

Aspects of Traditional African Culture

by Universal House of Justice

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To all National Spiritual Assemblies in Africa

Dear Bahá'í Friends,

As the Cause of Bahá'u'lláh continues its advance on the continent of Africa, it has encountered a number of traditional practices, with the result that questions have been raised about the relationship of these practices to the Bahá'í teachings.

In response to a request from the Universal House of Justice, the Research Department at the Bahá'í World Centre has produced a compilation entitled "Aspects of Traditional African Culture" drawn from letters written by or on behalf of the House of Justice, together with introductory summary statements prepared by that Department. A copy of this document is enclosed for your use, and for distribution to the members of your Bahá'í community if you feel it appropriate to do so.

The hope of the House of Justice is that the clarifications provided in this compilation will aid the dear African believers to obtain a clearer understanding of the implications of the Bahá'í teachings and of the actions which should be taken when Bahá'ís are confronted with the traditional practices described in this document.

With loving Bahá'í greetings

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For Department of the Secretariat

Enclosures

PS: Translation of compilation to be sent at a later date.

Cc: International Teaching Centre
Board of Counsellors in Africa
All Counsellors in Africa

Aspects of Traditional African Culture

with introductory summary statements by
the Research Department of the Universal House of Justice
August 1998

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1. The African Continent—Challenges and Opportunities

The letters of the Universal House of Justice cited below describe challenges and opportunities facing the African continent in the latter years of the 20th century. Among the difficulties afflicting life in Africa, the House of Justice lists such problems as ethnic conflict, political factionalism, economic distress, social dislocation and intense human suffering. It also expresses confidence in the ability of the African Bahá'í community to win great victories for the Cause of Bahá'u'lláh. To this end, Bahá'ís and Bahá'í institutions are called upon to avoid interference in partisan politics, to eliminate tribal prejudice, to foster education, and generally to use the Teachings of the Faith as the basis for transforming aspects of tribal and family life that are not in accord with the Book of God.

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- 1 For long centuries the African continent, or rather that great part of it which lies south of the Sahara, remained relatively isolated from the rest of the world, untroubled and scarcely touched by the surging conflicts of the nations to the north and east. Now, rapidly emerging into the mainstream of international interest, the African peoples, who were compared by Bahá'u'lláh to the black pupil of the eye through which “the light of the spirit shineth forth”, are being swept by the heady enthusiasms of new-found independence, torn by the conflicting forces of divergent political interests, their vision obscured by the haze of materialism and the dust of nationalistic passions and age-old tribal rivalries.

In the midst of the storm and stress of the battles of selfish interests being waged about them, stand the followers of the Most Great Name, their sight attracted to the rising Sun of God's Holy Cause, their hearts welded together in a bond of true unity with all the children of men, and their voices raised in a universal song of praise to the Glory of God and the oneness of mankind, calling on their fellow-men to forget and forgo their differences and join them in obedience and service to God's Holy Command in this Day.

The Army of the Cause, advancing at the bidding of the Lord to conquer the hearts of men, can never be defeated, but its rate of advance can be slowed down by acts of unwisdom and ignorance on the part of its supporters. We are writing you this letter to help in clarifying some of the issues that have, in the past, blurred the vision of some of the believers, and caused them to commit errors of judgement which have retarded the progress of the Faith in their countries.

One of these issues, and by far the most important, is a lack of appreciation of the implications of the Bahá'í principle of non-interference in political affairs....

So vital is this principle of non-interference in political matters, which must govern the acts and words of Bahá'ís in every land, that Shoghi Effendi has written that "Neither the charges which the uninformed and the malicious may be led to bring against them, nor the allurements of honours and rewards" would ever induce the true believers to deviate from this path, and that their words and conduct must proclaim that the followers of Bahá'u'lláh "are actuated by no selfish ambition, that they neither thirst for power, nor mind any wave of unpopularity, of distrust or criticism, which a strict adherence to their standards might provoke."

"Difficult and delicate though be our task," he continues, "the sustaining power of Bahá'u'lláh and of His Divine guidance will assuredly assist us if we follow steadfastly in His way, and strive to uphold the integrity of His laws. The light of His redeeming grace, which no earthly power can obscure, will, if we persevere, illuminate our path, as we steer our course amid the snares and pitfalls of a troubled age, and will enable us to discharge our duties in a manner that would redound to the glory and the honour of His blessed Name."

The second issue which causes difficulties for the African friends in these days is the matter of tribalism. As Bahá'ís they are convinced that mankind is one and must be viewed as one entity, yet, as members of their respective tribes, they find themselves expected by their non-Bahá'í brothers to give their first loyalty to, and even aggressively pursue the interests of, their tribe. They live, moreover, in an atmosphere which is only too often one of mistrust, fear and even hatred against the members of other tribes.

The Bahá'í attitude in such a situation is clearly set forth in the Writings. As Bahá'ís we are attached to our tribes and clans, just as we are to our families and, on a larger scale, to our nations, but we do not allow this attachment to conflict with our wider loyalty to humanity....

The principles in the Writings are clear, but usually it is when these principles are applied that questions arise. In all cases where the correct course of action is not clear believers should consult their National Spiritual Assembly, which will exercise its judgement in advising the friends on the best course to follow.

(8 February 1970, from the Universal House of Justice to National Spiritual Assemblies in Africa)

2 Many of the gravest ills now afflicting the human race appear in acute form on the

African continent. Racial, tribal and religious prejudice, disunity of nations, the scourge of political factionalism, poverty and lack of education are obvious examples. Bahá'ís have a great part to play—greater than they may realize—in the healing of these sicknesses and the abatement of their worst effects. By their radiant unity, by their “bright and shining” faces, their self-discipline in zealously following all the requirements of Bahá'í law, their abstention from politics, their constant study and proclamation of the Great Message, they will hasten the advent of that glorious day when all mankind will know its true brotherhood and will bask in the sunshine of God's love and blessing.

That the African believers are fully capable of taking their full share in building the Kingdom of God on earth, their natural abilities and present deeds have fully demonstrated. An African Hand of the Cause of God, even now in the course of a brilliant, triumphal teaching tour of the planet, African Counsellors, Board members, national and local administrators and an ever-increasing army of believers testify to the vigour and immense capacity of this highly blessed continent to serve its Lord in the great day of His appearance. That the African believers, so beloved by the Guardian of the Faith, will rise to the challenge facing them and earn the gratitude and goodwill of all mankind by their deeds of dedication and self-sacrifice is the longing of our hearts.

(January 1971, from the Universal House of Justice to the participants at the Monrovia Conference)

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- 3 Clearly, then, Africa is poised to register a victory for the Cause that will reaffirm its position among the front ranks of our world community. The time is critical, and you must act promptly to realize this prospect. We therefore urge our African brothers and sisters to take immediate account of their strengths, needs and opportunities, and then resolve to turn the challenge posed by these conditions into the means of success. You will of necessity give concentrated attention to various plans and programmes of activity if you are to advance to new stages of entry by troops, but simultaneously certain underlying requisites will claim your special vigilance and exertion. These are the elimination of tribal prejudice, the transformation of prevailing social practices, and the fostering of education.

Tribal conflict is one of the most pressing issues facing Africa. This must be dealt with in the heart of every faithful follower of Bahá'u'lláh and resolutely overcome through the collective will of every local and national Bahá'í community. Indeed, how can the lovers of the Blessed Beauty allow tribal prejudice and rivalry to be practised in their midst when He has made unity the pivotal principle and goal of

His Faith?...

Much of what distinguishes African life is to be found in patterns of behaviour displayed in the tribe and particularly in the family. Increasingly, urban life threatens to destroy the positive qualities of such patterns. Since change is inevitable if progress is to be made by any African society, a primary challenge to Bahá'ís is to preserve and improve those wholesome aspects of tribal and family custom that are in accord with the Bahá'í Teachings and to dispense with those that are not. Such a challenge must be embraced with the understanding that the Book of God is the standard by which to weigh all forms of behaviour. While unwavering action is necessary, wisdom and tact and patience must, of course, be exercised. Let it be understood, too, that Africans are not alone in the struggle to change certain age-old practices. People everywhere have customs which must be abandoned so as to clear the path along which their societies must evolve towards that glorious, new civilization which is to be the fruit of Bahá'u'lláh's stupendous Revelation. Indeed, in no society on earth can there be found practices which adequately mirror the standards of His Cause. His own truth-bearing Words clarify the matter: "The summons and the message which We gave were never intended to reach or to benefit one land or one people only. Mankind in its entirety must firmly adhere to whatsoever hath been revealed and vouchsafed unto it. Then and only then will it attain unto true liberty. The whole earth is illuminated with the resplendent glory of God's Revelation."

The acute inadequacy of plans and programmes to educate Africa's people poses a particular challenge to the followers of Bahá'u'lláh in that continent, for He has emphasized the importance of education for all; and individuals ought to be taught at least to read and write. The education of which Bahá'u'lláh spoke includes both spiritual and material aspects. The lack of such education affects the ability of people to achieve true progress.... Closely linked to this concern is the principle of the equality of men and women taught by Bahá'u'lláh.... The Bahá'í community is not fully equipped to undertake what responsible authorities have neglected to do for the education of the people; however, the Bahá'í institutions at all levels are urged to give attention to these critical needs, as circumstances permit....

Dear Friends, we are acutely conscious of the crushing difficulties that afflict life in Africa: the conditions that have caused a flood of refugees on the continent, the horrors created by ethnic conflict, the political unrest, the economic distress, the high incidence of hunger and disease, the horrendous natural disasters. But, paradoxical as it may seem, there exist in all of these the very possibilities of your success. Your ability to endure and forge ahead is reinforced in the assurance given by the Divine

Physician, Who anticipated all these conditions and prescribed a sure remedy. His prescriptions have been placed in your hands.

