

# Talking for Money, Looking for Money: the donor industry as fulfillment of ancient African religious ideals, in missiological perspective

By Jim Harries, May 2006  
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The ancient mythology of the Luo people in East Africa depicts mankind as receiving his daily needs without expending difficult physical effort. The current system of aid and donations in Africa appears to actualize this historic utopian ideal.

A Luo story tells of a *miaha* (newly married lady) being sent to take a hoe to a field (Ogot 1983). Had she simply left the hoe there, it would have dug the field by itself over-night. Instead, because she was determined to please her new family, the *miaha* swung the hoe and began turning the soil using her own strength. Unfortunately this act broke the spell. From that day on the Luo people have had to work by the sweat of their brow. But the existence of the story tells us that the Luo people have not forgotten their utopian ideals.

## Utopia, Magic and African History

The above story of the *miaha* has striking parallels with the Biblical account in which Eve's listening to the serpent resulted in the 'fall' of man to a state of having to work hard for his daily bread (Bible, Genesis Chapter 3). The notion of a prior era of close fellowship with 'god' and 'easy living' followed by a fall seems to be widespread in human societies. But how consequential is this utopian view for contemporary life? If Weber was right in identifying a "Protestant work ethic" arising from European Christianity, this utopia has taken backstage in Europe (Weber 1992). But has it elsewhere?

"When an American needs money, he works for it. When an African needs money, he talks for it" says Maranz (2001:23). These seem to be radically different approaches to economics. If Maranz is correct, then money for an African comes from a person and not from a process designed to effect its generation. The title of Maranz's book; *African Friends and Money Matters*, reveals that economics and friendship relations are particularly closely integrated in Africa, such that friendship in Africa is only sought in the interest of material gain\*!

Whereas some of my specific examples and illustrations are drawn from the Kenya Luo people, with whom I have lived since 1993 to date, I am applying the insights of this essay to Sub-Saharan Africa as a whole. While acknowledging local and regional differences, I do agree with Maranz (2001: 2), Magesa (1997:26) and others—that the people of Sub-Saharan Africa have many cultural similarities. Hence what applies specifically to Luoland in Kenya certainly in broad-outline also applies much more widely across the continent.

There is a sense in which to talk of 'economics' in South Africa is inaccurate. An 'economy' in the Western (i.e., mother-tongue English) understanding is something that while derivative from it and closely connected to it, is in some way distinct from a community. Hence one can speak of a community or a nation, and its economy. Such drawing of category boundaries is characteristic of Western societies. It does not occur in holistic African communities. Hence Blunt found investment and savings advice columns adjacent to articles on how to avoid

witches in a Kenyan periodical (Blunt 2004: 317). Blunt's research into what is going on under the surface of Kenyan society, finds a pre-occupation with chasing away devils. This is in line with my own findings; that the good life comes by default and people's energies are expended in removing untoward spiritual influences (Harries 2006).

The deeply inherent orientation of African people to a *subject*, with some oblivion to his/her environment (by comparison with British/American perspectives) is shown in many ways. African photographers, unless deeply influenced from the West, will only take pictures of people, never of scenes, views, flowers or other 'things.' In a way that is hard for Westerners to understand, things are extensions of people: "the Negro African does not draw a line between himself and the object ..." (Senghor 1964: 72). The human body, human social and spiritual existence, all arising from the (metaphorical) heart of a person are the sum of people's attention and interest. Other 'things' are seen as extensions of hearts.

The link between someone's heart and their environment or surroundings as perceived in Africa has been much studied. Anthropologists have thrown light onto this in their work on African magic. The body of literature on this is enormous. Seminal work was done by classic researchers like Evans-Pritchard in his book *Witchcraft, Oracles and Magic among the Azande* (1976). *Witchbound Africa* is a book on the Kaonde people in Zambia, first published in 1923 (Melland 1923). A blurred (for Westerners) relationship between things, forces and human subjects is articulated by Davis (2000). Unfortunately for scholars using English, we find a paucity of terms in English to help us to understand this area of life because the English language has (in its mother-tongue use) been monopolised by science. Recognizing that I am unable to overcome such language difficulties, perhaps the best I can do while asking for the reader's considered understanding, is to say that; the whole of life in Africa is governed by magic. (See also Harries 2000.)

