
Good-by-Default and Evil in Africa

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The continuous struggle against evil that characterizes life in parts of Africa today is here revealed by a careful analysis of events and written material particularly from Western Kenya. Indigenous African churches operate with rules, heeded by popular acclaim, designed to keep misfortune at bay. The untoward spiritual powers that they, as the diviners that preceded them, seek to help their people grapple with stand in such stark contrast to European peoples' behavior that the latter are perceived as gods. The 'modern clothes' of language and environment conceal the ongoing powerful impact of this worldview on day to day life.

"Ka ng'ato oyudo gimoro maber giwacho ni 'Nyasache ber'"

"If someone gets anything good they say 'his God is good' "
(Mboya 1997:17)

According to Mboya 'good' comes from God (*Nyasaye*). This essay attempts to explore to what extent and how exclusively this is the case for the African people with whom I have associated and about whom I have been able to learn. If good is seen as coming from God, then perhaps there is no good apart from that originating in God. If this is the case, then what are the implications of this in the Luo people's comprehension of the impact that outsiders have had on their society from the Colonial period to date? If God is the only source of good, does this mean that everyone else is bad? I have found many indications to this effect.

African cosmology is a hierarchy (Chirairo 2003). God is at the top. He is said to be distant, but always existing (Chirairo 2003). What then is his role?

Having lived in North West Province of Zambia from 1988 to 1991, I first came to Luoland in Western Kenya in 1993 where I have been mostly resident from 1993 to 2002, living with the same community in the same area. I have learned to speak Kiswahili and Dholuo fluently. Having originally come to Africa to teach agriculture, my own valuation of the agriculture I was teaching has subsequently fallen greatly. On moving with local people in Zambia, I found them to be so in the grip of the fear of

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evil (witchcraft) that my technically based agricultural training seemed to be entirely peripheral to the issues they were facing. I took that as God's telling me to focus more directly on Christian teaching and the work of the church, this being in my view at the cutting edge of the transformations going on in people's hearts.

From my arrival in Africa to date I have found myself on a fascinating exploratory journey. As a "thinking person," I came with many preconceptions — which have gradually been eroded away. My efforts at instigating development projects in my early days in Africa consistently failed, as development projects are wont to (see Clay and Schaffer 1984). I perceived what I then called a "self-destruct mechanism" that seemed to be built into every positive constructive venture that I initiated. The nature of this mechanism was to elude me for a long time.

In this essay much of my information comes from the Luo people in Western Kenya, amongst whom I live. Through reading, traveling, and listening to people, I believe that much of what I have found amongst them also applies much more widely. I have made much use of Mboya's 1997 book throughout. Mboya is a published source of many of the issues that are habitually discussed but less frequently written down by the Luo people.

The Struggle against Evil

As the years went by I gradually came to perceive some regularly recurring patterns in the speech and behaviour of my African hosts and colleagues. These patterns became evident in different ways:

- 1) While in Zambia as an agriculturist I had many opportunities to ask farmers why they did not produce more food. Patient listening revealed that they were limiting their productivity to accepted norms. In this part of Zambia there was a hungry time of year. He who has food at that time and does not share it is liable to be bewitched by jealous neighbours. There was no point in producing more than others.
- 2) Living with African people while also interacting with fellow missionaries of European origin enabled me to observe startling differences in the nature of informal conversation. Europeans take 'x' to be 'good,' and occupy themselves in devising the best ways of achieving it. 'x' could be a medical project, journey, school etc. The informal conversations of African people are not so oriented. Conversations instead easily turned to identifying evil and the means (usually ritual) to overcome it. This difference is colossal!
- 3) The behavior of our (African) students at Kima International School of Theology in Kenya is striking. The Principal up to 2002, Rev. Dr. Steve Rennick coming 'fresh' from America initially felt it would be good for him periodically to meet with the whole student body. He was amazed to find an almost total absence of positive constructive talk from these aspiring church ministers. Meetings were instead used for griping and voicing grievances. This American Principal stopped meeting with students (Rennick 2001).

