Inter-cultural Communication in the African Mission Context:

an examination of practice

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Glossary

'Africa' is here assumed to refer to Sub-Saharan Africa.

Abstract

Incorrect assumptions in language meaning / impact are found to lead to wrong 'answers'. Specific policy recommendations guiding Western interventions into Africa drawn in this article include that there be: an emphasis on theology including the study of 'witchcraft' beliefs, attention to development and use of African languages and investigation into options for capacity building in Africa from a local economic and cultural base. A careful logically guided consideration of intercultural communication and translation includes an examination of formal education in Africa in relation to Western scholarship. Widespread misunderstandings regarding theology and traditional religion in Africa are identified, including especially the deleterious impact on African scholarship of the necessity to assume atheism in order to satisfy Western academia. A serious gap in scholarly understanding of African views of 'god' is found to have arisen from the almost universal use of European languages in African scholarship.

1.0 Introduction

Language can conceal as much as it reveals, so it is said,[1] yet few seem to realise this. Even fewer consider its implications in practical contexts of intercultural communication and scholarship. Its consequences for translators and inter-cultural workers are shown in this article to be substantial and are examined in relation to ongoing interventionary activities by the West into Africa.

A very logical explanation for the above named issues is given in this article. This is followed by first a secular, and then a theological analysis of the West's ignoring of above mentioned linguistic issues. Finally solutions are advocated – that are both very practical and very radical.

2.0 Unique Features of Languages

Mathematics can give us equations such as that below:

$2y + 5(\text{cosine of } 74) = 98$

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[1] "Often a language will 'filter out' from the field of potential recognition even more information than it includes in that field" (Steiner 1998:90).

Mathematicians will then say 'solve for y.' It is logically impossible for someone to solve this problem if they do not know how to calculate the cosine of 74. It is very easy to get wrong answers, for example we can *ignore* the word cosine:

$$2y + 5 \ (cosine \ 74) = 98$$
$$2y + 5 \ (74) = 98$$
$$2y + 370 = 98$$
$$2y = 98\text{-}370$$
$$y = (98\text{-}370) \ / \ 2$$
$$y = \text{-}136$$

Doing the calculation as above, by ignoring the meaning of cosine (in effect assuming it to be 1) gives us the impressive answer, that y = -136. The only problem with this kind of answer, much to the chagrin of many a school child, is that according to the precepts of mathematics, it is wrong. The rules of mathematics (unfortunately?) do not allow us simply to ignore that which we do not understand. In fact, instead of ignoring *cosine*, the correct procedure to solve this equation would be to learn the meaning of cosine, then to apply that meaning in deriving the value of y.[2] (And in fact y comes out equal to 48.57.)

Does this have anything to teach us with regards to intercultural communication? I believe it does. Inter-cultural communication rarely deals with mathematical issues like the above. But inter-cultural communicators *do* need to know how to deal with words, the meaning of which may initially be unclear. How they deal with those words may be, following our example above, of critical importance in order to get the right 'answers'.

Let us take this 'formula' expressed in the language of the Luo people of Kenya, by way of example:

richo ema kelo chira

We want to 'solve' this 'equation'. Let us imagine we are told that translating the first 3 words we get; 'it is sin that brings …'. We are left with a puzzle – that is to say, what is *chira*? Now we have two broad options. Firstly, we can ignore *chira*, and consider it equal to 1 (following our mathematical example). That is, we can substitute what appears to complete the phrase from our own understanding (as it is argued that all people share a common humanity and so ought to be able to understand one another) and presume the phrase to mean 'it is sin that brings guilt' or 'it is sin, that brings punishment'. Then we conclude that *chira* means either guilt, or punishment. Unfortunately, as happy as we may be with such a phrase (as we were with our answer of -136 in the above mathematical example), we may be wrong. The second option of course is to endeavour to discover the meaning of *chira*, which will require us to look beyond this 'equation' to the context of it's use.

In short we can say that inside and outside mathematics, assuming that we know what we do not know, can result in wrong answers. The judges of what is right or wrong presumably are the cultural owners of the terms that we use. Mathematicians who pose the equation 2y + 5(cosine 74) = 98 will be the ones to judge the correctness of someone's answer. The owners of the Luo language will judge whether or not someone has correctly understood the phrase

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[2] The cosine of 74 equals 0.171717342 according to Google. 'Cosine(74)' http://www.google.com/search?q=cosine+74&btnG=Google+Search (accessed 18.03.2008)

"*richo ema kelo chira*". There is a good chance that, unless they have very carefully learned and examined the Luo culture and language, that someone will be found to be wrong.