Therefore, we remind you of the noble ambitions the beloved Guardian held for you as a people in a continent that has “a great contribution to make to the advancement of world civilization.” May such memories resound afresh in your hearts, quickening your will to fulfil the major aim of the Plan before you, and setting a pace for your actions like the urgent rhythm of drums pulsating throughout your immensely potent, far-stretching land.

(Ridván 1996, from the Universal House of Justice to the Bahá'ís of Africa)

2. Transforming Prevailing Social Practices

2.1 Fostering Cultural Diversity

The following extracts from letters written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice affirm that the fundamental principle of the oneness of humankind, and the aim of the Faith to promote unity in diversity, underlie the Bahá'í approach to indigenous peoples. Bahá'ís are encouraged to preserve their inherited cultural identities and practices, so long as the activities involved do not contravene the principles of the Faith. Two extremes are to be avoided: needless disassociation from harmless cultural observances and continued practice of abrogated observances of previous dispensations which will undermine the independence of the Bahá'í Faith. A distinctively Bahá'í culture will welcome an infinite diversity in regard to secondary characteristics, but also firmly uphold unity in relation to fundamental principles.

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- 4 Bahá'ís should obviously be encouraged to preserve their inherited cultural identities, as long as the activities involved do not contravene the principles of the Faith. The perpetuation of such cultural characteristics is an expression of unity in diversity. Although most of these festive celebrations have no doubt stemmed from religious rituals in bygone ages, the believers should not be deterred from participating in those in which, over the course of time, the religious meaning has given way to purely culturally oriented practices. For example, Naw-Rúz itself was originally a Zoroastrian religious festival, but gradually its Zoroastrian connotation has almost been forgotten. Iranians, even after their conversion to Islám, have been observing it

as a national festival. Now Naw-Rúz has become a Bahá'í Holy Day and is being observed throughout the world, but, in addition to the Bahá'í observance, many Iranian Bahá'ís continue to carry out their past cultural traditions in connection with this Feast. Similarly, there are a number of national customs in every part of the world which have cultural rather than religious connotations.

In deciding whether or not to participate in such traditional activities, the Bahá'ís must guard against two extremes. The one is to disassociate themselves needlessly from harmless cultural observances and thus alienate themselves from their non-Bahá'í families and friends; the other is to continue the practice of abrogated observances of previous dispensations and thus undermine the independence of the Bahá'í Faith and create undesirable distinctions between themselves and their fellow-Bahá'ís. In this connection there is a difference between what Bahá'ís do among themselves and what they do in companionship with their non-Bahá'í friends and relations. For example, in a letter written on behalf of the Guardian there appears the following guidance:

As regards the celebration of the Christian Holidays by the believers: it is surely preferable and even highly advisable that the friends should in their relation to each other discontinue observing such holidays as Christmas and New Year, and to have their festal gatherings of this nature instead during the intercalary days and Naw-Rúz.

Further, there is no objection to Bahá'ís attending religious marriage ceremonies of their friends and relatives or take part in festivities usually connected with these events, provided that in doing so they do not contravene Bahá'í Law. For example, if consuming alcoholic beverages is a part of such activities, the Bahá'ís, of course, would be obliged to refrain from partaking of such drinks.

There are some exclusive religious ceremonies in which Bahá'ís should not participate, in order to safeguard the independence of the Faith. In this regard, the beloved Guardian has given the following advice to an individual believer: "In these days the friends should, as much as possible, demonstrate through their deeds the independence of the Holy Faith of God, and its freedom from the customs, rituals and practices of a discredited and abrogated past." In observing this principle, the House of Justice advises the Bahá'ís to maintain a balance between their adherence to the Cause and obedience to its laws on the one hand, and their role in society on the other. When an individual becomes a Bahá'í he acquires, as you are aware, a wider

loyalty to the Manifestations of God. Having found this new way of life, he should be careful not to isolate himself from his family and his people, and he should show respect for his former religion. The Bahá'ís should, of course, avoid performing any acts which could be considered as implying their membership in another religion or which are contrary to Bahá'í principles. There is a clear distinction between participating in festive and cultural events, as opposed to performing religious ceremonies and rituals.

It should also be remembered that the weaning away of the Bahá'ís from customs and traditions, which have been established among communities for centuries, takes time and is a gradual process. Therefore, while the National Assembly should avoid rigidity in these matters, it should also not compromise when the interests of the Faith and its integrity and independence are at stake.

(26 May 1982, written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to a National Spiritual Assembly)

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- 5 It is abundantly evident, from innumerable passages in Bahá'u'lláh's Revelation, that His Message is intended for the whole of mankind and that every nation and race in human society should regard Him as a Manifestation of God Whose teachings are directed to their upliftment and happiness. He has written that "The summons and the message which We gave were never intended to reach or to benefit one land or one people only." The people of minority backgrounds who have experienced oppression and subjugation might well contemplate the words of Bahá'u'lláh in which He states that "The Ancient Beauty hath consented to be bound with chains that mankind may be released from its bondage, and hath accepted to be made a prisoner within this most mighty Stronghold that the whole world may attain unto true liberty." The Bahá'í community should regard itself as having been commissioned by Bahá'u'lláh to deliver His Message to the whole of humankind, in obedience to His injunction to "Proclaim the Cause of thy Lord unto all who are in the heavens and on the earth."...

Your letter raises the issue of cultural diversity within the Bahá'í community. The Faith seeks to maintain cultural diversity while promoting the unity of all peoples. Indeed, such diversity will enrich the tapestry of human life in a peaceful world society. The House of Justice supports the view that in every country the cultural traditions of the people should be observed within the Bahá'í community as long as they are not contrary to the Teachings. The general attitude of the Faith towards the traditional practices of various peoples is expressed in the following statement of Shoghi Effendi's, published in *The World Order of Bahá'u'lláh*, U.S. 1982 edition,

pages 41-42.

Let there be no misgivings as to the animating purpose of the world-wide Law of Bahá'u'lláh.... It does not ignore, nor does it attempt to suppress, the diversity of ethnical origins, of climate, of history, of language and tradition, of thought and habit, that differentiate the peoples and nations of the world.... Its watchword is unity in diversity such as 'Abdu'l-Bahá Himself has explained:

“Consider the flowers of a garden.... Diversity of hues, form and shape enricheth and adorneth the garden, and heighteneth the effect thereof....”

Of course, many cultural elements everywhere inevitably will disappear or be merged with related ones from their societies, yet the totality will achieve that promised diversity within world unity. We can expect much cultural diversity in the long period before the emergence of a world commonwealth of nations in the Golden Age of Bahá'u'lláh's new world order. Much wisdom and tolerance will be required, and much time must elapse until the advent of that great day.

(25 July 1988, written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to a National Spiritual Assembly)

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- 6 The fundamental principle of the oneness of mankind, and the aim of the Faith to promote unity in diversity, underlie the Bahá'í approach to indigenous peoples. Their rights are inseparable from human rights for all, and the Bahá'í Faith upholds the right of indigenous peoples to develop and take pride in their own identity, culture and language. Great importance is attached to teaching the Faith to the indigenous populations in a country, more especially since they have so often been neglected or downtrodden by other segments of society; in many instances their suffering has made them particularly receptive to the Message of Bahá'u'lláh.

...A unique feature of the Bahá'í Administrative Order is the manner in which it enables all the diverse elements of the Bahá'í community, drawn from a variety of ethnic, racial, cultural and educational backgrounds, to work together in a mutually supportive and spiritually beneficial manner. This is in direct contrast to the declining social order external to the Bahá'í community, in which each segment seeks to pursue a separate path in its social and political organization and activities.

(25 July 1995, written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to an individual believer)

7 ...the oneness of mankind will not be based on forced assimilation, but upon protection of cultural diversity. At the same time, however, we should beware of inadvertently settling upon a limited model, such as the one sometimes associated in contemporary discourse on multiculturalism. A distinctively Bahá'í culture will welcome an infinite diversity in regard to secondary characteristics, but also firmly uphold unity in regard to fundamental principles, thereby achieving a vigorous complementarity. For example, in *Selections from the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá* (Haifa: Bahá'í World Centre, 1982), page 273, we find the following intriguing statement:

What a blessing that will be—when all shall come together, even as once separate torrents, rivers and streams, running brooks and single drops, when collected together in one place will form a mighty sea. And to such a degree will the inherent unity of all prevail, that the traditions, rules, customs and distinctions in the fanciful life of these populations will be effaced and vanish away like isolated drops, once the great sea of oneness doth leap and surge and roll.

The point is not to minimize differences, nor to make of unity and diversity a false dichotomy, but ever to keep in mind that the Bahá'í standard is very high and grounded in divine love.

(13 February 1996, written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to an individual believer)

2.2 Guiding Social Transformation

In the extracts cited below, the Universal House of Justice observes that peoples in all societies have customs that require modification, and that, over time, many existing cultural practices will most likely disappear. The teachings of Bahá'u'lláh constitute a divine standard for determining what aspects of a particular culture are to be retained. In guiding social transformation, Spiritual Assemblies must distinguish between aspects of traditional community life which are related to fundamental Bahá'í laws (e.g., monogamy) and matters of lesser importance, from which the believers can and should extricate themselves gradually. Assemblies have a dual responsibility: to exercise patience and wisdom in weaning the Bahá'ís away from certain long-held customs and traditions, and to educate the believers

and encourage them to uphold Bahá'í laws, thereby preserving the integrity of the teachings and the independence of the Faith. Social transformation can also be facilitated when the Bahá'í community in a village represents a significant proportion of the population. The community not only serves as an example but is in the position to take initiatives to improve the quality of life in the village.

