



Mission in a Post Modern World: Issues of Language and Dependency in Post-Colonial Africa

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Abstract

The communication revolution has made texts and languages available to people who, it is here suggested, might not have the cultural components needed to use them in the same way as native speakers. Introduced languages have in much of Africa eclipsed indigenous knowledge from opportunity for home grown development. Africans flocking to Western languages supported by numerous Western subsidies, leaves African ways of life concealed from the West. Western languages can be used to undermine the West. The inadequacy of English in Africa is illustrated by the contrast between the holistic and dualistic worldviews; English being dualistic is a poor means for expressing African holism. This makes the use of English in and for Africa inherently confusing. It is proposed that indigenous development be encouraged through challenging and encouraging African theology on its own terms, by encouraging some Western missionaries to use African languages and resources in their task.

Keywords

mission, linguistics, Africa, development, holistic

Introduction

This article looks at the contexts that missionaries work in and some of the tools that they use. Missiologists typically make use of disciplines such as anthropology, philosophy and linguistics. This article looks at a gap that has been left between these disciplines — concerning the contribution of context to language meaning.

This article is intended to be read by any one concerned for world mission — and especially mission to Africa. Being rooted in experience, it is especially likely to be appreciated by people who have had cross-cultural missions experience. Even more — those who have been bruised in the course

of cross-cultural mission may recognise in these pages some of the root causes for their bruising. References to 'Africa' should be taken as being to Sub-Saharan Africa.

A critique of the use of English and European languages on the African continent acts as background for the rest of this article. I begin by looking at the use of Western languages in Africa in terms of power. I then take a historical perspective, and examine events in Africa from colonialism to the present age as a movement towards a cargo cult, or prosperity gospel. In the third part I look at the miraculous as a case study, and consider language use in day-to-day practice in Africa. The fourth section, that precedes the conclusion, is a 'drawing together' of significant implications that arise from this article.

That we are in unique times at the start of the 21st century is frequently acknowledged, and I suggest just as often inadequately grasped. Centres of global power today have an international influence at a scale that in the past was unthinkable.¹ I will restrict my view mostly to a bipolar one — comparing Africa with the West. I will speak mostly of the Anglophone parts of sub-Saharan Africa. In talking of the West, I focus mostly on native-English speaking parts of it, the major players internationally being the USA and UK, but also Australia and other territories previously colonised from the British Isles. I am aware that such a bi-polar view appears to ignore other global powers, notably Asia (perhaps especially China) and the Arab world. Were these to be brought into the picture, the scene would be more complex, but I believe this would strengthen and not weaken my case.

1. Power and Language Issues Twixt the West and Africa

Unique times, I believe, need a unique approach. Not unique in all its component parts. In that sense perhaps there is 'nothing new under the sun' (Ecc 1: 9). Rather, what I am suggesting is needed in the post-modern era is a new way of putting together what is already known. Some aspects of life as it used to be that the modern era put aside — to be resurrected; some things that modernity has insisted upon, to be put aside. Certainly 'on the menu' is the need for a renewed emphasis on spirituality. That includes a role for God, for

¹ This is explained in more detail below. The global spread of English combined with effective media coverage and an incredibly widespread communication system means that messages from Western centres can travel around the world extremely quickly and to a very high number of people almost instantly.

faith, for Christian conviction in the world, which for some had gone with the winds of change.

Perhaps ironically, I suggest that there are parallels between the history of Biblical scholarship, and the meeting of the West with Africa. Both are instances of the West's dealing with tensions in its understanding of the 'enlightenment'. I have pointed out elsewhere that missiologists (amongst others) from the West can be forced to rely on something akin to magic² in order for their prescriptions in Africa to succeed.³ That is striking — or should be. Tambiah tells us that '... modern science in its victorious march has blotted out the immediate past, and one generation's conscious omissions become the next generation's genuine amnesia.'⁴ No longer being conversant with extra-enlightenment features of life, gaps are left between the limits of Western scholarship and reality on the ground in Africa, that only magic seems able to fill.

A detailed explanation of some aspects of the above paragraph is given in the article referred to above.⁵ In this I argue that institutions (schools, churches, businesses, etc.) operate as effectively as they do in the West because of safeguards, feedback mechanisms, controls and accountability that are built into their operations. For various reasons, some of these are not operative in Africa. Corruption is one reason, different traditional social behavioural patterns is another. Hence such institutions either 'do not work', or they work differently to the way they do in the West. In practice the West ignores such differences and prefers to assume African institutions to be the same as those in the West in its interactions with them. This becomes problematic when the West ends up with ill-informed but powerful influences over such institutions — for example through its donor-activities, that prevent institutions in African from responding to local contexts.

The above have come hand-in-hand with unprecedented penetration powers (for want of a better term) of Western scholarship and Western ways of

² There has been much debate about the meaning of the term 'magic' in English. I do not here try to draw on the history of the term as used in the native English speaking world, so much as I am using it as a means to represent things that are happening (or believed) in Africa for which there seems to be no better alternative English word.

³ Jim Harries, 'Providence and Power Structures in Mission and Development Initiatives from the West to the Rest: A Critique of Current Practice', *Evangelical Review of Theology* 32/2 (2008), 156-165.

⁴ S.J. Tambiah, *Magic, Science, Religion and the Scope of Rationality*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1990, 28.

⁵ Harries, 'Providence'.

life. Western, (especially American) language, traditions, social lives, entertainment and education are increasingly widespread globally. The absolutely phenomenal impact of the communication revolution and the globalisation that it has spawned — while already much discussed inside and outside of academic circles, disqualifies simple comparisons with prior eons of history. Neither Persians, Greeks, Romans, Chinese nor any other empire in by-gone years had anything even slightly resembling the power to communicate that is available to global authorities today. Edicts passed by King Artaxerxes of Persia, to give a Biblical example, must surely have travelled incredibly slowly and been carefully honed through translation in their transit to the typical citizen of his empire.⁶ Compare such to broadcasts of President Obama's speeches over numerous international networks today.

