

# Power and Ignorance on the Mission Field or "the Hazards of Feeding Crowds"

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Crowds followed Jesus for bread in John Chapter 6 only to leave him again when he revealed the true spiritual nature of his mission. Many did not understand his mission.

## Do we today?

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## Summary

*Working so as to remain close to the people is the strategy recommended for missionaries and aid / development workers in Africa in this paper. Failure to do so results in ignorance of the effects of ones activities. The outcome of projects and interventions may be negative while the person doing the implementing remains oblivious.*

*There are many barriers to effective proximity to African people by 'Europeans'. These are economic and cultural. They result in ongoing inter-racial suspicion. Radical measures are needed to enable profound relationship and thereby effective mutual understanding. Such measures are suggested in this paper. They include the use of local as against European languages, adjusting to local ways of operating, aiming to teach by example, and being slow to condemn what is not fully understood. Perhaps the most controversial of the suggestions are the need for a 'dual-ministry' and for some 'Europeans' on the African Continent to operate with absolutely minimal funds so as to be able to set a relevant example to the indigenous people.*

*The use of English, giving of gifts, motivation by guilt, depending on short-term visits and orientation to "success" may not be the best way forward in working on the African Continent. Effective ministry and lasting positive change only come through the efforts of those who are prepared to identify very closely with those they are serving.*

## Introduction \*

1) How Power Propagates Ignorance \*

A. The Power of Language Cripples the Outsider \*

B. The Power of Gifts Darkens (the Europeans Vision) \*

C. The Power of Guilt Insulates the Outsider \*

D. The Power of Travel Gives False Visions of Grandeur \*

E. The Power of Success Stupifies \*

2. Rules of Thumb for Understanding People in a Foreign Land \*

- A. *Use Local 'Languages' \**
- B. *Do not use Money \**
- C. *A Dual Identity \**
- D. *Adjust to Local ways of Operating \**
- E. *Be slow to Condemn Anything \**
- F. *Teaching by Example \**

## **Conclusion – Allowing the Grace of God to be Heard \***

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## **Introduction**

Accelerated technological and sociological changes in the lives of Euro-American peoples are making it harder and harder for them to adjust to living in and understanding other parts of the world. This is a great handicap to the spread of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. This essay attempts to provide very practical guidelines to those who would like to live closely with a foreign people in order to better understand them and thus reach them more effectively with the Gospel.

The need for Europeans to understand people in cultures around the Globe is vital. Ignorance combined with the power that the Western economy brings is dangerous!

Some may deny the existence of such 'ignorance'. There must be more books in the USA than in any other country of the world. Educational standards in Western nations are rising, and the rest of the world is following this example. Surely ignorance has been dispelled?

I believe that there are things that books cannot teach, and that while functioning in only one language and culture people cannot learn. This is the ignorance that I am referring to. Its danger is frequently demonstrated around the world in the meeting of people from different cultures. People frequently not only disagree, but fail to understand one another. Tension, strife, false accusations, mistrust and even fighting may be occasioned.

Few would question that the Western economy is powerful. I suggest that it is this power that in many ways propagates ignorance. The first part of this essay looks at how this happens. The second part is a suggestion as to the strategies that can avoid it.

Because my experience is in Africa, I will refer to African people and the African context. I imagine that there will also be great applicability in other parts of the world. I frankly acknowledge the danger of over-generalising in my references to 'Africans'! I can only speak from the experience that I have, and concede that there is a great deal I do not know and have not experienced.

It was 13 years ago that I committed myself to serving God in Africa. Since then I have spent 10 years on the Continent. In almost all that time I have lived as part of a rural African household sharing in much of the peoples' lives. For the first three years I lived in rural Zambia and learned Kikaonde. For the latter 7 years I have been living in Western Kenya in a Luo village and have learned Kiswahili and Dholuo.

I have struggled to find an appropriate term to use to refer to the outsider who enters Africa. I have decided to use the term 'European' referring in the general sense to a Westerner who

comes to do his thing on this Continent. In English I have referred to people in this essay as male. There is no difference between 'he' and 'she' in African languages, and the reader should understand that I do not thereby intend to exclude the female gender.

I have not distinguished between development or aid workers and missionaries in this article. This is partly for the sake of simplicity, and partly because from the African point of view these have many similarities. The confusion is heightened as many 'missionaries' are heavily engaged in activities that are foundationally secular, such as medicine, provision of water, school teaching etc. There is also much evidence to suggest that secularism has deep roots in Christianity.

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## **1) How Power Propagates Ignorance**

Power is not neutral. The power a person has rather effects the way he interacts with others. This effect may be negative.

