

‘The Name of God in Africa’ and related contemporary theological, development and linguistic concerns

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Abstract Recent discoveries in linguistics here summarised reveal problems in the choice of an African name for God, especially when theological debate is in English, as this results in the ignoring of important differences in how God is understood. Translating the Luo term ‘*Nyasaye*’ as ‘God’ ignores his Luo character as ‘bestowing force’. Similarly translating ‘God’ by ‘*Nyasaye*’ falsely assumes a carrying over of native-English theological presuppositions. These differences are shown to be consequential and, if disregarded, serious. The use of African languages rooted in African culture in debate is found to be essential for the future health of Christianity, and socio-economic development in Africa.

Keywords

theology, Africa, linguistics, epistemology, African languages, assumptions, culture

1. Introduction

I recently asked an elder in a local church which we were visiting in Western Kenya how his people’s understanding of God today had changed from what it was 100 years ago (that is before the coming of the missionaries). “Not at all” was his confident response “the way our forefathers understood God, is the way that we still understand him today. Nothing has changed.” I was taken aback. If one hundred years of Bible believing Christianity has not changed how some Christians consider that they understand God, what has gone wrong?

In this part of Africa, in both church usage and translated Scriptures, local African names for God are used. This implicitly assumes that the African people already knew God in advance of the coming of missionaries. Presumably that made, and/or makes, it difficult for outsiders to speak authoritatively about God.¹ How can one engage in Christian theological teaching, when the people already know ‘God’ on the basis of their own ancient extra-Christian oral tradition?

The industry recently built up around Third World ‘development’ seems in some ways to have usurped what was once the role of Christian mission in reaching out to non-European territories. This article is, in my view, as applicable to ‘development workers’ of all kinds with an interest in Africa as it is to Christian mission.

It has at times proved difficult to know in this essay when God (or translations of God) should be capitalized. Please ignore the capitalisation of God, which is anyway not an issue in oral societies.

¹ As it would be hard to correct a woman’s understanding of a man she has been married to for 40 years, so the choice of a name for God that a people already know makes it hard to convince them of anything new.

2. Understanding of Language

Understanding of this article depends on an appreciation of some assumptions made in linguistics and pragmatics, which have been given in outline form below.² For more details see my PhD thesis.³

1. The critical eye of non-Westerners reading Western languages is preventing Westerners from stating publicly that which is evidently true, because to do so would either:
 - (a) offend the non-Westerner or
 - (b) cause the Westerner to consider the non-Westerner to have been offended according to the former's (sometimes false) perception of the nature of the non-Westerner.
2. There is a limit to how foreign a thing can appear when the language used to describe it has to be familiar. The foreign, obscure and incredible easily appears domestic and familiar when the only metaphors available to picture it are thoroughly commonplace.⁴ Similarly what is domestic and familiar must, at least initially, appear foreign and obscure when expressed in an unfamiliar language.
3. The fact that people will interpret "in line with their experience of the way the world is"⁵ cuts both ways. Wonderful truths, be they scientific, technological, social or theological, are frankly grasped in a different way by those in the South than is anticipated by Westerners. Explanations by Southerners to Westerners do not reveal 'what is', but an imagined middle world somewhere between reality on the ground in the South, reality in the West, and Western mythology and fiction.
4. Enormous context dependence of language unveiled in recent research in pragmatics and discourse analysis has shown that mutual understanding is possible only insofar as one has a mutual context.⁶ The more distant the context of communicators, the lower the level of understanding. It is hard to imagine a more distant context than between some Western and Southern societies.
5. While misunderstandings occur in very simple day to day activities, these linguistic difficulties apply the most profoundly and intricately to the complexities of spiritual life, meaning, value and purpose, that are the bread and butter of the work of the theologian and missionary.

² This section is very similar in content to a section published in another article: Jim Harries, 'Mission to the South, Words to the North: reflections on communication in the church by a Northerner in the South.' *Exchange, Journal of Missiological and Ecumenical Research*, Bril. 36/3, 2007, 281-298.

³ Jim Harries, 'Pragmatic Theory Applied To Christian Mission In Africa: With Special Reference To Luo Responses To 'Bad' In Gem, Kenya.' PhD Thesis. University of Birmingham. 2007.

⁴ Lawrence Venuti, *The Scandals of Translation: towards an ethics of difference*. London: Routledge 1998, 67.

⁵ George Yule, *The Study of Language*. (Second edition) Cambridge Low Price Editions Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1996, 141.

⁶ Ernst-August Gutt, *Translation and Relevance: cognition and context*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell Incorporated 1991, 97.

The above introduce a particular obstacle to cross-cultural communication, which has caused difficulty in writing this article. That is, that every term used may (even if written in English) originate either from an East African or an English meaning or impact, or some other alternative. For example, because the word ‘life’ in English when translated into *Dholuo* includes ‘prosperity’, an important question is which of these meanings do I assume in this article when I use this word?⁷ Similarly for the term ‘God’ itself. With some exceptions, I attempt to use English meanings when writing in English, meaning that the arguments here contained may not be sensible to Kenyan English speakers if they assume English word meanings or impacts to be equivalent to those of Kenyan languages (including Kenyan English).

