



This picture seems to illustrate the situation with 'spiritual battles' in Kenya! The gate in the background is the entrance to the Coptic Orthodox Compound in Maseno, where I have my office. In the foreground a local witchdoctor has put up a notice advertising his practice. The notice reads: "Doctor from Kitui. 1. Broken marriage. 2. Lifting up your business. 3. Erectile strength for men. 4. Household goods that are lost (stolen). 5. Protection (against witchcraft) for your home and gardens. 6. Getting people to pay debts they owe you. 7. You have lost your job."

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- **Some experiences and reflections from Jim Harries 2015 trip around Tanzania and back into Migori, Kenya, July to August 2015.**

I made stops in Dodoma, Babati, Mbulu, Singida, Mwanza and Musoma in Tanzania, then Migori in Kenya.

I stopped with church leaders, many once my students at Kima International School of Theology, Kenya, and spent my time encouraging and fellowshiping with believers.

Endless people amazed at language knowledge

The almost constant topic of conversation with people I have engaged with on route, has been my language knowledge. I don't want to open that topic of conversation. I just go and talk to people. Nine times out of ten, they say 'how do you know Swahili / Luo? You speak it really well!' Yes, I did get rather tired of this question, but it kept coming. Even at home where I live in Kenya the question comes all too often from people who do not already know me well. In one town in Kenya (my last stop on my trip) I overheard many people saying 'that White man has an excellent of the Luo language!' After just two days there, I seemed to be the talk of the town. To me, that question is a little embarrassing. It seems to reveal something about my people. When people see me of course, regardless of how long I have lived in 'Black Africa', they see a White man. Even I get a shock when I see myself in a mirror. I look just like a tourist, but I speak like a local (except for the English accent). The shock that people express when they hear me speak their language shows just how rare it is for Westerners to take African languages seriously.



I sometimes reflect on how the 'reverse' would go down in the UK. Almost every African person I meet with who does not already know me well, knows from experience that someone of my colour must be addressed in a foreign language. I guess they are right. Hence African people are very prejudiced in how they address someone. You are addressed according to your presumed ethnicity. Now imagine I was to do that in the UK. Imagine if in the UK I was to assume that someone I met who wasn't as white as me did not know English. ... If not a racist, I would at least be accused of being prejudiced. Ironically, norms that we implement in the UK to try to accommodate people to our culture, like to assume that everybody is educated and speaks English, can have a divisive impact in Africa.

Where to stay

Visiting in the circles I know in Africa, the question of where I will be sleep is frequently only gradually revealed. On this trip, I would arrive at a place and meet my host, while not knowing where they have in mind for me to sleep. In some places, I have been in a guesthouse with electricity and running water (and sometimes neither electricity nor running water works). At other times, well, a whole variety of African homes. My European upbringing continues to trouble me with respect to sleeping places in Africa. It's not only me. Before I left for Tanzania a missionary colleague said to me 'if you stay in people's homes you will

soon get infected with bedbugs and lice'. I hanker after white sheets, clean beds, painted walls, and a desk, chair and lamp so that if I wake up at night I can read or write something. Often I did not get such things.



This hankering seems to me to be illogical. Money can indeed in many places in Africa buy these things. I could stay in a hotel with clean rooms etc. But then I would miss out enormously on the company and interaction that you get when you stay with a family, especially when relaxing with people in the evenings. Why should a bed-bug or a few lice (if they are there? I've never seen a lice) be responsible for breaking Christian fellowship and setting me apart to stay alone or only with wealthy people in town? Am I going to refuse to do God's work because of lice? It's illogical, but my European me thinks in this way!¹

Simply teaching the bible

It is very common these days for people visiting Africa to have an agenda to 'help Africans' in a variety of ways. This could be through a wide variety of projects. Western people have this approach in Africa, that they generally do not have in Europe. Within Europe (or North America) you go to visit friends for the sake of maintaining friendships. In Africa, it is like Europeans very often seem to have an agenda of showing people a better way of life. That better way of life arises from ways of understanding that are peculiar to Western people. Typically, as a bare minimum, it requires a good knowledge of English to implement. It also requires outside money. This means that many visitors to Africa from the West carry money to their hosts.

Some Westerners I guess do not know how troublesome that money is when it comes to developing relationships with African people. The same applies to the approach that is one of 'I have come from a superior people and I have plans to help you to benefit from our superiority'. This kind of approach immediately sets up a certain relational dynamic which puts the African hosts at the bottom. Whether they realise it or not, this puts the visitor into the role of patron, and the local person into the role of client. It also means that all the neighbours are likely to get jealous, as they assume that the white person you have visiting you has carried a lot of money and is handing it out. Very often fights break out, people fall out, or even steal from one another, after their visitor has gone.



It has been my conviction, that the most important thing that I can share with people is a knowledge of God. When expressed in their own language, such knowledge of God comes for free. Because I do not advocate a project that works on the basis of Western worldview presuppositions, I do not need to advocate English learning, science, or other things that Westerners are often better at than Africans.

¹ The bible seems to advocate staying with local people. When Jesus sent out his disciples in Luke 10:5-7, he told them to stay in the house which they entered, and to eat and drink there.

