

THE CENTURY OF AFRICAN WOMEN SOWING THE SEEDS OF HOPE BY SONNI DAVID, UGANDA

I work as a rural sociologist for the International Center for Tropical Agriculture (CIAT), Uganda. I am the only woman and the only social scientist on a team of seven biological scientists. I am also one of only two African women scientists working in the consortium of agricultural research institutions known as the Consultative Group on International Agricultural Research.

CIAT works to improve food security among the poor in developing countries by developing and disseminating new agricultural technologies.

Although originally from Liberia, I am now based in Kampala and work with small-scale farmers throughout Eastern and Southern Africa. I feel that it is important for sociologists, especially African women, to work in agriculture, since providing solutions to the problems of African agriculture requires an understanding of the social context.

Also, in most parts of Africa, women are the mainstay of family farms.

I joined the SGI in Kenya in 1992 and moved to Uganda in 1993. My Buddhist practice helps me be more optimistic about the future despite the seemingly gloomy political and economic situation in much of Africa. What encourages me is SGI President Ikeda's call for Africa to become the continent of the twenty-first century, and the Buddhist view that one person can make a difference in the life of an entire society. I feel that Buddhism's emphasis on celebrating differences is highly relevant to helping Africans overcome ethnic hatred and gender discrimination. My own Buddhist practice has helped me respect others regardless of their background or status.

There is a significant link between my Buddhist practice and my role as a sociologist. As a sociologist working in rural development, I am seeking to empower rural people to develop themselves, create value and bring about social change. As a pioneer Buddhist in Africa, I feel my role is also to facilitate change at the spiritual level by encouraging people to do their "human revolution" (a process of fundamental inner reformation) and in that way bring about peace and social change. I believe that Buddhism has much to offer African people since, in contrast to the dependency mentality cultivated by colonialism and neocolonialism, it encourages self-reliance, based on the recognition that each individual holds the key to his or her own happiness. I feel fortunate to have the dual challenge of being a pioneer Buddhist in Africa and working in development, and I look forward to many more challenges and successes.

TAKING RESPONSIBILITY BY GERALDINE E. OKU, NIGERIA

I was born in Lagos, Nigeria, and qualified as a lawyer in the United Kingdom. I currently work with a bank in Nigeria. I was introduced to Buddhism here in 1988 by my sister. Practicing Buddhism has enabled me to experience significant personal development, allowing me for example, to become aware of and change a tendency to be critical and judgmental of myself and others. This, in turn, has enabled me to function more happily and effectively in my work.

I find the teachings of Buddhism very empowering. They have cleared up a number of perplexing questions for me, like why "bad" things happen to "good" people or vice versa. The Buddhist law of cause and effect clearly and logically explains why things "happen" to individuals, and even whole peoples, countries and continents.

I have also become more acutely aware of the larger society I live in. I have realized that the causes of our problems on this fantastic continent originate in people's mindsets and their

attitudes to life; I have also realized that the solutions rest with us. We must change the course of our history as a people. It is here that belief systems — religious or not — play their role. It is people's belief systems that influence the actions that they take. When — individually or collectively — we see the power to create changes as being outside ourselves, we relinquish our responsibility, leaving everything up to that “source of power,” whatever it may be. In fact, however, wars, famine, the AIDS epidemic and so on are not caused by a source outside of ourselves, and therefore, as Buddhism teaches, the solution to these problems must come from us now. I have realized that I must be part of the solution in the way that I am best suited to be.

Practicing Nichiren Buddhism has enabled me to see that I cannot be happy on my own while others around me are suffering — not just materially but spiritually. My goal is to contribute to relieving that suffering in my own way. I try to do this in my work with my clients by finding constructive ways of resolving problems.

I am determined to show that the efforts of one human being continuing to make positive changes in his or her life can help bring about a peaceful world.

TRANSCENDING LIMITATIONS BY SOLANGE KOUO EPA, MOZAMBIQUE

I am a medical doctor, a pediatrician and community health specialist. I was born in Cameroon but have lived most of my life elsewhere. I was introduced to Nichiren Buddhism in 1987 when I was studying in France. My deep wish at the time was to have a job that I enjoyed and that would enable me to contribute to society.

In 1989, I had the good fortune to land a job as a national program coordinator for the World Health Organization (WHO). I was thirty-eight years old at the time. To date, no one else has ever been appointed to this responsibility at so young an age.

Since 1990, I have worked in a number of African countries and have recently been transferred to Mozambique, one of the countries most lacking in health care. I view my appointment as an opportunity to create positive change and as an acknowledgement of my competence. The African region of WHO includes forty-six countries, and at present there are only six women in leading positions within the organization in this region. I feel that holding such a position as a woman is particularly significant in Africa because I can contribute to the enhancement of women's status. Women often work harder, more seriously and with more humanism than men. I feel we also tend to build more confidence in the activities of the United Nations.

The wisdom and energy that I derive from my Buddhist practice have enabled me to continually transcend my perceived limitations in my work. I base myself on the Buddhist principle that “faith equals daily life.” The more I practice my faith, the easier it becomes for me to treat the people I meet with genuine respect and to feel a heart-to-heart connection with them. This has also enabled me to transform conflictual relationships with male colleagues who have felt threatened by my independence. In 1995, my contribution to my field was acknowledged when I received the first WHO award in the African region.

The wisdom and determination that I have derived from my practice of Buddhism have enabled me to chart a clear course to the present, particularly when times have been difficult and I have felt challenged by life.

I firmly believe that, as individuals base themselves on the teachings and philosophy of Buddhism, Africa will be able to stand up and shine as a model for the world in the twenty-first century.

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