This communication ability must be considered hand in hand with a look at the globe's economic systems. The African peasant farmer seems, from his own perspective, to do all that could possibly be done to 'produce' for his family. Given the cultural, climatic and physical restrictions he is under, he (or she) thinks very carefully about achieving effective food-productivity. All available land may be dug and sown. Crops are carefully chosen, and planted in a way that is based on generations of experience. A pig eats leftovers, chickens scour the area for the smallest morsels. The forest is scoured for edible herbs. Yet for all their wisdom, care, intelligence, endurance and hard work — peasant farmers can on today's international ratings be considered to be absolutely poverty-stricken! How capitalist societies have at the same time as the farmer digs with his hoe produced skyscrapers, aeroplanes, computers, banks, food surpluses (and shortages) and nuclear weapons, all being operated through a back and fore of electrons in numerous computers — is so bewildering as to be 'out of this world' to the peasant.⁷

Capitalism must seem to many to be a con! In its ignoring of 'religious' prohibition of usury, it seems to be immoral.⁸ Many of its tenets are little

⁶ Hand-carried copies of an official letter translated into various languages being transported to the few literate people in governance in far-flung provinces is a far cry from today's radio, television, internet and other media (Esth 8: 9).

⁷ My references to 'capitalist' are here to that referred to by Weber as 'rational capitalism', only found in recent centuries, which is unlike booty, pariah or traditional capitalism, that have been around for a lot longer. (Frank Parkin, *Max Weber: Key Sociologists*, London: Routledge, 2002, 41).

⁸ Wayne A.M. Visser, and Alastair McIntosh, 'History of Usury Prohibition: a Short Review of the Historical Critique of Usury' (1998), website *History of Usury Prohibition*, http://www.alastairmcintosh.com/articles/1998_usury.htm, accessed 19 July 2009.

understood — even by experts. The ability of banks to generate credit ‘from nowhere’ blows the mind. Not even gold is these days needed to underwrite banking activities. The electronic flow of money can happen (literally!) at lightening speed — masses of transactions can occur and the same money can be reused hundreds or even thousands of times in a second — that is breathtaking even to think about. Wealth can appear to come from absolutely nowhere. Ancient commonsensical notions of ‘limited good’⁹ are blown to smithereens — and few people know quite how it happened. That all this is based on trust — should also have us stop and think carefully, in the context of Africa.¹⁰ ‘Trust’ is tentative in societies governed by witchcraft; it can be (in its Western sense) almost nonexistent.

Whatever tricks or techniques are involved — capitalism has proved itself capable of producing a vast amount of goods. My concern here is not exactly that of Karl Marx (although some credit must go to him for perceiving where unbridled capitalism could lead to). Marx was concerned with the empowerment of the masses (the proletariat). He assumed them to be sufficiently enlightened to be able to take over the means of production. But were they so enlightened?¹¹ Perhaps not according to subsequent lessons of history and according to Weber, who complicated the picture by correlating religious belief with economic prowess.¹² Not according to many capitalist nations, with the USA as front-runner, who have seen one of their roles on the international scene as being to encourage the promotion of capitalism and the demise of communism.

My concern is therefore not primarily about the impact of capitalism on those who do not have capital. It is about the reasonable possibility of capitalist principles being learned and acquired at the periphery. That is — whether African people, given their history and context will or can, adopt capitalism? Then how such adoption can be enabled or encouraged?¹³

Many peasant farmers have not only to contend with the physical world. They are also bound hand and foot by ‘rigid traditions’ (including witchcraft

⁹ G.M. Foster, *Traditional Societies and Technological Change*, London: Harper and Row, second edition 1973.

¹⁰ The rooting of capitalism in trust is discussed in: Francis Fukuyama, *Trust: The Social Virtues and the Creation of Prosperity*, London: Penguin 1996.

¹¹ I use the term ‘enlightened’ in a specific way here, relating to economics.

¹² Max Weber, *The Sociology of Religion*, Boston: Beacon Press 1991, 246-274.

¹³ Assuming capitalism to be rational capitalism of gradually accumulating profit and not booty, pariah or traditional capitalism. (Parkin, 41).

beliefs) that restrict the advance of economic rationalism.¹⁴ Unless or until these are overcome, economic productivity will be limited. A dearth of 'trust' in many African societies means that many African communities must function on the basis of the 'trust' of others. That is — Africans cannot reproduce many of the markets and technology that they nowadays depend on. Because of witchcraft "many projects and investments, especially in rural areas, are bound to fail."¹⁵

Witchcraft beliefs are a serious impediment to development, economic advance, and social progress. But yet, piece-meal challenges to witchcraft cannot be its undermining. In other words; some trust is not trust, as to be truly 'trust' (in a given context), trust has to be 'whole'. What can build 'whole trust', I suggest, is *not* economic prosperity, but religious conviction. Secular interventions into the poor world, including Africa, that operate on the basis that an increase in wealth will result in an undermining of socially harmful beliefs such as those in witchcraft¹⁶ are misguided if religious conviction is the key to the greatest of accomplishments.¹⁷ A lack of sincere commitment to social change contributes to the ineffectiveness of secular models of development.

Of course there are pockets of capitalist operations (as defined in this article) in Africa. Large ones however are almost invariably not governed by indigenes (black) people, especially not those who remain in their 'homelands'. (Certain freedom from custom-bound counter-economic restrictions can be found the further African people move from their kin and family. This is because kin and family are the forte of the power of witchcraft and jealousies.) The most powerful economic players are often those originally from outside of

¹⁴ Weber, 269.