Students themselves or the African faculty were sometimes responsible for organizing an activity for students on a Saturday evening. They planned games, quizzes, and fun. Almost invariably, however, left to their own choice the preferred activity was one of worship and prayers against evil.
- 4) I have been privileged while in Kenya to work with a lot of indigenous African-initiated churches and Pentecostal churches. The latter especially are said to be growing fast. While struggling to get by with English it was not always easy to hear

what was being said. As my knowledge of Kiswahili and Dholuo improved, I was struck by the consistency with which the theme of testimonies and sermons was the battle against evil! A valued preacher friend of mine assures me almost every time we meet that if I want to succeed as a preacher, I must use the analogy of warfare in what I say (Onyango 2002).

- 5) The above and other observations prompted me to engage in recorded participant observation research in 2000. Four days a week for five weeks I carried my notebook wherever I went. I noted the gist of what was discussed and enacted in 'normal life' and during a number of church services. Again and again and again the issue attended to was cleansing of evil. So much so that this appeared to be the whole hub and focus of life (Harries 2001).

More and more my observations pointed to a widespread and common place perception of evil forces dominating life. There is so much that I could add to the above list of five. The tendency of leaders, including church leaders, to label fellow leaders as evil. The widely known pre-occupation of African Christians with the casting out of demons or evil spirits. The persistence of rituals, such as animal sacrifice, that are designed to counteract evil forces. The way that funeral attendance seems to preclude all other activities and dominates peoples lives — funerals, of course, being a cleansing of the evil associated with death. The conception of evil in the parts of Africa with which I am familiar is clearly very real indeed!

Paul Mboya is perhaps the most widely accepted authority by the Luo people themselves on the traditional Luo way of life. I set about translating his main text '*Luo Kitgi gi Timbegi*' (The Luo, their Traditions and Customs) in 1996. I completed my English translation (unpublished) in 2001. This book was originally published in 1938, based on research by Paul Mboya, a Luo man amongst his own people at a time when the majority of the live population could clearly remember the days prior to the coming of the European. It has been republished many times, the most recent being 1997, and has since been widely available in bookshops in Luoland.

This account of about 60,000 words in length is described by Ogot as an encyclopedic source of information on Luo customs (Ogot 1999:186). Mboya himself does not claim to have covered everything in the life of the Luo (Mboya 1997:ii). He hoped that more books would be written. The tone of the book is strongly suggestive of there being a right way of doing things. "No nation can progress well with foreign customs alone if they discard their own traditions and counsels... the people must put their own laws and traditions that are good as foundations first. Then they can build the counsel and customs of foreigners onto this foundation" says Mboya with apparent deep conviction (page in my translation). Issues concerning death and cleansing from evil recur repeatedly throughout this book.

Mboya's emphasis became focused in his latter book with the bold title '*Richo ema Kelo Chira*' (1978) ('it is Sin that brings the Curse'). The very title carries a sense of urgency that is strongly reflected throughout the text. It is written to young people to warn them to 'look out' for the problems that will beset them if they do not follow their ancestral traditions. A detailed recording of the progress of the lineage of a chief (also called Mboya) in Paul Mboya's home area illustrates the tone of the book in that it takes up 18 of the total of 54 pages (Mboya 1978:36–54). It maps out the family tree from Mboya showing just how many people have died without leaving

descendants. Mboya warns of an impending crisis that will not be averted while sin (*richo*) continues. This crisis is depicted as being one of the death and destruction of family lines. The book is a call to young people to go back to their people's 'traditions' in order to avert the approaching evil.

The terms '*richo*' and '*chira*' that are much mentioned in Mboya's second book warrant close attention. *Richo* is widely used in place of the English 'sin,' but also to explain the badness of things and orientation to evil in general. For the Luo very often *richo* is that which breaks taboo (*kwer*) or their law (*chik*). *Chira* is given by Capen as "sickness caused by breaking a taboo" (Capen 1998:24) and is used to explain the state of someone who has fallen foul of harmful powers due to their failure to do what is right. Mboya uses the term to explain the problems, illness, calamity, death, and destruction that can beset family lines. For Mboya problems and death arise from the failure to keep taboos. In other words, the taboos should be followed so as to avert these evils.