3. Names for God

Bediako’s research has revealed a startling difference between ways of naming God that historically occurred in Europe as against those in more recent years in Christian Africa. According to Bediako “.....the God of African pre-Christian tradition has turned out to be the God the Christians worship” whereas “no European indigenous divine name – whether Zeus or Jupiter or Odin or Thor – qualified to enter the Bible.” The reason Bediako gives for this state of affairs is that the European gods were “merely the heads of pantheons of divinities, and were not elevated above them.” Hence he concludes that “Africa had a higher and more biblical sense of God than Europeans ever had,” which to him is why Europeans tend to under-estimate Africans knowledge of God.⁸ Bediako explains that in African languages, the names of God are uniquely singular. Hence Tshehla tells us that “*Modimo* is ever one.” According to Tshehla *Badimo* are the living dead, but one such living dead would never be referred to as *Modimo* by the Sesotho people because this would be presumptuous, even though *mo-* is technically the prefix for singularity.⁹

This does not seem to apply to languages used by the Luo people of Western Kenya. Speakers of *Dholuo*, the language of the Luo people, most commonly use *Nyasaye* to refer to ‘God’. This is the term that translates biblical words such as *El* (for example Genesis 14:18) *Elah* (Exodus 4:24) *Elohim* (Genesis 1:1) *Yhwh* (when not translated as *Ruoth* (Lord) as in Exodus 3:2) *Theos* Matthew 5:9) and so on.¹⁰ Yet a human being or a ‘ghost’ can also be referred to as ‘*nyasaye*’. I will make further reference to the identity of *Nyasaye* in Luo traditional and current usage below. First however, I want to consider what appears to me to be a strong irony in the choice of languages used in discussing matters pertaining to God in Africa.

⁷ Non English words are in the Luo people’s language, *Dholuo*, unless otherwise specified.

⁸ Kwame Bediako, ‘ “Their Past is also our Present.” Why all Christians have need for Ancestors: making a case for Africa.’ Lecture presented at Annual School of Theology of the African Institute for Christian Mission and Research (AICMAR), Butere, Kenya, 1st to 4th August 2006, 9.

⁹ Samuel M. Tshehla, ‘Can Anything Good come out of Africa?’: reflections of a South African Mosotho reader of the Bible.’ 15-24 In: *Journal of African Christian Thought*. Vol. 5, No. 1st June 2002, 20.

¹⁰ Bible, *Muma Maler mar Nyasaye: moting’o Muma Machon kod Muma Manyien*. Nairobi: Bible Society of Kenya (Bible in the Luo language) 1976. This applies to the more recent translation of the Luo bible (1976). An older translation (1968) translated ‘God’ as ‘Jehovah’: Bible, *Muma Manyien mar Ruodhwa gi Jawarwa Yesu Kristo*. Nairobi: Bible Society in East Africa (Bible in the Luo language) 1968.

4. Languages used in Theological Debate in Africa

A great irony in formal theological discussion in Africa is that while little understood European languages¹¹ are often used to engage in theological debate, the nature of God himself is understood by African people to be already known (see above). That is, theological debate that ought to be the use of a known human tool (language) to elucidate the ultimately unknowable (God) is reversed – and God is known, but the language not. Surely debate on theology has to be a process of the discovery of the unknown using the known, where he of whom understanding is sought is God. But if God is known and the language not, then the debate going on is linguistic: ‘which terms in this foreign languages are the most appropriate to describe what is already known in someone’s mother tongue?’ Hence debates on African theology have become a process of explaining to the West what the African people already know about God, an explanation of a pre-existing theology, and not an exploration of new theological insights.

Few would question the value of helping the wider community to a better understanding of African brothers and sisters.¹² But it is important also to ask - if ‘theological debate’ in Africa is actually explaining things considered already to be *known about* God to foreigners, then where is the debate, rooted in the Scripture, that questions and considers what the nature of God actually is?

I suggest that very little of such formal debate is going on, and the reason for this is that almost all *formal* theological debate on the African continent happens in foreign languages, which have the problem mentioned above. This is more and more the case as increasing amounts of foreign funds swamp the continent to aid the theological process. In addition to the problem of the lack of understanding of how these European languages are used in their ‘home contexts’ is the additional issue - that theologies already exist in those languages. It is often said, and certainly true, that these theologies do not have a good fit, if any fit at all, to existing African contexts. Hence the widely prescribed need for genuine African theologies. (For example see Nyamiti.¹³) Yet using these foreign (to Africans) languages in ways contrary to accepted orthodoxy will elicit protest from the owners of that orthodoxy, i.e. ‘foreign Christians’. Hence in effect, again, theological debate in Africa using English is proscribed.

What would happen to theological deliberation in Africa if God was taken as having been *unknown* to African people? This could bring genuinely theological debate to the discussion table. There would be an evident gap in knowledge, that needed to be filled. But, and I suspect that this underlies the reluctance of African scholars to concede that

¹¹ I am here assuming that appropriate use of a language is only possible in so far as someone is aware of the context of its origin. Hence even someone with a very good knowledge of English vocabulary and grammar can be deficient in their communication ability if they are unfamiliar with pragmatic rules pertaining to that language, i.e. conventions of language usage in England or America.

¹² Although some may question how possible this actually is. The question of how one can translate between diverse traditions, give that the language of people A is rooted in a culture that is very different from that of people B, is both valid and important. (Jim Harries, ‘Intercultural Dialogue – an overrated means of acquiring understanding examined in the context of Christian Mission to Africa.’ *Exchange: Journal of Missiological and Ecumenical Research*. 37 (2008) 174-189.

