

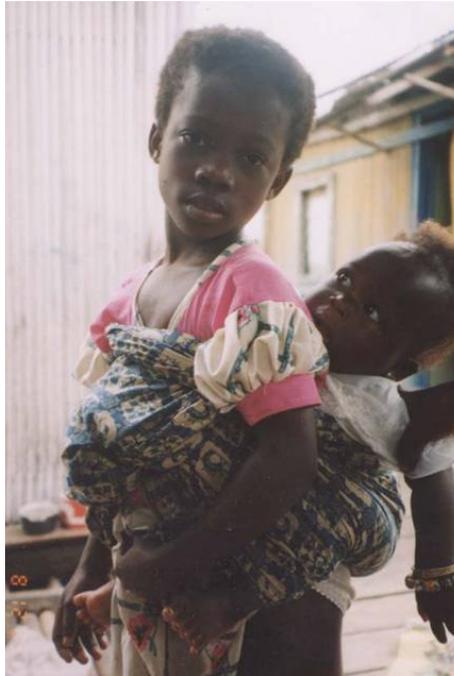
Are All Children Children of God?

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Brother Boakye looked in our direction and asked point blank, “And what do you think, Miss Chelsea?” I welcomed the sweet recognition of English, but the sound of my name was startling. I was too busy trying to make sure I understood the debate to have formed an opinion on the matter. “I have never really thought about it before” I replied. It was an honest answer.

What had started out as a lesson on one of the most basic principles in all of Gospel Doctrine, “The Family,” had evolved into one of the most complicated and fascinating discussions I have ever had at Church. The first paragraph was titled “All Children are Children of God.” Having grown up in the United States, this foundational principle of the Mormon Church was something I, and most Church members, took for granted. I can imagine my “home ward” back in California having approached the same text by simply reading a couple lines from this paragraph and then quickly moving on to the next section. However, here in West Africa, we had spent the last 90 minutes focused on this one concept and the question: Are all children the children of God?

I was living in Ghana as a professional anthropologist who spent my days seeking out and investigating indigenous knowledge. For some reason, I turned off this skill when I went



Photographs courtesy of the author

to Church. “All children can’t be children of God,” argued Sister Dworulu. “What about devil children?” We were all seated in the open air classroom of a local primary school, huddled into the children’s desks of the rented building. “If a fetish priest helps an infertile woman to get pregnant, is her child a child of God or of the devil?” Brother Mmemfri followed. The questions were coming in rapid succession now. “My cousin was barren. She went to an okomfo and she got pregnant. It was a good thing,” a new sister argued. “Sometimes those children turn out bad. Just you watch,” an older member challenged. It was in the middle of this debate that I was asked my thoughts. I

hesitated.

To an outsider this may not seem like a difficult puzzle, but to someone aware of the historical precedents and social repercussions, I was trapped. Either I validated indigenous healers as a legitimate source of power and healing (something that many Churches, including our own, have tried to dispel since the beginning of Christian missionaries coming to Sub-Saharan Africa in the Fourteenth Century), or I condoned the mistreatment and even infanticide of certain segments of the population based on cultural etiologies of birth and disease causation.

By way of introduction, it is important to understand that early Christian missionaries denounced all indigenous religious and healing practices. They taught that witchcraft didn’t exist and that only Jesus Christ had the power to heal or save souls. Despite these protestations, most parishioners continued to attend indigenous ritual healing ceremonies, arguing that if Christian Churches don’t believe in witchcraft, how can they protect us from it? Because many parts of Africa are religiously pluralistic, (i.e., you can believe in Allah, God, Jesus Christ, Joseph Smith, Onyame, and lesser gods with no contradictions or mutual exclusivity), many people adhere to multiple religions at the same time. Thus, many people have no problem going to Christian religions on Sundays and fetish priests on Wednesdays. “Why not have Jesus, Onyame, and Joseph





Smith?” argued my friend Emmanuel. “Who wouldn’t want more help?”

Over time, missionaries grew weary of trying to combat indigenous religious adherence. Witchcraft was such an integral part of people’s lives that Christian Churches could never retain members or get true converts, because they rejected and didn’t understand the power of witchcraft. Slowly, missionaries began to acknowledge that witchcraft, sorcery, and fetish priests did exist but subverted that power by arguing that these practices used the power of the devil. Christianity was, therefore, the only source of “good” power and could protect people from these “evil” practices. This concept has held its ground for a long time and many of the newer religions, like Mormonism, have not had to face these questions directly but have built upon the historical precedents of early Christian missionaries’ claims that indigenous religions and ritual healing ceremonies are associated with “evil.”

Yet, every once in a while there is a fundamental contradiction, such as

the questions that arose in our Sunday school debate, “If all children are children of God, then how do you explain the children brought about by fetish priests? Either they are created because fetish priests use God’s power, and all children are children of God; or they are created with the devil’s power, which means that there are some children who are not children of God.”

I fundamentally resisted this last possibility. West Africa has its own ornate past, full of infanticide and “devil children.” Historically, babies born with deformities were immediately assessed and labeled “snake children,” “bush children,” or “devil children.” It was believed they had been born with problems because family members had broken taboos like fishing on Wednesdays, sex in the bush, laughing at a pregnant person, witchcraft, etc. Since these babies weren’t “real” children, they could be left at the side of streams or in the bush to go back to their real homes. An increase in the number of hospital births over time amplified the number of physically handicapped children who survived in the population. While the overall treatment of handicapped individuals in West Africa is very specific to region and disability, judgment is usually based on the origin of the handicap (i.e., was the family being cursed for something they did?) Armored with this cultural knowledge I shuddered to think what actions I would be promulgating if I agreed that some children were devil children. When I was asked directly, I stammered out something benign like “I think God loves everyone as His children, regardless of the circumstances of their birth.”

