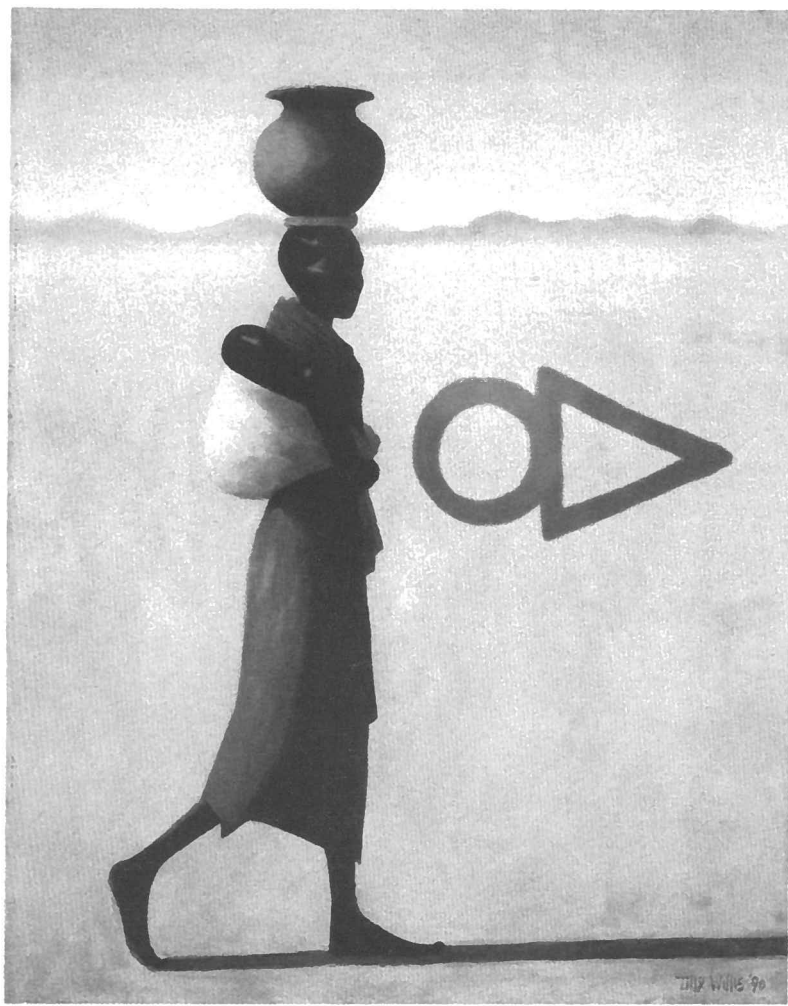
Once, the chief of the village I was staying in asked me to give a local anesthetic to his two girls aged 5 and 7, who were going to be circumcised. I

blankly refused, but he pleaded with me as he loved his girls and wanted to ease the pain for them. Finally, as he would not leave me in peace, I made a deal with him. I would help only if traditional birth attendant B would be allowed to do it. I told him that B performed type II, which was much less traumatic than the most drastic type that attendant A performed. The chief agreed.

I agonized, wondering if I had done right in agreeing to help, but as I had made a promise, I felt I had to go ahead. I also argued with myself that I was helping these girls to have an easier life. On the day of the circumcision ceremony all the men were out of sight. To my dismay, I saw both the traditional birth attendants there. The mother and aunts of the girls wanted A to do it, but I insisted that I was leaving if she did it. They had a long unpleasant debate, and it was obvious they were not happy with me,

*As a midwife working in East Africa for several years, I often delivered women on whom Type II or III were carried out.*





from educated people from their own tribe, and even then, it will take several generations, especially in the rural areas. Governments in some countries made FMC illegal years ago, but they have not succeeded in stopping it. Where I worked, people have been told they will pay a huge fine if they continue the practice, but the law is not implemented, so there is still no change to be seen.

When FMC is mentioned in Western countries, I see the same reaction of disbelief, horror and condemnation that I first experienced. I was angry and utterly frustrated, especially when a lovely baby girl died as a result of the practice, even after we had pleaded with her educated mother not to have it done. It was a slow process for me to accept that there was nothing I could do to stop FMC except pray and in love give them the gospel. I believe this practice would stop if these dear people would openly turn to Jesus Christ. Maybe you, dear reader, would ask God to raise up intercessors who will intercede for these people groups, that whole communities will be saved.