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- 8 When the masses of mankind are awakened and enter the Faith of God, a new process is set in motion and the growth of a new civilization begins. Witness the emergence of Christianity and of Islám. These masses are the rank and file, steeped in traditions of their own, but receptive to the new Word of God, by which, when they truly respond to it, they become so influenced as to transform those who come in contact with them.

(13 July 1964, from the Universal House of Justice to all National Spiritual Assemblies)

- 9 During this period of transition from practices current in the present social orders of tribal society to the standards advocated and upheld in the Bahá'í community, it is important for Bahá'ís to exercise patience, and endeavour to show respect to the tribal laws that apply in each case, provided they do not contradict basic Bahá'í principles and regulations involving such acts as denial of one's faith or contracting polygamous marriages. It should also be borne in mind that in cases calling for personal guidance, the friends should feel free to turn to their Local Spiritual Assemblies which, being on the spot and normally familiar with tribal and customary practices as well as with the Bahá'í teachings which apply, will be able to proffer advice, suggest solutions to personal difficulties and, indeed, in some cases, be themselves instrumental in resolving the problems.

(12 January 1986, written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to an individual believer)

- 10 When a Spiritual Assembly is faced with questions of possible conflict between tribal practices and Bahá'í law, it should distinguish between aspects of tribal community life which are related to fundamental laws (such as monogamy) and matters of lesser importance, from which the friends can and should extricate themselves gradually. Furthermore, the House of Justice has offered the advice that the institutions of the Faith should be careful not to press the friends to arbitrarily discard those local traditions which are harmless and often colourful characteristics of particular peoples

and tribes. Were a new Bahá'í suddenly to cease following the customs of his people, it is possible that they might misunderstand the true nature of the Bahá'í Faith, and the Bahá'ís could be regarded as having turned against the traditions of the land. However, Bahá'ís should exercise vigilance, with the aid of the institutions of the Faith, to avoid inadvertent involvement in events which appear at first sight to be purely cultural and traditional in nature, but which are, in fact, held as a cover for politically oriented gatherings. The weaning away of the Bahá'ís from customs and traditions which have been established among communities for centuries takes time and is a gradual process. While an Assembly should avoid rigidity in these matters, it should also not compromise when the interests of the Faith and its integrity and independence are at stake....

When the Bahá'í community in a village is a significant proportion of the population, it has a wide range of opportunities to be an example and an encouragement of means of improving the quality of life in the village. Among the initiatives which it might take are measures to foster child education, adult literacy and the training of women to better discharge their responsibilities as mothers and to play an enlarged role in the administrative and social life of the village; encouragement of the people of the village to join together in devotions, perhaps in the early morning, irrespective of their varieties of religious belief; support of efforts to improve the hygiene and the health of the village, including attention to the provision of pure water, the preservation of cleanliness in the village environment, and education in the harmful effects of narcotic and intoxicating substances. No doubt other possibilities will present themselves to the village Bahá'í community and its Local Spiritual Assembly.

(25 July 1988, written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to a National Spiritual Assembly)

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- 11 At the present time, the challenge to every Bahá'í community is to avoid suppression of those culturally-diverse elements which are not contrary to the teachings, while establishing and maintaining such a high degree of unity that others are attracted to the Cause of God.

(25 July 1988, written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to a Bahá'í couple)

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- 12 The matters raised in your letter are concerned with the differing cultures in ... and their expression in the Bahá'í community. The aim of the Bahá'í Faith is to maintain cultural diversity while promoting the unity of all peoples. This diversity will enrich

human life in a peaceful world society. Within the Bahá'í community the cultural traditions of the people who comprise it should be observed, as long as those traditions are not contrary to the Bahá'í teachings. It should also be recognized that many cultural practices will eventually disappear or be merged with related ones from other societies as the social evolution of mankind continues.

The application of these principles requires great wisdom and the exercise of careful judgement on the part of the Spiritual Assemblies. When there is a conflict between a traditional cultural practice and the Bahá'í teachings, the Assembly concerned must decide whether the issue involved is of fundamental importance, in which case the traditional practice cannot be continued by the Bahá'ís, or whether it is of lesser importance, such that the believers can be left to gradually extricate themselves from it over a period of time. An Assembly must also carefully seek out and follow a path which offers encouragement and support to each culture with which it comes in contact, while taking care not to slight the rights and preferences of the believers whose cultural group constitutes the majority in the community.

You are urged to consult fully and frankly with the Spiritual Assemblies concerning the issues raised in your letter. Also, you may well find it useful to seek advice from the Counsellors and Auxiliary Board members on these matters. Should you find yourself in disagreement with a decision of the National Spiritual Assembly on a specific issue which you feel to be of fundamental importance, you are free to appeal to the National Assembly for reconsideration of the matter or for its submission to the Universal House of Justice; in the latter case, the Assembly will transmit your appeal together with its own comments. By following these approaches, the unity of the Bahá'í community is preserved as it devises appropriate means of responding to the new challenges associated with the expansion of the scope of its endeavours.

(7 May 1989, written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to an individual believer)

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- 13 Bahá'ís should be encouraged to preserve their inherited cultural identities, as long as the activities involved do not contravene the principles of the Faith. When such activities are not in accord with the teachings of the Faith and have been established among communities for centuries, weaning the Bahá'ís from them is a gradual process and takes time and patience. Any bad habits of ancient cultural traditions are overcome by the offering of a greater spiritual attraction. As the new believers become more and more attracted to Bahá'u'lláh and His teachings, they are more likely to be able to turn away confidently from old ways that are in disagreement

with His teachings.

(28 October 1990, written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to an individual believer)

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- 14 An effective way of assisting the ... friends to abandon the use of peyote would be for believers like yourself, who are themselves ... imbued with the Teachings of Bahá'u'lláh and determined to live in accordance with His laws, to assist their fellow ... to understand the importance of turning wholeheartedly to the Manifestation of God for this Day and giving up practices that conflict with these Teachings. It is important for them to realize that Bahá'u'lláh is the Promised One Who alone is able to set the course and guarantee the attainment of their destiny; this implies adherence to His laws and ordinances. Moreover, they must know that they are not the only group that is obliged to give up certain cultural practices which are not in accord with His will. Every people is faced with the same challenge, because no people can be said to be living in harmony with the purpose of God for our time. Giving up such practices does not mean that any people must abandon every other feature of its cultural heritage. On the contrary, what Bahá'u'lláh has done for us all is to provide a standard by which to determine what is pleasing in God's sight, thereby freeing us to maintain those elements of diversity which are unique to our different cultures. The adoption of this divine standard enables each people to be confident in the permissibility of what it can retain from its past.

(23 June 1995, written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to an individual believer)

3. Eliminating Tribal Prejudices

In the letters cited below, the Universal House of Justice identifies tribal conflict as one of the most pressing issues facing Africa. It calls for the elimination of prejudices based on tribal differences and challenges the Bahá'ís to practise genuine unity among themselves and in their relations with others.

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- 15 The second issue which causes difficulties for the African friends in these days is the matter of tribalism. As Bahá'ís they are convinced that mankind is one and must be viewed as one entity, yet, as members of their respective tribes, they find themselves

expected by their non-Bahá'í brothers to give their first loyalty to, and even aggressively pursue the interests of, their tribe. They live, moreover, in an atmosphere which is only too often one of mistrust, fear and even hatred against the members of other tribes.

The Bahá'í attitude in such a situation is clearly set forth in the Writings. As Bahá'ís we are attached to our tribes and clans, just as we are to our families and, on a larger scale, to our nations, but we do not allow this attachment to conflict with our wider loyalty to humanity. The followers of the Faith, the Guardian has clearly stated, “will not hesitate to subordinate every particular interest, be it personal, regional or national, to the overriding interests of the generality of mankind, knowing full well that in a world of interdependent peoples and nations the advantage of the part is best to be reached by the advantage of the whole, and that no lasting result can be achieved by any of the component parts if the general interests of the entity itself are neglected.”

In further elucidating this theme he has written: “Let there be no misgivings as to the animating purpose of the world-wide Law of Bahá'u'lláh.... It does not ignore, nor does it attempt to suppress, the diversity of ethnical origins, of climate, of history, of language and tradition, of thought and habit, that differentiate the peoples and nations of the world. It calls for a wider loyalty, for a larger aspiration than any that has animated the human race. It insists upon the subordination of national impulses and interests to the imperative claims of a unified world. It repudiates excessive centralization on one hand, and disclaims all attempts at uniformity on the other. Its watchword is unity in diversity....” In these days when tribal tensions are increasing in Africa the friends should be vigilant lest any trace of prejudice or hatred, God forbid, may enter their midst. On the contrary, they should endeavour to bring into the Faith an ever larger representation of the various tribes in each country, and through complete lack of prejudice as well as through the love that Bahá'ís have for each other and for their non-Bahá'í neighbours, demonstrate to their countrymen what the Word of God can do. They will thus provide, for the scrutiny of the leaders and rulers of their countries, a shining example of a unified community, working together in full concord and harmony, demonstrating a hope that is attainable, and a pattern worthy to be emulated.

To discriminate against any tribes because they are in a minority is a violation of the spirit that animates the Faith of Bahá'u'lláh. As followers of God's Holy Faith it is our obligation to protect the just interests of any minority element within the Bahá'í community. In fact in the administration of our Bahá'í affairs, representatives of minority groups are not only enabled to enjoy equal rights and privileges, but they

are even favoured and accorded priority. Bahá'ís should be careful never to deviate from this noble standard, even if the course of events or public opinion should bring pressure to bear upon them.