¹³ Charles Nyamiti, , ‘Contemporary African Christologies: assessment and practical suggestions.’ Gibellini, Rosino, (ed.) 1994, *Paths of African Theology*. London: SCM Press Ltd. 62-77 1994, 73.

God may be unknown to them, the missing content would not be appropriate if the gap was to be filled using an unfamiliar (Western) language, with roots in an unfamiliar culture. God would be a stranger, and quite likely an unfriendly one at that.

If God's nature is taken as known before discussion commences, then debate cannot genuinely be on the nature of God. If he is unknown, and we are to define him using foreign categories, then he will turn out to be stranger. Hence we are stuck, for as long as we continue to use languages to engage in theological debate in Africa that are other than indigenous.

The theological venture on the African continent seems to be in trouble. The recent much acclaimed 'African Bible' is in English.¹⁴ The highly publicised 'Africa Bible commentary' suffers from exactly the same problem.¹⁵ Theological texts are continually being shifted to Africa from Europe and America. Theological education, along with much if not all of formal education in Sub-Saharan Africa, is in Western languages. (Some 'lower level' courses are taught in mother tongue or regional languages such as *Kiswahili*. In many cases though even then, the material taught is a translation from English so does not use genuine local African linguistic or cultural categories.) In fact almost the whole *formal* effort engaged in theologising in Africa is foreign founded and/or foreign rooted. The indigenous movements that exist almost invariably sooner or later (and usually sooner) fall into line. Salaries, support, incentives and inducements coming as they do from the West selectively favour what is 'foreign' in Africa. The foreigners do not understand, so can scarcely be expected to appreciate—never mind fund—genuinely African theological discourse.

The effect that the above has of precluding the option of genuine theological debate, has already been mentioned. There is another effect that runs in parallel, that is perhaps even more pernicious. This is – that supposed theological debate in English can easily be interpreted to African cultures as akin to magic. Bediako shares: "To suggest that a considerable portion of the missionary transmission of the gospel in Africa in modern times may have erred, theologically ... would be such a serious verdict to pass on a justly heroic enterprise, that one hesitates to entertain the idea. And yet, this may well be what happened."¹⁶

Why should such theological erring be a promotion of magic? Firstly, anything promoted that is other than truly 'God', being something other than God, if it is not science, could be considered magic. Secondly is the background in superstition for which Africa is known. (See Omari.¹⁷) People build and understand from the known to the unknown. When the unknown remains unknown that means that they continue with the known, which in Africa *is* 'superstitious' practices onto which people then continue to build. The apparent meaning of theological terms may appear (from the West) to point to God, while their actual implicature (impact) can be very different in Africa. Until a hitherto unknown god is made known to them, people remain as they were, with their prior magical ways.

¹⁴ African, 'The African Bible: biblical text of the New American Bible. Nairobi: Paulines Publications Africa 1999.

¹⁵ Tokunboh Adeyemo, (ed.) African Bible Commentary: a one volume commentary written by 70 scholars. Nairobi: Word Alive Publishers 2006.

¹⁶ Bediako, 'Their Past', 5.

¹⁷ C.K. Omari, *Uchawi na Ushirikina*. Mwanza, Tanzania: Inland Publishers 1993.

I use the term ‘superstition’ in the above paragraph, as a translation of *ushirikina* in *Kiswahili*. I am aware of its strong negative undertones and opposition to use of the term,¹⁸ but here it does seem appropriate to make my point. A label often given to the positive side of the perpetuation of ‘superstition’ is prosperity gospel. Sometimes known as the gospel of health and wealth, this interpretation of the scriptures proclaims success in life for all who truly believe.¹⁹ The wide spread of this misleading teaching through much of Africa surely shows that something is wrong. It appears to be a fulfillment of traditional conceptions that good ought to arise by default and that any lack of good results from the evil orientation of human hearts.²⁰ Apart from promoting idleness and a less than productive (from a Western point of view) view of life, it results in a search for a witch i.e. a person with an evil heart, every time misfortune arises.²¹ Few would deny the damage done by such witchcraft beliefs to human society. It is time to ask what has gone wrong theologically for such thinking to be so proliferate?

5. *Nyasaye* – God for the Luo people of Western Kenya

I will confine my discussion here to that with which I have some personal familiarity. I thus hope to avoid following misleading oversimplifications resulting from:

1. Translation into European languages as if European words have equivalent impacts to African ones.

2. Theological debates that have hidden agendas. That is to avoid “the kind of oversimplifications and over-generalisations which have bedeviled our [i.e. African] literature”²² because the African has seen himself as “a man more sinned against than sinning”,²³ one result of which has been the international academic community’s bending over backwards in order to conceal ‘primitive’ features of the life of African people from view.²⁴

Much has been written about God in Africa. Being in my 15th year of living in a Luo village in Western Kenya, frequently using *Dholuo* (the language of the Luo people) and closely involved with a variety of indigenous and mission churches. I hope my readers will consider justified my effort at enlightening the English speaking world a little about an African people’s understanding of ‘God’.

¹⁸ Jan G. Platvoet, and Henk van Rinsum, ‘Is Africa Incurably Religious? III A Reply to a Rhetorical Response.’ 156-173 In: *Exchange: Journal of Missiological and Ecumenical Research*. Volume 37, Number 2. 2008, 166 (footnote).