### **A. The Power of Language Cripples the Outsider**

European languages, especially English, are so widely spread around the globe that many Europeans see no need to go beyond it. This is a tragic error in terms of learning to understand the situation and people one works amongst. I suggest that it is impossible for a foreign language to accurately describe a native reality.

I need to explain the way that I am using 'foreign'. I refer to a foreign language as that language that is used in one culture whereas it has grown in another. For example English could in some respects be considered to be indigenous to East Africa. The indigenous use of and understanding of English is however different from that found in Europe or America. Therefore the English of a visitor is a foreign language, whereas the English of a resident may be indigenous. A European who wants to understand what is going on in East Africa would need to learn East African English. This is likely to be more difficult than learning KiSwahili or a language of local origin because he will continue to confuse this new English with his original English.

He who continues to use a foreign language presupposes an enormous amount. He presupposes that the people he is meeting are the same as those he knows in his home culture. Trying to teach such people in a helpful way what is meaningful to their own culture is like playing tennis while only able to see the shadow of the ball. Again it is like someone joining a basketball team yet consistently playing by the rules of football (soccer). Just as terms like 'penalty', 'offside', 'half-back' and a 'pass' are meaningless until one grasps what is going on in a game of football. Such is the sound of Europeans' words to the natives of a distant land.

### **B. The Power of Gifts Darkens (the Europeans Vision)**

A cow given in exchange for a wife in a traditional African community is loaded with diverse meanings and symbolic significance. The African does not just 'buy' a wife. Yet the European who is liable to accuse him of this, is meanwhile unceasingly pre-occupied in buying disciples and followers.

Living hand to mouth with food frequently being short in supply is normal in much of Africa. There are few indigenous means of rising beyond this level.

The desire for 'more' is implanted in generation after generation of young people. What they

learn about in school, can only be acquired through a link outside the continent. Links may come in many shapes and sizes. Charities, NGOs, government organisations, relief agencies, or the church may provide the link. Whatever links to 'prosperity' someone finds, he will follow and milk to his own advantage. Only a fool bites the hand that feeds him. It is 'surprising' how often one finds that the size of a European's following is directly proportional to the capacity of his budget.

If there is any risk that exposing him to the truth may result in withdrawal of funds, then it is better to say nothing to a donor. Having money that buys people propagates someone's ignorance. The acid test is whether people still 'follow' when there is no apparent material or social advantage to be gained. This test is rarely applied. (See John 6:25-71). The results may be shocking.

### **C. The Power of Guilt Insulates the Outsider**

Europeans travelling to Africa are usually motivated, at least in part, by their desire to alleviate poverty to help the poor. African people know this.

It is easy to get tired of constant begging in many parts of Sub-Saharan Africa. Yet the local people are hardly to blame. They are only following what the Europeans seem to be telling them. "You are poor. We are here to help you out of your poverty" is the implicit or often explicit message. The question is, which people are going to be helped? It is rare for someone to be able to 'help' them all. Hence the careful thought and constant manoeuvring on the part of native people to get in the line of those who will benefit.

Agencies working in Africa frequently publicise stories of how people have been wonderfully helped. This propagates a misleading romanticism. We have already seen how this kind of 'helping' results in the occluding of truth. It also results in fatigue. It is indeed a rare person who lives up to the standards perhaps attained by Mother Theresa of Calcutta and continues to be kind, generous, welcoming and open to every beggar who ever comes. Much more common is a fatigue, over always being wanted for one's money, and numerous people being ready to deceive in order to get hold of it.

The very people one came to serve become ones enemies! Constant harassment is wearing. People not only want the European's money, but also the use of his vehicle. Hours of time are consumed. A never-ending stream of people may come to the door, from early morning to late at night. Normal relationship has become impossible. The barriers go up. The watchman is told not to let people in. A high fence is erected. Guard dogs are employed. Europeans are happy to run projects in favour of the people, but on their terms!

Yet Europeans have brought this upon themselves. Western cultural ethics talk of equality. Europeans believe strongly in this. Yet reaching the African continent achieving this becomes an impossible task. The aim is to 'help' as many people as possible with as much money as possible. This is a way of cutting yourself off from the people. The explicit message given is that the Europeans business is money. Local people are simply responding to that. Then they are criticised and condemned for learning what they are being taught!

However objectively desirable it may or may not be, trying to redress the world's inequalities through handouts is a disaster for those trying to build relationships with the people. A European comes to have a few natural friends except typically Bishops and leaders who know English and how to beg in such a way as not to upset the donor. In his house surrounded by a high fence, in a vehicle aloof from the crowds, the people have become his enemy!

