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Practising Mission and Development in a Multi-lingual African Context of Jostling for Money and Power

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This article essentially seeks to complete the rooting out of residual colonialism in Western support of mission in Africa. Often that 'colonialism' is invisible to the West. African people may be reluctant to talk about it if the hand that engages in it is the same one that feeds them, as it usually is.

The relationship between Western aid to Africa and human flourishing has been a topic of much discussion. The results have often been disappointing. 'Numerous examples exist of hospitals, schools, and other facilities that were built with donor funds and left to rot, unused in developing countries that did not have the resources or will to maintain them.'[1] Inattention to the multi-lingual nature of communication between donors and receivers has 'yielded detrimental repercussions in the quality of interaction at the grassroots level'.[2]

Numerous writers have documented the disconnect between aid contributed and results achieved through both academic analysis and anecdotal summaries.[3] Attempts at explanation, however, consistently undervalue the impact on the West of centuries of exposure to the Christian gospel[4] and thus underestimate the extent of institutionalized covetousness and selfishness that persist in much of Africa. It is hard for anyone to cite this

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1 M. Lawson, 'Does Foreign Aid Work? Efforts to Evaluate U.S. Foreign Assistance' (U.S. Congressional Research Service, 2016).
2 O. Oketch, 'Language Use and Mode of Communication in Community Development Projects in Nyanza Province, Kenya' (unpublished paper), 2006, https://core.ac.uk/

download/pdf/58913026.pdf.
3 Abhijet Banerjee and Esther Duflo, *Poor Economics: A Radical Rethinking of the Way to Fight Global Poverty* (Philadelphia: Public Affairs, 2011); Daron Acemoglu and James A. Robinson, *Why Nations Fail: The Origins of Power, Prosperity, and Poverty* (London: Profile Books. 2012); W. Easterly, *The White Man's Burden: Why the West's Efforts to Aid the Rest Have Done So Much Ill and So Little Good* (New York: Penguin Books, 2007); Dambissa Moyo, *Dead Aid: Why Aid Is Not Working and How There Is a Better Way for Africa* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2010).
4 Vishal Mangalwadi, *The Book That Made Your World: How the Bible Created the Soul of Western Civilisation* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2011).

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problem as a reason for the failure of well-meaning Western-originated projects, because anyone who does so risks becoming the target of accusations of racism.

The Alliance for Vulnerable Mission (vulnerablemission.org), of which I am chairman, has dealt with these issues in detail. Members of this Alliance challenge the assumption that people can be 'developed' by outsiders. They especially question whether missionaries and development workers can effectively engage in depth with developing communities while using non-indigenous languages from contexts very different from that of the local people they are trying to help.

Most of my research has concentrated on the Luo people of western Kenya. However, much of what has been discovered about the Luo people of Kenya appears to be true for Africans more broadly and even for other majority-world people. I do not wish to over-generalize, but I think it would be wrong to assume that a particular group of people within Africa is somehow peculiar.[5] I welcome parallel studies among other people groups that test the contentions that I present here or articulate principles that would be more relevant in those cultures.

I. Methodology

Intercultural situations accentuate issues of research methodology. Even simple studies, such as on family re-lationships, can in practice be very complex, because any English word will be used differently in Africa as opposed to Europe. Simply assuming that a European language such as English is adequate for research on Africa is naïve.[6]

As a relative insider to a particular culture in Africa, I hope to 'translate' some thoughts into language that Westerners can understand. My background as a native Westerner should help me to do this, since I am translating from the unknown culture to a known one, which is easier than moving in the opposite direction because the latter operates in the absence of understanding of the receiving context.

In addition, not being totally integrated into the native culture being explored gives me more freedom than some native informants to communicate things of importance to my foreign listeners that may be at odds with the immediate functioning of the socio-economic context in question. As in the patron-client systems common to many non-Western societies, clients are bound by honour to praise their patrons regardless of the actual circumstances; thus Africans tend to write and act in such a way as to pla-

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5 For more on the problem of generalization, see Jim Harries, 'Anthropology's Origins, Christianity, and a Perspective from Africa', *On Knowing Humanity Journal* 1, no. 1 (July 2017): 33–34.

