

Discussion Questions

1. Describe the ethical conundrum that Alma and Philip faced when observing the drama of Afwé/Nakoyan and her husband, Gaosu.

- Why did they pity both Afwé/Nakoyan *and* Gaosu?
- Why did they do nothing about the rape?
- How did you feel about their decision not to intervene?

2. Discuss the village of Kosangbé's resistance to revealing the secrets of their religious traditions to Alma, focusing on the case of the trial.

- Do you agree that Alma and Philip were right in challenging the chief, San Yao, for holding secret meeting in Asagbé without them?
- Do you support Alma's statement (page 187) that "We had one tiny basis for hope: we knew San Yao had acted inappropriately in holding the Asagbé meeting without us. But could I convince the villagers to find a chief guilty?"
- On page 192, an elder states that "If you can't name one person who told you of the trial, there's no reason to discuss the matter any further." Do you agree with Alma's and Philip's insistence that the names of those who provided information did not matter? Was this a double standard (how would their refusal to name names hold up in a U.S. court?)
- Was it okay for Philip to mention (on page 192), in his and Alma's defense, all of the things they had done to help villagers in Kosangbé?
- How did the trial end?

3. To what extent do Alma and Philip pretend to rely on indigenous

beliefs in magic, sorcery, and divination? Why do they do this, and what moral conflicts does such pretending entail?

4. Discuss the differences in Alma's relationships with her research assistant, Jean, and her key collaborator, Amenan.

- How would you characterize each of their social positions (were they marginal)?
- Why did they treat Alma so differently—the one not helping her learn about the culture even though he was paid to do so, and the other actively helping her to learn the culture even though she was not paid to do so?
- Were there any situations in which *you* would mistrust Amenan?