Raringo (no date but almost certainly published in the 1980s or 1990s) supports a similar conclusion in his small booklet called *Chike Jaduong e Dalane* (the rules for a man in his homestead). This contains 331 rules on how to respond to situations in home-life in such a way as to avert calamity or death. In my speaking with a variety of Luo people I have discovered that these rules are known — they are a part of the Kenyan Luo 'oral tradition.' This booklet is set out as a manual to be referred to in the many eventualities of home life. The rules, all oriented to eradicating or minimizing the effects of evil powers, make little sense to anyone not deeply familiar with the Luo way of life.

Oryare (nd, published in the late 1990s) implicitly draws the same conclusion in his autobiographical booklet written in English. Oryare is not defending Luo traditions, but rather advocating that they be left in favour of Christianity. He considers the Luo in following their traditions to be 'dancing with devils' yet his book, that is available in bookshops in Kisumu and other parts of Luoland that I have visited, is almost totally *negative*. That is, it is written *against* Luo traditional practices, to be replaced by a presumed Pentecostal faith in Christ.¹ In other words, it is written against what he considers to be evil practices, with almost no attention given to what is to take their place.

There comes a point at which it is difficult to identify the difference between displacing evil and actually promoting good. Is life for some Luo people really only about countering evil? Mboya's 1997 text describes fishing methods. Fishing would seem to be a positive activity. But Mboya's description is full of detailed prescriptions on how to ensure ritual cleanness to prevent the encroachment of evil that would frustrate the fisherman's task. Preparations for fishing, making nets, and launching boats as described are complex and arduous processes requiring great ritual detail. Fishing is itself, in a sense, a struggle against evil — acquiring good food from a dangerous body of water that is feared almost as much as death itself. It is almost as if fish are caught 'by default' should all the evil things that prevent them from being caught be successfully averted (Mboya 1997:31–41).

Crop growing would seem to be a singularly positive activity. The success of cropping activities is however also only ensured by the keeping of numerous taboos. A closely specified order has to be followed in planting, harvesting, etc. according to

one's position in a family (Mboya 1997:66–67).² Remarkably, there is a myth amongst the Luo that even the necessity to cultivate by the strength of ones' own hands is only due to the rebelliousness of a newly married woman who refused to keep the taboo given her by her elders (Ogot 1989). Even the need to cultivate is due to evil, in this case of a newly married woman in a way somewhat reminiscent of Eve in the book of Genesis. It would appear that the attention of the people is constantly drawn towards the warding off of evil.

What Does It All Mean?

Mary Douglas' classic book *'Purity and Danger'* shows us that things that infringe the wholeness of a human body are considered 'dirty' (Douglas 1966:51). Hence finger nails, feces, spit, and hair are widely held as unclean. This being dirty also imbues those parts with special powers. Witches can take such components to prepare medicines to kill people. This is certainly as well known amongst the Luo as amongst other people (Mboya 1997:208).

Douglas then applies this same thinking to human society. She gives the Levitical laws as an example of setting boundaries around an orderly system (Douglas 1966:Chapter 3). Leviticus considers that bodily emissions render someone unclean, and unclean animals are those that do not fit into 'normal' categories, i.e. four-stomached and cloven hoofed. The latter causes pigs and camels to be considered 'unclean' (Leviticus 11:1–8).

The tendency for AICs to adopt and adapt such rules suggests that such thinking is not foreign to the Luo people. Amongst indigenous churches in the vicinity of my home, the *Nomiya* church considers that only circumcised men should be at the front in church. The *Luong Mogik* church sticks to Sabbath prohibitions even more strongly than the Seventh Day Adventists (SDA) church that they emerge from (Pudo 2002). Roho denominations claim to be able to see instantly if you hide a defilement like a cigarette in your sock on going to church (Omayo 2002). Questions of social uncleanness following a woman's period or sexual intercourse for men greatly troubles leaders of indigenous churches in Western Kenya (Kedogo 1999).

The requirement for purity described by Douglas seems to be a deep part of the lives of those people in Africa with whom I have been able to have close contact. The time at which it is particularly crucial to get things right for the people in my community is the time of death. A dead person becomes the focus of the people in the vicinity, who strive together to ensure that the spirit of the departed be content with how the body is buried, mourned for, and generally satisfied. Various sexual cleansing rituals are necessary after the late has departed and been buried (e.g. see Raringo nd:17).