¹⁹ Dickson Chilongani, ‘Prosperity Gospel in Africa: a response from the book of Job.’ Lecture presented at Annual School of Theology of the African Institute for Christian Mission and Research (AICMAR), Butere, Kenya, 1st to 4th August 2006, 1.

²⁰ Jim Harries, ‘Good-by-Default and Evil in Africa.’ 151-164 In: *Missiology: an international review*. Vol. XXXIV, no. 2, April 2006.

²¹ Harries, ‘Pragmatic’, 207-245.

²² Bethwell A. Ogot, ‘A Man more Sinned Against than Sinning – the African Writer’s View of Himself.’ Ogot, Bethwell A., *Re-introducing Man into the African World: selected essays 1961 – 1980*. Kisumu: Anyange Press Ltd. 189-196, 1999, 196.

²³ Ogot, ‘A Man.’ 189.

²⁴ Platvoet, 166 (footnote).

Okot P'Bitek (a Luo man from Uganda) has been one of the most controversial and provocative of post-colonial African scholars. His contemporary Ogot has at times been sharply critical of him.²⁵ Yet it is hard to totally ignore his aggressive outbursts, including his claim that the Luo people in their pre-missionary history had no conception of one high God. According to P'Bitek this notion was brought to them, or forced onto them, by missionary propaganda.²⁶ The names used for God by various Luo people today seem to support this. *Lubanga*, P'Bitek explains as originally being the "... *Jok* that breaks people's backs".²⁷ *Jok*, used by the Acholi (Luo people of Uganda) to refer to God is the term referring throughout the Luo languages to mystical force or vital powers.²⁸ *Were* used by the *Jopadhola* of Uganda and *Nyasaye* used by the Luo of Kenya are both terms shared by their Bantu neighbours. There is much debate as to the origin of the term *Nyasaye* – both Bantu and Luo peoples claim it as their own.²⁹ Yet the history books tell us that Luo and Bantu people have a distinct origin – the Luo having reached Kenya 500 years ago from Sudan,³⁰ whereas the Bantu originated from West Africa.³¹ Someone had to have borrowed the term from their neighbour, and if it was the Luo borrowing from the Bantu, this suggests that they may before meeting the Bantu have had no belief that needed such a word.

The Kenyan Luo have other names, less frequently used in Christian circles, for God. One such is *Obong'o Nyakalaga*. *Obong'o* is by Capen, and Odaga given as 'only son' – suggesting that this God is singular and unique.³² *Nyakalaga* refers to a force (or 'god') that 'creeps' (from the root '*lago*,' to creep). Odaga and Capen both give the term as meaning 'omnipresent'. Paul Mboya, writing at a much earlier date refers to God as 'creeping' (*lak*) within the bodies of people, reflecting the Luo belief that 'God lives in human bodies'.³³ Contained in this seems to be a notion of God as 'life' or 'life force'. The Luo term that can be used to translate the English life, *ngima*, is much broader than its English 'equivalent' as it includes health and prosperity in general.³⁴

The term *juok* (or *jok*) is often used by the Kenya Luo to translate witchcraft (*uchawi*) in *Kiswahili*. Its plural (*juogi*) are a type of spirit linked with ancestors or the dead. The popular name for the witchdoctor or diviner in *Dholuo* is *ajuoga* which implies something like 'just *juok*' or '*juok* only'. The person-of *juok* (*jajuok*) is after translated

²⁵ Bethwell A. Ogot, 'Intellectual Smugglers in Africa.' 134-138 In: Ogot, Bethwell A., *Re-introducing Man into the African World: selected essays 1961 – 1980*. Kisumu: Anyange Press Ltd. 1999, 133-136.

²⁶ Okot P'bitek, *Religion of the Central Luo*. Nairobi: East African Literature Bureau 1971, 50.

²⁷ P'Bitek, 45.

²⁸ Bethwell A. Ogot, 'The Concept of Jok.' 1-11 In: Ogot, Bethwell A., *Re-introducing Man into the African World: Selected Essays 1961 – 1980*. Kisumu: Anyange Press Ltd. 1999, 1.

²⁹ Gilbert Edwin Meshack Ogutu, 'An Historical Analysis of the Luo Idea of God c. 1500-1900.' MA thesis, University of Nairobi, 1975, 68 for the Luo. The Luyia people can explain the origin of *Nyasaye* as being in their word *lisaye*, meaning human procreation, so *Nyasaye* is 'the procreator'.

³⁰ Bethwell A. Ogot, *Economic Adaption and Change among the Jii-speaking Peoples of Eastern Africa*. Kisumu: Anyange Press Ltd. 1996, 76.

³¹ John Middleton, 'Bantu.' *The World Book Encyclopedia*. B. Volume 2. London: World Book Inc. 69-70 1985, 69.

³² Carole A. Capen, *Bilingual Dholuo-English Dictionary Kenya*. Tucson, Arizona: Carole A. Capen 1998 and Asenath Bole Odaga, *Dholuo-English Dictionary*. Kisumu: Lake Publishers and Enterprises Ltd. 2003. The question must arise as to whether this term or its usage has arisen since the missionary era. Interestingly however the term frequently used to refer to Christ as the only son of God is not *obong'o* but *miderma*.

³³ Paul Mboya, *Luo Kitgi gi Timbegi*. Kisumu: Anyange Press Ltd. 1983, 25.