¹⁵ Hugo F. Hinfelaar, 'Witch-hunting in Zambia and the International Illegal Trade', in: Gerrie ter Haar, (ed.) *Imagining Evil: Witchcraft Beliefs and Accusations in Contemporary Africa*, Trenton NJ: Africa World Press Inc. 2007, 229.

¹⁶ Professor Sachs, as many others concerned with 'African development' ignores the presence of witchcraft beliefs in his designing of the Millennium Development Project, preferring to say that: 'the barriers to development in Africa are not in the mind, but in the soils, the mosquitoes, the vast distances over difficult terrain, the unsteady rainfall' (Jeffrey Sachs, 'The End of the World as We Know It: "the fight against extreme poverty can be won, but only if Bush recognises that military might alone won't secure the world"', *Guardian*, Tuesday 5 April 2005, website *CommonDreams.org*, <http://www.commondreams.org/views05/0405-26.htm>, accessed 16th May 2005).

¹⁷ This not being the central point to my article I will not take it further here. Weber makes a similar point extremely powerfully (Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*. London: George Allen and Unwin Ltd 1930, 53).

the continent (for example, Indians and Chinese people). This may be true even if in various ways concealed for pragmatic reasons to do with race.¹⁸

Included in the ramifications of the situation discussed above, is the existence of absolutely massive economic power concentrated in certain parts of the world (the West) that currently barely spreads beyond the West. This means — massive power on which more and more of the globe, certainly Africa, is becoming dependent, the foundation of which, cannot be appropriated into native-African territory. In addition to the above, I would like to consider what I perceive to be the linguistic contribution to the ‘stupidification’¹⁹ of Africa, with respect to economics and other potentially beneficial fruit that have arisen from centuries of scholarship and discovery in and beyond the West.

‘Normal’ communication occurs between people who understand one another’s contexts. It is possible to go further than this and say — that communication succeeds to the extent that context is mutually known.²⁰ Simple examples illustrate what must equally apply to more complex contexts: Saying ‘it is cold’ cannot enable even a guess at the temperature without a context. It may be thousands of degrees if the statement asks whether the part of the sun being referred to is the hot part or the cold part. It may be 20 °C in tropical Africa. It may be -40 °C if said in Siberia in the winter. It may be 5 °C if referring to the conditions of a household freezer. Saying ‘I love you’ may mean ‘I lust after you’ if said by an old man to a prostitute. It may mean that ‘I don’t hate you’ if said in response to a question ‘do you hate me or do you love me?’ It may be a correct answer, if the quiz question was ‘what did Romeo say to Juliet?’

My point is that words have meanings in contexts. In today’s world, following the amazing communication revolution mentioned above, words travel widely, but their contexts do not travel with them. Such words cannot be correctly understood — if (and many important words in Africa are of this nature) they are travelling from America or Europe to Africa — where the contexts differ. Many kinds of context are relevant here — climatic, social, linguistic, inter-personal, personal, geographic, historical and so on. Missiologists have

¹⁸ Jim Harries, ‘Issues of Race in Relating to Africa: Linguistic and Cultural Insights that Could Avoid Traps’ (2007), website *The Civilization of Love*, http://www.civilizationoflove.org/httpdocs/archives/faceofafrica/Jim_Harries.pdf, accessed 26 August 2009.

¹⁹ Birgit Brock-Utne, ‘The Adoption of the Western Paradigm of Bilingual Teaching — Why Does it not Fit the African Situation?’ (In Press.)

²⁰ Jim Harries, ‘Intercultural Dialogue — an overrated means of acquiring understanding examined in the context of Christian Mission to Africa’, *Exchange* 37/2 (2008), 174-189.

in the past paid more attention to 'culture' than to 'context' according to Howell²¹ — an imbalance that needs to be addressed.

The above may seem amazing to some of my readers — presumably Westerners, given the wide spread of communication media and their popularly assumed effectiveness. Many Westerners who are influential on the international missions' scene are monolingual native-English speakers who have limited appreciation of translation issues. Many African people, however, on hearing a word in English, will equate it with a term in their mother tongue. The mother-tongue term may have a very different set of impacts to that of the English original. For all of the above reasons and more, messages are regularly transformed in the course of inter-cultural transmission.

Many who might argue that the whole point of education is to enable people to understand the world, especially the modern world, so as to acquire a context with which they can comprehend Western language uses, forget that formal education outside of the West has itself come from the West without much of its context! Indeed, it is through formal education that many African people acquire knowledge of a European language. But it must be said, that no amount of education ('additional learning') will do away with or negate where someone started from. That is, 'education' does not create from nowhere, but is a development of something that is already there. That is why a sheep, even if it attends all classes from nursery to university and if it could hold a pen, could never pass an examination! The foundation that education will build on is laid before a child ever goes to school. Because education is a moulding of what is already there, the starting point will always influence someone's educated status — no matter how many degrees later. That starting point being God's creation influenced by a complex of mother/child/family context, will vary between peoples and cultures. It may vary enormously. So then I suggest classroom education does not do away with the kinds of misunderstandings that we are here concerned about.

The communication revolution, while it may enable words to travel, is not so effective in enabling the travel of 'meaning'. Attentiveness to words from the West (which is very prevalent in Africa), may not be so much enabling as obfuscating! What may be being spread is a 'deskilling process'.²² Western

²¹ Brian, M. Howell, 'Contextualising Context: exploring Christian Identity in the Global Church through Six Contemporary Cases', in: Brian M. Howell and Edwin Zehner, (eds.) *Power and Identity in the Global Church: Six Contemporary Cases*, Pasadena: William Carey Library 2009, 22.