Instead, I just share about God. The God I share about is he who is far better than me. One of whom I am not worthy even to undo his sandals. I do not talk about how good I am because my relationship with God is not dependent on my being good! It is dependent on him accepting me, who is as bad as everyone else (or worse) simply because he chooses to. This kind of relationship with God is a great leveller.

Falling exercise levels in Africa

It was strange to find that my colleagues often do very little exercise. One thing I often find difficult on trips, is the lack of exercise. I guess I tend to do a lot of exercise when at home, arising particularly from the fact that I live in the middle of a village far from tarmac roads, and cycle everywhere. At the same time, a few years ago it was probably true that generally speaking African people were pretty fit and healthy. That may not be the case now. The advent of the mobile phone, plus the popularity of motorcycle taxi business on the side of numerous young men, means that getting around has become very easy indeed. There is no longer any need to walk anywhere, especially long distances, when one can just call a motorcycle taxi. People get picked up at their door and taken exactly where they want to go. The incidence of diabetes is rising sharply, one colleague told me, as I noted that he intentionally walks to work and drinks tea without sugar! Personally, I am glad to be re-united with my bicycle.



Longing to be home troubled me much!

I surprised myself by how much, while on my trip travelling around and visiting and encouraging churches, I longed to be home. I don't even quite understand why. One thing I think is, here at my office at home (well, actually, 7 miles from home, hence the cycling) I can get on with some work. A task oriented person like myself is easily frustrated by the lack of 'task' activity here in Africa. Especially amongst senior men, in which group I tend to find myself these days, relative inactivity seems to be highly valued. The other thing I think must be that I miss people at home (i.e. at home in Kenya), with whom I regularly share my life.

Discussing Critical Issues

Being a visitor opens up opportunities for relaxed conversation. Sometimes relaxed conversation with colleagues is the best sort. That is; it can be more fruitful than seminars or meetings. When people are relaxed they share their hearts. Just sitting together in the evenings, having a cup of tea, walking together ... can provide excellent opportunities for learning from one another. Visiting people gives opportunity for developing close relationships with a wide variety of people in a wide variety of circumstances. In my case, I was particularly privileged to spend a lot of time with church leaders.

I must admit though that these opportunities are not as good as one might hope. What do I mean by that? Someone coming to Africa from the English-speaking world can come with an agenda of discussions that they want to enter in to, things they want to talk about, and proposals that they want to make. That approach works for people when they speak only English, and engage in the short term while proposing projects that require a lot of money. I think they do not work very well for me. I know too much! That is: I will not enter into those conversations, because I can already see where they will hit the rocks. Hence I am

less inclined to have 'strategic' conversations, about how things 'ought to be' in the Western sense. When people are taken outside of their area of their own competence they might not stop talking, but the talk can turn to pleasing the Westerner and take them way beyond what they actually know.

Problem; being standard bearer for Whites

African people can put Whites into the same box. Once they have met one White, then they expect others to behave in a similar way. Sometimes those ways of behaving are offensive. For the sake of good brotherly relations, African people will put up with such offence, and life goes on. The mind boggles as to how often I might still be offending people without even realising it!



Although I can offend people, my long-time living on the Continent, and knowledge of local languages, means that I can be more careful in how I express myself. As above – I try to avoid taking conversations down 'western' routes, where my African colleagues flounder to know what to say. I am also fairly relaxed about where I sleep. One African leader on my trip announced a number of times in public that Jim is a good visitor, because he can sleep anywhere! I was not insisting on sleeping in a hotel. But then, what happens when other White visitors come, and

they want to stay in that hotel? Will I have shown them up? Will they be told; 'well, Jim ate this food, did so and so, and slept here, so why can't you'? That sounds like a good way of damaging friendships with fellow missionaries!

- **Where to from here?**

Having been on the road for most of the last 6 months, I am committed to spending more time at home for a while. Then the question arises – how much time I should in the future spend on trips like the one I have just been on in Tanzania? Perhaps I should be arranging more trips in Luoland in Kenya? I had planned to visit Congo and Zambia. They did not work out. Should I now re-enact those plans, maybe to travel early next year?

- **Islam, Hinduism, and Buddhism are NOT 'religions'**

Jim Harries, September 2015

(This is a copy of a blog that I posted, that provoked a lot of discussion from 50 plus scholars in September to October 2015.)

Translation blunders seem to be everywhere in history. Here is a particularly critical one for today: in recent centuries, some European people began to doubt Christianity. In the course of their doubt, they separated out areas of life that they considered were really 'not to do with Christianity'. Other parts of life, they left associated with Christianity. Then they used a label to describe the bits of life that they considered not a part of Christianity. The label was borrowed from the church. They called it 'the secular'. The other bit of life, the bit that they considered to belong to Christianity, they called 'religion'. Thus was invented the category 'religion'.