Many times I have thanked God that I was born in the West, as my heart went out to these less fortunate women who are treated as inferior to the men. Whereas in the beginning I

berated mothers for having their daughters circumcised, I learned to show love while treating the complications. I realized that it was only by the grace of God that I was not in their shoes, having to go through such suffering. God gave me the love, compassion, wisdom and ability to help them.

I still wish with my whole heart that this practice would stop, but I also know that horrific, evil practices are done in secret in our own societies. I'm reminded of Jesus' words to the men who caught a woman in adultery: "If any one of you is without sin, let him be the first to throw a stone at her" (John 8:7 NIV). Jesus did not condemn her, but showed compassion. I believe this should be our attitude, too, and the best way we can at present show that compassion for those who practise FMC is by praying for them.

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*Inger Olsen is Danish, working with YWAM (Youth With a Mission) in Scotland. She is at present part of an intercession team focusing on reconciliation between Scotland and England, and praying for revival. She is also involved in the YWAM schools, which train people in intercession, worship and spiritual warfare.*

*The symbol superimposed on the painting is a ceremonial knife.*

but they dared not go against the father's wish. Finally the woman I chose made ready to do it. I made sure everything was as clean and disinfected as possible. B used a new razor blade, and we went ahead. After that, I gave only one more child a local anesthetic, then I let the village know that I would never participate again, as I did not condone FMC.

It may be very hard for us Westerners to understand the practice of FMC, but we must realize that in these cultures a girl's vocation in life is to get married. It is a great shame for the family to have a daughter who is not married, and poor families would not be able to afford to keep her at home. In many places the only alternative to marriage is prostitution. As the girl cannot marry except she be circumcised, not having it done is out of the question.

When I first encountered the gruesome effects of FMC, seeing the great pain these women endured, not to mention its accompanying psychological effects, I did not fully understand why they could do such a thing to their children. I was horrified and condemned the practice. I tried to persuade the women to stop the practice, explaining how it is far better not to circumcise their daughters. They shook their heads with a forbearing smile. They knew I just did not understand. You cannot quickly change deep-seated traditions and beliefs. Change has to come

# Religious Syncretism: *A Harmful Virus in African Churches*

by Joseph Koabike

Religious syncretism is one of the most devastating viruses in African churches. It weakens considerably the faith of many Christians and destabilizes the church as the body of Christ.

In the history of the Western church, various groups with divergent beliefs have attempted to influence Christian theology, but fortunately these could not stand in the light of the written Word of God. However, the situation in Africa is quite different. Here, religious syncretism is rooted in the very way people are christianized, in how they are forced almost harshly to reject their African religion and culture; Westerners seem not to perceive any difference between the two. Some years after their conversion, African Christians begin to realize that the Western culture is not necessarily the biblical culture they originally thought it was.

Complications arise for Christian intellectuals who have studied abroad and are now struggling to find their African roots. For those who have never been to school and thus cannot read the Bible, the situation is doubly confusing: they are not aware of the difference between Western culture and Christianity; neither do they know what to retain as good in their African culture and what God considers incorrect or ungodly. Prior to their introduction to Christianity and Islam, Africans never made a distinction between culture and religion – both intertwined in their normal daily

life. Yet, people felt they lacked something essential, lacked answers to existential questions. Christianity answers these difficult questions, but unfortunately its messengers largely ignore the problems that African Christians face in their everyday life. Many preachers bring new wine with no consideration of the wine skins into which they pour it, and worse

family will die. Normally a Moba would consult a diviner and offer the recommended sacrifices to the ancestors to avoid the death. A Christian, however, won't know what to do, for it is rare that a Sunday teaching will deal with the interpretation of dreams.