3.0 Maths and other Issues in African Schools

African people[3] long ago realised that their own languages did not have the vocabulary needed to do 'education' in the way that their new European colonial visitors presented it. When they tried doing European education using their languages (ignore the meaning of cosine – see example above) they found that they would get the wrong answer. They did not have words that could translate the components of the European worldview necessary to understand the education they were promoting. Across the continent the solution that educational decision makers came up with was to use a European language such as English in education. Then by paying careful attention to all procedures presented to them they could come up with answers that Europeans considered to be correct.

Europeans have unfortunately been slower to latch onto this solution in reverse. If African languages do not have the vocabulary needed to perform required operations in Western education – could it not be (must it not be) that European languages do not have the vocabulary needed to perform all required operations in African (informal) education – i.e. ways of life? If the use of African languages has made it a problem for Africans to master Western education (as it has evidently been), could it not be a problem for European languages to correctly describe or articulate African 'education'? The assumption has been that this is not the case. European languages have been taken as 'super languages' with enormous vocabularies that can equally do the job of any 'trivial' language.[4] But is this true? I suggest not. Rather, simply ignoring what is not being understood (as in our examples above), has made a mockery of Western scholarship about Africa.

One reason for this of course, is that languages are not sets of unrelated parts, but integrated systems used to describe a whole. In chess, losing one piece (such as a bishop) does not affect the rules guiding the movement of another piece, but to a professional player will alter overall game-strategy. So in language, losing one word (i.e. the content of one word, not a sound that can be replaced by a synonym) affects the whole system: How would the English language be if there were no 'wedding', 'wheel', 'cosine', 'children', 'kissing'? Because words are all inter-related, not having 'wedding' means there will be no illegitimate relationships, not having 'wheel' means no bicycles, not having 'cosine', no trigonometry, not having 'children' means no schools, not having 'kissing' means nothing to do with your wife when you come home. The absence of even one 'word' will variously change the impact of all other words!

A similar thing can be said for African languages. If there was no *nyasaye*, or *kuong* or *dala* or *doho* or *migogo*, then that would be a serious undermining causing chaos in this case for the Luo language (of Kenya) and its people. None of these words translate into English. How then can the English language be used to understand the Luo people's way of life?

Western scholars have blundered. Africans correctly realised that in order to 'do' Western education to the satisfaction of the European, it is practical to use the European's language. (Although unfortunately this in turn means that the Western education is of little relevance to their way of life.) The European has *not* realised that the reverse applies, and that attempts at

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[3] I use 'African' to refer to the people of Sub-Saharan Africa.
[4] Steiner (1998:277-278) discusses such views of language.

understanding and interacting with African cultures using European language(s) unfortunately do not work.

4.0 What Words Conceal

The use of a foreign (European) word does not in itself reveal the content of the word as the European uses it. To say 'the cosine of 74 is 0. 171717342' is not to understand what use this number is to anyone. This statement can be made, and be totally misunderstood. Knowing how to write a word (or pronounce a sound) is only a small part of the complex process needed to acquire an 'education' equivalent to that of another people from a distant part of the world.

Cosine is a mathematical word, the meaning of which is revealed in the context of the culture of mathematics. The culture of mathematics can only be fully understood within its host culture – that of science and technology. This culture must in turn be understood within its host culture; Western culture as a whole, in order to appreciate the importance of its component parts. Knowing the meaning of 'cosine' without being able to place it within its wider context is in a functional sense not knowing it at all. This of course applies generally – knowing what a wheel/insurance/battery etc. are without knowing the use of these words / things is pretty *useless*! In other words, the necessary foundation for a formal education system to be effective is learned outside of the classroom. Any formal education system must be designed to fit the foundation someone has from outside the classroom with which they enter the classroom.[5]

Contrary to Westerners' notions of their own superiority – what applies to their language and culture also applies to other people's languages and cultures. 'Knowing' *kuong*, *doho*, *migogo* (see above list) will be of little help to someone who does not know how to use these terms in the wider context of the Luo way of life. Knowing, for example, that *migogo* is a name given to a girl who has been married when she comes back to visit her parental home, does not in itself tell you how this word is *used*.

