

*Storm clouds gathered on the horizon.
Suddenly, without warning, lightning struck
the tree under which she sat.*



Anna

The Thunder God

Anna Agbanvor

[Ask a woman to present this first-person report.]

My father was a powerful voodoo high priest in southern Benin. I saw firsthand how powerful voodoo can be. It can kill, or it can heal, and apparently it can suspend the laws of nature.

I was pregnant far beyond the normal nine months, but I could not go into labor, and the baby could not be born. Someone had put a curse on me. No modern hospital was available to intervene, and I was miserable. But a group of Adventist Christians in my village learned of my plight and came to pray for me and my unborn baby. Soon after their prayer I went into labor and delivered the baby.

From that time on I realized that the Christians' God is more powerful than the voodoo gods. I decided to worship the living God, and my

husband and I began studying the Bible with Adventists in preparation for baptism.

Trials and Tragedy

My extended family was furious that I had turned my back on the family gods. They warned us that our decision could cost us our lives. But we were determined never to return

Voodoo (or vodun) is an animist religion that originated in Benin and spread through tribal groups in western Africa. It traveled with slaves to Brazil, Haiti, and parts of North America, where it is still practiced. Rituals include drumming, dancing, ancestor worship, and animal sacrifice. Dancers become possessed by a demon or spirit and speak with the voice of that demon or of a recently dead family member.

Hundreds of spirits are believed to control nature—the wind, the sea, the sky—and bring or withhold health, wealth, and happiness. Followers go to a voodoo priest or priestess for advice or to place or be released from a curse.

to the worship of darkness. Once one leaves voodoo, it is foolish to go near it again.

Then my father, the voodoo priest, died. Everyone in the family was expected to go to the funeral, which involves many voodoo ceremonies—dancing, calling on the spirits, and drinking. During these ceremonies the voodoo priests have power over the people, so I refused to go to my father's funeral. The priests and my relatives threatened my family—my children, my husband, and me—if I did not go. But I refused to place myself on the devil's playground.

That night we prayed before going to bed. During the night I awoke feeling an urgent need to pray. I knelt down and prayed for God's protection. Suddenly I heard thunder, as if a big storm was approaching. Then, without warning, the house crashed down around

They expected to find a body under the smoldering tree, but nobody lay there.

us. When I gained my senses, I realized that the roof had fallen in one piece, protecting us from being crushed. But I was burned on my arms and legs from the lightning that had struck the house. I shouted for help from the doorway, but people who had seen the lightning strike and the house cave in were sure that we were dead and had run away.

I found a nurse who ordered me to the hospital for treatment. My husband and I knew that voodoo priests had called upon the thunder god to destroy us. We vowed never to go back to the voodoo gods and decided to be baptized as soon as possible.

Thunder God Strikes Again

We found a different house to rent and moved in. A few days later as I sat under a tree shelling nuts, my husband saw storm clouds approaching and told me to go inside. But before I could move, lightning struck the tree under which I was sitting and knocked me out. I lay on the ground, barely conscious, next to my motionless husband. I felt a hand pushing on my chest as if to force breath into my lungs. Then strong arms carried us inside the house and placed us on the floor. To this day I don't know who helped us.

Villagers rushed to our house to see who had died. They believe that when thunder strikes, the thunder god has killed someone, and they may take the dead person's property. They expected to find a body under the smoldering tree, but nobody lay there.

Four priests of the thunder god entered our house to find the bodies they expected to see. But only my husband and I lay on the floor, semiconscious. I had burns on my arm and leg, but no other injuries. The thunder priests asked who had died, and I told them no one. They tried to carry us away, but some Adventist believers had arrived and refused to allow the thunder priests to touch us. They knew that the thunder priests would have killed me if they had been allowed to carry me away.

My husband and I were taken to the hospital, where doctors found seven burns on me. My husband was not seriously injured.

Death in the Family

Four days later I was released from the hospital. Only then did I learn that my eldest son, who lived in another village, had died the day I was struck by lightning. I dared not go to his funeral, for I knew that my older brother, who had taken my father's place as the voodoo priest, would kill me for deserting the family gods.

It wasn't safe for us to return to our home, for custom dictates that we make sacrifices to the spirits in order for the house to be "cleansed" of spirits. Church members helped us find a house to rent and took our children into their home for safety.

I was very sad. I had lost my son and my home on the same day, and I knew my own brother was putting these curses on us to force us to leave God and return to voodoo. But the tragedy drove us closer to God. We prayed more and

trusted Him more every day.

No Turning Back

Life is a challenge for us every day. Some people believe I'm a witch, because the thunder god could not kill us. Others place "juju," tokens from the voodoo priest, by our door. I just throw them away.

People tell me my life would be easier if I would just return to my father's religion, but for me and my family there is no turning back. I share my faith with others and tell them that my God saved me from the thunder god. I want everyone to know that my God is more powerful than any voodoo that people can try to use against me. I praise God that He led me to truth and that I can worship Him.

Our congregation numbers 70 or 80, and we meet in a small carport. It is difficult to invite people to worship God in a carport. Poor people will come, but those who have money laugh at us. And because we cannot all fit inside the carport, when it rains some people do not come to church.

Your weekly mission offering helps us reach out to people who have been blinded by spiritual darkness. Part of this quarter's Thirteenth Sabbath Offering will help build churches for congregations such as ours throughout West-Central Africa Division. When you give, remember the needs in Benin and West Africa.

Anna Agbanvor lives near Cotonou, Benin, where she shares her faith.