We Believe That the Earth Is God's Gift to Us
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# We Believe That the Earth Is God's Gift to Us

HINDUISM TODAY's publisher and editor met Nana (which means "queen") at the Parliamentary Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro. She is an ohemaa, or ruler-priestess of the Akuapem (part of the Akan) people and culture of Ghana, Africa. She offers a glimpse into the traditional African religion and its beliefs about God and the Earth.

There is strong revival of African traditional religion going on at this time, and the African is notoriously religious. The key to understanding him is through his religion. He considers God as our universal Father. For the Akans of Ghana, He is also our divine Mother, Nyame Obaatan Pa, a very caring provider. God is omnipotent, Gye Nyame, all-knowing, omnipresent and sustainer of the whole world. In African culture, all revolves around religion which strongly influences the living and thinking of the ordinary man and woman. In fact, African religion, no matter the level of sophistication or education of the individual, permeates every aspect of his life, from seedtime to harvest, through the rites of passage, birth, puberty, marriage, death and hereafter. We have no creeds to recite, as these dwell in the heart, and each one is himself the living creed.

All over Africa, the earth is regarded as the female spirit Asase Yaa, Mother Earth. One is expected to care for her, nurse, cherish and love her. Generally, one will not till the land without her prior permission. We ask her permission again before digging to bury the dead so that her child may return into her womb. Thursday is set aside for her, and on that day many Akans will not till the land. Asase Yaa is also known as the upholder of truth, and whenever someone's word is in doubt, he is asked to touch his lip to some soil to become credible.

Before every function and ceremony, a libation is done whereby water or spirit are poured onto the ground while calling the name of God, Mother Earth and the ancestors, and beseeching their blessings upon all present. Some have criticized this practice, but that is because they do not understand that every single act or

gesture of an Akan has a significance. Gesture and symbol play an important part in African rites. When in a dance a priestess raises her hands, she is delivering a message, "I am leaving all in the power of God."

We do not worship ancestors, but they are honored and revered as spirits and elders who stand close to God, who are a link between the living and the dead.

The European missionaries who colonized Africa from 1900 to 1945 condemned everything African - the religion, art, music and the systems of names, inheritance and marriage. Africans were forced to abandon their culture and adopt the Western style of life.

However, colonialism was mostly and urban phenomenon; it did not penetrate the rural areas where the majority lived. There, the tradition survived. It is still the way of life today and has tremendous influence on most Africans, whether Christian or Muslim. Almost all faithfully carry out the rites of passage. Children are given indigenous names, and the naming and outdooring (first-outing) ceremonies for babies, as well as puberty rites, traditional marriage and funeral rites all are done before their Western counterparts.

The aim of African religion is to promote harmony between man, the spirit world, society and the environment. Its distinctive feature is the sharing spirit. We believe that the earth is God's gift to us. We are merely the keepers of the earth and are charged with taking care of it and leaving it in a better condition than we found it. If we fail, our children will not have any earth to inherit.

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