Therefore we can conclude that *knowing* language if it is not to be a futile exercise must correspond to *knowing* the culture that goes with it. For all their astuteness and all the apparent (but unfortunately largely foundationless) advantage gained through African country's and people's wholesale adoption of European languages, this adoption in Africa has been a serious mistake. African people are suffering and will continue to suffer the consequences of this mistake, as the functionality of 'their' (European) language is effectively dependent on *magic* (to fill gaps of understanding where they use African presuppositions of meaning where European ones with which they are unfamiliar are required. See also Harries (2008a)). The European choice to follow the opposite track (complimentary of course to that of Africans) and to assume the use of their language as sufficient for understanding Africa is also problematic. Although oppressing African peoples and preventing them from progressing has in many ways apparently worked in favour of Europeans – at least economically and in the short-term.[6]

5.0 Theological Misnomers

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[5] If this were not the case, then children would need to be born into school classrooms, and then spend their whole lives in school classrooms.

[6] Use of European languages in Africa helps to ensure that Europe maintains control over the continent.

European people's exclusion of God from academic discussion, is the taking of a particular theological position. The adoption of this position appears to have been justified by its outcome or impact and not its derivation. That is – there is no evidence to say that God is either absent or inconsequential to human life.[7] Rather, the West has found that assuming this to be the case assists in the pursuance of particular interests. That is, making certain assumptions about the nature of God (he is not pro-actively engaged in the day to day life of people for example) has contributed to making Western scholarship what it is today. That does not make Western scholarship 'correct' in the absolute sense – as only God can make that absolute call, and he may or may not appreciate being 'ignored'. Holding to a theological position is different from *reaching* a theological position. One person or one society holding to a theological position will have different implications than another person or society doing the same. A people accustomed to a daily dependence on God may have particular difficulty with being told that they must accept his being absent or inconsequential.

Can we understand the actions, motives, behaviour, desires and problems of women by deciding to totally ignore the existence of men? This question seems ridiculously naive. It would leave begging the question of how women get pregnant. There would be little reasoned explanation as to why a woman gets up earlier on certain days of the week, if it was not because her husband goes to work early on those days. Going shopping the woman will drive the car, but on a weekend trip it will drive itself. Sometimes a woman will argue forcefully with herself. She will prepare food that will disappear of its own accord. As I have said – this question appears ridiculously naive. Then why ignore 'God'?

One may stumble across an occasional lonely spinster who hates and avoids men. Taking her case as typical would be something of a social distortion, however. Looking more carefully at the history of the spinster would of course reveal that she had a father, and /or brother, boyfriend and so on at one time. Certainly the particular shape of past relationships helped to set the course for her present (at the time of research) existence.

Perhaps the reason it is seen as excusable to ignore God's role in human society, is his invisibility. Although that seems a bit short-sighted. My late great-grandmother is 'invisible' yet I do not question the vital role she had to play in my 'being' what I am today. Someone's never meeting the executive director of the company that employs them, will not cause a question regarding his existence. 'Love' is not 'visible', but its effects are evident, and acknowledged. Sexual desires may not be talked about or seen at times and can be controlled – but are there and powerful. One's great great grandchildren are unseen – but that doesn't mean an old person can't plant a tree so that they can sit in its shade years later. 'Career ladders' are not real or visible ladders, but they motivate millions of people to work hard. 'Voices' are unseen, but heard. Of course, our sense of seeing may anyway be deceiving us – through illness, hallucination, visions – raising the question of whether the world is 'real' in the first place, given that we only perceive it's presence through our subjective senses.[8]

An ignoring of God that may (or may not) have helped academia in the past, is a major stumbling block to its sensible spread today. As a particular spinster would be foolish to consider men to be inconsequential to the gentle-sex as a whole, so the West is foolish to

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[7] It is very difficult to prove that something does not exist. However hard someone may try to look, God may be elsewhere where one has not yet thought of looking, or cannot look. Some would say that God's failing to answer their prayers indicates that he does not exist. On the other hand – this could be taken as simply being a character of God, that he does not answer certain prayers.