(8 February 1970, from the Universal House of Justice to National Spiritual Assemblies in Africa)

16 ...there is a challenge of great urgency facing the world-wide Bahá'í community. When launching the Ten Year Crusade, Shoghi Effendi urged the believers to “carry the torch of the Faith to regions so remote, so backward, so inhospitable that neither the light of Christianity or Islám has, after the revolution of centuries, as yet penetrated.” A number of such regions still exist in places like New Guinea, the heart of Africa and the Amazon Basin in South America. As the influence of civilization spreads, the age-old ways of life of the inhabitants of these regions will inevitably perish, and they will rapidly be infected with the materialistic ideas of a decadent civilization. It is our pressing duty to carry the Message of Bahá'u'lláh to such people while they are still pure-hearted and receptive, and through it to prepare them for the changed world which will come upon them....

In addition to the tribes in these remote regions of the world, there are tribes and minorities who still live in their traditional ways in the midst of other cultures. All too often such peoples are despised and ignored by the nations among whom they dwell, but we should seek them out, teach them the Cause of God, and enrich through their membership the Bahá'í communities of the lands in which they live.

(25 May 1975, from the Universal House of Justice to all National Spiritual Assemblies)

17 ...the Universal House of Justice is deeply concerned that misunderstandings seem to have arisen within the Bahá'í community, stemming from real or imagined prejudices based on tribal differences. We are to convey its comments.

The mere awareness of such differences, and the resentment felt over them, quite apart from voicing bitter feelings about them, can be a deadly poison, eating into the vitals of a community, which is the depository of God's message of oneness and unity for all mankind. The National Spiritual Assembly must resolutely address this problem, if it has not done so and, as a watchful and loving father, ensure that all traces of dissatisfaction and disaffection are removed, and that a spirit of loving fellowship and understanding, of forbearance and of heartfelt goodwill prevails. The National Spiritual Assembly must, in a wide and loving embrace, bring the conflicting elements of the community together, and encourage them to forgive and

forget the past, and face the future with radiance and confidence.

If these differences should, God forbid, prevail, the result will be, as ‘Abdu’l-Bahá predicted, “darkness upon darkness” but, on the contrary, should the light of harmony shine, the confirmations of the Concourse on High will be attracted and the outcome will be strength upon strength, and victory after victory.

(16 February 1989, written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to a National Spiritual Assembly)

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- 18 Tribal conflict is one of the most pressing issues facing Africa. This must be dealt with in the heart of every faithful follower of Bahá’u’lláh and resolutely overcome through the collective will of every local and national Bahá’í community. Indeed, how can the lovers of the Blessed Beauty allow tribal prejudice and rivalry to be practised in their midst when He has made unity the pivotal principle and goal of His Faith? Hatred and animosity based on tribe, like those based on race, blight the human spirit and arrest the development of the society that accommodates them. If outside the Bahá’í community in recent years influential persons and public officials have been able to see the practical benefit of bringing diverse groups together towards unity, how much more should it be possible for those imbued with the spirit of our Teachings to strive to eliminate within the Bahá’í fellowship the unsavoury characteristics of tribal division and disunity. It is imperative and urgent in the current state of society for the Bahá’ís so to practise genuine unity among themselves and in their relations to others that they may become renowned as a new people in the eyes of all Africans. Such a demonstration will attract divine confirmations and greatly reinforce their power to succeed in spreading the Teachings.

(Riḍván 1996, the Universal House of Justice to the Bahá’ís of Africa)

4. Guidance Concerning Aspects of Traditional African Culture

The following extracts from letters written by and on behalf of the Universal House of Justice comment on aspects of traditional African culture and provide guidance to the African Bahá’ís concerning a number of cultural practices and customs.

4.1 Dance and Music

Dancing and music are integral parts of African culture. These forms of cultural expression are welcomed within the Bahá'í community. At Bahá'í events, the believers and Spiritual Assemblies are encouraged to ensure that artistic performances are in harmony with the high ethical standards of the Bahá'í Cause and reflect the social conventions and customs prevailing in a particular country.

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19 ...dancing is an integral part of African culture, and there is certainly room for the observance of such practices within the context of the Bahá'í community.

(25 March 1985, written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to an individual believer)

20 With reference to the question concerning the clapping of hands in songs where the Greatest Name is used, the House of Justice does not want to draw hard and fast rules. Clearly such matters are secondary and subject to cultural considerations, customs, and the social conventions prevailing in a given society. In some cultures, for example, clapping, as part of religious expression, is considered offensive; in other cultures, clapping is a means of keeping the rhythm of a hymn, especially in the absence of a musical instrument, and is integral to religious experience; among other peoples, clapping may constitute a demonstration of religious fervour. Further, within any given country there may well be regional cultural differences.

Therefore, it is left to the National Spiritual Assembly to weigh each case with care and sensitivity in light of the prevailing cultural milieu and, if necessary, provide guidance to the friends.

(1 October 1986, from the Universal House of Justice to the International Teaching Centre)

21 We are in agreement with the view that traditional dancing in Africa is permissible in Bahá'í Centres. It should be borne in mind, however, that traditional dancing usually has an underlying theme, or a story to tell. Consequently, care must be exercised to ensure that the themes of the dances are in harmony with the high ethical standards of the Cause and are not portrayals that will arouse base instincts and unworthy passions. Furthermore, ... Bahá'í principles call for the practice of "moderation in all that pertains to dress, language, amusements, and all artistic and literary avocations".

In all such matters it is unwise to lay down hard and fast rules to cover all

individual cases. Whenever the friends need specific guidance in the application of Bahá'í principles, the Spiritual Assemblies concerned should provide such guidance in the light of local conditions.

(12 November 1986, from the Universal House of Justice to the International Teaching Centre)

22 ...traditional dances associated with the expression of a culture are permissible in Bahá'í Centres....

As for choreographed dances whose purpose is to reinforce and proclaim Bahá'í principles, if they can be performed in a manner which portrays the nobility of such principles and invokes appropriate attitudes of respect or reverence, there is no objection to dances which are meant to interpret passages from the Writings; however, it is preferable that the motions of a dance not be accompanied by the reading of the words.

The principle which must guide the friends in their consideration of these questions is the observance of “moderation in all that pertains to dress, language, amusements, and all artistic and literary avocations”.

(20 June 1991, written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to a National Spiritual Assembly)

23 The Universal House of Justice has received your faxed letter dated ... in which you raise various questions about the use of music and dance at Bahá'í Centres and we have been asked to respond as follows.

As you may know, in many parts of the world there are certain tribal and traditional dances which are performed in glorification of God, and it is perfectly acceptable for a prayer to be interpreted in the form of movement or dance. However, to avoid that such expressions of prayer become gradually ritualized, or that certain gestures and movements become habitual accompaniments to prayers, it is preferable that they not accompany the reciting of words of the prayers. Through the revealed prayers, we seek communion with God, hence they must be offered with the utmost reverence and dignity. Each individual Bahá'í should be free to pray as he wishes, for there is no set form for prayer except for those few which have special instructions for observance upon their recitation.

In your second question, you ask regarding the performance of drama and cultural dances in Bahá'í Centres. Provided that the underlying themes or stories are noble and that they are performed in a way which does not elicit base feelings, there

is no objection to choreographed dances and dramas, which are intended to illustrate Bahá'í principles, being held in a Bahá'í Centre. This same principle would apply to traditional dances or dance movements associated with the expression of a culture. As long as care is exercised to ensure that the themes of such dances are in harmony with the high ethical standards of the Cause and the qualities of dignity and grace are upheld, there is no objection to their use.

With regard to what kind of music can be played at events in Bahá'í Centres, there is no particular type of music which Bahá'ís should or should not use. In this respect, a Bahá'í may well be best guided by the words of Bahá'u'lláh in the Most Holy Book, where He makes it clear that music can be both “a means whereby [the soul] may be lifted up unto the realm on high” and “as wings to self and passion”, and warns against allowing music to “cause you to overstep the bounds of propriety and dignity.” In the planning of Bahá'í events, it is left to those responsible for the programme to determine “the bounds of propriety and dignity” and ensure that the music chosen is befitting the purpose and solemnity of the occasion, in view of what is most suited to the country's culture and customs.

(24 March 1997, written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to a National Spiritual Assembly)

4.2 Drinking of Alcohol

In many societies the drinking of alcohol is associated with inherited cultural practices and tribal customs, including certain forms of ancestor worship, and initiation and burial rites. Bahá'ís are, nevertheless, encouraged to make every effort to refrain from its use. Spiritual Assemblies are enjoined to ensure that all believers are clearly informed about the Bahá'í law which forbids the drinking of alcohol, and, where necessary, to take action to counsel, assist and warn those who blatantly violate the law. When believers persist in violating this law, they are likely to be deprived of their Bahá'í administrative rights.

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24 The development of the teaching work in Africa has always been characterized by the receptiveness with which the truths of the Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh have been accepted and valued by the peoples of that vast continent, by the joy stemming from the pure hearts of the African believers as reflected in their radiant faces, and by their growing maturity in appreciating the importance of adherence to Bahá'í laws and ordinances.

One of these ordinances is the clear prohibition in the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh of the consumption of alcoholic drinks. This has been explicitly revealed in His Most Holy Book, the Kitáb-i-Aqdas....