We have made a few findings or hypotheses so far. One is that people in the African way are seeking for an utopian life that should be theirs if only they could succeed in deterring the evil (or bad) forces that threaten it. This ideal is constantly sought through the development of relationship, and the target relationships are those who are seen as having succeeded in economic and material terms (once considered in terms of wives, children and land, but nowadays also in terms of Western measures of prosperity). Hence, African people are constantly searching for patrons, this being to them the only way forward (Maranz 2001: 137). The means of the acquisition of desired wealth can be described by the term *magic*. (While acknowledging the weakness of this term because of the relative absence of such an orientation in the Western world.)

Aid to Africa is magical and mystical. The African people find foreign aid to be a clear confirmation of the above-mentioned utopian ideal(s). In Africa today aid-flows are incessant. While changing from one form to another, they never stop. They are not earned or achieved in any rational way. They seem to vindicate and confirm ancient African beliefs.

The current socio-economic climate in Africa is proving an enormous boost to traditional religious ideals. The dreams of many prior generations are being fulfilled in the present. Careful negotiations with the 'the West' release at times enormous supplies of all kinds of material wealth. The traditional attitude of helplessness and dependence on others, particularly the dead, in the face of oppressive spiritual powers is paying dividends. As the influx continues, the African man is careful to remain on his guard. Protective measures against bad magic, life's fundamental orientation to pleasing the dead, and ambiguity in life that prevent evil forces from taking a hold continue.

The position and identity of the White man as a patron is frequently reconfirmed. Millions of African children spend seven, eight, twelve or more of the prime years of their youth learning English and European ways. These have proved to be the great languages of magic of the current era. “Talking for money” (Maranz 2001: 23) is these days in Africa becoming more and more effective, and the addition of extensive and widespread communication media such as the internet, further enables the possibilities of finding a White person to communicate with.

The above paragraphs have outlined some very serious barriers to social and economic advance (I write as a Westerner and not as an African, for whom all of the above are not problems, but benefits) that require urgent attention. At the moment, the impact of the West in confirming and strengthening traditional religious beliefs is not even recognised, never mind being addressed or resolved. It is not perceived by the West—as the issues concerned disappear in the process of translation. The ever-growing identification of Whites as wealthy patrons, who are best kept in ignorance of local processes, is constantly re-affirmed. This raises and reinforces barriers to the gaining of mutual understanding. Hence power in Africa is more and more in the hands of the ignorant.

It would seem in Africa today that all Whites are taken (by the indigenous Black population) as patrons or potential patrons. A relationship with a patron is a particular kind of relationship, with deeply ingrained expectations and conventions. It is certainly a relationship of respect, for which read (it is hard to get this into English) distance, a sort of formality, and a degree of concealment of truth. I wonder whether such a universal ‘standoff,’ which I guess in British English could be called racism (in reverse), is very healthy?

### **Patrons and Language**

If I am correct so far, then (almost) the only type of language used by African people and communities in relation to Whites, is that language spoken and heard that is appropriate to patrons.

A problem arises if this is not realized. I suspect that few African people are unaware of this dependence-communication. I suspect also that few Whites are fully aware of it—how can they be, as it is generated by cultures foreign to them? Now, it seems to me, that it is the turn of the West to be accused of believing in ‘magic.’

African people are on the whole perfectly competent at forming words, sentences, paragraphs and more in the language(s) that have been exported to them—for example English. What the West does not fully realize, is that someone sharing words and sentences of a particular language that they have been obliged to learn since childhood, does not amount to their having grasped the meaning of what is being said that would be intended by the originators of that language. There seems to be an easy deceitfulness in all this. If someone says, “I have seen an elephant” then we assume that they know what an elephant looks like, when actually it is quite possible (and easy) *to say* “I have seen an elephant” without ever having seen one. The ability to *say* “sustainable development” does not in itself show that someone has understood what a British or American person means by such a term. To say “Tanzania is modern” will mean something different if said by an African, who has not been able to experience whatever it is to ‘be modern’ in America, that if it is said by an American. A Tanzanian saying that “Tanzania is modern” is frankly insufficient basis for an American to conclude that “Tanzania is modern”, because the latter’s idea of what is ‘modern’ will be vastly different from that of a Tanzanian. Some words have ‘false friends’—for example

what in the UK could be called a shack in which you can get a cup of tea, can in East African English boldly be called a “hotel”.