Eventually, everyone in the class reached the conclusion that we don’t know where the power of the fetish

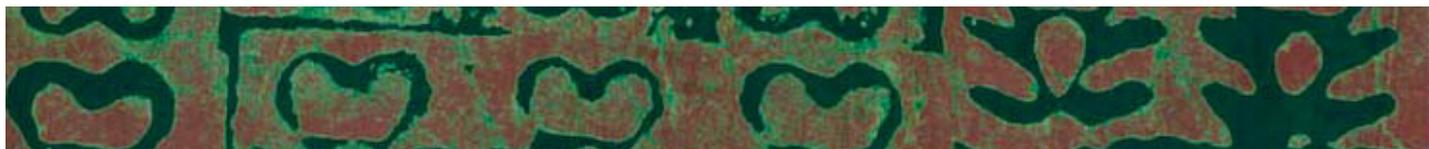
priests comes from, but all children should be treated like children of God, “even those you expect are really bush children,” whispered the elderly lady sitting next to me.

I laughed at my neighbors aside and felt really good about our Sunday School conclusion. On the difficult journey home—waiting for two taxis to fill up with passengers, traveling an hour on pot-holed roads, and walking a half mile in the red dirt—a thought crossed my mind. What if an obruni leader had been there today? What if they had asked a missionary with limited cultural knowledge these questions? What if they didn’t really understand the Twi meanings or the larger implications of these seemingly simple questions? More importantly, I wondered, how often do I give my Sunday school answers without really understanding the context and personal history of those with a differing cultural background from mine?

Recognizing this hit me like the dense Harmattan winds of the West African winter that Sunday. Too often in our religion, we use the word culture to connote something superfluous, peripheral, secondary, or changeable. We refer to the “culture of Christ” as something that supersedes different ethnic and national cultures. While I agree that Gospel principles can reach beyond man-made boundaries, I think that this misunderstanding of the term “culture” threatens our ability and desire to seek out the best practices from societies around the world and to acknowledge, both theoretically and practically, the implications of this knowledge.

This was supposed to be a very simple lesson. I’m sure “devil children” never even crossed the minds of the committee members who created the lesson and the apostles who gave





their approval. With different languages, cultures, levels of Gospel knowledge, and unique histories of people in the Church, it seems practical to promulgate correlated Church education materials that are simple and uniform. My concern, however, is that there are consequences to studying the Gospel—which is neither simple nor uniform—this way. My fear is that the pendulum has swung so far over in the direction of similarity that we are missing out on the benefits of diversity—the rich knowledge and expanded sense of hope that comes in seeing things a new way.

Christ was a great example of this. He chose as his closest confidants lowly fishermen and based many of His words on their indigenous knowledge. The parables were created by using their idioms, folk knowledge, references, and perspectives. Even though He had an eternal perspective of the Gospel, He recognized the importance of culture and used this knowledge to teach lessons that were more powerful and more personal than just reciting doctrine. Our scriptures are inundated with historical insight, cultural meaning, and social relationships. They are not correlated, simple, or uniform. To me, this means there is as much or more to be learned from recognizing and understanding the specific environments in which the Gospel is practiced as well as the general principles themselves.

When I finally arrived home that day to our cement compound in the middle of the thick rainforest, I was exhausted. I plopped on my bed and started peeling off my shoes. I noticed that my feet were disgusting. There were clearly demarcated lines where my sandals had been and the rest was pure dirt. I sat there with my feet hanging off the bed too tired to move. I secretly wished that someone would magically

appear and go fetch the water and wash my feet. This thought lasted one second before I realized that I wouldn't wish that on my worst enemy. My feet were covered in mud, ants, dirt, and the consequences of outdoor urinals for women. I had been exposed to live chickens in the taxi, goat feces at the station, and all of the remnants from cooking: ash, crushed peppers, fu fu spatter, and spilled soda.

I lied there with my feet off the bed, weighing my predicament in my mind, when I felt a warm sensation overcome me. I remembered the story of Christ washing the apostle's feet. For the first time in my life, I began to think about the condition of their feet. I thought about their roads, homes, and water sources. I realized that their feet would have looked something like mine. Suddenly, I understood Peter's reluctance and Christ's humility in a more abundant way. I had tears streaming down the sides of my eyes as I replayed the story of the woman in Luke 7 washing Christ's feet with her tears and her hair.

As I fell asleep, feet protruding like Procrustes, I thought about how much more I got out of Church that Sunday than usual. A cultural perspective had

given me incredible insight into stories I had known my whole life as well as new questions. How do Okomfos heal? Why have I never thought about the reality and power of spiritual gifts before? What implications does that have for other faiths? For women?

I used to bear my testimony that the Church was the same all over the world and that taking the sacrament in Twi felt so comforting. I don't say those testimonies any more. Not because they are incorrect but because they communicate things that we already know. We already know that Church doctrine and practices are the same whether you are in Sri Lanka or Helsinki. What I find more significant is what we don't already know. How can we learn from and be edified by each other? How can knowledge flow both directions? What parables would Christ use if He had gone to Africa? Asia? Or Provo? It takes diversity and indigenous knowledge to expand our paradigm and no amount of simplicity or uniformity can replicate that.

The question had seemed harmless enough. But it was through these simple words that I discovered the importance of cultural knowledge. ■