The materialism and the conscience of the West have become a trap from which a Westerner

in Africa rarely emerges. Always helping, always giving (materially), the hole gets deeper and deeper.

This situation not only affects the 'guilty', but is carried over to all others of his race. The association between skin colour and this kind of behaviour is strong. All people of European stock are blighted with this reputation. The building of true relationships between Europeans and African people is rendered extremely difficult.

The first rule for getting out of the trap is for the European not to feel guilty about the enormous disparity in wealth he lives with. The second is to get as close to the way of life of his hosts as possible. The visitor needs to adjust, and not the natives. The third is to learn how love and sharing functions in the society the visitor is living in, and to stop trying to use Western money to do it.

#### **D. The Power of Travel Gives False Visions of Grandeur**

The combination of the European's thinking that because he is richer than others, he is cleverer than others, and his ability to use those riches to visit all over the world, is dangerous. Time upon time short-term visitors (for as little as 1 or 2 weeks) come to Africa to preach, teach, help and share. They find a welcoming people and willing audience, then go back to their homeland now as an 'expert' because 'he was there'.

Little do these people realise that parts of Africa are very used to receiving visitors and very good at pleasing them. This is good practice for those Africans who want to get 'rich quick', as money soon starts to fall out of the visitors pocket. Welcoming a visitor for one to two weeks can set someone up to be funded generously for life!

Back in the West, these short-term visitors are the ones with the voice. The man who knows what is going on cannot communicate with the West because he is stuck in Africa. Even when he gets 'home,' he no longer knows how to relate to his own people as he once did. The short-term visitor may even condemn him for his lack of love to the people. He may be tossed and turned by the whim of his supporters at home...

The power-of-money means that the short-term visitor cum donor never finds out the truth. He is never faced with the realisations or frustrations of the person on the ground. Yet he is the 'expert' on Africa as far as his own people are concerned. The power that enables a 2 week visit over thousands of miles and enormous cultural chasms, is not always helpful.

#### **E. The Power of Success Stupifies**

There is a branch of popular wisdom that informs Europeans interested in working in Africa that they need to 'ask' the African people what they want, and then attempt to supply it. This is considered the best way forward. Europeans seem to be there to win popularity.

This policy combined with the use of many funds can indeed be a major ego-boost. The European rides high on a philanthropic wave.

In normal life we have to deal with rejection. Conviction that withstands rejection is impressive. Rejection first has to be rendered possible by weakness. The final outcome is a strong testimony, and the ability to learn.

Rejection forces great feats of learning. Hence it is one of the most severe means of disciplining children. Businesses use it to determine their product range. Fear of it is what keeps people in a community listening to each other.

A project that is heavily funded from overseas will never suffer 'rejection' in a poor country

where many people are hungry. Hence learning avenues are not opened up, the testimony will never be strong and the project will in due course simply die.

## **2. Rules of Thumb for Understanding People in a Foreign Land**

So what then should be done? Here are some suggestions for a European on how to relate so as to build relationships and give a genuine and long lasting 'help' to the African people.

### **A. Use Local 'Languages'**

The practice of accepting visitors as if they are angels is widespread in many parts of Africa, and is Biblical (Hebrews 13:2). A visitor asked to teach or preach should perhaps take that opportunity. But let him not deceive himself into believing that what he is saying is relevant, helpful or understood.

Communication is no ancillary issue to the outsider who intends to work with people. Neither is it only about the spoken word. It rather encompasses all words and behaviour in any public place or when in contact with locals. Where a man sits relative to his wife in a room is important. How one responds to a visitor at ones' door. How one responds to an acquaintance met on the road. The way of introducing oneself in church. Household tasks to engage in or not engage in. Even the time of eating meals and the location of the eaters is important. (It is very widely accepted practice in Africa for men and older boys to eat separately from women and children.)

Language itself can be used or abused. Women (in Luoland in Western Kenya) are rarely referred to by name, but much more often by the name of their place of birth or the name of their oldest child. Christians may have certain ways of greeting.

Meanings of words must be learned by listening to them in use and not only from dictionaries and language books. The art of listening is the foundation stone for the skill of speaking.

As a rule of thumb an outsider should not take (or be given) a responsible position in a community until he has sufficient fluency to communicate in the home language of that community.

### **B. Do not use Money**

#### **I. Hazards of Money**

The multitudinous variety of 'projects' set up by Europeans in many corners of Sub Saharan Africa almost invariably suffer from the same glaring blunder. They need money.

It is ironical how frequently investments are made with the stated aim of doing away with the need for outside investment. Projects that are funded supposedly to teach self-sufficiency implicitly show that foreign money is the first necessary requirement for this. If a local person is genuinely to be able to imitate what Europeans do then he must use only local resources.