That kind of seems fair enough. However, in due course, descendants of the people who had made the above invention assumed that it was somehow written into the nature of things. They forgot that someone had 'made' it, in a particular historical context. Then those people, when they began exploring beyond the boundaries of Europe, found that other people also had 'things' like their 'religion'. That is, they found that other people were praying, wearing priestly robes, preserving holy books, gathering people for ceremonies, and so on. Ah, they thought, those things seem to be like Christianity! They must be 'religion'. Let's call them 'other religions'. Thus the category 'religion', that really describes Western Christianity of the time, was used as a category to include the ways of life of other people around the world. The starting point for those researching or trying to understand non-western (Christian) people's ways of life, always became Christianity, but called by another name: religion.

From the above we got to the position, really very much the case up to today, in which Buddhism, Hinduism, Jainism, Islam, Judaism etc. are all taken as being 'religions'. Thus they are assumed to be variants of Christianity. That is to say, in the study of comparative religions, the basic assumption is one of sameness to Christianity, unless or until *otherness* is discovered. Any otherness that is found tends to be described comparatively to the original 'religion', i.e. Christianity. For example, if one should say that another religion has 'many gods', the understanding of 'gods' of which there are many, remains that of Christians. The 'gods' concerned are by default assumed to be Christian notions of 'god', even if that association is not made explicit.



This process of starting with a default 'religion' and comparing everyone and everything else (i.e. 'other religions') with it, is very deceiving in the contemporary world. Native English speakers, who are rooted in the very Western Christianity we are talking about, end up with a very distorted view of the rest of the globe. The English language carries the same confusion all around the world and plants it through education, media and translation wherever it goes. In short; it is very deceiving to call Islam, Hinduism, etc. 'religions'. Doing so is giving them a false Christian baptism that they do not own, frankly often do not want, and that does not fit.

Sources include:

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- **PhD thesis supervision**

A man from Mozambique has enrolled in a PhD programme with one of the colleges that I have frequently visited in the USA. Having read a lot of my material, he has asked whether I am ready to join the committee guiding him through his PhD.

Xavier (his name) has noticed that Christian development initiatives tend, in Mozambique, only to work with certain kinds of churches. In doing so they largely ignore many indigenous churches that actually have the larger following. Not only do they have the larger following, but they are also more in tune with what the African in Mozambique are actually thinking.

When he asks can development initiatives helpfully engage with the churches they are currently avoiding, he is in a sense asking: can Western development agencies engage with African reality?

A colleague called Andrew Springfield made a related point at our conference in Gloucester earlier this



year. Working in Tanzania, he realised that outside agencies tend to work with the development arm set up for the purpose by African churches, rather than with the churches themselves. The 'development arm' is in a sense the 'handle the foreigners arm'. This means that outsiders approaching African churches tend to be 'handled' by specialists in handling outsiders. They do not engage with regular believers, except indirectly.

Xavier's question resonates very much with my own experience and daily challenges. There are reasons why African churches have 'development arms'. They perceive a non-compatibility in direct relationship. Direct relationship putting real African issues into the face of Westerners may be more than the Westerners can handle.

Questions that arise in my own mind include:

1. How can or 'should' outside Christian initiatives handle very overt allegiance to ancestors or the living dead?
2. How can or 'should' outside agencies communicate with churches who do not have development arms e.g. vocal representatives who are fluent in international languages?
3. What defines that Christian who one can work with? What would one need to find to say "no way could I work with so and so"? In other words working in parts of Africa where the Gospel has had much influence, when is someone to be evangelised, and when are they to be taken as already a Christian?
4. Western development initiatives tend to presuppose their own legitimacy. Because they have good intentions, powerful backers and educated workers, are they a given, or could some of what they do or endeavour to do be considered illegitimate? What should they do (or be) and how?
5. How can one, or can one at all, do justice to these kinds of issues using internationally acceptable English? English has many of the wrong categories. For example, in English 'evil spirits' tend to be strangers, whereas in Africa they can be very familiar. God means very different things in English as against in African languages.

Your prayers appreciated as in helping Xavier, all of us are seeking answers to some critical questions.

- **Missionary Training**

A group of American missionaries based in Kisumu have recently asked me to help to train some of their new missionaries. ... I am not sure that 'train' is really the right word. What I can do, is mainly to share some experiences, and encourage them as they begin to attempt to engage with people who live a very different life to their own. I spent two days with one missionary, walking with him to visit indigenous churches. God willing the second missionary will come next week so that I can take him on other similar visits ...

- **Proposed Swahili Course**

As I write, I am putting together plans for a 3 week course in Swahili for missionaries to Kenya. It often proves very difficult for foreign missionaries to learn Swahili. A major reason for this, is that many Kenyan people are already very familiar with English. Yet, many critical discourses, particular of issues related to heart and family, are conducted in Swahili. If we get enough students, we are to hold this course here at Coptic January to February 2016. Details here: <https://goo.gl/40BTpL> Perhaps we will also endeavour to hold a similar Luo language course a few months later?

- **People who think different**

How should one best relate to people who do not distinguish spirits from money? This may seem a crazy question in English. Yet, it is a serious question here. Indeed – it is a real puzzle to me, so used am I (and my people) to dividing up the world so that these two things are kept distinct. Reading more widely, I discover that such distinction being absent is not unique to Africa. Historians are finding a similar thing in all people everywhere before about 1600!

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