

Mzungu! Mzungu!: **an appeal for vulnerable western missionaries to Africa**

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Becoming the centre of attention to groups of children shouting “*Mzungu, Mzungu*” and “how are you” is a common experience for White visitors to sub-Saharan Africa.¹ “Children do this because they are happy to see you” local people have explained to me. Locals seem to see nothing wrong in this practice, blissfully unaware of how such racial discrimination would be seen in the West. (Imagine a group of children in a Western city shouting ‘black man, black man’ on seeing an African ... !)

White people are far from being integrated into African societies. Many prefer to remain distinct. Partly at least – this is because of poverty in Africa. Who wants to join poverty? Such poverty does not happen without reason. Some aspects of African lifestyles are repugnant to Westerners. African people realise this, so don’t mind keeping them at a distance. “Don’t interfere with us, but do allow us to benefit from your being here” can be the implicit message. A distance is maintained, but Whites are valued for what they can give. An African church looking to relate to the West is often one seeking to get money. Presumably African children are told that Whites are wealthy and powerful – hence they are marked out for the kind of attention that their own people never get – shouting ‘*Mzungu Mzungu*’ when they appear.²

A combination of things gives Whites in Black Africa a reputation for ignorance that makes it hard to take them seriously. Many Whites seen in Africa these days are short-term visitors. Many of those who are around for longer do not learn local languages. They are driven around in cars and stay in hotels, rather than walking and staying in people’s homes where they could find out what is happening in the community. Whereas Africans make major efforts at reaching out to Westerners by spending many years in school learning European languages and ways, the typical European visitor knows little about Africa. It is hard for the few who may be better informed not to be painted by the same brush, at least whenever they travel.

If Westerners want to run projects in Africa, they are expected to pay for them. As a result they cannot tell how much the people value them. European knowledge is greatly valued – but for the formal sector of the economy, and not for how it touches people’s hearts or inner lives.

¹ On reading ‘Africa’, assume ‘sub-Saharan Africa’ in this article.

² Of course not all Westerners are White, but the association seems to be strong in many people’s minds. ‘*Mzungu*’ being very widely used for Whites, has come to mean ‘White man’ in Kenya. It could also be taken as meaning (from Kiswahili) ‘he who walks around a lot’ or ‘the wise and capable one’. This phrase and variations of it are used to refer to Europeans in much of Eastern, Southern and Central Africa – and perhaps even beyond.

These are some of the issues that an orientation to Vulnerable Mission seeks to address and resolve. One way of doing this is ensuring donor aid not be identified with or controlled by a particular Westerner working on the ground in Africa. Vulnerable Westerners may have finance to support themselves, but should not be privileged to be the gate keepers to other outside funds. This levels the playing field! It means that what the Western missionary or aid worker can do is no longer a result of privileged financial status. Instead Westerners must use their wits and learn how the local society functions in order to make a positive contribution – of the Gospel of Christ, of a testimony of holiness and love, through some development activity, and so on.

Once Westerners are no longer financial gatekeepers people need be less cautious in what they say to them. We all know that “you don’t bite the hand that feeds you”! A Westerner can be accepted into the ‘in’ group only if the risk that honesty can cut funding is removed. Once on the inside, a Westerner begins to learn those things that are essential for requiring a true grasp of what is going on in a community, that in turn enables clear communication.

It is the European whose ‘project’ is not subsidised by foreign funds whom local people can imitate. Trying to imitate a foreign-funded enterprise quickly hits the rocks, in the absence of foreign funds. The need for funds to maintain Western-founded initiatives has led to much frustration and corruption. For an activity – be it a church or a development project – to flower, it must be capable of surviving and multiplying in local soil. If a foreigner cannot ‘make’ his/her project succeed under local economic conditions, then what chance for the locals themselves? If locals can’t do it, then what is being created is dependence.

Foreign subsidy is more likely to result in unhealthy dependence than in indigenously rooted change. The aim of an outside change agent should be to change people’s priority in their use of already available resources. Outside subsidy usually cannot be refused, but changing people’s use of their own resources (including time, money, land etc.) is a sign of real, deeply rooted change.

Use of local languages greatly aids understanding. What is said in English may be for the benefit of donors. This does not apply to African languages. Having to learn to speak like native English speakers while not in a community of native English speakers, constantly ensures that African people stay ‘behind’. They can never catch up! Even less can they ever get ahead. But, when African people use their own languages, they are already ahead. This is one good reason for outsiders to encourage the use of African languages – preferably by using them themselves!

Making something ‘one’s own’ requires it’s being in one’s own language. Once in one’s own language, someone can work with it, whatever it is. If confined to a foreign language, insights remain foreign. When moved into another language, because no two languages have identical sets of words and meanings, insights change. So then

they have to be re-understood, re-formed and re-articulated in the light of the new language/context/culture. The process of 're-understanding' is a vital part of the appropriation of knowledge. Without it, learning is confined to rote, and / or building on foreign models. I agree with Qorro's saying that: "there is a need, therefore, for policy change in the whole of Africa towards using African languages as media of education in order to bring about development".³

Using African languages enables 'enculturation'. By confining themselves to local languages and resources foreigners can be enabled to contribute, even if in a small way, to internally-motivated growth and development of the Christian church in Africa. Enculturation is not something done by people in think-tanks in ivory towers and in foreign languages. It is done with the people within the strictures of their economy and using their language in the ebb and flow of life.

³ QORRO, MARTHA, A.S., 2003, 'Unlocking Language Forts: language of instruction in post-primary education in Africa – with special reference to Tanzania.' 187-196 In: Brock-Utne, Birgit and Desai, Zubeida and Qorro, Martha, 2003, *Language of Instruction in Tanzania and South Africa (LOITASA)*. Dar-es-Salaam: E and D Limited. 194.