³⁴ This is one reason for the prosperity nature of the Gospel in Luo land.

into English as ‘night-runner’ - a witch who runs around at night naked frightening people by rattling windows or throwing stones onto them or their homes. I have already mentioned that this very term *Jok* was used by the Acholi people (a Luo tribe in Uganda) to translate ‘God’.³⁵ The Shilluk people consider *Juok* to be spirit, God and body in one.³⁶ Ogot has found *jok* to be the Luo equivalent of Placid Tempel’s *vital force*,³⁷ which Tempels found through his research amongst the Luba people of the Congo forms the basis for African philosophy. Tempels explains of the African (Bantu – Luba) people that this vital force “dominates and orientates all their behaviour”.³⁸ The “Bantu speak, act, live as if, for them, beings were forces” explains Tempels.³⁹ Because everything, including the animal, vegetable and mineral has ‘forces’,⁴⁰ the whole of African life is sacred – there is nowhere that *juok* (vital force) is not found.

“The relationship between *Nyasaye* and *Juok* is difficult to explain”.⁴¹ Mboya takes *Nyasaye* and *juogi* (the plural for *juok*) as synonyms in the following passage: “*Giluongo wendo juogi; ka wendo ok wendi ionge juogi maber. Juogi tiende Nyasaye; ok ng’ato nyalo riembo Nyasaye; tiende, wendo ng’at Nyasaye*”.⁴² This can be translated (taking ‘Nyasaye’ as ‘God’) as: “Visitors are called *juogi*; so that if you do not get visitors they say that you do not have good *juogi*. *Juogi*, that means God; someone cannot chase God away, meaning that a visitor is a person of God.” (What underlies this passage, seems to be the Luo people’s belief that having visitors brings good fortune (*gueth* – blessing) here apparently brought by *juogi*.)

So-called ‘spiritual churches’ are amongst the Luo known as *Roho* churches where *Roho* (originating in Arabic and reaching *Dholuo* through *Kiswahili*) is considered to be the Holy Spirit of the Scriptures. The predecessor to *Roho* is known as having been *juogi* – the object of attention of spiritual gatherings prior to the coming of current *Roho* practice across the border from Uganda before 1912⁴³ and the *Roho* church movement in 1932.⁴⁴ In some senses then *Roho* (Holy Spirit known by Christians as God as he is a member of the trinity) is a translation of *juogi* – ‘spirits’.

Another term *hawi* could be translated as ‘good fortune’.⁴⁵ Odaga goes so far as to say in her dictionary that *hawi* is “interchangeable with the word god”.⁴⁶ She said a similar thing in a lecture.⁴⁷ I have frequently experienced the same in people’s use of *Dholuo*. A Luo translation of *goodbye* is ‘*oriti*’ which means something like ‘he keep you’ or

³⁵ Ogot, ‘The Concept’, 1.

³⁶ Ogot, ‘The Concept’, 2.

³⁷ Ogot, ‘The Concept’, 7.

³⁸ Placide Tempels, , *Bantu Philosophy*. Paris: Presence Africaine 1959, 21.

³⁹ Tempels, 57.

⁴⁰ Tempels, 63.

⁴¹ A.B.C. Ocholla-Ayayo, *Traditional Ideology and Ethics among the Southern Luo*. Uppsala: Scandinavian Institute of African Studies, 1975, 219.

⁴² Mboya, 191.

⁴³ Cynthia Hoehler-Fatton, *Women of Fire and Spirit: history, faith and gender in roho religion in Western Kenya*. Oxford: Oxford University Press 1996, 12.

⁴⁴ Bethwell A. Ogot, ‘Reverend Alfayo Odongo Mango 1870-1934.’ Ogot, Bethwell A., *Re-introducing Man into the African World: selected essays 1961 – 1980*. Kisumu: Anyange Press Ltd. 109-131, 1999, 129. “Indigenous charismatic Christianity developed alongside – and borrowed heavily from – *juogi* spirit possession” says Hoehler-Fatton, (206).

⁴⁵ The term ‘luck’ is often given as a translation of *hawi*, but I think misleadingly so because of the association of ‘luck’ in Western English usage with statistical probability.

⁴⁶ Odaga, *Dholuo-English* 119.

‘he to protect you’ where the ‘he’ presumably refers to ‘god’ however understood. It seems almost that what ‘he’ (or she, the Luo term is gender neutral) refers to is intentionally left ambiguous. An alternative farewell is ‘*Nyasaye obed kodi*’ (God be with you), which seems to be interchangeable with ‘*bed gi hawi*’ (be with ‘*hawi*’). *Jahawi* (a person of ‘*hawi*’) is someone whose ‘*nyasache ber*’ (‘god’ is good).

The Luo can refer to *Nyasache* (his/her god), often strongly implying that everyone has their own god, and that this god is like *hape* (his ‘*hawi*’ or fortune). So it can be said that ‘*hape ber*’ (he has good fortune), which is interchangeable with ‘*nyasache ber*’ (his god is good). This seems to correspond in some ways to the guardian angel conception found in some Christian theology. Having ‘good fortune’ the Luo recognise often arises through having a relationship with someone who is competent and is good to you. Hence explains Odaga: “your fellow human being ... is your god [i.e. *nyasachi*].”⁴⁸ I have heard much the same thing said in various church circles.