Imagine that the man with this dream is a new convert or even a mature Christian – he will not know what to do about this matter of life and death. He will probably go to see his pastor or the foreign missionary for help. Suppose, then, that the missionary, not being conscious of the impact of the dream on the Christian, gives him a scientific explanation of how dreams occur, or perhaps an interpretation of the dream according to Freud; maybe he simply shows surprise that a Christian would be concerned with dreams. (Since Western cultures normally do not take even significant dreams seriously, they consequently also do not treat as important those

passages in the Bible that deal with dreams.) The African brother will clearly deduct that the Bible does not have an answer to his troublesome question. In order to find a satisfactory solution, he will then go to see a diviner. Knowing that the church forbids Christians to consult diviners, the man will do it by night, secretly. If he has satisfaction in offering the sacrifices recommended by the diviner, he will suggest the same thing to other Christians, but again,

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*Christianity answers these difficult questions, but unfortunately its messengers largely ignore the problems that African Christians face in their everyday life.*

still, are not ready to listen to the basic questions, deeming them too silly or too pagan to be considered. To make this more concrete, let me use the common situation of dreams.

In the Moba culture, dreams have meaning. A dream could be a warning against a misfortune, or an announcement of something positive, etc. If, for example, a man dreams that he has built a new house or that he stands up to his neck in running water, the traditional interpretation would mean that a member of his

## ***Translating the Message: The Missionary Impact on Culture***

by Lamin Sanneh

(Maryknoll, NY, Orbis Books, 1989).

Reviewed by Mary Henkelman

In *Translating the Message*, Lamin Sanneh opened up for me a number of new ways to look at both the history of Christianity and the nature of Christian faith itself. Sanneh, a professor of Mission and World Christianity at Yale Divinity School, has not written an easy book. But the vistas to which he leads us are well worth the climb.

Sanneh's thesis is that Christianity has been, right from the start, a translatable religion. He begins with the early apostles, particularly Paul, who in reaching out to the Gentiles, translated the Jewish gospel into Greek culture. As in all translation, this had two thrusts: it relativized the Jewish aspects of the faith, and it destigmatized Gentile culture. In such pluralism, Jewish and Gentile understandings became closely and creatively intertwined. While Christianity next spread through translation to the Armenians, Copts, Goths and Ethiopians, it is the ninth-century mission to the Slavs that Sanneh next chooses to examine in detail. In this case, two brothers, Methodius and Constantine-Cyril, for whom the Cyrillic alphabet is named, worked on the Slavonic translation of Scripture. Despite persecution by those who wanted to maintain the power of the Latin church, their work in the vernacular led to a later flourishing of Slav faith and culture. When he comes to the Reformation period, Sanneh again shows how the vernacular translation

of Scripture was integral to that movement.

The central chapters of *Translating the Message* focus on 19th century Christian missions, with particular emphasis on West Africa. (Sanneh himself is a West African who grew up in Gambia.) While historians typically implicate missionaries in the spread of Western colonialism, Sanneh's focus on translation calls this interpretation into question. When they translated Scripture into vernacular languages and promoted literacy, missionaries – whether or not it was their intention – validated and revitalized indigenous cultures. In so doing, they prepared the way for subsequent African independence movements. Such an interpretation makes this period of history no longer a white story, but a black story! Even more, it is God's story! Having been so firmly planted into the culture, Christianity had become for Africans an African religion – and it grew like wildfire. In the two decades after colonial rule ended, the number of Christians on the continent increased from 60 million to 240 million.

Sanneh concludes his book with a general discussion of Christianity's translatability. That the gospel is translatable means that Christianity values culture. As at Pentecost, all can validly understand the gospel in their own language and through their own thought forms. Pluralism is part of God's purpose in this world, and Christian faith has been enriched by translation. However, translatability also means that Christianity judges culture. No culture has the final word – nor is it the final authority. Christian faith continues to require that even religious cultures be reformed and renewed – otherwise they wither and die.

Almost as a postscript, Sanneh attaches a final chapter comparing

Christianity and Islam. Sanneh was raised a Muslim but converted to Christianity as a young man. Having departed from Islam, he is careful to ensure that his comments do not judge but rather elucidate. Unlike Christianity that has been readily translated, Islam strongly upholds the sacredness of Arabic. Translation of the Qur'an or the liturgy has always been considered heretical. This has allowed Islam to maintain a unity of belief with limited institutional hierarchy, whereas Christianity has greater variety of belief despite stronger hierarchies. In contrast to the Islamic focus on Mecca, Christianity is unique in now being peripheral in the land of its origins. Although both religions have strong missionary imperatives, their differing attitudes to culture result in quite different approaches: Islam spreads by diffusion, Christianity by translation. In these current times, Sanneh's comments on Islam provide useful insight.

