

**The Prerogative of Imitation in Cross-Cultural Mission:  
discussion in an African context**

By: Jim Harries

Revision: 9.10.07

Copyright applies.

2007

Submitted to [nfrizzell@lausanne.org](mailto:nfrizzell@lausanne.org) on 17.08.07 for publication in Lausanne World Pulse.

Accepted by them for publication in March 2008.

Dr. Jim Harries works as a missionary reaching the Luo people of Western Kenya. He is the chairman of the Alliance for Vulnerable Mission, that seeks to encourage mission using the language of people being reached through non-subsidised ministries, especially in Africa. See: [www.vulnerablemission.com](http://www.vulnerablemission.com).

### **Introduction**

Learning can occur by hearing and following instructions, or by imitation. For example:

“to peel an orange, first take the unpeeled orange into your left hand with the lump facing up. Pick up a knife and clasping the handle in the palm of your hand, have your pointer finger along the back of the blade. Press the blade forcefully against the skin (i.e., outside) of the orange near the lump while making a back-and-forth action...”

Or I could say ‘do this’ and demonstrate. In fact that is how most people learn most of the time.

### **Learning by Imitating**

‘Learning by imitating’ is very effective. Learning by following instructions in a manual requires a pre-existing detailed knowledge of language, which must itself have been acquired through imitation. It requires learning every eventuality. (Hence instruction manuals can be very weighty.) For example, telling someone to turn the key to start a car engine will not help a novice driver (who has not seen an example to imitate) unless you tell him to put it into the hole first, which hole it is, which way up to put it, how far in to push it, which way to turn it, how much pressure to apply in turning, not to be surprised by the engine starting, etc.

Careful consideration of human learning will help us realise the vital and dominant role of imitation : watching someone ride a bike then riding it; toddlers observing adults walking on two feet; noting how the preacher stands on the platform to give his message; recognizing that people check for traffic before crossing the road ... and so on. “The meaning of a word is its use in the language,” says Wittgenstein (cited in Hanfling 1989: 42). Surely then observation and imitation set the foundation for all subsequent education. Even in the church I have seen African children kneel, sob and cry in repentance for their sins—not only because their hearts are strongly convicted (they may or may not be), but also because they have seen adults do so. Even African spirituality is, at least to a degree, learned through imitation.

If learning is rooted as strongly in imitation as indicated above, then we can assume that what is available to imitate will have a determining effect on people’s comprehension, education and worldview. A worldview is a platform on which subsequent learning occurs. Such a platform, I suggest, resembles a language and is integrally linked to a language. Someone who has received elementary schooling in German is ready to be taught in German at university. Yet that particular platform is also built on a specific set of imitation experiences that determines the potential for further learning.

How can we help people who have such a foundation for ongoing learning? Specifically, how are we going to introduce them, or further enlighten them, to God’s truth? There are two options: either to continue the established learning process, or provide translation to enable further learning from a different foundation. So, using our example above someone familiar with German studying in the UK will either need to continue to be taught in German, or learn English. Therefore, in cross-cultural mission, someone rooted in a non-Western imitational platform will either have to go through a

process of translation to transfer onto an unfamiliar (to them) platform, or be taught according to their existing platform.

Yet, conventional wisdom seems to ignore the gap between ‘imitational platforms’. This is like saying that a German speaking person travelling to study in the UK will succeed without any English instruction. Or that someone qualified in mining engineering can without difficulty be enrolled into a sociology Masters programme. In other words, someone with a foreign imitational platform is expected to be able to build on what s/he has without taking into account their particular platform. That is, differences in basic understanding arising from diverse foundations of imitation are ignored in ongoing personal development when, for example theological education originating from one platform (or set of platforms), i.e. ‘the West’, is dispensed globally without interpretation or translation.

