

AFRICAN ANECDOTES

November 2009

It is wonderful to have the opportunity to sit down and write to you again after such a long time. I am sorry that it has been so long, but I can't say that I feel guilty – there truly has not been time. I am very thankful to say that all is fairly well with us and with our family. Joy is experiencing problems with her pregnancy – gestational diabetes, and that is causing some concern, but we are praying that all will be well. She is due on December 17th.

The purpose of our trips to Zimbabwe is for teaching. But sometimes the teacher learns more than the students! I feel this is always true for myself. Firstly, the one who studies for herself always learns more than the one who simply receives information, and it is one of my dearest wishes that African women learn how to study for themselves. There are some rare gems who are able to do this, but most have almost insurmountable hindrances. In the group of 60+ women at Chingesi (Photo 1), only three had Bibles. And there were very few, if any, who completed high school.

They also have major cultural hindrances to strong faith because their culture has not been impacted by Christian values the way western culture has. They truly fear evil spirits (and animals they supposedly inhabit such as owls), witch doctor's spells, leprechaun-like tokoloshi, and ancestors. One brother told Les that he was absolutely certain that evil spirits had attacked him because his children and their spouses are dying.

The sister pictured here (Photo 2) with her granddaughter has lost eight of her nine children. It certainly cannot be easy to face up to the fact that your children are dying because of their own sins – much more comfortable to believe you are a victim of evil spirits. By the way, 2 ½ years ago this same grandmother, at that time a very new Christian, asked me to go pray for her daughter who was at the point of death – the one and only time I was ever at her village, 10 kms away. The girl in the picture is one of the daughter's 12(?) children who stared at me with big eyes as I prayed. Her big eyes motivated me to "dig" and find out whether the mother had heard the gospel and what could be done to ensure that she met the Lord with her sins forgiven. The "baptizing-tent" was erected right outside the hut, and water was carried for kilometres to fill it. The mother did not have enough strength to walk or even raise herself out of the water. I have often wondered what happened to that family, and really rejoiced to see that they are still worshipping God.

As I get to know the women, I learn how very difficult it is for them to overcome their culture. To not participate in ancestor worship can mean denying yourself meat at a funeral when it is the only meat you have seen for weeks. It can mean being accused by your family of bringing disaster upon the whole family - possibly even to be chased away from your home. It can mean turning your back on your only hope of recovering from an illness because there is no medicine at the clinic, and the herbs given by the witch doctor, which are sometimes effective, come only at the cost of paying him to worship ancestors.

As I teach, I learn a lot about African culture – I should say cultures, as culture varies from tribe to tribe and even within tribes. It is very interesting – and like all cultures, there are areas where I could learn a lot from them, and there are areas where there are major conflicts with the will of God. The part of their culture that I think negatively impacts their spiritual and physical lives the most is their marriage customs. Before the time of the white man, an African man had to prove his ability to care for his wife before marriage. That is in full agreement with Genesis 2:24: "a man shall leave his father and mother." The way this was done was by presenting a farming implement, such as a plow, to the parents of the girl. As years went by, this developed into an elaborate business arrangement between the extended family of the groom and extended family of the bride, including gifts and a bride price, called lobola. (I have been in contact with over 20 different African languages, and have found only three common words among all the languages: muntu (person), lobola, and tokoloshi !) In recent times, perhaps because times are so difficult, parents have become so greedy that now it takes, on average, 20 years to pay the lobola. As you can imagine, this leads to a lot of fornication – to the point that now fornication is just accepted as a natural part of the culture. The way 95% (that is their estimate) of people in Zimbabwe get married is: 1. Become one flesh until the girl gets pregnant. 2. The girl's parents chase her to live with the boyfriend at his parents' home to force his family to begin negotiating lobola. After 20 years of paying lobola, they have a wedding and go sign. 3. That enables them to finally truly leave their parents. (Until that time, legally and culturally, the girl and any children born to her belong to the girl and her parents.) Of course, a major problem, even in their eyes, is that most never get married. A woman either ends up with a string of children, each by a different boyfriend, or she ends up staying in a relationship with a man who treats her like a servant and sleeps around with many others. AIDS is rampant. Getting the African brethren to see that their culture is the exact opposite of Gen.2:24 is relatively easy. The bad fruit of their cultural practice is obvious to all. Getting them to come up with solutions acceptable both to them and to God is difficult. I always ask them for their solution first, and in the past, they have laughed at women who come up with what I consider to be a good solution. This time I decided to first ask, but then encourage them by telling them the way strong South African Christians with the same culture have solved the problem. (Unfortunately not all S.A. Christians are strong.) The strong ones remain pure and negotiate lobola in their cultural way, including such a steep bride price that it is impossible to pay. Then they negotiate how much lobola is reasonable to expect at the moment. Then the bride and groom are allowed to go and get legally married with the parents' blessing. Abstinence for a few months of negotiations is much more doable than 20 years of celibacy! Years later, when the lobola is fully paid, there is a huge cultural wedding, usually with several of their own children in attendance! This requires sacrifice on the part of the bride's parents because they fear that once their daughter is legally married, her husband will not bother to pay all the lobola. Many Christians, stumble at this. Many non-Christian "husbands" of women who have been baptized don't see why they should go and get legally married after living together for years. And many teens don't see why they should wait for negotiations before sleeping together – their parents didn't! This subject is the one Les and I spend the most time on because it is destroying them physically and spiritually. I pray that as we learn more and more about their culture, we will become better and better at helping them.