It was the policy of Shoghi Effendi, upheld by the House of Justice, that, in the early stages of the teaching work in countries whose people have for centuries been accustomed to the use of alcohol, the institutions should be patient and lenient, educate the friends, and allow time for them to extricate themselves from this pernicious habit before applying sanctions. This education has been an on-going process. Regretfully, however, it has been seen that in some cases, even among certain prominent believers, the friends have not freed themselves from this practice. Some may have wrongly thought that light alcoholic drinks, if taken irregularly, were permitted, without realizing the detrimental effect that their example was having on others. It is always most unfortunate when Bahá'ís of long standing, and even members of institutions at the national level, partake of alcoholic beverages, thus damaging themselves, harming the good name of the Faith in the eyes of non-Bahá'ís, and setting a bad example for the rank and file of the believers.

The Universal House of Justice feels that it is vital, for the sound development of the Cause of God in those communities where there remains any doubt among the friends as to the importance of obedience to this law, that the National Spiritual Assemblies ensure that all believers are clearly informed of it. Of course, the Assemblies should not pry into the lives of individual believers; but in the case of any Bahá'í who blatantly violates the law, he should be counselled, assisted to overcome the habit, warned repeatedly of the consequences of continued disobedience, and ultimately, if he does not respond positively, be deprived of his administrative rights.

Furthermore, in order to protect the interests of the Faith, the Universal House of Justice has decided that, henceforth, any believer who occupies a Bahá'í administrative or teaching position on the national level and is seen to be consuming alcoholic beverages, should not only be counselled but should be removed from office during the process of the correction of his failing. If he does not give up drinking, he should lose his administrative rights; if he changes his ways, and the National Assembly is satisfied that he is obeying the law, he would regain his full rights. The positions the House of Justice has in mind are those occupied by members of the National Spiritual Assembly or any committee under its aegis, whether national or regional, by Bahá'ís who serve at the national office or in the training institutes at any level, and by travelling teachers and pioneers serving under the direction of the National Assembly or its subsidiary agencies.

It is the hope of the House of Justice that such a step will give a signal to the

entire community that, whatever the inherited cultural practices or tribal customs may be, every effort should be made by each conscientious believer to obey the sacred law of God which forbids the drinking of alcohol. The friends must become aware that there are certain essentials of Bahá'í conduct that they cannot continue to disregard with impunity. Continued, blatant disobedience to this law will, in the case of any believer, lead to consideration of deprivation of his voting rights. The friends should also realize that refusing to comply with this requirement will not only harm the offender and injure his family but will certainly impede his spiritual development and lead to the cessation of the confirmations of Bahá'u'lláh—confirmations and blessings without which his life will eventually be brought down to misery.

Love for God is best exemplified not through words, but through deeds. “Let deeds,” Bahá'u'lláh says, “not words, be your adorning.” By obeying His laws we demonstrate our love for Him. He has also written: “My love is My stronghold; he that entereth therein is safe and secure, and he that turneth away shall surely stray and perish.”

The guideline that Shoghi Effendi gave at the outset of the Ten Year Crusade, setting forth the manner in which the Bahá'í law on the need to abstain from alcoholic drinks should be explained while teaching the Faith to the people of Africa, is as applicable today as it was in 1953 when the Guardian's secretary gave the following advice on his behalf:

The question of impressing upon the Africans who are seeking enrolment the necessity of not drinking is a delicate one. When enrolling new believers, we must be wise and gentle, and not place so many obstacles in their way that they feel it impossible to accept the Faith. On the other hand, once accorded membership in the Community of the followers of Bahá'u'lláh, it must be brought home to them that they are expected to live up to His Teachings, and to show forth the signs of a noble character in conformity with His Laws. This can often be done gradually, after the new believer is enrolled.

Every effort should thus be made by the institutions of the Faith, as well as by those who are directly engaged in the expansion and consolidation work, to make conscious and determined efforts to assist the new believers to realize the grave consequences of disobedience to God's laws, and to appreciate the bounties that flow from growing spiritually under the shadow of His Holy Cause.

(30 March 1997, written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to all National Spiritual

4.3 Hunting

While the Kitáb-i-Aqdas prohibits cruelty to animals and warns against excessive hunting, hunting and the use of animal products for food, clothing and furnishings are not, in principle, contrary to Bahá'í law. Hunting is to be regulated, but certain latitude is left to individual conscience and with respect to the diversity of circumstances under which human beings live. As the laws brought by Bahá'u'lláh become known and practised throughout the world, humanity will find the proper balance in adjusting itself to nature and to the world of animals.

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- 25 It must be borne in mind that hunting is not forbidden by Bahá'u'lláh. The warning that is given is against excessive hunting, but what constitutes an excess in hunting has to be defined by the House of Justice in the future. Similarly, the laws that prescribe avoiding the eating of game if it is found dead in a trap or net can be applied universally only when the necessary subsidiary details to such laws are decided upon by the House of Justice....

In the light of the above, the friends in such areas as ... may continue their hunting practices as they have been doing over the years, within the latitude allowed by the civil authorities. Only gradually, and as circumstances will permit, will the relevant laws of the Aqdas become applicable to them in the future. At that time these laws will be elucidated and supported by supplementary legislation, as may be called for.

(28 May 1984, written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to an individual believer)

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- 26 Your letter concerning the zebra skin in the International Archives Building, written while you were on pilgrimage, was conveyed to the Universal House of Justice, which has asked us to send you the following reply.

The House of Justice fully agrees with the dismay and anger felt by environmentalists at the appalling depredations taking place in the world, both on the environment in general and in relation to the killing off of endangered species, often for exploitation in the luxury markets of the world. However, this disastrous

course of action is but one more example of extremes of action which turn acceptable behaviour into a danger for the world.

It cannot be deduced from the current situation, or from the restrictions which are necessary to overcome the present dangers, that the use of animal skins for clothing or furnishing is, in principle, contrary to the teachings of the Faith.

Many millions of human beings are dependent for their livelihood on the hunting or domestication of animals and their use for food and clothing....

‘Abdu’l-Bahá has indicated that in the future human beings will be vegetarians, but abstention from eating meat is not a law of this Dispensation. The laws of God are attuned to the needs and possibilities of each age.

Zebra skins have been used by Africans from time immemorial. The inclusion of one in the International Archives Building helps African pilgrims to feel at home at the World Centre of their Faith; it is no indication of any approval of the poaching of African wildlife.

(26 April 1989, written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to an individual believer)

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- 27 Your concern for the prevention of cruelty to animals and for restraint in exploiting them unduly for food and other purposes is indeed praiseworthy; however, the House of Justice is not aware of any absolute prohibition in any Holy Book against the use of animals for food and clothing. As the laws brought by Bahá'u'lláh become known and operative throughout the world, we believe that humanity will find the proper balance in adjusting itself to nature and to the world of animals. As in so many other areas, the Teachings of Bahá'u'lláh in this regard follow the golden mean: kindness toward animals is definitely upheld, vegetarianism is encouraged, hunting is regulated, but certain latitude is left to individual conscience and in practical regard to the diversity of circumstances under which human beings live. For example, the indigenous peoples of the Arctic would be hard-pressed to subsist without recourse to animal products.

(20 November 1992, written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to an individual believer)

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- 28 You are quite right that Bahá'u'lláh in the Kitáb-i-Aqdas warns against excessive hunting, and in His Writings and those of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá kindness to animals has been enjoined. It is also clear from the writings of Shoghi Effendi and the advice given by the House of Justice that cultural identities and practices should be

preserved.

(27 February 1994, written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to an individual believer)

4.4 Initiation Rites and Female Genital Mutilation

The Bahá'í Faith does not attempt to suppress cultural diversity. However, this does not mean that all traditions and practices must inevitably be preserved in a future Bahá'í society. Those practices associated with initiation ceremonies which are in conflict with Bahá'í law are to be discarded, and the believers are encouraged to change their old ways and follow the way of Bahá'u'lláh. The practice of female circumcision, which forms part of the initiation rites among some tribes, is contrary to the spirit of the Bahá'í teachings. Bahá'í institutions have the duty of weaning the friends from it through an ongoing programme of education based on spiritual principles and sound scientific information.

* * * * *

29 The Universal House of Justice has given careful consideration to your letter of ... inquiring whether Bahá'ís are free to engage in traditional practices associated with initiation ceremonies in your country....

The general attitude of the Faith towards the traditional practices of various peoples is expressed in the following statement of Shoghi Effendi's, published in "The World Order of Bahá'u'lláh", pages 41- 42:

Let there be no misgivings as to the animating purpose of the world-wide Law of Bahá'u'lláh.... It does not ignore, nor does it attempt to suppress, the diversity of ethnical origins, of climate, of history, of language and tradition, of thought and habit, that differentiate the peoples and nations of the world.... Its watchword is unity in diversity, such as 'Abdu'l-Bahá Himself has explained:

"Consider the flowers of a garden.... Diversity of hues, form and shape enricheth and adorneth the garden, and heighteneth the effect thereof."

However, this does not mean that all traditions and practices must be preserved in a future Bahá'í society. There are certain practices which are in conflict with

Bahá'í law, such as polygamy or the use of alcoholic drinks on special occasions like the birth of children, marriages, funerals and initiation ceremonies. Such practices should, obviously, be discarded, and the friends should make every effort to change their old ways and follow the way of Bahá'u'lláh.

Moreover, the practice of excision, or female circumcision, which forms a part of the initiation rites among some tribes, is contrary to the spirit of the Bahá'í teachings....

(19 July 1984, written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to a National Spiritual Assembly)

30 The question of the excision and infibulation of girls and women was first put to the Universal House of Justice in 1984 by certain National Spiritual Assemblies in Africa. Subsequently the same question was asked by an individual believer who also raised the question of the circumcision of males. In response the House of Justice stated that no reference to the excision of females has been found in the Writings, but that this practice is definitely contrary to the spirit of the Bahá'í teachings. It seems to be a very ancient practice, entrenched in tradition and widely practised by certain tribes and peoples in Africa and neighbouring lands. Patience and perseverance will therefore be required on the part of Bahá'í institutions which have the duty of weaning the believers away from this practice through an ongoing programme of education based on spiritual principles and sound scientific information.