In this paper I identify two levels of knowledge. One is like language, such as English, German or Kiswahili. Another is the imitational foundation that underlies the use of language. The latter is not carried by words. Translating bread (English) to *Brot* (German) does not tell my reader about the differences in behaviour between Germans and Brits in relation to bread. Presuppositions underlying what we say are contained in the background and not in the words that we use. Telling an American to eat his lunch using ‘British English’ will not in itself have him pick up his knife and fork as Englishmen do. Mere translation of language is not adequate for achieving inter-cultural transfer of knowledge with any profundity, unless there is a parallel translation occurring at the pre-suppositional level.

### **Learning in Mission**

Instruction seems to be a dominant model in Christian mission from the West to non-West today. Hence there is a widespread emphasis on Theological *education* that comes with the export of books and educational programmes from West to non-West. Students from outside of the West pour into European and American universities to learn a multitude of disciplines, including theology. Learning English is more and more desired to aid such processes. Literature production, radio programming, websites, television preaching, CDs, you name it, are the growing methodology of mission.

These methodologies are perpetuated by the “rewards” given to their followers. Non-Western leaders are increasingly those with competence in some Western field which allows them to be “understood” by and therefore come to be “rewarded” by Westerners who hold the purse strings. This spreading of theological (and other) knowledge ignores the fact that the foundation of learning is in imitation.

### **Money, Mission and Education**

‘Successful’ mission to Africa that results in mass conversions and booming churches often occurs on the back of foreign finance. But, are people being converted to money or to the Gospel? The most foolish, pointless and rootless missions-methodology could be welcomed (overtly) with open arms, if it is well funded. African evangelists who have foreign financial backing can quickly get a following, but then their pre-occupation is maintaining that Western lifeline.

Western missionaries do not always realise — *that others are watching them with the intent to imitate what they are doing*. When a missionary drives to a meeting (as against walking), nationals take note. If a foreigner uses a PA system, nationals have another behaviour to imitate. Using a foreign language is associated with true (i.e. White man’s) spiritual power. Giving clothes or blankets or providing a church roof are noted as components of effective Gospel witnessing. Surely, the African person may think, Western missionaries would not give this example if they knew Africans cannot imitate it? The African, in seeking to imitate the missionary would then need a vehicle, English language, a PA system and more in order to be effective. African nationals might then put their task on hold as they ask the Western missionary for these things.

Let me explain further.

The Gospel of Christ can be known by its foreignness or unfamiliarity. What is foreign can be the most visible. When your paperboy arrives by bicycle and delivers the newspaper your child tells you “the newspaper has come”. But what if the newspaper boy lands by helicopter then drops the newspaper

through the door. Will your child say “the newspaper has come”? No, of course not! He’ll say, “hey this is amazing, a helicopter has landed outside”! The coming of the newspaper is no longer the news.

If a foreigner brings the good news of Jesus, the foreignness can be the first thing noticed. Consistent association of foreignness with the Gospel will result in association between the Gospel and foreignness. If the Gospel is foreign, and if the missionary is a wealthy Westerner, then we have the prosperity Gospel. Facets of Western life consistently exported to Africa with the Gospel come to be known as part of the Gospel and in fact are syncretism.

This issue can be resolved by minimising the cultural gap between preacher and preached to — between evangelist and congregation. Many Westerners are expert at this within their home shores. Hence Western churches have young peoples’ programmes run by youth, women’s programmes led by women and so on. One finds Korean services, Black churches and Chinese fellowships operating within the UK. But why is the same wisdom not applied to Africa? Why are White churches in Africa frowned upon? Why are African libraries filled with books written in the West? Why is formal theological education in Africa almost invariably in English? Why are *short-term* missionaries, who have little chance to avoid being ‘foreign’, crowding the continent? Why are African students desperate to attend Western Bible Colleges? Why is the West seemingly so intent on dominating the African church? No other continent is so subject to foreigners. Why do other countries (China comes to mind) keep Westerners out?

The peculiar humility and abject poverty of the African people plays a part. A poor man’s answer to a proposal from a wealthy man is usually ‘yes’. But does that make a wrong into a right?

