



## CHAPTER 6 ENRICHMENT ACTIVITY

# Understanding African Poetry

### LISTENING TO ANCESTORS

Many Africans strive to follow the codes of conduct that their ancestors left behind. They believe that ancestors have the power to bring disaster to a family or even a whole village if they disapprove of their descendants' behavior. Thus, beliefs about ancestors lead to civic order. These beliefs also put death in a positive light.

The poem below shows the traditional African's view of death as a passage to a higher plane of influence.

**Directions** Study the poem, then answer the questions that follow, using a separate sheet of paper if necessary.

Listen more to things  
Than to words that are said.  
The water's voice sings  
And the flame cries  
And the wind that brings  
The woods to sighs  
Is the breathing of the dead.  
Those who are dead have never gone away.  
They are in the shadows darkening around,  
They are in the shadows fading into day,  
The dead are not under the ground.  
They are in the trees that quiver,  
They are in the woods that weep,  
They are in the waters of the rivers,

They are in the waters that sleep.  
They are in the crowds, they are in the homestead.  
The dead are never dead. . . .

Those who are dead have never gone away.  
They are at the breast of the wife.  
They are in the child's cry of dismay  
And the firebrand bursting into life.  
The dead are not under the ground.  
They are in the fire that burns low  
They are in the grass with tears to shed,  
In the rock where whining winds blow  
They are in the forest, they are in the homestead.  
The dead are never dead.

Source: Birago Diop, "Breath," *A Book of African Verse*, eds. John Reed and Clive Wake (London: Heinemann Educational Books Ltd., 1964), pp. 25-26. First published as "Souffles" in *Lurres et Lueurs* (Présence Africaine, Paris, 1960).

### ■ INTERPRETING THE POEM ■

1. What natural phenomenon does the poet describe in the phrase "grass with tears to shed"? \_\_\_\_\_

2. Do you think Africans' beliefs in ancestors made them receptive to missionaries' teachings about souls and eternal life? Explain. \_\_\_\_\_

### CRITICAL THINKING

3. **Determining Relevance** Would an African city dweller be more or less likely than an African villager to abandon the traditional belief in the power of ancestors? Explain your answer.

Be, be, 'fore we came to this country  
We were kings and queens, never porch monkeys  
There was empires in Africa called Kush  
Timbuktu, where every race came to get books  
To learn from black teachers who taught Greeks and Romans  
Asian Arabs and gave them gold when  
Gold was converted to money it all changed  
Money then became empowerment for Europeans  
The Persian military invaded  
They heard about the gold, the teachings, and everything sacred  
Africa was almost robbed naked  
Slavery was money, so they began making slave ships  
Egypt was the place that Alexander the Great went  
He was so shocked at the mountains with black faces  
Shot up they nose to impose what basically  
Still goes on today, you see?  
If the truth is told, the youth can grow  
Then learn to survive until they gain control  
Nobody says you have to be gangstas, hoes  
Read more learn more, change the globe  
Ghetto children, do your thing  
Hold your head up, little man, you're a king  
Young Princess when you get your wedding ring  
Your man is saying "She's my queen"