²² Alastair Pennycook, *The Cultural Politics of English as an International Language*, London: Longman 1994, 49, citing Masemann, 1986.

words may be being used by Africans to avoid the trouble of having to think for themselves! Sometimes it would be better, actually, to re-invent the wheel.²³ The level of indigenous foundation needed in order to helpfully appropriate knowledge tied up in Western languages, may not always be there in Africa.²⁴ A ready and subsidised supply of pre-packed knowledge may be a serious disincentive to the acquisition of such a foundation.²⁵

2. Colonialism to Cargo Cult

Colonialism has clearly had a profound impact on the history of Africa. But Africa was not a 'first' for colonialism. The Old Testament tells us of the colonisation of Canaan by the Israelites.²⁶ Later, the northern tribes were sent into exile and their land was colonised by others. In AD 70, historians tell us, Jewish lands were 'colonised' by others.²⁷ Outside of the Biblical scriptures, the Spanish and Portuguese colonised much of South America. Before that, Anglo Saxons colonised the UK, only to find themselves threatened by marauding Vikings with colonial ambitions. Aryans 'colonised' India.²⁸ Bantu people colonised many areas of the African continent, sometimes displacing their *cushite* predecessors.²⁹ My home area in Kenya — Gem in Nyanza Province — was colonised by Luo speaking peoples in the 19th Century.³⁰ In fact when the British came colonisation was still 'in process'. Colonialism is not a new thing started by the British!

There are variations on the colonial theme. That is; different colonial strategies have been employed at different times. The Israelites were instructed to

²³ William A. Dyrness, *Invitation to Cross-cultural Theology: Case Studies in Vernacular Theologies*, Grand Rapids MI: Zondervan Publishing House 1992, 17-18.

²⁴ I am sure that the reverse also applies.

²⁵ Pennycock, 48-49.

²⁶ See the Book of Joshua.

²⁷ Darrell G. Young, 'Oh Jerusalem, Thou that Killeth the Prophets', website *Focus on Jerusalem*, <http://focusonjerusalem.com/thefallofjerusalem.html>, accessed on 19 August 2009.

²⁸ Although there are some who dispute this version of history. (Koenraad Elst, nd, 'Zydenbos vs. Rajaram: A Case Study in Aryan Invasion Polemic', website *The Koenraad Elst Site*, <http://koenraadst.bharatvani.org/articles/aid/zydembos.html>, accessed on 19 August 2009.

²⁹ Or at least their languages. website *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, sub voce: History of Eastern Africa, <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/176961/history-of-eastern-Africa/37491/The-interior-before-the-colonial-era#> accessed on 19 August 2009.

³⁰ Bethwell A. Ogot, *An Autobiography: My Footprints in the Sands of Time*, Kisumu: Anyange Press Ltd. 2003, 1-4.

annihilate the Canaanites when they took over their land.³¹ The Babylonians seemed to be more considerate — removing and resettling troublesome Israelites rather than simply killing them off.³² The Luo people, in order to penetrate Bantu villages, would set up *alara* villages, according to Ogot; people living in the region of such villages could then either fight, flee, or be assimilated into the Luo language and tribe.³³ Colonialists were less compassionate, and annihilated much of the indigenous population of Argentina.³⁴ In North America, native Indians were confined to reserves.

A key issue for a colonial power is clearly — what to do with the natives? Assimilate, accommodate, annihilate, or remove, are some major options. This question faced European powers that moved into Africa in the 18th and 19th centuries. The answer found to this question would affect the colonial project for years to come. Successful annihilation, accommodation, assimilation or removal are necessary for long-term prosperity.

The question arises — what happened in Africa? Unique features of African colonialism include the ‘lateness of the hour’ that put the African colonial project into the modern era. Without going into great detail; neither annihilation, assimilation, nor removal, (except in certain regions) were systematically practiced. We may be helped by Appiah and Gates’ realisation that Africa was colonised by Europeans who considered Africans to be some evolutionary precursor of civilised man.³⁵ An implicit assumption built into European colonising efforts was to the effect that the black man was innately inferior and would accept a position of subservience. History was to prove otherwise.

The colonial project went ahead without all questions having been fully answered. It was not to last as long as had been anticipated. I want to focus on the side of colonial and post-colonial language policy, but first make a small diversion to examine how African people’s beliefs impacted the colonial and post-colonial project.

³¹ Joshua 6:21, Deuteronomy 20:16-18.

³² Essortment, nd. ‘History of babylon: exile’, website *Essortment: Information and Advice You Want to Know*, http://www.essortment.com/all/historybabylon_rzyf.htm, accessed 26 August 2009.

³³ Ogot, 5.

³⁴ Geckogo, ‘Argentina History’, website *Geckogo*, <http://www.geckogo.com/Guide/Argentina/People-Culture/History/>, accessed 22 August 2009.

³⁵ ‘Up to about 1650 the general nature of European contact [with Africans] was to encourage a mutually profitable partnership which rested, emphatically, on a mutually accepted equality of power’. ‘Racism’, according to Appiah and Gates, began *after* this time. (Kwame Anthony Appiah and Henry Louis Gates, jr. (eds.) *Africana: the Encyclopedia of the African and African American Experience*, Basic Civitas Books (a member of the Perseus Books Group) 1999, 56.)

The colonial acquisition of Africa happened when a dichotomy in scholarship had already arisen. That is Western academia was rooted in a dualism in which the role of God was seen as inconsequential. (For more on this dualism, see part three of this article.) By contrast in Africa, 'God'³⁶ was given credit for almost everything. The theoretical position of the West made it especially difficult for colonial policy to respond to African beliefs. So to date — Western policy in respect to Africa tends to be to treat its people like blank slates simply waiting for Europeans to write on them!³⁷ Little could be further from the truth. Missionaries discovered this when the Christian church began to take root in Africa. The church changed! It began to be concerned for relationship with the African dead. Mbiti and others have more recently done much to elucidate the nature of African 'religions'.³⁸ African ways of life in pre-colonial times were steeped in magic, witchcraft and ancestral cults. The same profoundly influence how Africans relate to Europeans.³⁹

British colonial officers needed qualified personnel to assist them in running their administration. Some they imported from India — a move that has an ongoing profound impact on Africa as Indians continue to be remarkably influential in commerce in much of the subcontinent. Others they sought to obtain from African nationals themselves. Hence they wanted selected Africans to learn some English. Often assisted by Christian missions, an educated corps was produced. To the Africans; this was a mind-blowing experience! The access English gave them to the colonial administration, was like the fulfilment of utopian dreams and aspirations of prior generations. The power in English fulfilled numerous prophecies!⁴⁰ It was like magic come true! It enabled the living out, of things that had previously only been accomplished

³⁶ I.e. *Nyasaye, Lesa, Zambia, Mungu* — African names for God.