Many African people resist the efforts of foreigners to gain an understanding of their languages and cultures that will enable clear communication. This for many reasons:

- (1) The African culture is one in which knowledge on the whole is not shared freely (Maranz 2001: 30).
- (2) The details of African lifestyles often grate “unpleasantly” with Western values, resulting in criticism.
- (3) Being ignorant does not stop foreigners’ material generosity, so those interested in financial advance may prefer donors to remain ignorant.
- (4) From colonialism to date, there has been a demonisation of all that is ‘African’ (Douglas 1999: 178).

More reasons could no doubt be added yet these barriers must be overcome to render mission work effective.

To appropriate Western knowledge (although what an African ‘appropriates’ is of course not ‘Western knowledge’ as such, but rather an African understanding of Western words) is often the only alternative open to an African wanting to advance in today’s world. Certainly this applies to theological education. But is meeting unfamiliar educational targets provided from abroad the wisest option for the long-term benefit of a church or community? It is hard to know because this option (‘become Western’) is subsidised and alternatives are often excluded. For example, free education in Kenya is provided for all children, if it is in English and follows a foreign curriculum. In the church, books, trips abroad, lucrative salaries, support for orphan children, gifts, scholarships, grants, loans — can be conditional on the recipients (overtly) accepting Westernisation. But is this not a subsidy into incompetence, as the person is forced to live by what is ‘foreign’ to them?

In reality, the foundation set by imitation continues to provide the basic direction for African thinking. Whatever happens subsequently to help the person develop should build on that foundation. Most foreign-based education does not do this, rather it assumes a non-African worldview. Hence I suggest that it is immoral for people to subsidise the use of their own educational system for others, without very careful thought regarding the translation process.

Saying ‘but that is what the Africans want’ is insufficient reason for justifying a course of action because of artificially created economic incentives (‘aid’). If (as I believe is the case) the West dominates Africa economically, it must do so responsibly.

### **Drawing to a Conclusion**

Being responsible requires understanding. The basis of understanding, we have discovered, is imitation. Close understanding is not acquired by someone who already knows the answers, or is not prepared to take time learning from others. Westerners attempting to share the good news of Jesus with African people must imitate Africans in terms of language, as far as possible day-to-day life, preferably in diet and social life. Only then will the missionary begin to be in a position to communicate the Gospel (or the development worker to promote development) that is not 'foreign'.

Because financial power prohibits the vulnerability needed for true learning (Harries nd), a sector of the Western mission (or development) presence should be de-powered, especially financially. Then an indigenous African education in an African language could arise.

'Going native' has in the past been seen as spurious. Yet because it is only to the degree that a missionary 'goes native' that an African can be given an achievable example to imitate, the failure to 'go native', is a failure to communicate. Its outcome is evident in the African church – in many settings it's a lopsided dependent church addicted to material prosperity, unable to draw clear boundaries between what is Christian and what is Western, and it is bent on promoting the 'prosperity Gospel'.

For a foreigner to fall in line with the culture of his host people is only natural, if strenuous at times. It is a normal part of human relationship that is hampered if there is a gross power imbalance or lack of mutual respect. There is a desperate need for Western missionaries who can be accurately persuaded to be vulnerable enough to imitate African people, so as to acquire something of their presuppositional foundation, and in turn be able to present the true Gospel.

### **Bibliography**

DOUGLAS, MARY,

1999, 'Sorcery Accusations Unleashed: the Lele revisited, 1987.' 177-193 In: *Africa: journal of the international Africa institute*. 69 (2) 1999, (PDF) <http://links.jstor.org/sici=0001-9720%281999%2969%3A2%3c177%3asautlr%3E2.0.co%3b2-V> (accessed 21.10.05)

HANFLING, OSWALD,

1989, *Wittgenstein's Later Philosophy*. Basingstoke: Macmillan Press

HARRIES, JIM,

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

MARANZ, DAVID,

2001, *African Friends and Money Matters: observations from Africa* Dallas: SIL International

Jim Harries, 2007, Kima International School of Theology, PO Box 75, Kenya.

Email: [jharries@africaonline.co.ke](mailto:jharries@africaonline.co.ke)

Web page: [www.jim-mission.org.uk](http://www.jim-mission.org.uk)