6 *University World News Africa Edition*, like other academic sources, consistently presupposes that English is the best language for higher education across much of Africa. This claim is only rarely questioned, even though the *University World News* itself has published a report on possible negative impacts of the growing use of English rather than Dutch in the Netherlands (Rosemary Salomone, 'Dutch Court Defers Decision on English in Universities', 27 July 2018, http://www.universityworldnews.com/article.php?story=20180724140627526.

cate their Western supporters.

II. Research Foundations

Much Western engagement with the majority world is built on a donor model, which begins by assuming that the West has things that the majority world needs. Initiatives are boosted by resources from the West and documented using Western languages. Missionaries, development workers, and others engaged in such initiatives almost inevitably build their knowledge base on interactions that are constrained by their use of outside languages and resources.

1. Vulnerable Mission Uses the Local Vernacular

In contrast, we call for the use of local languages wherever possible. The use of outside languages limits the Westerner to engaging with and understanding only a certain, formal part of local people's discourse. 'Formal' understanding in Africa comes from Europe through the education system.[7] Yet 'formal education can never be integrated into people's innate understanding of life.'[8] An outsider who engages with African people using English will mainly access that formal arena. A vulnerable mission approach, which emphasizes using the indigenous language while drawing only on people's own resources, can reveal otherwise hidden aspects of the people's ways-of-being, some of which may be driving the success or failure of outside initiatives.

a) Translation and Globalized Englishes

Translation processes can result in enormous amounts of bias and often include a great deal of invention. 'Cultural keywords [that] act as 'focal points' for complex sets of culturally specific values … are very hard, if not impossible to translate without a great deal of paraphrasing', Taylor and Littlemore tell us, lifting the lid on just a small part of intercultural translation's complexity.[9] Some scholars consider intercultural translation to be essentially impossible.[10]

The intricacies of the translation process are particularly germane in today's communication-enabled world, in which English has become increasingly globalized, with the result that English is used both by the Westerner and by the majority-world people with whom the Westerner is communicating. Although such intercultural use of English is heralded by some as bringing wonderfully high levels of mutual comprehension, it also has drawbacks. Those who rejoice in the communication that it enables rarely consider what has happened to the sheer difficulties that translators are known to face. Is it really possible that learning to use

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7 Jim Harries, *The Godless Delusion: Europe and Africa* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock. 2017), 35.

8 Harries, *Godless Delusion,* 139.

9 John R. Taylor and Jeanette Littlemore, 'Introduction', in *The Bloomsbury Companion to Cognitive Linguistics*, ed. John R. Taylor and Jeanette Littlemore, (London: Bloomsbury, 2015), 4. For more on cultural keywords see A. Wierzbicka, *Understanding Cultures Through Their Keywords* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997).

10 T. Pattberg, *Language Imperialism and the End of Translation* (New York: LoD Press, 2015).

the same grammatical and phonetic code (i.e. the English language) makes those difficulties simply disappear?

Farzad Sharifian helpfully points out that words acquire meanings only when conceptualized through contexts in which they are used.[11] English terms such as 'love' or 'mother', when appropriated by a non-Western people, will often be understood as equivalent to the terms in their own languages. For example, among Australian aborigines, 'mother' might also refer to someone's aunts.[12] Therefore, using a language interculturally can easily hide from view significant differences in how certain things are understood.[13]

b) Location and Direction in Translation

Translation between a Western and African context can happen in either of two directions, and the person translating can be from either the originating or the receiving culture. This gives us four possible translation options, two of which involve translating from a known to an unknown context while the other two involve the reverse.

A person translating into his or her native cultural context is likely to be less well informed about the *source* of the translation. On the other hand, the person translating into a non-native cultural context will be less aware of the *target* of the translation. This raises the question of which is preferable. I strongly recommend translation into the known culture; that is,

the target audience and the translator should share the same linguistic and cultural background.[14] Some simple examples should illustrate my point.

A Westerner might say that 'Africa is hot' whereas an African might say that 'Europe is cold.' The former is culturally correct for Europeans, because to them Europe is not cold; it is normal. Similarly, Africans might react negatively to a statement that Africa is hot when to them it is normal.

An African might say that Westerners are far too lenient to homosexuals; a Westerner might say Africans are cruel to condemn homosexuals and are infringing upon their rights. In this case, a translator going from the known to the unknown culture might make a statement that is quite disconcerting or even offensive to the host culture—especially in Africa where the infringement of a taboo by one person is seen as having negative effects on the whole community.[15]

2. Vulnerable Mission Uses Local Resources

In addition to the use of the vernacular language, a vulnerable mission approach advocates using local resources while engaging in ministry. Outsiders working in the majority world often sense an urgency to facili-

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11   Farzad Sharifian, *Cultural Linguistics* (Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 2017), 20.