³⁷ Mabilia Justin-Robert Kenzo, 'Thinking Otherwise about Africa: Postcolonialism, Post-modernism, and the Future of African Theology', *Exchange* 31/4 (2002), 323-341.

³⁸ Perhaps most renowned is the following book: John S. Mbiti, *Introduction to African Religion*, London / Nairobi: Heinemann 1975.

³⁹ There has been much scholarly debate on the nature of African religion. The terms I am forced to use to describe it here are English, so are in no way accurate, but merely an attempt to impact a Western readership of this article in a helpful way for the purposes of the understanding of this article.

⁴⁰ Jim Harries, 'Talking for Money, Looking for Money: The Donor Industry as Fulfilment of Ancient African Religious Ideals, in Missiological Perspective', unpublished article 2006.

'in the talk'.⁴¹ It brought wealth, travel, fame and influence. To some Africans, English language and culture was intoxicating.⁴²

Before long Africans, as other subjects of British colonies around the world, found that knowing the colonial language revealed a chink in the colonial armour.⁴³ A clever African man could create turmoil amongst the 'ignorant' English! Ignorant, that is, of the complexity of African ways of life, and of the complexity of translation and inter-cultural linguistics. P'Bitek found scholars describing African people as primitive.⁴⁴ Having a good grasp of English, he did not find the term appropriate for use about his own people. He challenged Western academics. The plunder of English ensued. The English were being denied the freedom of the use of their own language: 'The attainment of political *uhuru* [freedom] by many African states during the 1950s has swept away the subject of study of many white Africanists; and the plain language which was once used habitually without question in the days of robust self confidence is rapidly becoming diplomatically taboo', wrote P'Bitek.⁴⁵

The English, as other people around the world, had considered their language to belong to them. So they could invest into it meanings and impacts that fitted their ways of life. Other English-speaking parts of the world at one time were little threat to this, as they were made up of English emigrants (i.e. native English speakers of English cultural origin). The colonial experience began to change this. 'The empirical data suggest that British language policy is perhaps best characterised as reactive in its quest to *limit access* to English' according to Brutt-Griffler (my emphasis)⁴⁶ instead 'English education was

⁴¹ Southall comments at length about the practice of the Alur, I suspect also found to some extent amongst other African people, on: '... the divergence between stated rules and observed or even recollected behaviour, and the great verbal stress by the Alur on regularities which do not obtain in practice' (Aidan W. Southall, *Alur Society: A Study in Processes and Types of Domination*, London: Oxford University Press 1970, 238.) Southall found that the Alur's (a Luo people found in Congo and Uganda) speaking impressively of social and economic conditions amongst their own people and were able to dominate some neighbouring tribes, even though these conditions never transpired in practice.

⁴² '... the Mzungu [White man] became the man of culture par excellence, the one to whom all deferred.' (David William Cohen and E.S. Atieno Odhiambo, *Siaya: The Historical Anthropology of an African Landscape*, London: James Currey 1989, 113.)

⁴³ 'Africans... transformed English from a means of exploitation into a means of resistance' (Janina Brutt-Griffler, *World English: A Study of its Development*, Bristol: Multilingual Matters 2002, 65.)

⁴⁴ Okot P'bitek, *African Religions in Western Scholarship*. Nairobi: East African Literature Bureau 1970, 23.

⁴⁵ P'Bitek, 23.

⁴⁶ Brutt-Griffler, x.

reserved for the colonial elite.⁴⁷ Attempts at limiting the spread of English failed. Instead of being a language owned by one people, that could fit the contours of their culture, English was to be used by others to challenge that part of its native use that described the 'foreign'. The English bowed under the pressure of this challenge. To date, English (presumably) has a dearth of acceptable words that can be used to describe people who are culturally different.⁴⁸

'... Africans... deliberately... transformed English from a means of exploitation into a means of resistance... Language... played a role in the anti-colonial struggle that British colonial officials had never envisioned' adds Brutt-Griffler.⁴⁹ This was so effective that by the mid-1960s British colonies in Africa had achieved their independence. The English language, turned against those who had deigned to use it to control or exploit, presumably contributed to the liberation process.

This feature of the use of English has not, I suggest, been widely acknowledged to date. It has perhaps been little considered — that if knowledge of English was used to counter colonialism, it could also be used to counter neo-colonialism. That is, is English used in order to enable wealth extraction from the West, and to subvert Western projects, programmes and ideals? I suggest the answer to this question is — yes of course it is. It is remarkable how widely the corruption in Africa is known, but how much aid still comes to be poured in from the West, as if oblivious to this.

The struggle, that uses English, is now often with the West on its home turf. It has had enormous success. It has contributed to the West's continuing to take responsibility for many of Africa's ills.⁵⁰ The MDP is a recent example of this — initiated by an African while in charge of the UN (Kofi Annan) with a vast budget.⁵¹ English language education in Africa does not assist Africans to do things for themselves, but to draw on international networks. This is clearly shown by Musimbi in the case of Kenya.⁵²

⁴⁷ Brutt-Griffler, x.

⁴⁸ I state this somewhat as conjecture, as it would seem self-evident, and not through statistical research of language in use.

⁴⁹ Brutt-Griffler, 65.