The House of Justice has noted a growing concern on the part of medical authorities in Africa and other places over the various methods and dire consequences of the operations involved in such genital mutilation, and that increasing attention is being given to this matter by governments and organizations, as well as by medical experts and social scientists....

With reference to the circumcision of males, the following are excerpts from two letters written on behalf of the Guardian:

Also with regard to the practice of circumcision: the Teachings bear no reference to this matter, and it is therefore not enjoined upon the believers.

(Letter dated 14 December 1940 to a National Spiritual Assembly)

The beloved Guardian says that the question of circumcision has nothing to do with the Bahá'í Teachings; and the believers are free to do as they please in the matter.

(Letter dated 27 March 1954 to an individual believer)

It is evident from these statements that no Bahá'í has the right to criticize Bahá'í parents over the decisions these parents make about circumcision of their male children.

From the above it is clear that there is a profound difference between the Bahá'í attitude to the circumcision of males and the excision of females.

It will not be an easy task to abolish female excision, since it is so ancient and has such profound emotional and social undertones. Only the wholehearted acceptance of the authority of the Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh is likely to produce the conviction and courage necessary to make the change among large sectors of the population. Hence the emphasis that the Universal House of Justice has placed on the deepening of the believers' understanding of the Faith and on a patient but persistent programme by the institutions of the Cause in weaning them away from this practice.

(2 January 1992, written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to the Office of Public Information, Haifa)

31 The House of Justice has given careful consideration to the question of the genital mutilation of girls, otherwise known as "female circumcision". No reference in the Bahá'í Writings to this subject has come to light; however, the House of Justice regards the practice of female circumcision as contrary to the spirit of the Bahá'í Teachings....

Because this damaging custom is entrenched in tradition and is reported to be widespread in Africa, the Bahá'í institutions have the duty of weaning the friends from it through an ongoing programme of education based on spiritual principles and sound scientific information....

The House of Justice knows that you will exercise wisdom in providing this advice to the friends and in encouraging them to adhere to the sacred instructions for the new day. You will undoubtedly wish to discuss with the Counsellors any plans which you may formulate, before putting these into effect, so that a united effort can be achieved.

(29 March 1995, written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to a National Spiritual Assembly)

4.5 Supernatural Forces, Evil Spirits, Witchcraft and Other Practices

In a number of African countries, and in many other parts of the world, such practices as black magic, ju-ju, witchcraft and voodoo, together with the belief

in the power of these forces and their exponents to adversely influence a person's life, frequently form part of traditional cultures. The Universal House of Justice sets out the Bahá'í perspective on this subject and provides guidance concerning how to protect oneself from the potentially negative influence of the power in evil and other such phenomena. The House of Justice affirms that the influence of these supernatural phenomena is dependent on the conviction, even on a subconscious level, that other people can influence a person's mind, and it attests that it is within the power of the individual to free himself from subjugation to these forces. By deepening themselves in the teachings of Bahá'u'lláh, Bahá'ís will come to recognize the lack of any true reality in such negative forces. Furthermore, Spiritual Assemblies are called upon gradually to wean the believers away from the illusions and practices that are potentially destructive to their spiritual and material well-being, by encouraging them to avoid involvement in such practices and by deepening their trust in the protective power of the Bahá'í Faith.

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32 The Local Spiritual Assembly has written that ju-ju is widely used in the area, and it is believed that Mrs. ... is beset with difficulties arising from the application of this magic....

We are confident that your National Spiritual Assembly is conscious of this problem, and tries to educate the friends not only to avoid such practices but to refuse to be influenced by them. In your efforts to educate the friends in such matters you may share with them such quotations as the following which have been gleaned from the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá:

As to the question of evil spirits, demons and monsters, any references made to them in the Holy Books have symbolic meaning. What is currently known among the public is but sheer superstition.

That the "Most Great Name" exercises influence over both physical and spiritual matters is sure and certain....

The important thing is for your National Spiritual Assembly to bear in mind the necessity of deepening the friends in their knowledge of the teachings, reinforcing their trust and faith in the Cause of God in this day, and adding enrichment and illumination to their spiritual lives.

(18 July 1972, from the Universal House of Justice to a National Spiritual Assembly)

- 33 In answer to those who may ask you what the stand is of your religion on the subject of demons, you can say without hesitation that the concept of Satan or the Devil as an actual being opposed to God is rejected by the Bahá'í teachings but that the term is understood by Bahá'ís to mean the promptings of self and desire and the dark side of human nature.

(13 February 1974, from the Universal House of Justice to an individual believer)

- 34 It is clear that what 'Abdu'l-Bahá and Shoghi Effendi had in mind when warning the believers against meddling with psychic forces were those that spiritualists believe come from a deliberate effort on the part of individuals to establish communication with the departed.

(13 June 1982, written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to a National Spiritual Assembly)

- 35 The House of Justice fully appreciates that in Trinidad and Tobago there are many instances of individuals being affected adversely by the psychic arts of other people. This is an observable phenomenon in many parts of the world.... The important thing for Bahá'ís to understand is that the influence of such "arts" is dependent on the conviction, even the sub-conscious conviction, of the person affected and, similarly, the power of the "priests" to overcome the influence is likewise an outcome of the sufferer's conviction that it is from the "priest" that he or she will be able to obtain help....

Bahá'ís recognize that evil is negative and has no existence in its own right, but that does not mean that there is no power in evil. Do not Bahá'u'lláh and 'Abdu'l-Bahá warn us repeatedly of the spiritual infection of Covenant-breaking? In one of His Tablets, 'Abdu'l-Bahá wrote:

...if you seek immunity from the sway of the forces of the contingent world, hang the Most Great Name in your dwelling, wear the ring of the Most Great Name on your finger, place the picture of 'Abdu'l-Bahá in your home and always recite the prayers that I have written. Then you will behold the marvellous effect they produce. Those so-called forces will prove but illusions and will be wiped out and exterminated.

In a letter dated 26 November 1939 written on behalf of the Guardian to an

individual believer we find the following:

Evil forces do take control of our life, but it is within our power to free ourselves from falling under their subjection.

There are, therefore, specific actions that Bahá'ís can take when confronted with the kind of situation of which you write, but the principal way in which they can overcome them is to deepen themselves in the Teachings of Bahá'u'lláh so that they will come to recognize the lack of any true reality to such negative forces.

One of the Bahá'í pilgrims from the West who asked 'Abdu'l-Bahá about the power exercised by evil souls who had passed to the next world, recorded His answer as "There is no power exercised over the people by those evil souls that have passed away. Good is stronger than evil and even when alive they had very little power. How much less have they after they are dead..."

Also, in a letter to an individual believer, written on behalf of the Guardian on 18 January 1951, it is stated: "You should not be afraid any one can affect your mind. Even when we want to catch the thoughts of those we love most we cannot do so, how much less can other people succeed in penetrating our minds."...

Concerning your appeal for a solution to the problem, we are instructed to say that the approach is twofold. It involves a process of educating the friends, deepening their understanding of the Teachings and their trust in the power of the Cause, and gradually weaning them away from those illusions and practices which are potentially destructive of their spiritual and material well-being.

You are encouraged to ponder the advice contained in the following statement written on behalf of the beloved Guardian to an individual believer who was troubled about matters that are similar, although not identical, to those which concern the friends in Trinidad and Tobago:

We must use the Writings of the Prophets as our measurement. If Bahá'u'lláh had attached the slightest importance to occult experiences, to the seeing of auras, to the hearing of mystic voices; if He had believed that reincarnation was a fact, He, Himself, would have mentioned all of these things in His Teachings. The fact that He passed over them in silence shows that to Him, they had either no importance or no reality, and were consequently not worthy to take up His time as the Divine Educator of the human race.

We must turn our faces away from these things, and toward the actual practice of His Teachings in our everyday life through our Bahá'í Administration, and in our contact with other people and the examples we give.¹

(30 August 1984, written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to an individual believer)

¹ From a letter dated 22 April 1954 written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to an individual believer

36 The Bahá'í teachings state that there is no independent force of evil in the world. However, there are negative forces which are described as evil, and which can affect an individual adversely. It is reassuring to note that in a letter of 26 November 1939 written on behalf of the Guardian to an individual believer there appears the statement:

Evil forces do take control of our life, but it is within our power to free ourselves from falling under their subjection.

An important element in the process of freeing oneself from subjection to evil forces is recognition of the fact that, so often, the influence of such forces is dependent on the conviction, even on a subconscious level, that others can influence one's mind. In another letter to an individual believer, written on behalf of the Guardian on 18 January 1951, it is stated:

You should not be afraid anyone can affect your mind. Even when we want to catch the thoughts of those we love most we cannot do so, how much less can other people succeed in penetrating our minds.

With the coming of Bahá'u'lláh, spiritual powers of limitless magnitude are available to the believer, to reinforce his endeavours to free himself from evil influences.... Through recourse to prayer, consultation with the Bahá'í institutions and obedience to their instructions, and through wholehearted participation in Bahá'í community life, a believer may partake of the life-giving and healing spirit which has been released to the world with the coming of the Manifestation.