The expectation that a word can move across a vast cultural divide and not change fundamentally in nature and content is frankly not rational but magical. It can be said in a sense that every word someone uses assumes their whole culture, and every expression is correctly understood only in the light of that culture. An adult person cannot know a word without implicitly attaching vast amounts of context and background to it. Try saying any word to yourself. Then think of different parts of your particular history and context that link to that word. Much of that is specific, individual knowledge. This applies even to scientific terms. If someone says, “methane is CH<sub>4</sub>” my mind goes back to a particular chemistry lab in a particular place where I was taught by a particular person while of a particular age—and so on and so on. My hearing a word itself, such as ‘methane’, brings to the fore many links and associations in my mind.

The potential for miscommunication becomes vast when someone, or even whole communities, learn someone else’s language without sharing in the culture from which the language arises. There is a (vast!) difference between a French person learning to speak English while at a French school, and another French person learning English by interacting with people on the streets of Oxford. The former will, by default, apply a French-person’s life context to the English words that they are using. This happens more and more with the current global usage of English, and the possibility of English spreading almost totally devoid of its culture; as enabled by widespread print and electronic media.

Foreign words of themselves, I suggest, usually do not challenge an environment that they enter if shorn of their foreign content, as words of course are! Rather, foreign words are appropriated *into* the new home context. How, after all, can foreign words effectively challenge a strange cultural situation, when on account of the fact that the situation is strange, the words in the process of cross-cultural transfer lose the contextual component of their meaning that is invariably vital to their original anticipated function?

Going back to the case of patronage above can easily furnish us with examples. “I love you” said to a Patron on whom one is dependent for one’s daily existence, is clearly different from “I love you” said to a beautiful girl one happened to meet. “Yes, I will” in a context in which “no, I won’t” would endanger my life is different from “yes, I will” to someone who offered for me to join them for supper. Anything said by a client to a patron, I suggest, will be understood differently according to whether or not one realises the existence of the patron/client relationship. In other words, someone listening to or even participating in a patron/client conversation while ignorant of its patron/client nature can easily miss the whole plot and will certainly misunderstand. Therefore the meaning of words, sentences and even whole conversations or books differs according to the context in which they are understood.

What then are the implications of having a patronage system dominate a community? Institutions set up in such an environment may be established and maintained *not* through the heart-will of the people, but as a result of particular patronage offered. So, someone will work as a nurse in a hospital, not because that is how in their own mind the sick should be tended, but because there is a salary on offer for doing it. Someone will teach in a school, not because they value the insights that they are imparting, but because that is the way they know to make a living. Housekeepers, UN employees, even Bible School teachers and indigenous-‘missionaries’ operating in a patron-client system (being paid for their services and having the perimeters of their roles dictated to them) are all doing that which may be contrary to their deeper heart-felt orientations, because they are in need of an income. All

these people are fulfilling particular rituals in pursuance of a fundamental aim—receiving finance. They are all going to be careful to conceal whatever may run contrary to the required ongoing flow of funds. That is, they will be careful not to tell the truth to their donor(s) whenever this appears to contradict the donor’s primary aim(s).

The solution to this shroud of secrecy surrounding every patronage situation is simple, if also complex. That is, for not *everyone* from a particular ethnic or cultural background to be a patron—a position that is chronically the case in terms of Whites in Sub-Saharan Africa at the present.

A prominent feature of African society today, is that while people have been taught how to spend money, they have not been taught how to generate it, except through sale of poverty in the form of sad stories designed to beget ‘guilt’ in Westerners. A society is being produced in which all initiatives are fueled through foreign funding. Locally based thinking is increasingly squashed. Corruption is generated and perpetuated.

Can anything be made out of African roots that is not a corrupt little-understood copy of what is foreign? The chances of this occurring seem to be getting simmer and slimmer. I could share of my own experience as a Westerner who came to this continent as a missionary in 1988 with the hope that I might understand and encourage the African people in their godly walk. Twenty years later, the system of patronage has gained and not lost ground. The only role for a foreigner in my home (Kenyan) community seems to be that of patron. Maranz (2001: 11) tells us: “The Westerners are people who appear to have ample resources that many Africans would like to have them share but lack most other qualifications for meaningful relationship.” One’s influence rarely goes further than one’s money. Even local knowledge acquired over years of exposure to a people appears to be of little help. Ignorance on the part of the West may be preferable to understanding in the frenzy of activity pursuing aid money. Thank-you donors for constantly reconfirming the compelling message to the African people – that money comes without strenuous effort if only one will wait long enough.