Two years ago, Lamin Sanneh taught at Regent College Summer School on the topic of Christianity as a world religion. The concept of translation is obviously an important tool in tackling the challenges of religious pluralism. Also, in a recent and excellent book, *Evangelism for Normal People*, John Bowen uses Sanneh's thesis to consider how one might translate Christian faith into contemporary Western culture. These are some of the many directions in thinking to which *Translating the Message* points us. For myself, Sanneh's concept of translation has led me to reconsider both the wonders of the incarnation and God's project of translating us into God's own multicultural image.

Mary Henkelman lives and writes in Toronto. She spent a year teaching in rural Kenya in the early 1970s. Since then, she has visited Africa several times.

# "Home" from Africa: A Family Reflects

*Rob Neufeld, Lois Coleman Neufeld and their children, Karin and John returned from a sixteen-year ministry in Africa last year. They have settled in Winnipeg, where Lois works as Director for Canadian Programs at the Mennonite Central Committee, Rob is renovating the older home they bought, Karin attends university and John is in grade 10. Lori Matties interviewed them over supper in their home.*

**SOPHIA:** *What countries did you serve in Africa, and for how long?*

**Lois:** We worked in Congo for 11 years and in Zambia for 5 years over a period of 6 years.

**S:** *What was the work that you did?*

**Lois:** When we were in the Congo we worked with the National Church of the Congo to start a carpentry school and help the Congolese church to run it. We also facilitated the work of the missionaries in the church and the church's institutions.

**Rob:** Then in Zambia, we worked for the Mennonite Central Committee as country representatives, Lois for Zambia and I for Angola.

**S:** *Were you kids born in Africa?*

**John:** We were born in Zaire [now Congo].

**S:** *Were you looking forward to coming to Canada?*

**John:** I was. More technology. I could get my stereo.

**Karin:** For me it was kind of hard because it was grade 12, But it wasn't terrible. No one was mean, so that was good, and people are pretty accepting.

**S:** *What were some of the challenges you faced in your first year back?*

**Lois:** Some of the adjustments you don't realize when you're going through them. Part of what we had to adjust to was that everybody was asking about Africa. If you had asked for an interview a year ago we would have rolled our eyes, and said, "We don't want to talk about it!" because everybody was asking us.

**Karin:** Yeah, now I can talk a lot more freely about where I come from, because now when people ask me where I'm from I say, "Now I'm from Winnipeg," so that avoids a lot.

**John:** Because then it makes it past tense that we moved here from Africa.

**Karin:** Yeah, it's not like, 'Oh, I'm from Africa.' For some reason I would just get so frustrated when people asked

me, "Who are you, where are you from?" because I had to explain my whole life. I couldn't just say, "I live on Canora Street." And I didn't want to explain my whole life to everyone.

**Rob:** It's kind of funny that there were times when you felt that it was emotionally hard to talk about it and other times when you were with someone else who had had a similar experience, and you were just energized to be able to talk about where everything was.

**John:** I don't like to have to explain everything. People actually said, "Do they have electricity there?" I've been asked, "Did you ride elephants to school?" Oh my goodness! [laughter]

**Rob:** The hardest thing about leaving was having great friends over there, and then all of a sudden because you're changing your job or your home, the friendship is interrupted. You have relationships that you'd like to support in certain ways, and being in another city you don't have that connection. That was very hard.

**Karin:** Sometimes I think you [Rob] of all of our family are the most African. And sometimes I feel kind of guilty that I'm not African now. I've lived all my life in Africa and still I'm not African. My African experience was not really African. It was a North American experience in Africa. I went to an American school, I spoke English most of the time, I didn't get to know very many Zambians or Zairians. So in that way it wasn't really any different than being in another part of North America where people happen to be black and speak a different language.