One would expect the understanding of *Nyasaye* to affect the practices of churches in Luoland. If the Luo people take *Nyasaye* as being ‘vital force’, then one would expect churches to be seen as sources of *ngima* (‘life/prosperity’). Indeed this is what is happening. This ‘healing’ orientation of African Christianity is known throughout the Continent. (See for example Oosthuizen.⁴⁹) In the course of working with churches in Luoland, it has become clear to me that people are attracted to church by the prospect of material and physical reward. This can be the money and rewards carried by missionaries from Western churches, and/or *hononi* (‘miracles’) of various types by spirit (*Roho*) filled locals. Any Christian (or any other) movement without clear prospect of material reward (in which category I include miracles and healing) from one of these sources will get a minimal following.

Considering the above and many other uses of the term *Nyasaye* in Luoland, forces me to conclude that *Nyasaye* is in many ways accurately translated as the ‘vital force’ of Tempels,⁵⁰ who is valued according to his manifest and immediate power. This is increasingly so, judging by the young generation’s increasing attraction to Pentecostal denominations. Within Christian circles there can appear to be little *heartfelt* conception by the Luo of *Nyasaye* as a great High God. It is hard not to conclude that the perception of *Nyasaye* as a ‘High God’ could be a foreign notion brought to the Luo from the outside, that has barely penetrated the Luo people’s orientation to their Christian faith.⁵¹

The identity of god as life-force is evident in the Luo understanding of God. God being the power of *ngima* (life, including health and prosperity) means that *ngima* is what he is sought in prayer to provide.⁵² Someone who does not have *ngima* does not have

⁴⁷ Asenath Bole Odaga, ‘Christianity in the Context of African Cultural Practices.’ Maarifa Lecture presented at Kima International School of Theology on 23rd June 2004

⁴⁸ Odaga, ‘Christianity.’

⁴⁹ G.C. Oosthuizen, *The Healer Prophet in Afro-Christian Churches*. Leiden: E.J. Brill 1992.

⁵⁰ Tempels.

⁵¹ I suspect, that the *Roho* movement is a reaction against some mission practices taking ‘*Nyasaye*’ as resembling the English ‘God’. This not suiting African people, caused them to follow again their ‘African god’, now called by the new international name of ‘*Roho*’. For the founding of the *Roho* movement see Hoehler-Fatton 1996 and Ogot 1999d.

⁵² Note that the Luo term frequently used to translate ‘prayer’ (*lamo*) is much broader than the English term and includes worship and other religious practices and rituals.

God.⁵³ God being the one who creeps in living bodies means that his release occurs when those living bodies are sacrificed, hence the shedding of animal blood is thought to bring blessing. The role of a missionary and that of a donor are barely distinct when the god being brought is the god of prosperity. Then the success of a missionary is defined by the material prosperity that he or she brings. I have discussed elsewhere how this role of ‘provider’ has the additional affect of binding the missionary force to a position of ignorance of what is ‘actually going on’ amongst the people they are serving.⁵⁴

A missionary to the Luo people is here faced with very real difficulties. The scriptures make much reference to *Nyasaye*. Thus it is made clear that the ‘God’ of the Luo and the God of the Hebrew people who then is identified as the Christian God in the New Testament, are one and the same. It is as if the theological task has already been completed and the missionary is left with the role of bringing *ngima* (prosperity). The God whom the people want and the one whom they are implicitly and constantly being told that they already have is the God who is *ngima* (life), who supplies all needs to those who worship him. Major efforts by the Western donor community, Christian and secular, to provide materially for the ‘poor’ in Africa further substantiate this view. The foreign missionary (and ‘development’) role has been captured by foundational African cosmologies and incorporated into that set of people’s behaviours that seek to fulfill ancient utopian ideals⁵⁵ which can barely be considered to be Christian in the orthodox sense.

6. English language ministry in Africa

Difficulties faced by European missionaries in communicating theologically with the Luo people are compounded because the Europeans’ theology is based on an understanding of God in ‘retreat’ sometimes known as God ‘of the gap’, who requires apologetics to defend his very existence.⁵⁶ The Western theological understanding of God that informs its Christians has been weakened (‘spiritualised’) to the extent of being understood through metaphor, simile and illustration.⁵⁷ Jesus miracles were (according to Western Biblical interpretation) carried out to teach-us-something and not primarily to demonstrate the power of God, because if it were the latter yet in the present age miracles no longer occur, how could missionaries substantiate their claim to be his true followers? In the place of miracles, in the West there is science, planning, rationality, budgeting, engineering, banking and telecommunications. The God worshipped in England can seem as different from the Luo god as pie is different from cheese. *But, as we have discussed above, such difference cannot formally be acknowledged* because *Nyasaye* is legitimized by his presence in the Bible. To acknowledge it, to suggest that perhaps the understanding of God held by the Luo people is foundationally different to that of native English speakers, is to invite

⁵³ It is widely perceived that someone’s becoming sick indicates that they have lost their salvation.

⁵⁴ Jim Harries, 'Power and Ignorance on the Mission Field or "The Hazards of Feeding Crowds." ' <http://WWW.geocities.com/missionalia/harries.htm> (accessed 15.01.03) nd.

⁵⁵ In much the same way as Schumacher explains that anthropology has been ‘captured’ by African people: Lyn Schumacher, *Africanising Anthropology: fieldwork, networks and the making of cultural knowledge in Central Africa*. London and Durham: Duke University Press 2001.

⁵⁶ Apologetics being the “reasoned defence, especially of Christianity ...”. (J.B. Sykes, (ed.) *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Current English*. Seventh Edition. Oxford: Clarendon Press 1982.)