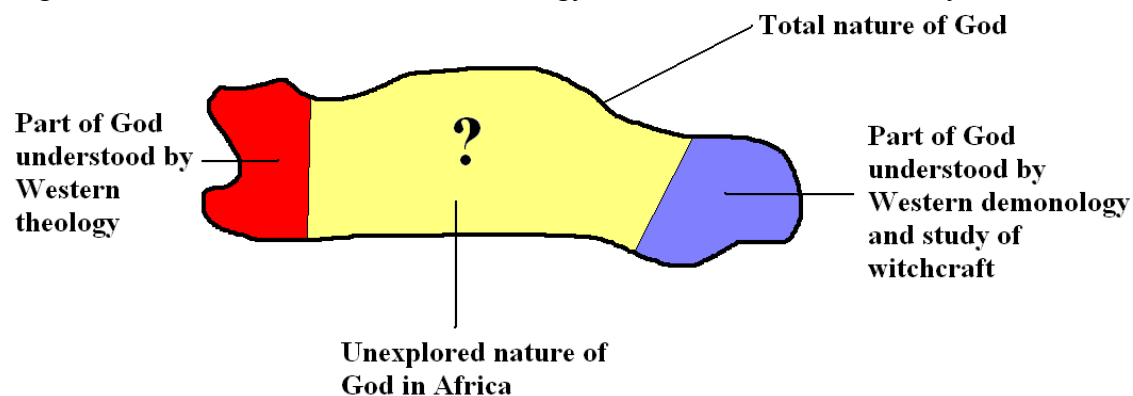[8] A question answered in the negative by many Eastern religions (Ogot 1961:129).

think that omitting God from its academia will help the rest of the world for whom 'who is God' and 'what is he like' are critical functional constantly asked questions. Does god exist is a naive question. Theological debate is as necessary as it is for women to talk about men, and more so.

The failure to consider theology an integral part of outside 'development intervention and aid' has been and continues to be a great flaw on the part of the West's foreign policy with regards to Africa.

6.0 Theology and Demonology

A failure to take a broader interest in theological issues has resulted in there being two dominant Christian theological approaches to the African scene. One is the impact of Western theology on Africa. Two is demonology, which can be simplified to mean the impact of African theology on the West. In other words, I suggest that God has been recognised by the academic community at the two peripheral extremes of his existence in Africa that happen to be visible to the Western world. This is illustrated in simplified form in Figure 1 below.

Figure 1. An Illustration of Formal Theology as Practiced in Africa Today

This diagram[9] does not seek to suggest that there is a 'gap' in African people's comprehension of God. Far from it – the 'gap' illustrated is of *Western* knowledge. There is an implicit assumption amongst Western academics coming from the Western worldview about African reality, that the powers behind witchcraft are distinct from 'God' and his powers. Such African theology is imposed on to Africa from the West.[10]

Western missionary theology tends to see 'witchcraft' and related beliefs as an unnecessary appendage to the African way of life and culture. Rather like a vestigial organ (such as a persons appendix) it is seen as being removable without the person suffering any loss to their general wellbeing. The very term 'witchcraft', associated as it is in the minds of Western people with the primitiveness and superstition of their unenlightened ancestors, almost necessitates this kind of thinking to avoid accusations of racism. Hence 'belief in magic' or 'the force' can be more helpful labels for this feature of African people's lives. My own experience in the course of time has been – that 'witchcraft' in Africa is far from a removable

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[9] Use of two-dimensional illustrations of 'word-shapes' is discussed in more detail in: Harries (2008b).
[10] This discussion may remind readers of Hiebert's writing on the 'excluded middle'. Although there are clear parallels, the point I am making is different to that of Hiebert (1982).

appendage.[11] It is more like: the essence of what people are – so-called 'witchcraft beliefs' are a part of what it is to be human in Africa.

Comprehension of God (Figure 1), and people's experience in life clearly impact one another.[12] One of the great questions in history is; which of these is primary and causative. A lot of recent thinking (and practice) assumes that someone's comprehension of god (assuming that 'god'/power lies behind witchcraft or 'demonic' beliefs) is best influenced by making adjustment to his/her living context. That is, that giving African people sufficient material provision and predictability in their lives will reduce belief in witchcraft (the force, or magic).[13] A great over-emphasis on this area is, I suggest, resulting in the creation of enormous dependency in much of Africa, as deeply ingrained beliefs and cultures are *refusing* to 'fall in line' (as the West would see it) with the 'technological' world surrounding African people.

Interventions by the West into Africa concentrate on trying to force people to adopt a secularised modern worldview through manipulation of their environment using foreign funds. Secular education, numerous subsidies and aid of all sorts assisting material and ideological flows from the West to Africa are intended to achieve this. There is a desperate need for an alternative approach that encourages and challenges people to bring about change from the bottom (grass roots) and from the inside. Only such latter change can be effectually integrated into people's lives (without instability of such a scale that threatens whatever is being built). The following strategy is advocated for adoption by Westerners seriously concerned for the wellbeing of the African people and continent, as encouraging of 'grass-roots' change.