**Lois:** But it was very, very different.

**Karin:** But I don't feel like I am African in the same way that many missionary kids are.

**John:** Well, it's also because North America is being taken to Africa.

**Lois:** The other part is that we lived in large cities all the time. So we weren't out in the village where it's easy to make connections with indigenous African people.

**Karin:** So, in terms of challenges, for example, [my friend] Ruth holds onto the places she has been. Whenever she goes to some place new, like Sudan or Zambia, she intentionally integrates that into herself, so when she comes to

North America, it becomes part of her identity and she can name that and she can say, "This is a part of me, I'm keeping this. I'm keeping this person's face in my head." I don't do that, and so to name what part of me is not North American is very difficult. But I know that I'm other.

**Lois:** You know you're other but you can't name it.

**Karin:** Right. And it's not being able to...

**Lois:** Separate it out.

**Karin:** yeah.

**S:** *Maybe you just enter into the situation you're in differently. When you're in Africa, you're wholly there, but when you're here you're also wholly here.*

**Karin:** Yeah, I think I just adapt to where I am. I remember Kevin [a friend here] commenting that I'm really good at being the new kid. Through lots of, you know, gnashing of teeth and what not [laughter].

**Lois:** One of the things I miss is that in Africa our evenings weren't nearly as busy. Once we came home for supper at 5:30, almost always we were home for the evening. That's something that I think was really valuable for our family. People often comment on how close our family is, and how much fun we have together, and I think that's why.

**John:** In Africa, things were a lot more organized. If you wanted to go anywhere, like to a friend's house, you had to plan at least a day ahead of time.

**Karin:** That's with North Americans. If you were going to a Zambian's house you didn't have to plan ahead.

**Rob:** One of the surprising things with the Africans was that if you showed up, they would drop everything and give you a royal welcome, and I guess because we weren't from there, it would be assumed that they would buy a Coke for you, or after church they would make a meal for you. Even if you declined it, it would be done, and it might take half of the church offering to do that. So that was a real sacrifice.

**Lois:** The church [in Africa] doesn't always ask for missionaries, and the mission thinks it's the best thing to send them over, and they'll welcome us anyway. Ironically, I have to leave for a meeting now, and in Africa, that would never happen. I would never leave, and nobody would expect me to.

**Rob:** The fact of the matter is, people have to live with a standard of living and an infrastructure that is so difficult that you understand, because you've been through it so many times. I think that if people had the opportunities to be on time, they would probably, but a Westerner going overseas doesn't understand that. We lack sympathy because of our different experiences.

# Crossing

By Eliesabeth Vensel

In that strange land  
Beside the house that saw me  
Only as The Foreigner, outside the wall,  
Crouched a windy whistle-stop, a siding  
Where the neat perspective of all the shining paths  
Divided, split, and splintered,  
Black in all directions.  
The crossing here was painful:  
A slantwise, zigzag, hopping step,  
One foot on the ties,  
Another on the slippery rails.  
Sharp cinders cut my dusty feet.

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*Eliesabeth Vensel, a member of Sophia's editorial committee, taught English as a second language in Harbin, China, with her husband, Ted, from 1987-1989.*