Amongst these 'resources' I would include local ways of thinking. A project dependent on local 'inputs', that needs a foreign mindset, is as liable to collapse as one dependent on foreign materials.

This can be worked out as follows:

- a. Our Western culture tells us to feel guilty if we have plenty but live in the midst of poverty. We must either overcome this guilt or adjust to the peoples' way of living.

Creating chaos in the surrounding community by an over-ripe propensity to give due to a guilt feeling is not in the long term helpful to anyone.

b. A European 'should' depend for his livelihood on those whom he is reaching (Luke 10:7). If this cannot be achieved in totality then he should get as close to it as he can. If he must use foreign funds to feed and keep himself, then he should keep them to himself. If he must live a foreign lifestyle that is different to that of the people, then let this be something for which he feels shame and apologises for, and not something which he makes out to people as being superior to theirs!

c. He needs to aim for his projects to fail. In the parts of Africa I am familiar with, this is almost inevitable. There are many reasons for this. Local people understand those who come from the USA or Europe as moneybags. It is not easy to convince them to the contrary. The local peoples' planning will assume the influx of large amounts of money. The project, designed in co-operation with the people, will thus invariably fail if funds don't come. (It will also fail if the funds do come, because the objective of the project is to eat of the money, not to enable it to fulfil the objectives set by a European in their way of thinking). Such failure should not be the cause for the slightest disappointment or discouragement on the part of the European.

d. Beware the vicissitudes of language. If a project designer makes a lot of use of a term like 'self-sustaining', then local people will usually pick this up and do the same. This can be very befuddling of the brain. The outsider may come to think that people have really taken his vision to heart, only to be the more disappointed later when expected results do not manifest. 'Self-sustaining' is after all only a succession of sounds uttered by the lips that will acquire a particular set of meanings in a particular circumstance and environment. It will not have the same meaning in the local community as it has to the outsider. In fact the meaning may be very different indeed.

Sometimes of necessity money can be used. The money we have should however not dictate our policy of working with the people. Donors should not make us jump or pull our strings.

## **II. Stick to a Lowly Occupation**

It is widely supposed in African circles that church leaders are very interested in having power and making money. Europeans give this example by being wealthy and usually parking themselves on top of whatever hierarchy they happen to find on their arrival in Africa.

Europeans in Africa tend to work with community leaders, be they secular or religious (Bishops etc.). This is in part because in an environment where political power is important, and is often acquired through finance, it is important for local leaders to pay attention to any new players in the community who bring money to spend. Their aim is to ensure that the newcomer as far as possible uses his money in ways in tune with their particular political interest. Political expediency thus forces these local leaders to cease to attend to the people whom they should be serving and instead focus their attention onto new outsiders. Is this helpful?

Local elders and family heads carry a lot of authority in many African communities. There are reasons for this. People are suspicious of the motives of others that desire power over them. This tendency to the empowerment of clan and family heads extends to the church. It means that churches easily split into 'family units' over issues that 'ought' to be resolved.

This sad circumstance could be helped if the European (as a role model for the church) could demonstrate how to accept authority even from fallen human beings. His being able to

subordinate himself to the authority of others (sometimes made especially hard by his being of a different culture) is a vital part of his being able to pass the same skill to others. This can of course only happen if the outsider has either relinquished the control of the purse strings or anyway has little or no money.

This is a difficult role to adopt by a European if he considers himself to be superior and needing to correct and admonish others. In Africa this is usually over issues of sexual immorality (especially polygamy), corruption and abuse of funds, syncretism etc. The European who is serious in his desire to function effectively in a community needs to disown the power that his foreignness and/or money brings and begin to tackle issues of right and wrong carefully and diplomatically from the inside like everybody else!

The desperate need for this in Africa is glaringly evidenced by the failure of the vast majority of Europeans to function in a way that is genuinely under the authority of an African church leader.

### **C. A Dual Identity**

I propose that much that is in the culture of a European easily becomes more of a hindrance than a help to the spread of the Gospel.

This is contrary to accepted wisdom. These days theological colleges function in English, promote the use of computers, give classes in mathematics, and have courses accredited through links to the USA by the internet. Europeans drive enormous vehicles back and forth, also typically operate in their mother tongue and spend more time on their computer than either with their Bible, in prayer, or with the people they are 'reaching'. The African people pick up a confused version of the Prosperity Gospel.

History has shown that Europeans cannot do away with these trappings. As Western culture strides onwards in leaps and bounds new workers become more and more distant from the African way of life. Drastic action is required to rescue the church in Africa from this corrupting influence.

