Africa, the 'Dark Continent'?
Category : April 1999
Published by Anonymous on Apr. 01, 1999

Africa, the 'Dark Continent'?

Swami Ghananand Saraswati of Ghana in his August, 1998, Minister's Message advised "India and Hindu masters to turn to Africa with swamis and brahmins coming to conduct workshops and give Africa a chance to remove the veil of spiritual darkness." Bemshu Thabiti Saanuote, an African-American training to be a Yoruba priest, counters that Africa is not a "dark continent." He calls for alliance with Hindus, urging them not to encourage Africans to abandon their indigenous faiths. The debate highlights the sensitive issue of Hinduism's presence in Africa and the renewal of indigenous religions.

Africa Shines Bright

Bemshu Thabiti Saanuote, 26,

Like most other black people who practice a traditional African religion, I recognize myself as an African, though I was born in America. I am an Orisa Worshiper (the traditional religion of Yorubaland, Nigeria, in West Africa) and am devoted to the Goddess Olokun. I belong to the oldest, most traditional (following strict Yoruba protocol) lineage in the U.S.--this is Oyotunji, also called Orisa-Vodou. This is different from the Voodoo that I grew up hearing about in my hometown of Lake Charles, Louisiana, in the deep South. I hope to begin my initiation into the Orisa priesthood sometime in 1999.

Swami Ghananandji is correct in saying, "African religions and Hinduism have certain similarities." Both possess important techniques for Self Realization and advancing world harmony. Therefore, as a reader of Hinduism Today and lifelong devotee of the African Divinity, Olokun, I am unsettled by Swami's statement that Hinduism can "remove the veil of spiritual darkness that has given Africa the name, the Dark Continent." Who says such a veil exists? African religions have worldwide membership, with priestly orders that consistently heal those afflicted with diseases which the West has labeled incurable; training people of all colors in ethics and spiritual sciences. From the United States to Sweden, African religions are sharing the rites of purification and growth. In the Swami's own homeland, a strong communal spirit exists that has built schools, hospitals and social service initiatives that are up to par with India in every way. Though it will sound tart, I would ask if Swami Ghananandji has given his own indigenous culture and religion a try?

While Indians would admonish their own children to hold fast to their own great culture, spiritual teachings and prophets, would they then encourage Africans to let go of their own equally great legacy? Africans have seen this same kind of egocentrism at the hands of Christians and Muslims. What we want is respect and partnerships, not religious conversion. I would hope that we will not endorse the demise of traditional African religions among Black people. I hope that Swami Ghananandji finds room in his heart to realize that Africa has never been the "Dark Continent." To the contrary, it illuminates the world with it's beautiful glow.

Regardless of Swami's intent, the term "Dark Continent" is a

throwback to the days of the African Holocaust or Trans-Atlantic slave trade. It's a term rooted in bias, and possesses a great and evil energy around it. It has been used to justify murder, discrimination, separation of family, loss of freedom and destruction of cultural continuity. It can be very degrading and embarrassing to hear the term used as if it is accurate. It reminds many Africans around the world that no matter what we contributed or continue to contribute to humanity, we are nothing more than animals to some people. Of course, this is unfortunate. We are all born to realize that we are "God living on Earth."

The modern conflicts in Africa can be traced historically to colonial efforts to divide and exploit African nations. Many of the wars currently being fought in Africa are over who will supply European nations with natural resources. Even many prejudices that result in tribalistic attitudes were begun by colonialists and are encouraged by modern multi-national corporations.

I am upset, because I thought that Indians and Hindus would understand and empathize with African people; that they would be the last to perpetuate stereotypes or misinformation--certainly the last to suggest that because of the abuse that Africans have suffered at the hands of Christian and Islamic imperialism, that they should now turn to a spiritual culture outside of their own. Would Siva or Kali approve of that? In closing, I would like to say that in recent years I have envisioned a formal alliance among traditional religions around the world. It would serve to protect our cultures and erase any misunderstandings between us.

Bemshu Thabiti Saanuote, 26, resides in St. Louis, Missouri, where he is the program coordinator for the only therapeutic camping program in America for homeless families.