7.0 Proposed Three-prong Strategy

The strategy here advocated can be summarised as being three 'prongs'. That is, three approaches by the West that are desperately needed to enable Africa to emerge from its ills:[14]

First, is serious attention to be paid to 'theological' concerns. I use the term 'theological' to encompass the whole range of African people's beliefs in and about the spiritual, super-human or the divine domain. Restricting this to traditional Western Christian theological debates is to address only a small part of the total range of African issues (see Figure 1 above).

This is not to say in the slightest that the theological approach used should not be Christian. The Bible and the church as it's practicing community are perfectly adequate for this task, with God's help, providing that existing theology is communicated according to the two principles below; of using local languages and without investing foreign funds into ministry. The implementation of these latter principles will effectively ensure that the whole of African people's ways of life are addressed by the Gospel, and not only that which corresponds to

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[11] "We may flatter ourselves officially that we [stop witchcraft] … but we do not" (Melland 1923:197). Melland seems to be right, as Haar writes in 2007 that: "The belief in witchcraft is as strong as it is widespread in Africa, to the point that academic writers on the subject and other commentators have suggested a significant increase in witchcraft accusations in recent years" (Haar 2007:1).

[12] Thus responded Weber in his classic work to Karl Marx's emphasis on material causation (Weber 1930).

[13] This thinking underlies approaches to poverty-eradication based on foreign investment in wealth-producing projects in Africa and elsewhere in the Third World. See for example: Endpoverty2015 (nd).

[14] My emphasis here is on interventionist policy by the West, and not 'what Africans should do'. The aim behind Western intervention is taken as being to empower African people.

Western lifestyles as occurs when the language in use is European (as illustrated in Figure 1 above).

The second necessary 'prong' is the use of a local language. *Which* local language is not really the issue for at least two reasons: 1) Once a precedent has been set through the use of an African language, other languages will be motivated to follow suit, and may quite easily do so once the groundwork has been laid. 2) The major objective behind this 'prong' is to escape the hegemony of European languages and culture – which can be achieved using almost any language rooted outside of the West. (That is any language which is controlled from Africa and of which the dominant semantic and pragmatic content is African.) While not ideal, so-called 'trade languages' such as Kiswahili can be used for this role. For outsiders wanting to 'assist' on the African scene this means that language and culture learning should be a prerequisite to production of materials (i.e. books, sermons, videos, advice, guidance and so on) that should be in African languages.

The third 'prong' is for there to be at least some Westerners/missionaries who on principle *do not* invest outside resources into their ministries. If working in Western-funded institutions (such as seminaries) then the individuals concerned must not be involved in or accountable for the financing of these institutions. Africa being what it is today, they are unlikely to escape from different types of dependency on the West. But, by seeking to work under prevailing economic conditions their 'success' will be a demonstration of what can be achieved by nationals and not a display of foreign power. Establishing a way of operating that is effective in local contexts can of course enable a multiplying impact far and beyond spread of a ministry that is dependent on foreign funds.[15] Expanding ones ministry through increased receipt of donor funds is indeed adding to its size, but identifying ministry that has a local fit and shape can have a multiplying impact.

The dependency already created on the West in Africa is so enormous, that simply to pull the rug on donor-based projects would be a disaster. A policy re-orientation advocated here is that such dependency, as far as possible, *not* be increased. Instead that a parallel track of 'foreign intervention' be instigated to enable the building up of indigenous capacity from the grassroots.

8.0 Conclusion

Serious and ongoing oversights regarding the nature of intercultural communication, especially in the context of Western intervention into sub-Saharan Africa, are brought to our attention in this article. The widespread use of European languages backed by foreign aid is found to be detrimental to the long-term interests of the African people. Theological discourse (including that about spirits and mystical powers) is found often to be a wanting part of development initiatives. Changes in policy oriented at rectifying these three areas is advocated as an important prerequisite to enabling indigenously rooted theological, social and economic progress in Africa.

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[15] As geometric progression is faster than is arithmetic progression i.e. 2x2x2x2x2x2x2 is a much larger number (128) than 2+2+2+2+2+2+2 (14).

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