As scientific theories suggest about light, so evil for the people who I mix with (and presumably other African people) is both 'wave and particle.' Elaborate rituals are conducted to pacify ghosts (*jochiende*). These generally have an identity, a particular ancestor whose life grievances were never satisfied or whose handling at death was inappropriate. In another sense evil is also like a shadow (*tipo*) that hangs over a person, family, or place causing ongoing calamity. There are times when more specifically territorial spirits like *juogi* and *sepe* — for the Luo typically lake spirits — are invoked

or held accountable for evil. All these things together are these days often given the label *Satan*, from the Hebrew word for Devil that has come to East Africa via English.

It should be clear at least that the fact that Satan is considered to be an *individual* source of evil in Western and/or Biblical lore does not mean that his identity is so restricted in East Africa. Here the word Satan covers many things such as witchcraft and evil powers in general (Omari 1993:90). This allies with my experience in Luoland, where witchcraft power and ancestral spirits are almost synonymous and rooted in the word *juok*.

Okorocho from West Africa tells us that "It is true that Igbo gods keeled over at the advance of the British gunboats, but their demise did not indicate a rout" (Okorocho 1987:279). This seems to apply to East as well as West Africa. Major spiritual battles rage in Luoland today. The association between cleanness of living and ritual functions, with health and prosperity runs very strong in people's psyche. It is a fallacy to think that one can understand what is happening in a society by only listening to the eloquent (in English) and young and healthy who may claim that 'all those things are gone.' Pressures to conform to one's community's notions of 'clean and unclean' are in reality enormous, and usually effective.

A widely discussed and greatly troubling issue is that of the inheritance/cleansing of widows. Until inherited, which involves the building of a new house and usually four days of co-habitation with a selected man, a woman in Luoland is considered to have *okola*. In my 8 years in Luoland, I have seen many women widowed. Many of these have said that because they are Christians they will not be inherited. All those whose cases I have followed have been inherited despite such resistance. A non-inherited widow having limited social contacts and being liable to be blamed for calamities that arise in the community will usually not stand up to the pressure.

There are various present day responses to such restrictive practices. Christians claim the power of Jesus to be greater than that of the ancestral spirits and to my observations are freed from the need to participate in certain practices. 'Modern' life brings a confused message of liberation, all too often closely followed up by meaninglessness, but it apparently brings some freedom from spiritual aggression to taboo breakers. The conservative camp is quick to blame the people's current problems on the speed with which they have ditched age old practices. The Kenyan legal machinery appears often vainly to try to bring order to an environment to which it barely fits. So the battles rage.

Assumed Guilt

'Guilty until proven innocent' seems to be the legal maxim people operate on in their day to day lives. This is a shock to discover for those accustomed to 'innocent until proven guilty' that operates in Western nations. In what sense is guilt then assumed?

This 'assumed guilt' seems to have a widespread effect on the African way of life. Years ago my colleagues in Zambia frequently explained to me that any African owning a car must be a liar or a thief. It is hard to imagine that someone could be sufficiently good as to deserve such 'foreign' wealth, so it is rather assumed that it was acquired through corrupt means. This means that the wealthy are particularly likely to be accused of evil. I am personally aware of a Bishop of a small group of churches who managed to curry favor with some Christians from Britain who agreed to buy

him a personal vehicle. The local version of events, that he bought the vehicle using money intended for distribution in the churches, has since often come to my hearing. This Bishop, as so many church leaders before him, has been branded a thief by those under him in a case in which I know he is innocent. Peoples' respect for this leader is severely diminished. 'Evil' is assumed.