We Are Deep in the Shadows

Swami Ghananandji, 61,

I know very well that my message will not only cause a stir among certain Black African communities but will also attract both positive and negative responses from the entire reading public. Such responses are all welcome, as they offer the opportunity for clarification, especially to those of African descent who are outside the continent and love Africa so much, but yet know very little about the continent. I am simply stating my views as a Hindu monk and what I think Hinduism, alongside other religions, can do to uplift Africa from the mess in which we find ourselves. I would like to stress here that I have my roots in African religion. My grandfather was a traditional priest, and my father is a prominent traditional priest, and so was my mother. The truth is that having been exposed to Hinduism, I now understand African religious practices better. I am not asking Africans to abandon their religion. Neither am I asking for any cultural enslavement that will make Africans Indians. I also hope the good works being carried out by priests of African religions in the U.S. and Sweden by "training people of all colors in ethics and spiritual sciences" does not mean converting them to African religions.

I am very happy to learn for the first time from Bemshu Thabiti Saanuote that African religions have worldwide membership and are healing people with incurable diseases elsewhere. But

it's not happening in Africa, which has more people afflicted with incurable diseases. Thousands of people die every day from very simple diseases because of lack of medical facilities. Why is the focus in far-away United States of America and Sweden, where there are such excellent medical facilities and the best hospitals on the globe? On the continent of Africa today, most of the hospitals, where they occur, either do not have the personnel, or the drugs are simply not there. Most of the hospitals are virtual graveyards. The kind of healing Africa needs, as we enter the next millennium, is the one that will cure the broad masses of the continent from the ills of ignorance, squalor, illiteracy, poverty, disease, hunger and deprivation. On Africa being depicted as the "Dark Continent," I shall entreat Mr. Saanuote to read all the good history and geography books to see for himself how the early writers described Africa as a "Dark Continent." I made reference to the "Dark Continent" just to make my point clear, because the term is well known.

Why does Mr. Saanuote doubt that there exists a veil of spiritual darkness? He should not expect to see the veil with the eyes of flesh. This veil can only be seen with the spiritual eye. The veil is so thick and dark, and this has imposed night on the eyes of the people of the continent, as a result of which people are fighting senseless and bloody wars. There is a spate of ethnic conflicts and tribal hatred. People of the same country--speaking the same language--are killing themselves because one is tall and the other is short. There is rule of terror all over the continent. Oppression, suppression and repression are the order of the day among our leaders.

Two African countries have fought a brutal war over an arid

and unproductive land, with very heavy loss of life. Leaders of certain countries support rebels and factions in other countries to make life uneasy for the ordinary citizenry. Africa today has the highest number of refugees in the world. The veil is too real, and the darkness that it imposes on the continent makes our leaders defend ideologies and forget about uniting the peoples of the continent. The industrialized countries create situations for us only to buy arms and ammunition from them to kill ourselves. This veil must be removed.

Mr. Saanuote claims that in my own country a "communal spirit" exists that has built schools and hospitals. I would like to invite him to come and point out one school or hospital that has been built, owned and run by any of the African religions. The missionary schools and hospitals in my country as I know them are either Christian or Muslim. I would like to invite Mr. Saanuote to my country to show him where Africa truly is.

Finally, I would want to assure Mr. Saanuote that I have a very big room in my heart not only for our rich African cultural heritage, but also for all true religions and all the progressive cultures of the world that can determine a way forward for Africa to develop both materially and spiritually.

Swami Ghananandji, 61, was initiated by Swami Krishnanand of India in 1975. He heads the Hindu Monastery of Africa in Accra, Ghana, and regularly imparts spiritual guidance to devotees.

CONTACTS: SWAMI GHANANAND SARASWATI, HINDU MONASTERY OF AFRICA, PO BOX 13693, ACCRA, GHANA. E-MAIL: tonyjalkh@hotmail.com; BEMSHU THABITI

SAANUOTE, 6855 PLYMOUTH AVENUE APT. A, ST. LOUIS, MISSOURI 63130 USA.
E-MAIL: saanuote@yahoo.com