

This African Mary

Understands My Swahili Prayers



It was the week before Christmas in Dar es Salaam and a Tanzanian mother was reminding her young daughter Bahati about the Christmas story. She took a Christmas card of a European painting of the birth of Jesus Christ from the table in their sitting room and said: “Bahati, here you can see Mary, Joseph and the new born child Jesus. And there are the shepherds and the animals in the manger.” Bahati nodded happily. Her mother went on: “If you pray to Mary, the mother of Jesus, she will always help you.” But suddenly Bahati frowned and said in a sad voice: “But I don’t think this foreign Mary — this ‘Mzungu’ [Swahili for foreigner] Mary — will understand my Swahili prayers.”

Bahati’s mother was taken aback and said: “Oh!” Then Bahati’s mother went over to the table, picked up another Christmas card and said: “Maybe you’ll like this one better.” It was a painting by a well-known Tanzanian artist that portrayed the scene of Jesus Christ’s birth in an African setting. The cave or stable in Bethlehem had become an African hut with a thatched roof. Several sheep nuzzled the straw that the baby Jesus lay on. The African Mary sat quietly receiving gifts of maize meal, milk, oil to shine her baby and firewood from her neighbors. Joseph sat attentively off to the side. A single chicken wandered around in the background.

Bahati’s mother sat waiting. Suddenly Bahati’s face glowed with a big smile and she cried out: “Oh, yes! I’m sure *this African Mary* understands my Swahili prayers.”

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