The situation in present day Kenya is such that 'immoral' behavior pays dividends to the extent that the morally upright may even be mocked for his naivete, (I take 'moral' here as being that behaviour that follows the mores of ones' people, and not rationally derived ethical understanding). There are two parallel economies operating in Kenya, as elsewhere in Africa, being the so called 'formal' and 'informal' sectors. In the informal sector, which includes subsistence farming, craftsmanship, and small-scale trading, many people make a living but seldom much more. Large amounts of money circulate only in the formal economy. This is largely in the hands of people of foreign ethnicity. A local person wanting to draw from this economy requires good English and the ability to elbow his way into places. A chronic level of misunderstanding due amongst other things to cross-cultural miscommunication means that corruption is rife in this sector. The person who will benefit from it must fit to those corrupt ways, and then may suddenly become rich out of all proportion to his colleagues sweating in the informal arena. In this loose sense then, evil pays. It follows that he who has much wealth is assumed to have used evil means to get it.

This clearly puts Christian churches into a difficult predicament. Many foreign planted churches maintain links outside of Africa. Much of what they do thus becomes identified with the formal sector, with all the above implications of immorality and evil. When the church is so heavily involved with money as it often is in Africa, particularly because outsiders see it as a convenient conduit for their aid and projects, the identity of God and the devil easily become confused. The church, supposedly the harbinger of good, is often the means by which people come face to face with immorality arising from windfalls of money, televisions, scanty dress and long trousers for women, widespread use of the language of exploitation and corruption (English), advocating 'courting' of prospective marriage partners that is considered taboo in traditional Africa, and so on.

From wherever it has arisen, the concept of 'guilty until proven innocent' is extremely far-reaching in its social consequences. In short, no one can be trusted. It is not easy, perhaps often impossible, to prove one's innocence. So all are assumed to be guilty. The implications of this on business and other social organizations are profound!

It could be argued that it is the kind of trust sometimes found in Western nations that is unusual, and that it is not unusual on a global and historical scale for people not to trust one another (Fukuyama 1996). If this is the case, then unfortunately the West is not succeeding in spreading its ethic of trust to Africa!

Failure in business is widely attributed to incursions by evil entities. Hence I was struck some years ago on being asked to lay hands on and pray for a lathe used in the business of a member of a particular church. The business of the above in fact failed, as he explained to me some years later in 2001 (Otieno 2001). Otieno takes his failing in such worldly exploits as a calling to serve God, and is gifted in the pastoral field, although hindered by his having two wives. Such directing of people into his service

by the Spirit of God is reminiscent of the traditional African practice of pacifying possessing spirits by agreeing to be a medium for them to speak through (e.g. see Lan 1985:49 on Zimbabwe and Kirwen 1987:91 on the Kenyan Luo).

This brings us to the vexed question of the evil in possessing spirits and by implication the activities of the witchdoctor (Luo-*ajuoga*) who is typically guided by such (Kirwen 1987:91). Discussion with students at KIST has often revealed that the witchdoctor is widely considered by them to be a valuable person to have around, as he is responsible for doing away with evil, saving people from death, etc. Ironically the 'evil' is needed (in so far as people also recognize the social damage done by witchdoctors) in order to bring good. In my own experience, Pentecostal churches with strong links to the West are inclined to cast out such 'evil' possessing spirits. Truly indigenous churches, such as those of *Roho* and *Legio Maria*, interpret spirits as being God's Holy Spirit and encourage the incumbents to prophecy to the church (see also Ndiokwere 1981:90).

In this way indigenous churches have often appropriated the role previously held by the witchdoctor. Their being active in healing and preventing death is well known (Wambugu 1995:31). Preventing death has been the preoccupation of Luo magical practitioners in years gone by, such that according to their tradition the Luo people know that they should not die (Obondi 2000). The pastor of my local *Luong Mogik* (indigenous) church concedes that all men are destined to die, but sets out to prevent "unnecessary death" (Pudo 2002). This is death caused by evil forces that can be turned away through prayer and a variety of rituals such as throwing water over someone, hopping around them, hitting them with a Bible, finding herbs for them as given by God in a dream and so on.

Aging to the Luo is not a 'natural' process as we understand such in Western nations. The infirmity associated with advancing years is caused by an accumulation of evil attacks, leading to a gradual decline of the body's well being. The upright person is able, by closely following the right as against the wrong way of life, to avoid the circumstances where evil attacks are many and strong. Careful communication with the divine realm helps to counter specific attacks.