⁵⁰ Some would argue that it is inappropriate to say that the West is acting for this reason. In various ways though, I consider that to be accurate.

⁵¹ Richard Horton, 'Mission Possible: can the Millennium Development Goals be saved?', *The Boston Globe*, 6 February 2005, 3rd edition, website *Lexis-Nexis*, <http://www.unmillenniumproject.org/documents/BostonGlobe06-02-05.pdf>, accessed on 16 August 2009.

⁵² '[English is important because]... Kenya has become a centre for service that extends over the whole of Eastern Africa and beyond... and the importance of English as the most widely

The points made in the above paragraph deserve re-emphasising in two ways. First, to remind us of the material poverty widespread in Africa in pre-colonial times. For various reasons African material culture was extremely basic.⁵³ African people left to their own devices will presumably still struggle to build up their own material resources. The latter have come and do come from the outside and are accessed largely through European languages. Second, is to remind us of African people's proclivity for magic. That physical cause and effect links are not clear, not observed, or tenuous, is not a problem in Africa in the way that it might be in Europe, because for an African used to depending on magic, such is normal.

Whereas in colonial times, it was accepted that projects and programmes for Africa were to be run from the outside, these days they are supposed to be cooperative ventures. The term 'partnership' is often used. There is widespread acknowledgement that there has been much deterioration in infrastructure of Anglophone Africa since independence. Surely it is time to ask — does (or even 'can') this kind of inter-cultural cooperation work? In other words, and to change the question only slightly — is the presence of an international language effective in closing understanding gaps between historically and culturally vastly different people? The answer may be — no! Unfortunately (or perhaps fortunately in the short term) it is often not in the immediate interest of African beneficiaries to admit that they do not understand what is being communicated to them, or that they cannot implement it as originally conceived by the West.

Here is a great danger of English for Africa; especially in the globalising world in which it is increasingly used to draw wealth from the West. (Increasing numbers of African people spend time on the web 'surfing' for Westerners to whom to sell some kind of story of poverty and need in exchange for cash.) Because English is *not* an effective means at building African societies from the

used international language in the world has increased so much that ability in English is often the yardstick by which young Kenyans are judged.' (Kanyoro, R.A. Musimbi, 'The Politics of the English Language in Kenya and Tanzania', in: Jenny Cheshire (ed.), *English Around the World: Sociolinguistic Perspectives*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1991, 405.), citing a book produced by the Kenyan government for use by Kenyan secondary school English teachers.

⁵³ Many related to witchcraft and jealousy. Maranz talks about many of these reasons. (David Maranz, *African Friends and Money Matters: Observations from Africa*, Dallas: sil International 2001.) In short one can say that the African ethic of sharing is so strong that anyone who does not share what they have easily fears being bewitched. This fear encourages the maintenance of poverty.

grass-roots up, it can be a distraction from life's real issues.⁵⁴ Its use is like in a cargo cult — it is laid out, then the African waits for the goodies from the West.⁵⁵ Its use internally to Africa is imprecise — rarely is it known just which words, categories or concepts from people's mother tongues (the actual basis for much that is important in life) are translated into or are affecting English terms: 'We should write our theology in African languages, because otherwise there are so many misunderstandings' shared Bujo.⁵⁶ The means of pouring aid (large lumps of money with unclear ownership in irregular flows only loosely connected to indigenous activities etc.) make English extremely liable to corruption. Hence, I suggest, English cannot form the basis for a coming roots-up development of the African continent.⁵⁷

3. The Gospel and the Miraculous in the African View

Africa is usually described using terms already familiar to Western readers. That is (for Brits and Americans) using English terms. In fact of course, non-English terms are much more frequently used daily all over the African continent. But Westerners cannot understand them, so do not read or listen to them. The vast majority of Westerners only read about Africa in their own (Western) languages, and especially in English, as international language.

The West is at times ready to acknowledge that its own history is peculiar. That is — it is rooted in the Enlightenment. 'Western people' appropriated Enlightenment beliefs into their way of life, that other people either rejected, or did not ever know about. These beliefs have become a part of 'normal' life for them. They have even become a part of the language. So English has words like 'super-natural' which implies that there is a part of life that is 'natural' and another part that is somehow other-than-natural. So life is dualistic.

⁵⁴ Naz Rassool, *Global Issues in Language, Education and Development: Perspectives from Postcolonial Countries*. Clevedon: Multilingual Matters 2007, 1-2.

⁵⁵ A 'cargo cult', as I am defining it, is a cult in which people imitate the behaviour of others, typically Westerners, without fully understanding the reason or basis for that behaviour. They then expect the goods (cargo) to arrive. Nowadays in Africa many people are imitating the behaviour, including the language, of Western people, and because of the West's aid policies, are being rewarded for their efforts. See: K. Burridge, 'Cargo', in: P. Maranda (ed.), *Mythology*, Middlesex: Penguin Education 1972.

⁵⁶ Bénézet Bujo, cited in: Diane B. Stinton, *Jesus of Africa: Voices of Contemporary African Christology*, Maryknoll NY: Orbis Books 2004, 141.

⁵⁷ As does Brock-Utne: 'the challenges of democracy and development can only be met when Africans begin to work as literate societies in African languages' (Brock-Utne, 'The adoption').

The word 'supernatural' directly implies the presence of dualism. But could it be that other words assume the same, even when they do not appear to refer to it? Such as the word 'miracle', or the word 'god' or the word 'man' or the word 'sky' or the word 'water' or the word 'spirit'? Considering those words, that seem to be almost a random selection, they seem to fit into one of two categories — 'natural' or 'supernatural' but not both. For example: miracle = super-natural. God = supernatural. Man = natural. Sky = natural (heaven would be supernatural). Water = natural. Spirit (as in 'evil spirit') = supernatural.⁵⁸

It appears that the English language is inherently dualistic! When using English one does not have to say 'when I say sky, I mean something 'natural' as against 'supernatural'', because native hearers of English will simply assume this to be the case. Such categorisation, that is such a dualism, is built into the language — at least for its native speakers.

