

## An African Religious Experience....in Winnipeg

### A new country, a new religion, and the blessings of the Shekinah

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Maybe you're like I am: when you travel, you want to see the sights, sites and sounds, but you also want a meaningful, personal connection. Something that wakes you up, surprises you, makes you think, wonder, feel. Sometimes, it's obvious and easy. Other times, it's like prospecting for truffles: you have to sniff around a whole lot to get a precious one.

I was sniffing around Winnipeg, Canada, with my husband Paul, on a perfect, cloudless day. There were plenty of places to visit and explore....but no truffles. We went to The Forks-an engaging tourist destination that combines a vast array of ethnic eateries, a very contemporary and artfully-designed museum of Winnipeg history, a riverfront walk, and shops. We were browsing in one when we heard what sounded like the wrath of God: sudden, explosive thunder, blinding lightning and pelting rain so intense we half-expected Noah to be off in a corner, hammering gopher wood into an ark.

Without any rain gear, and wearing the flimsiest of clothes, we stood in the shop, waiting for the second coming or the storm to pass-whichever occurred first. "It will probably last all day and maybe into the night," a saleswoman chirped. Half an hour dragged by. "How will we get out of here?" I whined to Paul. But he wasn't listening. He was staring through the window of the shop at a group of people standing outside under the eaves. "Look," he said. "All the girls are wearing the same clothes. And there's a nattily-dressed man with them. I'll bet they're a singing group."

We ran outside the shop, sidled alongside the building, and stood under the eaves. Sure enough, when we got close, over the crashing downpour, we could hear them singing. And then, suddenly, they stopped. "Encore!" we cried out, but they said they had to leave to get to their performance.

The man turned to us. He was wearing a long, checkerboard-patterned jacket and alligator shoes. "Come with us!" he said invitingly.

We huddled with them under their umbrellas, and got into their van-- our questions flying fast and furiously. Can you tell us about your group? Where are you from? Where are you performing? It turned out they were a church singing group, most of them lived in Saskatchewan and had come as refugees from South Sudan, which just became an African state in July 2011. The man was the founder and minister of a church with branches in seven countries. Hmm, did I detect a potential truffle?

We asked a million questions about South Sudan.. well, maybe six or seven. And their answers clarified a part of the world that was obfuscated for us before. South Sudan has oil. North Sudan has the pipeline. North Sudan wants a huge chunk of the revenue from oil in the South because they have the pipeline. China has moved in and is building a pipeline that bypasses North Sudan.

"It's so clear," I said. What I didn't say is that this is one of the reasons I travel: because I learn about other peoples' countries and cultures from them. Not from a third party, or from our media, but directly from the peoples' mouths.

"The name of our church is Shekinah," the preacher, Apostle Jonnahs A. Pound, said, interrupting my travel musings.

You could have knocked me over with a Hebrew Bible. Shekinah means the divine in-presence of God, the female aspect of the divine, the Sabbath Bride.

"I would like to tell you how our church got its name," Apostle said. "I heard the name Shekinah. It came to me, but I had no idea what it meant. Later on, when I went to Kenya, someone told me that it was Hebrew, and explained to me what it meant."

We arrived in front of a building that housed an organization of South Sudanese women. When we walked inside, we were gobsmacked. The large meeting room was filled with Africans--generally from South Sudan and Congo--and most were in native dress. The colors were dazzling. The accents were delicious.

We had heard that Winnipeg is one of the most ethnically diverse places in North America, but we hardly expected to be in the heart of Africa in the city!



It was hard to be unobtrusive, because we stuck out like two parsnips in a cup of cocoa. We tried to sit in our seats, but it was impossible once the African beat began.



We leapt to our feet, swept away by the joyous gospel singing. And then, from the stage, Apostle Jonnahs looked over at us. We smiled, waved, nodded. Then he pointed at us. Uh oh. And next, he called us onto the stage.

The eyes of Africa were upon us. We mounted the platform, and addressed the crowd. We told them that we were from the United States, that our [religion](#) and culture were different, but we shared and appreciated their exuberance, and we were dedicated to peace among nations. We congratulated South Sudan on its statehood, bowed to the applause, and resumed our places in the audience.

The Shekinah was with us. I am sure of it. The man sitting next to me whispered, "The female spirit of the divine wants us to respect each others' religions. It is how we can move forward on the road to peace."

"Amen," I said. "Amen."

I had found my truffle.



Photos are by Paul Ross.

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