

Letter from Africa

by Riley and Duncan Murdock

May 2005

Nayesu! That's how to say hi in the Waama language, which is one of the 12 or so languages people here speak. The fun thing about Waama greetings is that the response (like saying "all is well") is "Yo!"



Greetings are really important here and can go on and on as people ask each other how they slept, how their families are, how their health is, and so on.

While you guys have been enjoying snow and spring, we have been in the hot season, and this one is really a doozy! It's the worst one Mom and Dad can remember. Our house rarely gets below 90 degrees, which wouldn't be so bad if the humidity weren't so high too. I sure hope the rain starts soon!

Since we last wrote you, Duncan and I got some new pets – 3 little deer, called duikers, and a tiny piglet. We saw the pig one day wandering around without her family, so we adopted her. We think she was the runt, she was so small. We got the deer from men who found them in the bush while they were hunting. We had to bottle feed them milk for a long time. They are all really cute and fun!



In our last letter, I said I would try to explain to you what people here believe about God and how it makes their lives really hard, scary and sad. The traditional religion here is called

animism, and people who practice it are called animists. Animists can be found all over the world and have many beliefs and practices in common. To help you understand a little better, I decided to write as if I were an animist boy and tell you about myself.

"Before I was born, my mother made a sacrifice and prayed to Tchangoua, an important spirit, that she would have a child. After my birth, my parents went back to the altar of Tchangoua to thank him and to dedicate me to him with more animal sacrifices. Every year we must go to Tchangoua's altar and renew our pledge of faith to him by sacrificing at least a chicken. Now if I get sick, we ask Tchangoua, or one of the lesser spirits, to give me good health and we make a sacrifice at the same time. Once, when I was really sick, my parents didn't have the animals necessary for a good sacrifice, so they begged Tchangoua to heal me with the promise that when I am older I will repay him myself. I got better, and one day I will have to repay Tchangoua.

See, we don't believe in a god to worship. We do believe that there is one god higher and greater than the other spirits out there, but he is too far away to care about us. Instead, we focus on the spirits we believe are all around us – spirits of our ancestors and other non-human spirits. But we don't worship them either – we use them to get what we want. If we give them what they want (like animal sacrifices) or do the right things (like special ceremonies) we can get them to do what we want, either good things (like send rain) or bad things (like curse someone). We can also get them to tell us what we want to know, like whether we should plant our crops yet, or who stole our cow.

"Since we don't always know how to manipulate the spirits, our "medicine men" or fetishers, tell us what to do. For example, if we want rain, we make a special sacrifice. If we want a good harvest, we burn the dry grasses on the nearby mountains. If one of us gets sick, my father goes to the fetisher to find out why. It might be a neighbor who

cursed us because he's jealous of our crops or because one of us gave him a dirty look (in which case we curse him back). Or it might be our old great uncle who died last year and doesn't think we gave him a good enough party at his funeral (so we throw a bigger party). Everything is connected to the spirits – we think about them all the time, and we are often afraid, because we never know what they will do. They are unpredictable and greedy and they lie. The fetishers can get them to do just about anything for the right price, so we have a hard time trusting anyone.

“In order to protect ourselves, we use charms or fetishes. These charms have power and anyone can buy them, but if a fetisher has “blessed” them they're even more powerful. These can be a ring, a bracelet, or a little leather pouch with bits of the Koran in



them to wear as a necklace, for example. We have fetishes and shrines in our houses – piles of rocks, a mound of mud where we do sacrifices, special bones, and so on.

“As you can imagine, it is hard to get ahead when you have to constantly be making sacrifices and paying the fetishers. Every week my grandfather, who is the head of our



household, goes to the fetisher and makes a sacrifice to make sure we are all protected, to find out if there is anything he needs to know about our future, and so on. Hardly anyone here can improve his life because he is kept poor doing this kind of thing. Some people get powerful by doing a lot for the spirits and they can get richer than the rest of us.”

Wow - imagine trying to live with “gods” like that instead of believing in a loving Father who never changes, who is all-powerful and who wants the best for us. When people here find out that Jesus was the ultimate and final sacrifice, it really means a lot to them – it means they are really free! Sometimes they shout for joy when they find out! Even so, their animistic beliefs have been such an important part of their lives for so long, it takes a while for them to really change the way they think and act. Please pray for the people here to find freedom in Christ, and for the Christians to totally leave behind their old animistic ways.

QUIZ

1. What new animals do we have?
2. Do you remember how to say hi in Waama and what the response is?
3. What religion are most people here?
4. Tell me some of the things they believe.
5. What would you tell an animist about Jesus?