When we look at Sub Sahara Africa, we find that African people were not 'in the loop' when Europe was devising such peculiar dualistic philosophies. Hence African people do not distinguish the two stories — supernatural as against natural. Then surely we have a problem when we want to use English to describe or to understand Africa? Talking about Africa using English means applying philosophical assumptions to Africa that do not fit.

What of African people themselves? Many of them 'know English'. Does a knowledge of English transform their worldview into a dualistic one? If so, how does it do so? Does learning a language teach someone about the way of life of the native users of that language? Well — to a small extent one could say, maybe yes. It would be difficult to quantify to what extent. It could not be 100%. It will depend on how one learns that language. A foreign language learned in a classroom from one's own people is likely to be much less transformative than should that language be learned in that foreign country (context) through interaction with native speakers.

What happens if someone uses a language, the foundations of which they do not know? In so far as they do not use the language according to its native foundations, because they do not know those foundations — well are they not then abusing that language (from the perspective of native speakers)? For example, should a native English speaker from America ask a Bemba speaker in Zambia the word used to translate miracle. Then should they use that translation in a Western way (as if 'miracle' was in the category of other-than natural) then they would be abusing the Bemba language, which does not have

⁵⁸ Some may query this categorisation in terms of 'man'.

such a category. The reverse would of course also apply (i.e. should an African person use English).

Misunderstandings that can arise from such language ‘abuses’ can be major and serious. The missiological literature, and other literature related to intercultural issues, is full of such misunderstandings. Differences arising from such varying interpretations often come to be in a category that seems like magic. So, for the African an aeroplane rising into the sky seems like magic, as for a Westerner healing carried out by a ‘witchdoctor’ or diviner in Africa seems to occur by magic. The difference is very often simply over whether a dualist or a holistic view is presupposed. Aeroplanes going into the sky is explained by separating the natural from the supernatural (aeroplanes fit into the natural category) and ‘miracles’ in many African contexts arise from a lack of distinction between the two categories.

Looking more specifically at Christian mission — there is a constant danger that the difference between these two views be confused for God. So Westerners looking at African churches see God at work in the healing miracles being performed, whereas Africans see God at work in the prosperity of the West (the prosperity Gospel). This confusing state of affairs is very widespread but surprisingly few people realise that it is going on. In mission circles this is often because people defend the view of God that they find in examining ‘the other’. I suggest that God is greater than this. In many ways one can say that to be clearly visible: God needs to be seen at work amongst one’s own people. What appears to be ‘god’ over there can be a mirage arising from misconceived linguistics (mis-translation).

The truth of God can be concealed in the encounter between cultures, through (through want of a better term) the oppression of language. Western people were once more aware of their own peculiar circumstances. They recognised the uniqueness of their position globally, realised that God had taken them where they were, and had terms (like ‘primitive’) to describe those who had not yet undergone changes — such as that of the enlightenment.

We have already discussed how English has lost terms that used to describe ‘the other’ (see above). What has also vexed the West is that despite its many efforts it has not been easy to knock the ‘primitiveness’ out of non-western people! In Africa poverty and corruption continue to be the order of the day despite enormous efforts by government and non-government organisations to spread education and development around the continent. Some of the reasons for this have been articulated above. The difficulties inherent in cultural change (removing what is ‘primitive’) can be aggravated when reference to needed changes are rendered invisible by the language used.

Globalisation is bringing what is often known as the 'global village'. People can relate inter-culturally but often only through language (e.g. written words), quite likely of an international language (such as English). 'Others' are neither annihilated, accommodated or moved. They are not assimilated, as human contact is lacking. But they are under pressure, as is much of Africa now, especially through financial carrots and sticks, to conform to a way of use of language other than their own.

Formal schooling in much of Africa being carried out using European languages means that people with a holistic worldview are taken through an educational system based on a dualistic worldview. The dualistic foundations to the educational system are maintained and perpetuated through contact with the West, that is increasingly enabled by globalisation. The material-productivity of the dualist view combined with human desire for prosperity ensures its popularity even amongst those who fail to grasp its foundation.

The tension involved can be illustrated by the case of 'miracle'. 'Do miracles happen?' If a miracle is an intervention of the divine in the natural realm, and if the starting position in the dualist view is that the divine is separate from the natural realm, then clearly for dualists 'miracles' do not happen. A holist on the other hand, has no problem with miracles at all, as they will see no distinction between the 'two realms' from the beginning!

The wide spread of this confusion is defining in many inter-cultural relationships between Africa and the West. When the West looks at Africa, it finds an irrational contradiction. People appear to believe things that are absolutely incredible. But now in today's globalising world, it is not considered appropriate to belittle others for their beliefs. So then a European way of thinking rooted in dualism, ironically, takes on board an understanding of the world that contradicts it. In Africa in the meantime, a way of thinking is officially adopted (dualism), that is deep in people's hearts an anathema!

Much more could be said of this that is beyond the scope of this article. I end this section by saying that theologians, as others, need to be aware of the difficulties inherent in translation between Africa and the West. In a sense one can say — that an African should not believe a European, and vice versa. So called 'inter-cultural dialogue' can become a comedy of errors. The church should not confuse the sanctity of God with the confusion of inter-cultural encounters. The current trend in which Africans see God in Europe, and Europeans see God in Africa, should be recognised for what much of it often is — linguistic/philosophical confusion. God is, I suggest, greater than that.

4. Impact on Christian Missions' Activities

I now want to point out briefly some of the tentative implications of the above discussion for Christian missions' activity in Africa.

Much of Western scholarship is *not* helpful in the African context without at least first having gone through a process of translation. This applies to a lot of theological scholarship. The interest of Africans in Western theology is more connected with its prestige and finance than its usefulness or relevance to their context.