There is a solution. It is not perfect, but given the current situation is a lot better than continuing to do nothing about these dilemmas. That is what I am here calling the 'dual identity'. Let a 'modern' European keep his gadgets and material wealth if he so desperately needs them. But let him not confuse these with his ministry to the African people.

Instead a European must have two homes – his African home and his Euro-American home. His wife, children, television, car, computer electricity supply, running water and air conditioning stay in the latter. His *ugali (fufu)*, bicycle, Bible, vernacular dictionaries and warm African hospitality be in the former. For three days per week he is allowed to be his Euro-American self, keep in touch with his friends, and look after his family. For four days a week (which need to include Sunday) he is 'at work', only to be contacted in a dire emergency and living and sharing with the people.

It may be objected that a Christian shouldn't have a 'dual ministry'. It appears dishonest. In the ideal world I would agree. But we do not live in the ideal world. Europeans are making a mess out of Africa. Desperate measures are required to overcome a horrific problem.

People may complain that they are no longer benefiting from the 'spin-offs' of having a European amongst them. The European concerned must be ready to apologise for his culture.

The European may find that his relationships with people change radically, as friendship now



no-longer means benefiting from riding around in a vehicle, learning English, using a computer, or even trips to the West where the money comes from. He may find that church Bishops are no longer very interested in his friendships, which will instead be with 'normal' local people. He may even find that when he goes to visit a church he is not given the seat of honour or asked to preach, but left to sit with the Congregation.

***The playing field has been levelled. Now let him play his best!***

## **D. Adjust to Local ways of Operating**

Parts of the communication and functioning patterns of African communities are extremely difficult for Europeans to follow. For example:

1. Lack of attention to timekeeping and peoples' orientation to events over time.
2. Deeply held magical beliefs that put being of the right attitude towards a certain goal as more important than action towards it.
3. The tendency to function, particularly in important religious events, over long periods of time including well into or right through the night.
4. Peoples' orientation to death and funerals.

Neither of these are easy for Europeans to accept, but it is only in so far as one can follow them that one can draw closer and closer to a people.

## **E. Be slow to Condemn Anything**

A European's pre-occupation with his own understanding of what is right and wrong can quickly set him apart from the people. I have discussed this in more detail in (Ref. article to be published in Missionalia). I have there suggested that much of the ethics of European peoples is based on the thinking of many philosophers down the ages, especially the ancient Greek thinkers. This means that it is not universal. Other people around the world have very different ways of distinguishing right and wrong.

It is very easy and appears very logical for Europeans to condemn certain things that they see on the basis of their ethics and their understanding of cause and effect. For example a child with malaria who is treated by incision to remove a foreign object from its body. 'Wasting' of vast amounts of money on funerals when children do not have sufficient funds to pay their school fees. Peoples' failure to boil water.

Are the African people stupid? That conclusion is easily drawn. I refuse to draw it, and I suggest that people seriously interested in working with Africans follow suit. It is the European who is ignorant and presumptuous to think that all people around the world should be the same as he. If he begins to condemn, then the local people will probably not throw him out because they want his money, but they will continue to do what they do secretly. Is this helpful?

## **F. Teaching by Example**

It is widely accepted that the most important teaching in life does not happen in the classroom, but in how we live our lives as an example for others to imitate.

The 'example' given by Europeans to Africans is a horrific one! It is often extremely foreign in its presuppositions and its out working. It consumes vast amounts of money, which local people do not have. If example is indeed an important part of teaching then this is why European based education is these days making such a mess of Africa.

People are following the European educational system. This is not because it makes sense to them or because it is valued for what it is. It is because it enables African people to latch into the international world that they see around them. It may not make sense but it makes money.

It is often said that the Christian church rides on the back of colonial influence. The church is like a stepping stone to wealth and secularism that is followed by millions in the search for material prosperity. The example set by the church can make people foreigners to their own culture.

It is much more difficult for a foreigner to draw a following in a way that makes sense to the people, for the simple fact that he does not understand them. It is much easier to go and buy a following using the benefits of Western prosperity. Yet even one disciple who can continue to speak meaningfully to his own culture may have more longer term impact than thousands who live in a cultural no-mans-land.

Teaching effectively by example means sharing in the peoples' cultural environment.

## **Conclusion – Allowing the Grace of God to be Heard**

A constant pre-occupation with money and what it buys by Europeans living and working in Africa, is like the disturbing noise of a competing channel on a radio. The Word of God ceases to be clearly audible. Eventually people give up trying to hear it. Instead, they are listening to the messages of wealth and prosperity.