(24 March 1988, written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to an individual believer)

37 ...you ask for guidance in answering questions put to you about African traditional astrologers, and so-called "bad spirits". We are directed to convey the following. Bahá'ís should be encouraged to preserve their inherited cultural identities, as long as

the activities involved do not contravene the principles of the Faith. When such activities are not in accord with the teachings of the Faith and have been established among communities for centuries, weaning the Bahá'ís from them is a gradual process and takes time and patience. Any bad habits of ancient cultural traditions are overcome by the offering of a greater spiritual attraction. As the new believers become more and more attracted to Bahá'u'lláh and His teachings, they are more likely to be able to turn away confidently from old ways that are in disagreement with His teachings.

(28 October 1990, written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to an individual believer)

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- 38 The information available at the Bahá'í World Centre indicates that the term “voodoo” generally refers to a variety of practices often including sorcery, the supposed summoning of spirits, elaborate rituals, and animal sacrifices. While nothing has been found in the Bahá'í Writings specifically on the set of beliefs and practices which make up voodoo, Bahá'ís can readily use the authoritative texts of the Faith as a standard with which to assess the various elements of voodoo. In this regard, you would find it useful to examine the section on psychic phenomena in the book *Lights of Guidance* (revised edition, 1988, pp. 512-522), in addition to such books as *Some Answered Questions*.

It is also pertinent to note that, in a letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to an individual believer, it is stated that “Evil forces do take control of our life, but it is within our power to free ourselves from falling under their subjection.” Immersion in the Teachings of Bahá'u'lláh, prayer and meditation, moreover, can provide the means to recognize the lack of any true reality to such negative forces. Indeed, we Bahá'ís know that with the coming of Bahá'u'lláh, spiritual powers of limitless magnitude are available to the believer to reinforce his endeavours to free himself from evil influences.

(27 October 1997, written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to an individual believer)

4.6 Traditional Healing and Traditional Healers

In responding to questions about traditional forms of healing and the activities of traditional healers, the Universal House of Justice sets out the Bahá'í perspective on medical treatment. While the Bahá'í Faith does not support any one particular school of medical theory or practice, it calls upon the believers to consult scientifically trained, competent practitioners; this does

not necessarily exclude traditional healers who have undergone a rigorous training in their craft. While Bahá'ís are free to decide which doctor to consult, they are also cautioned not to cross “an important borderline between unorthodox medical practice and sheer quackery or superstition”. In guiding the believers concerning such issues, the Spiritual Assemblies are counselled to distinguish between remedies that are prescribed as a simple therapeutic remedy and something that is taken as part of a religious or fetishistic ritual. As to Bahá'ís who are traditional healers, while it is recognized that certain individuals have a gift of healing, such people are encouraged not to attribute these powers to the Faith and they are to refrain from practices, such as those involving communication with departed spirits, that are incompatible with Bahá'í teachings.

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39 In the Kitáb-i-Aqdas Bahá'u'lláh has stated: “Whenever ye fall ill, refer to competent physicians. Verily, We have not abolished recourse to material means, rather have We affirmed it through this Pen which God hath made the Dawning Place of His luminous and resplendent Cause.”² The secretaries of the Guardian have conveyed his guidance on this point in many letters to individual believers in passages such as these: “...refer to competent physicians, and abide by their considered decisions”; “...invariably consult and follow the treatment of competent and conscientious physicians...” and “...consult the best physicians ... doctors who have studied a scientific system of medicine.” Thus the obligation to consult physicians and to distinguish between doctors who are well trained in medical sciences and those who are not is clear, but the Faith should not be associated with any particular school of medical theory or practice. It is left to each believer to decide for himself which doctors he should consult, bearing in mind the principles enunciated above.

(11 July 1978, written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to an individual believer)

² Paragraph 113—note that this is an older translation than that found in the published version

40 1. As you point out, the acceptance of a system of medicine as “scientific” can vary from country to country. However, the friends should be left free to make their own choices in such matters, so long as they do not break the law of the land by administering or taking a treatment which is contrary to the law....

4. As stated in 1 above, a believer is free to follow any form of healing that he favours, even if it is not officially recognized, so long as by doing so he does not

violate the law of the land.

5. The so-called “gift of healing” is a God-given talent, as Shoghi Effendi has explained. There is nothing in the Teachings to prohibit the friends from discovering, either for themselves or with the help of experts if they wish, that they have such a gift. Your understanding that a Bahá’í is free to practice such powers as long as he does so without attributing his or her powers to the Faith or to Bahá’u’lláh is correct; likewise that Bahá’ís are free to accept treatment from individuals whom they believe to be endowed with such a gift.

(13 June 1982, written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to a National Spiritual Assembly)

- 41 Regarding the use of traditional curative herbs, any herb known to have medicinal effects can surely be used by the friends, and those administering such medicaments should be left entirely free to carry out their profession.

However, it must be borne in mind that this is different from traditional fetishist practices which involve communication with departed spirits.

(23 December 1991, written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to a National Spiritual Assembly)

- 42 The Universal House of Justice has asked us to respond to your letter ... seeking guidance with respect to the permissibility of a Bahá’í’s using peyote, under the direction of a Native American medicine man, and whether such a practitioner “could be considered under some circumstances or by some people a legitimate practising physician”, in which case, presumably, his prescription to use peyote would represent the kind of professional guidance the Guardian referred to as “the advice of a competent and conscientious physician”.

The House of Justice does not wish to comment on the medical qualifications of such Native American healers. However, it is informed that peyote is customarily prescribed, not as a simple therapeutic remedy, but as a part of a religious ritual in which it plays the part of a sacrament, much as sacramental wine is used in the Roman Catholic mass. Indeed, it is said that those who follow this ritual not infrequently draw a comparison between the two practices. If this is so, it is clearly not permissible for a Bahá’í to resort to the use of peyote in such a manner, no matter who prescribes it, since it would imply acceptance of the doctrines of the Native American Church....

The statement defining health practitioners from a Bahá’í point of view is given

in a letter written on behalf of the Guardian to an individual believer on 8 June 1948: “In His Most Holy Book (the “Aqdas”) Bahá’u’lláh says to consult the best physicians, in other words doctors who have studied a scientific system of medicine.” It is clear from other statements made by the Guardian, as well as from the practice of Bahá’u’lláh, the Master and the Guardian himself, that by “a scientific system of medicine” he was not limiting the choice to the medical theories currently dominant in western countries. The House of Justice, therefore, does not exclude the use of traditional native healers, who have often gone through a rigorous training in their craft. There is, nevertheless, an important borderline between unorthodox medical practice and sheer quackery or superstition, and this we should be careful not to cross.

In the specific matter of the use of peyote, the House of Justice is given to understand that, in the United States at the present time, the use of peyote for any purpose is prohibited by law. If this is not so, or if in future it should become legally permissible for peyote to be prescribed for medicinal purposes, you should refer the matter to the House of Justice once again for further elucidation.

(17 June 1994, written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to a National Spiritual Assembly)

43 The Universal House of Justice has received your letter of ... seeking its advice concerning your questions about those friends who persist in practising traditional medicine while attributing their power of healing to Bahá’u’lláh or to the Faith, and we have been instructed to send the following comments....

We draw your attention to some quotations on the subject of healing, from letters written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi, with which you are perhaps already familiar:

As to your question about healing: although there is no objection to your helping others to regain their health, he does not feel you should associate the name Bahá’í with your work, as it gives a wrong impression; we have no “Bahá’í healers” as Christian Science and various other sects have. You are a Bahá’í and a healer, and that is quite different.

(From a letter dated 13 December 1945 written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to an individual believer)

The Guardian knows nothing about your kind of healing, nor would he care to go into the question in detail, as he has no time for such matters. But he can lay down for your guidance certain broad

principles: there is no such thing as Bahá'í healers or a Bahá'í type of healing. In His Most Holy Book (the “Aqdas”) Bahá'u'lláh says to consult the best physicians, in other words doctors who have studied a scientific system of medicine; He never gave us to believe He Himself would heal us through “healers”, but rather through prayer and the assistance of medicine and approved treatments.

Now, as long as your healing is in no opposition to these principles, as long as you do not try and take the place of a regular doctor in trying to heal others, but only give them your kind of help through constructive suggestion—or whatever it may be—and do not associate this help with being a channel of the direct grace of Bahá'u'lláh, the Guardian sees no harm in your continuing your assistance to others. But you must conscientiously decide whether, in view of the above, you are really justified in continuing. He will pray for your guidance and happiness.

(From a letter dated 8 June 1948 written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to an individual believer)

It is perhaps understandable that a Bahá'í, especially if not well-deepened, feeling himself to be endowed with a special gift, would, out of love, wish to attribute this power to the Faith, especially if the phenomenon were not explainable in scientific terms.

The Assembly should deal sensitively with such persons, advise them not to confuse what they are doing with Bahá'í practices, and be forbearing, unless their actions are against the Teachings, are illegal or immoral. The key point to observe in this case is the important distinction between a claim of Bahá'u'lláh's inspiration, which is likely the consequence of sincere conviction and needs to be addressed through firm but loving counsel, and flagrant immorality, challenges to the authority of the Covenant, or violation of an administrative principle of the Faith, which are far more pernicious and require direct interdiction in the form of sanctions. With this in mind, you may wish to call to the attention of this person the guidance of the beloved Guardian, but avoid giving undue prominence to the matter or making it an issue. Another useful approach might be to inform the Bahá'ís generally of these exhortations, but without pointing a finger, so as to raise the level of awareness. In this way, the community as a whole will gradually come to attain a greater maturity in regard to such practices.

(9 January 1996, written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to a National Spiritual Assembly)

44 The Universal House of Justice has received your faxed letter of ... regarding believers in your country who continue to perform traditional cultural roles including that of fetishist healer, and we have been asked to reply.