Photo 3: An example of one African culture. The man must walk in front of his family, carrying a weapon to ward off lions, etc. The women walk behind, carrying all the luggage, plus babies on their backs. Now that there are no more lions, it means he doesn't have to carry a weapon! The brethren walked up to 20 miles in the burning sun and in the rain, carrying their luggage, to attend the meetings.

One of the truly amazing facets of African culture - one I (and I suspect most of you) could really learn from, is their ability to handle correction without getting angry. Les's translator for part of the trip, a young man from Gwanda, said he was greatly encouraged by the marriage lesson. He says he will invite us to his wedding! At Mugaladivha, the wife of a witch doctor answered correctly that witch doctors are an abomination in the eyes of God. At Dolo, after the lesson on witch doctors, one woman raised her hand and said to the other 200 women, "Let us not lie. We have been doing these things. But now that we know better, let us stop." Below: Part of the 200 women at Dolo.

At Silalatshani, Les preached on the parable of the sower in Mark 4 and talked about the "rocks" and "thorns" they are facing. We both elaborated on these for three days from the book of Mark: evil spirits, ancestors, marriage and divorce, causing others to stumble, cheating on drought relief instead of having faith in God's provision, forsaking the assembling of the saints to go to funerals instead of remembering Christ's death (most had no idea what it meant to die on a cross). I told them that we also have rocks and thorns in our culture – some are just different! And after three days of those difficult lessons, sitting flat on the ground on grass mats under a tent that was so hot it caused the pages of my Bible to warp, the women said, "We love you so much. We want you to be our mother and never leave us." (They now consider me to be "grown-up" since I have six grandchildren.) Their letter of thanks is in Les's newsletter. Photo 4: the "sauna" at Silalatshani and a rare sight –

An African woman who has lost her headscarf (bottom centre, photo 5). They wear the scarves 24/7 once married.

The hands of this precious sister who worked so hard to make a gift for me tell their own story (photo 6).

in Africa is not all serious. Africans really have a keen sense of humor and laugh at each other without hard feelings. It is sometimes hard for us to share humor because of the language barrier, but at Safari, I had such a good translator that she was able to "catch" my jokes – and translate their replies. So I had one of the most delightful afternoons ever. Added to the fun was a couple of old grandmothers who kept dozing in the heat. Every time they nodded off, their papers blew away in the strong wind! No translation was needed to see the humor in that, and all laughed uproariously. Yet even though the gogo's kept losing their papers, they refused to put them away. Even though they could not read, they HAD to pretend like they could! (The "pulpit" and "floor" in this picture is made of African cement: a mixture of termite mound dirt and animal dung.)

At the end of the day, several wanted to be baptized so we went to the nearest well – a well newly dug by one of the brethren. The water coming out of the well looked like mud and I heard the women muttering. So I said to my translator, "This dirty water has the power to make people clean." She clicked right away, giggled delightedly, and lost no time in turning the women's mutters to chuckles. However, there was not enough of that muddy water to do the job, so the brother instructed his wife to empty a 20-gallon jug of clean water she had carried for several kilometres. She was willing, but I was so proud of Les for stopping her from making that sacrifice, because there still would not have been enough water. They had to pour the muddy water out of the "baptizing tent" and walk several kilometres to the next well.

I want to close by thanking the many of you who constantly keep us in your prayers. You and your prayers are so special to us. The Lord has helped us through many difficulties. When I think of the past trip I think of the trip when the most went wrong (Bigboy also had major car trouble) – and the trip when the most went right! I have been blessed in so many ways – a mechanic-in-a-million for a husband – and friends like you! May God bless you all!

With love from Linda Maydell