Again and again we have seen wealth and progress arising from people's success in countering evil forces. What I have perceived increasingly is that being wealthy and even eternal life are the default position that would be everyone's if were not for recalcitrant spiritual forces of evil.

This goes a long way to explaining the power of the prosperity Gospel in Africa. The products of the 'civilization' that the white man has brought to Africa have been identified as those things that every person should have but for his inadequacy at countering evil. The past ideal of much land and many cattle, children and wives has been replaced in many people's minds by a new one of brick houses, vehicles, televisions, phones, and graduation robes that would all be theirs *if only* people were able sufficiently to purify themselves and keep evil forces at bay! This is, to them, evidently what has happened elsewhere in the world or the wealthy Christians from America wouldn't always be such staunch advocates of prayer. Complex traditional rituals are temporarily put aside as the young African Pentecostal immerses himself in his attempt to imitate the West (in language, dress, even social behavior) and follow

cleansing ceremonies as interpreted from the Bible by Pentecostal Christianity, such as fasting, all night prayers, emphatic confession, and repentance for sins, etc.

The Anglican churches in my vicinity are another striking illustration of people's tendency to concentrate on fighting evil forces. The Anglican church is divided into the saved or redeemed (dholuo *jomowar* or *jomokwo*) and the unsaved. A retired Anglican minister given opportunity to speak at a wedding at Ulumbi (St. John's) Anglican Church on 6.07.02 said "*ji mangeny wacho gin jomowar, to kanisani ok oger gi jomowar*" (Many people say they are saved, but this church was not built by the saved) (Odera 2002). The 'saved' these days resemble an indigenous church within the Anglican church. They favor meetings that the Luo call *lalruok* (fellowships) at which people are required to confess their sins (Olanga 2000). These fellowships are often beyond the control of the official hierarchy of the church who are themselves likely to be considered as *gak* (i.e. unclean or in some way corrupted by evil and in need of cleansing Obondi 2002).³ This strong and, according to the church hierarchy, somewhat subversive movement within the Anglican church is illustrative of a tendency within the Christian church in Africa as a whole to a domination by an active struggle against evil.

The African has finally viewed the actual source of prosperity that he has so desired. Although not easy for him to understand, it now appears that there is 'good' in the universe. The teaching brought by the white man confirms that this good comes from God. It appears to the African that this god is indeed the white man himself. Hence I have often heard people say that "*Jarachar en Nyasaye mar ariyo*" (the white man is the second God, or more literally 'is God number two').

There is a lot of evidence that this is the conclusion being drawn. The acclaim of the white by African children is widespread; in Kenya, Tanzania, and Zambia it is much the same — where the white person walks throngs of children are likely to gather shouting '*Mzungu*'.⁴ In casual conversation people are enthralled by the white man's achievements, the greatest of all to their minds perhaps being his construction of airplanes.⁵ This acclaim of the divinity of whites has widespread repercussions for the life of my neighbors and colleagues.

'Worship' of whites is especially evident in Christian churches. Prominently displayed pictures of a white Jesus accentuate such. Those church leaders that are widely respected are those who have traveled in the white-man's lands. Seminars, conferences, and teaching sessions are rendered respectable by the presence of whites. Photographs of Africans with whites are put on prominent display in people's houses. A calendar produced by one particular African church for its members is resplendent with pictures of their leaders sharing close fellowship with whites.⁶ The white man's language, English, is coveted as the language of power. Compared with the white man, the African often sees his own standards falling far short.

While few would dispute that whites are held in great awe in Africa, some will deny my above association of whites with 'gods' and 'worship.' I suggest that such a debate may be academic. Given the African traditional conception of good and evil plus his wholistic world view, it is hard to escape the conclusion that whites are seen as superhuman (where human refers to his fellow Africans) which seems to come into the English category of divine. In the old days, Mboya tells us people used to say *Nyasache ober* (his God is good) (1997:17). Perhaps people did not know good apart

from God. They only knew that if they could succeed in defeating evil then one day good would come via God. 'Good' has come, albeit in a confusing array of styles and colors, so those who brought it must be god(s).