...the House of Justice understands that Mr. ... inherited from his maternal grandfather the position of fetishist chief and that he is a traditional therapist by profession. However, it was unclear from your letter to what extent Mr. ...'s duties as fetishist priest are religious in nature, as well as having to do with traditional healing, and to what extent they involve cultural ceremonies of a non-religious nature. While it may be difficult to draw such distinctions, doing so will better enable your Assembly to choose an appropriate course of action in this and similar cases.

In particular, that Mr. ...'s profession is that of traditional therapist or healer is, in itself, not necessarily a cause for concern. It is clear from statements made by the Guardian, as well as from the practice of Bahá'u'lláh, the Master and the Guardian himself, that by "a scientific system of medicine" he was not limiting the choice to the medical theories currently dominant in western countries. The House of Justice, therefore, does not exclude the use of traditional healers, who have often gone through a rigorous training in their craft. Some fetishistic practices, however, such as those involving communication with departed spirits, are not compatible with Bahá'í teachings, and the believers should gradually be weaned from such things.

(22 April 1998, written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to a National Spiritual Assembly)

4.7 Tribal Chiefs and Traditional Leaders

The Universal House of Justice envisages an important role for tribal chiefs and traditional rulers within the Bahá'í community and provides guidance to enable the Spiritual Assemblies to assist these distinguished individuals to fulfil their responsibilities in the most befitting manner.

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45 The Universal House of Justice has considered your letter of ... asking how far the influence of a tribal chief over the population should extend after he has become a Bahá'í, and we have been asked to convey the following.

Obviously, whatever else he does, a believer cannot become embroiled in politics, but the Universal House of Justice sees no objection to ... calling a meeting for the

purpose of using his influence as a chief to urge the people to investigate the truth of the Teachings of Bahá'u'lláh.

(10 March 1980, written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to a National Spiritual Assembly)

- 46 While it goes without saying that the traditional rulers are entitled to the respect and courtesy of the Bahá'í friends, your Assembly should make sure that those who embrace the Faith are wisely, patiently and fully familiarized with the essential Teachings, so that in time they will come to recognize the spirit and authority of the Administrative Order which Bahá'u'lláh has ordained.

(13 October 1987, written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to a National Spiritual Assembly)

- 47 Your letter of ... requesting guidance on the matter of enforcement of the marriage laws in relation to traditional chiefs has been received by the Universal House of Justice... We are instructed to convey the following. You are advised by the House of Justice to inform traditional chiefs who become Bahá'ís of the marriage law which calls for monogamy. A chief who already has more than one wife is not required to divorce any of his wives, but should not extend the polygamy by taking an additional wife. Any chief who is adequately informed of the law but violates it should be subject to normal administrative sanctions.

...your Assembly should of course not become preoccupied with this question to the extent of prying into the personal lives of any of the chiefs; however, should it come to your attention that the law of marriage is being violated by any of them, then appropriate action must be taken by your Assembly.

(13 June 1990, written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to a National Spiritual Assembly)

- 48 Your letter of ... has been received by the Universal House of Justice and we are directed to convey the following response to your request for guidance in the matter of a Bahá'í being appointed a traditional chief in his community.

There is no objection to his acceptance of this position so long as he does not involve himself in partisan politics. He should, of course, at all times uphold and demonstrate the high standards of rectitude of conduct and integrity that are a central part of the Bahá'í Teachings.

(2 February 1993, written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to a National Spiritual Assembly)

49 Your letter of ... has been received by the Universal House of Justice and we are directed to convey the following response to your request for guidance in the matter of your having been appointed a traditional chief in your community.

The House of Justice appreciates your desire to use your position in a way which will advance the interests of the Cause. We are not aware of any specific references in the Writings to traditional leadership, unless one were to read the various admonitions to kings and other rulers as being applicable also to the situation of a tribal chief; ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s letter to the people and rulers of Persia, published as “The Secret of Divine Civilization” would be particularly instructive. The main thing is, of course, to uphold and demonstrate at all times the high standards of rectitude of conduct and integrity that are a central part of the Bahá’í Teachings and to avoid anything which could be construed as involvement in partisan politics.

(9 May 1993, written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to an individual believer)

4.8 The Status of Women

The Universal House of Justice calls attention to the importance of raising the status of women and to encouraging the active support of men in this endeavour. To this end, the House of Justice stresses the importance of the African Bahá’í community’s providing educational and training opportunities for girls and women to enable them to take their rightful place in the community. It also underlines the contribution of women to social, economic and cultural development and specifies that women must be welcomed into full partnership with men in consultative decision-making and in guiding the progress of their Bahá’í communities.

* * * * *

50 The attainment of the full equality between men and women has been specified by the House of Justice as being vital to the development of world peace. The efforts being made by the Bahá’í community to enhance the status of women in the developing countries are as yet incomplete. However, as the activities of women in the Bahá’í Faith increase, the role played by women in the establishment of world peace will become more clearly evident.

(24 January 1991, written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to two believers)

51 The contribution of women to social, economic and cultural development is paramount. As the primary educators of children, women must themselves be educated and receive literacy training. As wives and mothers, as members of the professions, as farmers, as stewards of the health and well-being of families, and as members of Bahá'í administrative institutions, women must be welcomed into full partnership with men in consultative decision-making and in guiding the progress of their communities.

We are confident of your ability to set in motion processes of development and patterns of living which, emanating from within the Bahá'í communities, will exert salutary effects on the destiny of nations. Inspired and reinforced by the guidance and life-giving properties of the Word of God, the Bahá'ís of Africa can choose to play a leading role in brightening the fortunes of their entire continent. Be assured of our heartfelt prayers at the Sacred Threshold that this conference will be a center of spiritual illumination inspiring the friends to redouble their efforts towards ensuring the unhampered, systematic involvement of women in the vital work of the Cause.

(9 October 1991, from the Universal House of Justice to the participants at a Bahá'í International Women's Conference in Nigeria)

52 The Bahá'í community in ... is dear to us, and it has over the years distinguished itself among its sister communities in Africa for its extensive teaching and proclamation activity, and for its vast experience in initiating and maintaining social and economic development projects. We feel that the goals outlined in your Plan befittingly build on the advances made by your community during the Six Year Plan, and will lend a positive impetus to the further expansion and consolidation of the Cause in that beloved land. We were greatly pleased by the number of goals which were devoted to providing for the spiritual enrichment of the women in your community, thus assisting them to take their rightful place in the vanguard of your activities.

(13 April 1993, from the Universal House of Justice to a National Spiritual Assembly)

53 The acute inadequacy of plans and programmes to educate Africa's people poses a particular challenge to the followers of Bahá'u'lláh in that continent, for He has emphasized the importance of education for all; and individuals ought to be taught at least to read and write. The education of which Bahá'u'lláh spoke includes both spiritual and material aspects. The lack of such education affects the ability of people to achieve true progress. This matter should be of the keenest interest to all segments

of the community. Parents have a special responsibility to see that their children, both boys and girls, receive an education; and they must take care that the girls are not left behind, since well-educated girls are a guarantee of the excellence of future society; indeed, preference should, if necessary, be given to their education. Closely linked to this concern is the principle of the equality of men and women taught by Bahá'u'lláh. It is also highly desirable for adults, both men and women, who are illiterate to participate in literacy programmes, so that gradually all Bahá'ís will be able to read the Word of God for themselves. The Bahá'í community is not fully equipped to undertake what responsible authorities have neglected to do for the education of the people; however, the Bahá'í institutions at all levels are urged to give attention to these critical needs, as circumstances permit....

What specific actions, you may well ask, would indicate that you are fulfilling the basic requirement of the Plan in Africa? A reply would include mention of the following....

...Multiply plans and programmes to raise the status of women and to encourage the active support of men in such endeavours.

(21 April 1996, from the Universal House of Justice to the Followers of Bahá'u'lláh in Africa)

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- 54 The activities you have planned for promoting Bahá'í education of children and youth, teaching women and strengthening family life are indeed commendable, and as they are more fully developed will be of great assistance in bringing families into the Faith, which as you know is one of the specific actions presented by the House of Justice in its *Riḍván* Message to the Bahá'ís of Africa.

(15 January 1997, written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to a National Spiritual Assembly)

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- 55 The Universal House of Justice was heartened to receive a report ... from your National Committee for Advancement of Women concerning the activities held for International Women's Day from 2 to 8 March. It noted with interest the patient labouring of the Committee to proclaim the importance of the equality and education of women.

The efforts of the Committee are highly praiseworthy and it should be encouraged to continue with undeviating purpose to involve the friends in activities which will uplift the station of women in Uganda. An increase in programmes to raise the status of women and encouragement of the active support of men in this endeavour are specific actions that the House of Justice called for in its *Riḍván* 153 message to the

followers of Bahá'u'lláh in Africa, and it is hoped that the members of the Committee, whose individual efforts are of unique importance, will continue to earnestly strive to accomplish their goals.

(25 May 1998, written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to a National Spiritual Assembly)

56 GREATLY PLEASED GATHERING PARTICIPANTS IN NATIONAL WOMEN'S CONFERENCE. DEARLY HOPE THIS EVENT WILL RESULT IN CONTINUATION SYSTEMATIC, CONSTANT, HARMONIOUS LINES OF ACTION FURTHERING STATUS AND ROLE OF WOMEN. GO FORWARD WITH CONFIDENT HEARTS AND SEIZE TEACHING OPPORTUNITIES. PRAYING HOLY SHRINES ACTIVITIES MAY ATTRACT ABUNDANT CONFIRMATIONS BLESSED BEAUTY.

(10 August 1998, from the Universal House of Justice to a National Spiritual Assembly)