12   Sharifian, *Cultural Linguistics,* 49.

13   Sharifian, *Cultural Linguistics*, 197.

14   Harries, *Godless Delusion*, especially 136–40.

15   For this reason, the pressure to conform can be intense in African communities. See Lucas Shamala, *The Practice of Obuntu among the Abaluyia of Western Kenya: A Paradigm for Community Building.* (Saabruecken, Germany: VDM Verlag, 2008), 135. Shamala notes that failing to attend a ceremony can be interpreted as 'wanting to destroy' the group concerned.

tate the transfer of resources. Those who do not engage in such resource transfer may be quickly condemned.[16] This tendency has almost certainly become more intense in recent years, as outsiders are expected to participate in improving the lives of developing peoples in ways that require financial contributions from elsewhere.

Although it may be instinctive for warm-hearted Western people to be materially generous to others, this practice has its disadvantages.[17] Even seemingly low levels of generosity can seem extravagant when viewed from within the local context, causing people to respond to donors in a manner motivated by interest in culturally inappropriate acquisition of funds or material aid. This can perpetuate a status quo that perhaps ought to be undermined: Georges and Baker call into question the simple formula that 'giving things will help' by pointing out that 'the de facto economic system' that prevails in much of the majority world is in Western terms 'immoral'.[18]

As Westerners have realized the problems that result from overly free giving, some have gravitated towards a second option, which is to be *less generous*. Corbett and Fikkert advocate carefully restricted financial gen-erosity, emphasizing for example that we should 'not do things for people that they can do for themselves',[19] but instead focus on what people have.[20] Implementing the need for less generosity leads to a kind of dance as people seek to give enough but not too much. When the Western outsiders are deciding when to be generous, this leaves a lot of power in their hands.

Limiting one's generosity may unfortunately not prevent people in the majority world from being preoccupied with issues related to the exchange of material goods, such as seeking the 'best' use of resources or the most efficient work flow. A heavy stress on efficiency is not present in most non-Western worldviews and, where imposed or strongly encouraged by outsiders, can reduce local motivation by hampering a sense of community and perpetuating the appearance of outside domination. Moreover, merely moderating Western generosity is not likely to undo the common majority-world perception of Westerners as 'suppliers of all things needed'.

Foreigners who retain financial power in a cross-cultural situation while blind to local circumstances can create a scenario similar to blind-man's buff, the game in which one person is blindfolded while others call out to and then try to dodge the person. In the African context, outsiders are the blindfolded ones, encouraging local people to reach out

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16 Joseph G. Healey, *A Fifth Gospel: The Experience of Black Christian Values* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1981), 75.

17 Jim Harries, *Vulnerable Mission: Insights into Christian Mission to Africa from a Position of Vulnerability* (Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 2011).

18 Jayson Georges and Mark D. Baker, *Ministering in Honor-Shame Cultures: Biblical Foundations and Practical Essentials* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2016), 52, 54.

19 Steve Corbett and Brian Fikkert, *When Helping Hurts: How To Alleviate Poverty without Hurting the Poor … and Yourself* (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 2009), 115.

20 Corbett and Fikkert, *When Helping Hurts*, 126.

for their money while not having the local information needed to achieve the desired purpose. (In this version of blindman's buff, the Africans' intention is not only to dodge the blind man, but also to get money out of his pocket without being accused of malpractice.)

The third option, promoted by advocates of vulnerable mission, is that an outsider's material contributions to ministry should either be pegged (roughly) to those made by other local people or should be zero. This approach offers the following advantages:

- People can be honest with each other as there is no possibility of enabling a flow of funds through flattery.
- By not controlling the purse strings, the outsiders avoid taking charge of contexts that they do not understand or situations in which their control will not be appreciated.
- Not being involved in a dance of generosity enables an outsider to spend time on activities more closely aligned with the promotion of sustainable mission or development, such as encouraging use of local languages and innovations in what we might call the 'spiritual sphere', which is often otherwise dominated by the demands and expectations of the patron-client system.

It is not without cause that Westerners tend to have a 'pessimistic view of patron-client structures' in the majority world.[21] Such structures are of minimal economic functionality.