This coincidence of identities gives present day missionaries an extremely difficult task that they rarely want to engage. That is to point to a God who is other than themselves, and thus avoid the strong undertones of idolatry that otherwise emerge. This is extremely hard to achieve in practice. In a place where a holistic worldview holds sway, as in Africa, God is the source of good. At the same time the white person claims to be the source of good. He will bring 'good,' and sometimes claim that it is not God's but *his own* or that of his people. He will confirm people's suspicions as to his divinity through being able to hold his wealth to himself even in the face of great need amongst the people around him.⁷

This topic is a large and a complex one. It would hardly be true to claim that white men have brought only good to Africa. Many problems come in their wake, such as the increasing poverty, rampant death, disease, and over population affecting many parts of Western Kenya today. Some would say it appears that not everything has as yet been got right. That is, that in their efforts at imitating the ways of the whites they are clearly still making (ritual) errors. Others will want to throw out the ways of the new 'gods' and go back to their old ways.

Why Ignorance Has Ruled for so Long

If this account is right and in my various contacts' ways of thinking, good is the absence of evil, why does this have to be announced afresh, and why is it not already widely known?

The expectation that the African is capable and aware of 'good' is clearly widespread. Much 'development aid' and financial support is regularly sent to Africa to enable people to use these resources in order to build and develop their nation and economy. Such plans frequently fail to work as envisioned. Resources are diverted from the supposed achievement of good (as ascertained by the Western donor) into uses that are countering evil, as valued by the African. Examples of the latter may include money invested in funerals, building of houses (in Luoland often built for ritual purposes as well as with use of the house in mind), and other investments that demonstrate ones 'purity' and confirm ones victory over evil, such as motor vehicles, mobile phones, etc. Some resources, of course, go into escape from evil by means such as moving overseas or studying foreign things to link in with the international sector. What is 'good' is foreign, whereas indigenous uses of money and resources are against evil.

English words that presumably once referred to ritual levels of cleanness have gone in at least two directions. Many, such as clean, pure and dirty, or infectious have been appropriated by the medical profession and are nowadays widely presumed to refer to the presence or absence of micro-organisms (see Harries 2000:488). Others, such as 'holy', 'sanctified' and 'repentance' have become specialist terms used by the 'religious' fraternity, often with specific meanings derived from Christian theology. The man on the street in the West may talk of feeling good, or refreshed, or confident, but will not say he is holy. The Swahili equivalent (*mtakatifu*) and also the Luo (*maler*)

are on the other hand common terms (or in the case of Swahili at least roots of terms) that are used frequently in the course of normal life.

Steiner (1998:375) sets the rhetorical question "Are there 'untranslatabilities' caused by the remoteness from each other of...cultural contexts?" My answer to him is — yes there are! Steiner looks at numerous translations made from Chinese to Western languages. He finds they are remarkably similar, and concludes that "Each translation in turn appears to corroborate what is fundamentally a 'Western invention of China' " (Steiner 1998:378). Is the same thing happening for Africa?

If there are things that are hard for a Westerner to perceive about Africa, with all the sophistication in research techniques he has at hand, is the reverse not even more likely to be the case? The African is taught English in most cases with only a minimal and almost certainly distorted view of the culture from which it arises. Such a language taught in a kind of cultural vacuum "is like a thin wash, marvelously fluid, but without adequate base" (Steiner 1998:494). This is hardly a medium through which to communicate the intricate details required to imbue the worldview that allows the building of a positive-good, as practiced in the West. Instead, the African person can learn the language and recall the words associated with financial management, economic growth, technical advancement, etc., without ever grasping the use intended by the originators of such terms. Instead the new concepts will be considered to have a pseudo-magical force, will be discarded as irrelevant, or reinterpreted into a familiar framework. (In the same way as a Western reader has a number of options as to how to comprehend Levitical laws such as those considering certain animals as unclean to eat (Leviticus 11:1–7) or those considering a woman unclean after giving birth (Leviticus 12:1–4). Westerners often either stand in ignorance but awe of some Levitical laws, ignore these laws as irrelevant, or re-interpret them in ways that make sense to their current understanding, such as in terms of the need for hygiene).

