

Why be Vulnerable? Development and Mission in Africa

Jim Harries, 2013.

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Much intervention by the West in the Africa is these days administered using Western languages, and funded using Western money. The AVM (Alliance for Vulnerable Mission) suggests that some Christian missionaries opt out of this system and instead use non-Western languages and indigenous resources for their key ministries. Thus they could avoid the often gross lack of fit between project design or gospel communication as envisaged in the West, and that which results when translated into local contexts. They could also avoid buying compliance by (effectively) forcing non-Westerners to agree with what the West has to say in order to benefit from Western money.

"Yes of course it will work" my African host assured me repeatedly as I shared my thoughts and plans for a local theological education programme. Yet, the same programme has consistently refused to flourish. I had to realise that the "of course it will work" assumed that "if you the wealthy Westerner pay the people to do what you want them to do". Then I was forced to realise; surely that would apply no matter whether the people really appreciated what I had to offer or not? Who wouldn't want to find work for pay in a poor country after all?

"Yes of course it will work" said all the villagers to the American young men who had come to start a project to make and sell wood-burning stoves. The villagers had, after all, nothing to lose, but much potentially to gain from the Westerner coming to self-fund this business in their village, then to be handed over to them. People were especially careful in what they said, because the host to these Americans was a powerful member of that village community who would not take kindly to discovering that certain villagers were discouraging his lucrative and potentially even more lucrative American guests. People were especially reluctant to try to explain some of the complex reasons this project could not work using the only language the visitors could understand, that they felt embarrassed and incompetent to use with native speakers (English).

"Yes he has AIDS" responded the villagers to a question about one of their number who was sick. The Westerner who had asked the question assumed therefore that the sick person was being treated and was to be treated according to known means of AIDS therapy. Little did he know of a disease called *chira*. The latter, known for many generations by his African hosts, has symptoms (such as growing thin and weak, then dying) very similar to those of AIDS. The

people were wary that he might laugh at them if they conceded that they believed in disease causation connected with witchcraft. Yet local people were convinced that the ill health was caused through the person having displeased the ancestors and were treating him through the rectification of taboos he appeared to have broken by placating the ancestors through the shedding of animal blood.

"Yes that is right" said the villagers when the visitor explained that mankind was depraved, that salvation was by grace alone, that no-one could work for their salvation but that God chose whose who he willed, and that the soul of a saved person went directly to heaven on death. Some of the villagers had studied English in school for twelve years; but they had never heard the term "depraved" before. They were not about to concede to their fellow villagers that after twelve years and vast amounts of money spent they could not understand the words of this visiting Brit! They could not understand how grace could possibly save someone from *chira*; they had been told and witnessed many times that the latter could only be resolved through the sacrifice of a sheep. The next time a villager died, one of the Christians refused to attend burial rituals because he believed the soul of the departed was gone and could not "haunt" him anyway. As a result he was ostracised and considered by many to have been responsible for killing the late – why else intentionally miss out on the funeral after all? "Yes someone's soul goes straight to heaven on death" this Christian would confess to Westerners – but from then on he made sure he played his part in rituals placating the spirit of any departed in the time before they were buried to avoid accusation.

"No of course I do not believe in the prosperity gospel" explained the pastor. "Of course being a Christian will add to the trials one has to face in this world" he added. That afternoon visiting a parishioner he was asked to pray that his home be blessed. Well, how could he refuse? "God gives me what I want. That's right isn't it pastor?" asked a sensitive but wealthy widow church member later on. "Yes of course" the pastor responded, reflecting on what a loss it would be should she leave the church and take her money with her should he affront or contradict her. The youth group in the church had boomed ever since a certain college graduate had taken it over. "If you pray right like I do" said the college graduate in front of the youth group "you will get a good college education like me, make money, and speak English, not so pastor?" "Yes of course" said the pastor, proud of how many youth he was attracting to his church. "Yes, please give me the money to help my parishioners" said the pastor to a visiting Westerner who wanted to help him financially – realising that if he did not have money to hand out to his church members they would be likely to go elsewhere.

"Yes ... yes ... yes ... yes ... yes" said the local pastor to the Westerner talking to him. The Westerner thought from the local pastor's words that he had his agreement. He did not realise that "yes" was being used as a translation of *ndiyo*, meaning (something like) "indeed". He did not realise that it was extremely rude to disagree with a visitor. Or that the pastor feared that if he did not agree with the visitor, then the visitor might approach the pastor in the next village who he did not really like, with his proposal. Or that the time to discuss important things was after the meal when the women had left, or even on the way home accompanied by his host away from other prying ears. He did not realise that the success of an endeavour was thought to arise through everyone's agreeing with it, and that if it ended up "failing", the person (or people) who expressed doubt could be held responsible.

"The medicine will cure that disease" said the visiting missionary doctor. "So then obviously the first priority is to buy that medicine" he reasoned. He was not in the church on the Sunday when the pastor had told people that 'believing they were healed' was more important than medicine. He had also told them that Western medicine was not as effective as indigenous medicine, but that Westerners were in business and trying to make money through the sale of their products. He had also told them that it was lack of food and constant quarrelling between men and their wives that was resulting in the stress that was making people so sick. The visiting doctor did not know that people would only take medicine while they felt bad, but often stopped when they felt better before their dose was finished.

Perhaps it is time for a few Western missionaries to confine themselves to local languages and resources in their ministries (known as vulnerable mission) so as to avoid some of the above traps? See vulnerablemission.org