Someone can become a nurse, if it pays. You can teach—providing it is lucrative enough. You can be a pastor—but you’d better find a donor first. You can have children—as long as there is an orphan project around to look after them for you. You can work for government—if their overseas contacts are rewarding enough to keep you salaried. You can be an accountant—and I am sure no one will notice the bits of money going astray into your own pocket. If these options seem to fail, don’t worry because you can become a drunkard as are so many young men today who are no longer responsible for looking after their own families thanks to foreign charitable donations. Does the West have anything to offer that is not money, that only they know how to generate?

### **The Apostasy of the Church?**

Christ had ample opportunity to be a ‘patron.’ His temptations include that of turning the very stones around him into bread (Bible, Luke 4:3). He refused. He did at times feed thousands (Mark 6:30-44 and Mark 8:1-21), but then almost regretted having taken such actions. He is certainly not recorded as having solicited major funds from governments or wealthy businessmen. He was, it seems, very careful to ensure that those who followed him be ‘true followers,’ and not only after food or money.

Is this a contrast with the church of today? God’s servants who seek to put themselves at the hub of numerous donor projects become as prone to accusations of corruption as anyone else.

Donors attach strings, which at times restrict the church in its options in approaching people with the Christian message.

What can one say about the church in the West? Have Western Christians become so addicted to their comfortable lifestyle as to have abdicated their charitable responsibility to the problems faced around the globe? Or is it that they have swallowed whole the materialistic solutions implicitly proposed to them by the media's presentation of world issues? Are they right in expressing Christian 'love' in a way that is devoid of relationship—by acting as donors to those whose cultures and walk they cannot begin to comprehend? Is 'money' a sufficient alternative in mission to a living, breathing, crying, feeling person?

Someone holding the purse-strings usually cannot help having a say. What they say and how they say it becomes rather consequential. Westerners used to using money advocate remedies and solutions that require money, even when other alternatives are available. When these money-solutions are adopted, they result in a rise in costs out of proportion to any increase in benefit from the said project. Hence 'projects' are always short of money. The pressure is always on the donor to give more, while local managers are waiting, sometimes twiddling their thumbs, in expectation. The bottleneck is funding, so the pressure is on the distant donor while the local person sits pretty.

### **Impact on the West**

Globalization these days results in issues pertaining to distant countries receiving much attention in Western churches. 'Extreme need' can result in people being absorbed in the foreign to the neglect of local issues that they understand and really could resolve. Global communication being dominated by the secular-media affects the perception of global issues by local churches. This in turn orients people's understanding to the perception that money is the solution to all problems—from prostitution, to hunger to Satanism to earthquakes—you name it! Is this reduction of the churches' role to one of fundraising appropriate?

I have suggested above that when any other role of a Western missionary to Africa is combined with being a patron, rather than deep change being thereby advocated, tradition is re-affirmed. Shutting off the role for a patron in mission, opens up numerous alternative and (I suggest) much more challenging and certainly more 'Christian' avenues of service for foreign missionaries: nurses will be needed to nurse, and not diagnose and treat only as far as their budget can stretch. Teachers of the Word will be needed, but will not use their mother tongue even when thousands of miles from home. Pastors can pastor, instead of being expected to fundraise. Evangelists will not have to promise cars, PA systems and English classes in order to draw their congregations. The above roles will leave the missionaries concerned free to learn from their target people. Thus they will be free to draw nearer to them. They will be able to relate to them socially as well as professionally. They will be able to integrate with them instead of only to dominate them. They will be able to recognize and interact with the deep spiritual issues that will make God's Word come alive.

It is the latter revival of spirituality that can bring deep heart-felt changes, which can be a foundation for healthy life-style changes around the world. The re-realization of the importance of spirituality in human existence is bound to have a kick-back effect on the West, which has in recent decades been so heavily influenced by (Marxist?) materialism. A revival of the church is as vital in Western nations as in other parts of the world, after all.

Living in such a way as to be vulnerable to a foreign people being reached by the Gospel is not an optional privilege for a few eccentrics. It is a necessary prior step to gaining of an

understanding that can be acquired in no other way. More specifically, the institution of the patron must be carefully examined and overcome in order to rescue African societies from their demise at the onslaught of Westernisation on their communities. Today's missionary force unfortunately all too often supports and confirms this orientation—as foreign missionaries plant themselves on the top of the African pile, and are listened to in accordance to the size of their budget.

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