⁵⁷ I here write so as to be understood by my African or Luo readers, to help them to understand something of where Western missionaries are coming from.

accusations of racism, colonialism and theological one up-man-ship. All that one can do with this enormous difference, is to ignore it! *Nyasaye* is simply taken as a translation of 'God'.⁵⁸

Theological texts coming from the West carry implicit assumptions about the nature of God. Many of those assumptions are not shared by many African people. These assumptions are not accessible to be taught to debate or to critique as they are officially no different from assumptions made in Africa. Yet the assumptions are profound and consequential.

The question as to what to do about this is as important for the field of so called 'development' (and other areas of academics and life) as it is for theology.⁵⁹ If prosperity arises as a result of appropriate interaction with vital force (God), then how can it at the same time also arise from budgeting, planning and the application of science? The assumptions about the relationship between God and the real world, the segments of life controlled by God and controlled by 'natural processes', are an important part of theology. Much of Western theology inside and outside of the church appears (from an African point of view) to say that God does almost nothing.

Examples of miscomprehension are many and frequent. A member of staff at a secondary school in Zambia had reared broilers, a process that takes at least 70 days. After his announcing that 100 broilers were ready for purchase, a fellow Africa prayed: "thank-you God for this unexpected provision". Thus God was given credit for what was from a Western point of view a very straight-forward human process of planning and implementation for success for which (in Western thinking) God deserves no particular acclaim. Here in Gem in Kenya we are privileged to be beneficiaries of the Millennium Development Project instigated and run by the United Nations. Should we thank God for this, or has it occurred because of certain key discussion having been made in our favour in New York city? Is the healing brought about through the removal of cancerous growth by a surgeon creditable to God, or to a surgeon's skill?

These are not empty questions, because the understanding of them will determine the responses made to them. For example, how should people respond to the absence of broilers, the end of free seed provision by millennium project workers, or the death of the doctor who knew how to remove cancerous growths? By prayers to God, or by an imitation and perpetuation of the desired processes? That depends on ones understanding of God, or one's theology. Here again we find vast differences between European and African theologies, that are in need of serious attention but that current theological protocol renders out of bounds.

Western theological texts are increasingly accessible in much of Sub-Saharan Africa. They come in via book-aid, and fill the shelves of theological institutions and pastors' libraries on the continent. Their being welcomed and valued however should not fool us into thinking that they are understood as their authors intended them to be. How could they possibly be, given the vastly different cultures underlying Western and Africa English language usages? What these English texts seem to present, when implicitly translated into African cultural frameworks, is too foreign for incorporation into an African people's own conceptual world. Instead a separate conceptual world is constructed to accommodate the foreign insights with tenuous and often unhelpful

⁵⁸ See footnote 8.

⁵⁹ If the theology is wrong I can be so bold as to say then so also will everything else be.

connections to the theological realities underlying someone's actual way of life. But then, what happens when these foreign theological formulations actually 'work'? That is if articulating them results in *ngima* (prosperity)? (Which typically happens if white people are on hand to fund those African Christians who are following Western usages.) As these are incompatible with any sensible world of indigenous theology, the only other option is that these things arise from other gods, or from magic. (See Harries for more comments on magic in Africa.⁶⁰)

African delegates at the Annual School of Theology in Butere were encouraged to *develop theory*. Bediako pointed out, in the course of plenary discussion, that theories which Westerners used to construct their academia (including their theologies), were not plucked out of the sky, but devised on the basis of their observation and experience.⁶¹ Such theory construction, we were told, is what African theologians (and presumably also non-theologians) should be engaged in today, to reduce current enormous Western dependence in Africa.⁶²

While an admirable objective, I suggest it is also a very problematic one in Africa today. It is true that this is what European people's have been engaged in for centuries, and that this is how they have gradually built up a vast resource of theological and other knowledge. (Note that reference to the scripture and God's spiritual revelations are not alternatives to learning from observation and experience. Both are intertwined, as the very words of the scripture or revelations received must be interpreted through language derived in interaction with the people's physical and social context.) But, in modern Africa people's contexts are greatly influenced from the outside in ways that they do not understand. To try to ignore these outside influences would be to produce archaic theologies that are no longer relevant in the world as it is today. To take account of those influences, given the starting point of many African peoples, is to create theologies in which white men are gods.

It is these theologies that are these days advertently and inadvertently being developed. While often functional for the African people, they are clearly problematic for Europeans! Taking white men, the instigators of amazing technological achievements that go way beyond much Biblical precedent even on miracles, as gods, raises questions of polytheism and idolatry. How should white men respond when they are the gods being worshipped? (If processes that they have devised through supposedly 'human intelligence' are in Africa considered to be divine in origin?) Theological systems always arise out of and in relation to contexts. Theologies that are dovetailed to 'contexts' such as aid provision, development projects, donated vehicles and imported mobile phones that are, from the Western point of view artificial human constructs, seem to be a re-mystification of science. Is it appropriate to create theologies based on contexts produced by the indecipherable (by local people) actions of foreigners? Surely the repeated construction, destruction and reconstruction of such theologies (that will inevitably arise as their foundations change, for example as technology advances) will, if they are Christian, cause the recipients to begin to doubt the theological truths that they perhaps ought not to doubt – such as the deity of Christ?

⁶⁰ Jim Harries, 'The Magical Worldview in the African Church: what is going on?' *Missiology: An International Review*. Vol. XXIV, No. 4, October 2000. 487-502.