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## Brother's Perspective

*Continued from page 20*

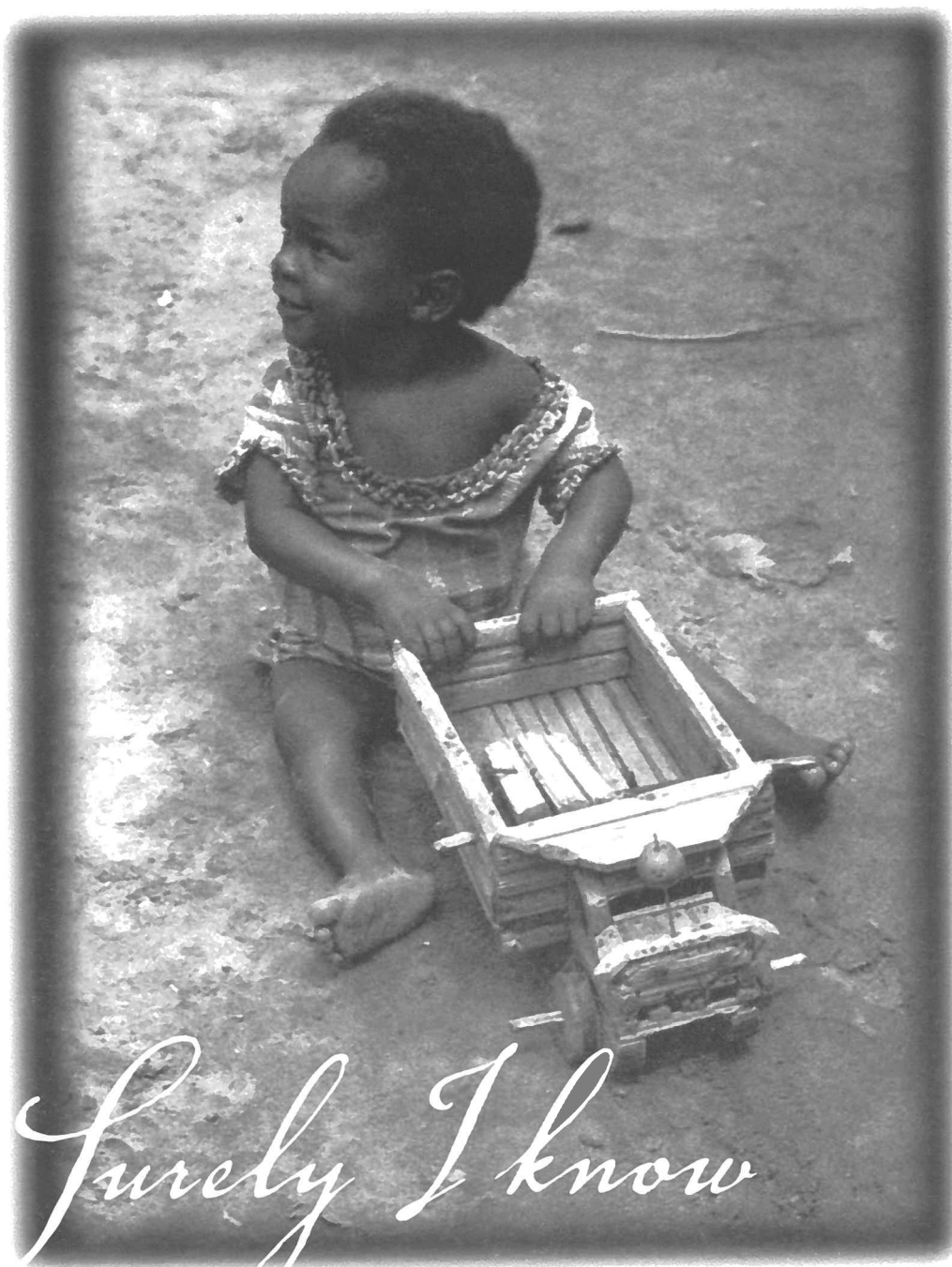
secretly. He will never confess this behavior, for it becomes a necessary part of his life. The result is a weakened church – that is, a church where maybe only ten or five of the many members are truly strong Christians who rely exclusively on the Lord to solve even their most difficult problems.

The thrust of this reflection is twofold. First, it is essential that any evangelization effort begin by getting to know the people well, by listening to their needs, by becoming familiar with their cultural/religious practices and perspectives and the implications of these in the lives of a Christian. Second, it is imperative to translate the Bible into their language. The Lord talks to everyone differently through the Scriptures – that dreams can have importance is not new to the biblical message; a mature African Christian who can read these biblical accounts will indeed find the solution in God's Word rather than with a diviner.

I am convinced that reading the Bible in their mother tongue would be the best medicine for African Christians against the dangerous virus of religious syncretism.

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*Koabike Bedouma Joseph, of Togo, West Africa, is an exegete and Bible translator in his mother tongue, Moba. He has a Masters Degree in German literature. His first book of research in Moba religion and culture will be published soon.*





*Surely I know*

*the plans I have for you,  
says the Lord, plans for your  
welfare and not for harm,  
to give you a future with hope.*

JEREMIAH 29:11 NRSV