Experience in leading institutions in the West does not necessarily qualify someone to do the same in Africa. Control from the outside (often inadvertent) of institutions in Africa using funding, is therefore inappropriate. Because it is almost impossible to give funds without using them to control⁵⁹ the value of financial 'giving to Africa' is questioned.

Comparison of the situation in Africa today with other post-colonial contexts to justify things like international languages is often illegitimate, because of ways in which the communication revolution has changed the scene.

Capitalism can appear, outside of the West, to be a bewildering con! To say this is not to attack capitalism, but to ask how effectively it can spread inter-culturally, especially to Africa. Spreading the effects of capitalism without enlarging its base could be taken as being immoral if the main product is dependency.

'Religious conviction' is a key component to effective change. This can be *against* harmful and fearful practices such as those of witchcraft. It can be *for* features like love in communities, societal unity, trust, etc.

The communication revolution has enabled an imposition of a common language and common patterns of language use around the globe, without a parallel transporting of the contexts with which to understand such language, or which fits to such uses.

The formal education or schooling system in Africa is *not* the laying of an indigenous foundation for development. The foundation is already there in what it means to be human in a given community. Education can only build on that foundation. It neither closes cultural gaps nor produces a homogenous product.

The African mission scene is unique. Biblical teaching needs to be applied to contextual African reality. Merely carrying over what has been understood

⁵⁹ Jim Harries, 'What to Give, How to Give, Why to Give, Who to Give, When to Give, If to Give?', website *Jim Harries Mission*, <http://www.jim-mission.org.uk/articles/difficulties-in-giving.html>, accessed on 26 August 2009.

in the light of Western contexts is inadequate. Because context is a necessary part of understanding, doing the latter results in misunderstanding.

The church in Africa will inevitably relate to the dead amongst its people in a way unlike that known in Europe. This a reality of its context, and not a subversion of the truth to be bracketed as illegitimate syncretism.

English is both extremely attractive to, and intoxicating to African people. Its anti-colonial role continues to date 'against' the West. The success of the use of English outside of the West has narrowed native-English speaking people's options for describing the other — which has often had a confusing effect on academia.

In today's world — Africans are in many ways the knowledgeable ones. I have outlined above (and elsewhere) how a language deprived of its context in many ways is *not* enlightening. Those who have a profound familiarity with both Western contexts *and* African contexts (and languages) are African people. Very few Westerners nowadays even know an African language. Less still have learned it in context! The same Western born people who are so ignorant are the ones who like to tell others what to do, and back their words with their money. Is it any wonder that Africans feel justified in ignoring (in implementation) much that is said by the West — even if this gives them a reputation for 'corruption'? Indeed many such Africans may be wrong to think they 'know' the West just because they know English. But if this is an error, it is one that the West has enticed them into making.

In missiological circles, the 'holistic gospel' has in recent years and decades acquired incredible traction. Such missiology and its associated teaching, that the Gospel must come hand-in-hand with some kind of rationally obtained handout or material benefit, has become very popular despite its obvious non-Biblical and non-historically-Christian features. In Africa it is often considered a legitimisation for beliefs in magic. In the West, it is used as a justification for getting involved in mission without getting entangled in complex issues of language and meaning because the Western missionary's key role is in providing resources. Arising as it does from an increasingly secular West, it adds to the 'threats' already mentioned above of the sanctity of the gospel.⁶⁰

The position has already been reached in much of Africa, where Western missionaries (including of course those who operate from within the West utilising today's communication media) can be valued almost entirely not for

⁶⁰ For more on this see: Jim Harries, 'Material Provision' or Preaching the Gospel: Reconsidering Holistic (Integral) Mission', *Evangelical Review of Theology*. 32/3 (2008), 257-270.

their Christian faith or understanding of it, but for their money and their language. This is a tragedy.

Conclusion

A major causative reason for Africa's often being considered to be economically a 'basket case' is here identified as being its language policies. This article presumes a 'post-modern' model for language and language use in which the contribution of the context of language use to its meaning is clearly recognised.

This age in the history of the world is in various ways unique. The ability that is now there to communicate is way beyond the scale of what any other empire has ever been able to do in the past. Words and money nowadays travel quickly and widely from major centres of civilisation such as London and Washington, and reach places and people who are largely ignorant of the context of their origin. The focus of this article has been especially on language. Given the dependence on context for meaning the heavily subsidised global use of English spreads considerable confusion. Imposing economic systems while disregarding people's contexts, including their original beliefs, is shown to bring intractable problems.

The experience of the colonisation of Africa has been unique on a global and historical scale because it occurred in the modern era. Values and technology from Europe impacted a subcontinent whose material-culture had been extremely 'primitive'. The roots of the civilisation that descended on to them being largely out of the view of the Africans who received it, the fruits were taken without roots, and implicitly understood in terms of Africa's original culture as arising from magic. English has been enormously valued and loved as it was found to be lucrative and could be turned against the colonialists. Even now it can be used to undermine its original purveyors in Africa's favour, and is economically extremely fruitful. Unfortunately this creates dependence and perpetuates corruption.

A more detailed look at English reveals that a dualistic worldview (spiritual as against material) is for native English speakers a part of their language. It being implicit in the language is different from its being understood in the course of merely learning the language. English learned in Africa is abused (from the perspective of native English speakers) in so far as its users do not grasp this quality. This illustrates the impossibility of inter-cultural communication using language alone. In practice, both sides consider the differences found to be explicable only by something akin to magic.

The final section is something like a pre-conclusion, that makes bold suggestions regarding the implications and ramifications that arise from this article. The recommendation I would like to give by way of final conclusion, is that at least some Western missionaries who seek to work in Africa enhance their relevance to the grass-roots context by avoiding the distortions caused by outside money and languages. That is, that some missionaries do their work through utilising only local languages and resources.

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