⁶¹ Kwame Bediako, Discussion following lecture presented at Annual School of Theology of the African Institute for Christian Mission and Research (AICMAR), Butere, Kenya, 1st to 4th August 2006.

⁶² Bediako, Discussion.

The above are the popular theologies being constructed for indigenous consumption in Africa. Other theologies are also being constructed by African people in international languages for other reasons again related to *ngima* (life/prosperity). There is a big market for foreign-language theologies in Africa. Salaries, facilities, prestige and even fame are available for African lecturers at colleges and universities, authors of books, conference speakers and even radio presenters, if they are adept at the use of English (or other European languages). The language used by these theologians on the international scene must not be offensive to their supporting donor community. Not understanding the basis for the rules of the game that these foreign-language theologians are following unfortunately again orients these theologies, in their attempts 'to please', to magic.

European peoples, as others around the world, once had the privilege of understanding God as he appeared in, through, and in contrast to 'nature'. Such an understanding is now considered to be 'orthodox'. The option of developing such theologies is not available to budding African theologians today, as they are facing not nature but a context dominated by incomprehensible foreign powers. Hence it can be impossible for African people to achieve theological orthodoxy without committing intellectual suicide! Such a singular and unique predicament, brought about by vast impersonal (enabled from a distance by technology) intrusion of Westerners onto African communities, has never before been faced by mankind on a comparable scale.

Empires today are uniquely 'faceless'. Different peoples have in the course of history frequently conquered, dominated and oppressed each other. But technology now enables this to occur impersonally and from a distance. Never in the past has technology (printing, radio, internet, TV, satellites etc.) enabled one people to crush another's values and culture *without a personal presence*. This absence of 'personal presence' means that those being imposed upon do not have the option of filling the gaps in their understanding through imitation and careful observation of the life of the 'other'. This is a serious epistemological tragedy. It denies 'subject peoples' the means for ever attaining a deep understanding of that which encumbers them.

A major failing in previous efforts at overcoming some of the above difficulties, is the assumption that it can be done through the use of a language whose foundations are unfamiliar to the listeners concerned. That is, attempts that originate in Europe to 'educate' African people who continue to live in their own contexts, using languages whose contexts remain unfamiliar. The result is garbled at best, and all too often the construction of artificial (somewhat meaningless) conceptual islands only tenuously connected to 'real life'. The only way to 'help' African people to build from their own foundations, is for missionaries (and development workers) to build on what is already there. This requires operating in African languages, sufficiently profoundly understood as to be correctly used in relation to a people's foundational culture. This in practice requires 'poverty' on the part of the European – or at the very least an opting out of those so-called 'development projects' that are dependent on foreign funds.⁶³

Theologically, I suggest that it is only appropriate for Christians to take African names for God, if theological debate about that God then continues to be in the very African languages. Only such is self-correction on the understanding of God through the hermeneutical circle⁶⁴ in the reading of the scriptures and people's experience of God enabled.

⁶³ Which is pretty much all 'development projects'. (For more details see Harries, 'Power' and Harries, 'Pragmatic'.)

If this is not done then either:

1. People's understanding of 'God' will be unresponsive to theological debate,
- or
2. Christianity become a faith rooted in ritual but not understanding.

7. Conclusion

What should be done? One option is to 'continue as we are'. What are the implications of this course of action? In my view — serious. The brutal insensitivity of current levels of imposition of Western life onto the African continent is threatening to exterminate whole peoples because: "societies with ancient but eroded epistemologies of ritual and symbol ... [are] knocked off balance ... under the voracious impact of premature or indigestible assimilation".⁶⁵ How can I as a Christian stand by and watch fellow human beings be reduced to the status of being victims of Westerners ideological and sociological experiment? I suggest the following steps as essential to the missionary (and development worker's) task of the future:

1. An admission of the mystery and unknown-ness of God. It is only when one is ready to have one's view of God questioned that true theological debate can occur.
2. A prerequisite for number 1 above is that theological debate occur in indigenous languages. It is inappropriate to expect heartfelt acceptance by genuine Christian people that God's character must be defined in terms that are foreign to them. To expect to be able to so contort the English language, as to make it fit into African categories, while the Westerner is looking on, is plainly impossible.
3. The missionary task must be one of communicating Christ *across* cultural and linguistic divides. This requires a missionary (and development worker's) force that is ready to 'die to this world' so as to live for and be used by Christ in strange cultural contexts. It requires the dominant communication in a cultural context to be in a language that is rooted in that context.
4. A prerequisite for No. 3 is a discontinuation of the current enormous drive at imposing Western technologies, languages and cultures by force around the world. If the secular world is not ready to stop, then at least the Christian missionary force must opt out of such practices, and begin to promote Christ and not Western culture.
5. I do not perceive an easy solution to the current 'facelessness' of the context being presented to African peoples mentioned above, apart from a 'filling of the subject gap' by those who are prepared to take the time (i.e. spend their lives) in translating in more or less formal ways, between African and historically Christian European worlds.

⁶⁴ Anthony C. Thiselton, 'The New Hermeneutic.' 78-107 In: McKim, Donald K. (ed.) *A Guide to Contemporary Hermeneutics: major trends in Biblical interpretation*. Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company 1986, 90.

⁶⁵ George Steiner, *After Babel: aspects of language and translation*. (Third edition). Oxford: Oxford University Press 1998, 16.