Therefore carefully put together English instructions intended to lift the African out of his 'superstitious fear of evil forces,' are so distorted in the process of communication that they simply become a part of the same original African worldview. 'Western activities' going on in Africa could be compared to (the way a Westerner might understand) rituals conducted repeatedly by a priest in a temple as long as they are effective in bringing him wealth and possessions. Because the purpose of the knowledge held by teachers, doctors, lawyers, etc. is not *deeply* appropriated, changes in circumstances defeat the 'professional.' Things grind to a halt when the state of affairs is transformed.

'Twisted communication lines' continue to be the order of the day. Massive cultural exchange, as is being attempted to Africa, does not work as is all too often expected in the West. Effective communication with someone is only possible in so far as one understands his way of life. This is learned by living with him. Such proximal-living between Westerners and Africans is rare, so the African is left trying to learn from someone who is distant.

My colleagues in Kenya and Zambia are left seeing good occurring by default in the absence of evil. Its positive manifestations are brought by white men, standing in the place of God. The people's preoccupation is countering spiritual sources of evil and attracting as much of the good that whites bring as they can.

Conclusion

Life in parts of Africa has been found in this essay to be a constant struggle against evil forces. 'Good' is the default position achieved if these evil detractors are successfully averted. The belief that good comes from God has been strengthened and supported by the coming of the Gospel to Africa. Good was at one time defined in terms of number of cows, wives, and children that a man had. It is these days increasingly perceived as the possession of Western goods and a Western lifestyle. Hence the strength of the prosperity Gospel and the frustration of the African man that prompts him to pray all the more vigorously should he fail to prosper in this way.

The ability of European people to acquire and even 'be' good is sufficiently startling to many African people for the white person to be considered to be a god. Such confusion of the human and divine is all too often naively ignored or incredulously misunderstood by the West, yet its ramifications are many and widespread. An embryonic theology arises out of the African worldview regardless of whether or not the bringers of what is good claim a divine origin for their products. Westerner's communications with people that supposedly ignore good and evil powers are loaded with divine connotations on their appropriation. Secular language does not exist amongst the people I have lived and worked with on the African continent over the last 15 years. The failure of many missionaries to separate their own identity from that of the divine himself by claiming to be or acting as if they are good has been a root cause of the idolatry-of-the-West that continues to encumber Africa.

The perception of 'good' as the default position that is prevented by evil in the form of bewitchment and spirits is a key to unlocking the African worldview. It is implicitly assumed in the teaching of many African churches. Theologians who understand this and can communicate the Gospel through this worldview are desperately needed.

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Thanks to Stan Nussbaum for his helpful advice that has helped me to edit the above article.

Notes

1. Oryare seems to rather naively assume that if only people would pray, life's complexities would cease, and as in much African theological thinking, people would become wealthy as if 'by default.'

2. This rule at least continues to be widely known and discussed, even if not universally followed by the Luo.

3. According to Obondi in 2002, the formal church leaders cannot participate in these *lalruok* meetings because it is inappropriate and would result in an inordinate amount of gossip should the church hierarchy have to 'tell all' where their members are present.

4. I understand that this term is used in praise and awe of a white man.

5. I have noticed this mentioned as the pinnacle of the white man's achievements by a number of people in conversation.

6. I saw such a calendar produced by the Voice of Salvation and Healing church in a pastor's home in rural Luoland in June 2002.

7. In 'traditional' Africa claims to personal ownership were limited. Land, for example, was never someone's own, but belonged to the ancestors or to a man's clan. Food was there to be shared with the whole extended family. The use of tools, chairs, etc. was either restricted by laws given by the ancestors (Dholuo *chike*), or they were available widely to the whole community. Good things that come from God, like animals hunted, and large amounts of wealth, were to be distributed. Hence on coming to power in Kenya in 1963 Jomo Kenyatta said "*Nimeshika ng'ombe kichwa. Kazi yako, kamua*" (this is Kiswahili for 'I am holding a cow by its head. Your job is to milk it) (Kenyatta 1963). The cow refers to the wealth left to Kenya by the withdrawing British colonial powers. In Africa he who fails to make wealth available to the community acts contrary to accepted norms. One of the ground-rules of Western economics is contrarily the holding of finance to enable the building up of productive capital.



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