3. Vulnerable Mission Embraces Diversity

Westerners make major efforts in the name of 'anti-racism' to emphasize that majority-world people are not fundamentally different from them.[22] If differences are acknowledged at all, particular care is taken not to sound racist. On the other hand, in my experience, Africans and other majority-world citizens are frequently happy to compensate for what they perceive to be peculiarities of Western people's ways of life and behaviour. They do this because they understand that when they do things in Western ways, they are likely to benefit financially. Hence majority-world peoples expect, so as to enable Westerners to do 'business as usual', to fit into a foreign model of 'normality.'

Since Westerners most often meet English-speaking people of African origin in Western-style contexts, such as in a Western country, at a university, in a hotel, at a conference funded by the West, at a lodge in a game park or on an airplane, the setting adds to the appearance of similarity between African and Western people groups. Many African people have another life—in their families, celebrations and indigenous churches—in which they speak non-Western languages. Hence, meetings between Westerners and Africans occur on Western 'territory', but African people also maintain their own territory, perceiving and maintaining differences from the West that Westerners fail to see. Although Westerners tend to minimize differences, Africans know that

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21 Georges and Baker, *Ministering in Honor-Shame Cultures,* 52.

22 See Emma Kowal, *Trapped in the Gap: Doing Good in Indigenous Australia* (Oxford: Berghan, 2015).

differences between Western ways-of-being and their own are enormous.

I now turn to exploring the dynamics of development initiatives in more detail.

III. Giving Gifts to the Poor

Giving to the poor is a problematic and at times apparently self-contradictory activity. The West is heavily engaged in making donations to the poor in the majority world, but it rarely asks what kind of obligation the receiver has vis-à-vis the donor. Donations might, from the Western side, seem to be 'free gifts' given altruistically.[23] Even then, for the sake of accountability, the giver of a free gift is frequently obliged to make sure that it is used in a particular way. Receivers of 'free gifts' never, I suggest, take them as totally devoid of anticipated reciprocation.[24] Rather, receivers know that they are expected to deliver some kind of return. As such, gifts to the poor can be a residue of colonial power.

Whether it be money or tangible items, accountability of some sort must be present even when gift giving and receiving happen across a cultural divide.[25] This can become extremely complicated. One thing that donors and recipients typically have in common is ignorance of each other's cultural assumptions regarding the giving and receiving of gifts. The donor needs to understand that recipients' default response will be to apply their own cultural context, values and beliefs to guide them in the implementation or use of a gift. Being unfamiliar with the donor's culture, recipients will almost inevitably want to use the gift in a way different from what the donor might have envisaged, thus stretching the donor's tolerance. It is possible that the donor will consider the recipients' use of the gift not just different from what was intended, but also wrong or unethical.

We could put the potential uses of a gift on a scale from identical to the use in the Western donor's home country to extremely unfamiliar. Note that missionaries and development workers who are familiar with the recipients' culture may be able to envisage and comprehend uses of gifts that are too close to indigenous ways for most donors to comprehend.

Recipients of outside funds are frequently pulled in multiple directions simultaneously. They desire to use the gift to maximum advantage within their cultural context, while realizing that if the gift is not used according to the donor's specifications they may be accused of corruption. They can be caught between endeavouring to help a community in the way that the community believes it should be helped and not wanting to offend donors who may stop funding projects that fall outside the intended purpose.

Imagine, for example, that a donor designates assistance through a poverty-alleviating organization for a child to receive a Christmas gift. At the same time, a close relative of the

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23 See John M. G. Barclay, Firth Lectures, University of Nottingham (2018), https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jlQ9UN_b4Zs for a history and problematization of the concept of altruism.

24 John M. G. Barclay, *Paul and the Gift* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2017), chapter 1.

25 'Giving directly' endeavours to get around this (see https://givedirectly.org/). I do not have space to analyse this organization's activities here.

child has died and family members need funds to travel to the funeral. Since kinship relationships form the central organizing principle in many majority world cultures, there will be considerable pressure from a moral standpoint to use the money to fulfil obligations to kin.

If donor organizations view such redirections of funds as improper and therefore decide to send aid elsewhere, this decision can cause bad feelings, especially towards whoever tattled on the recipients. As a result, either a gap emerges between what is said and the actual situation, or a distinction is made between those who use aid 'properly' and those who 'mismanage' it or are corrupt.

Even if a project proves to be unsustainable, the seed money already invested in it is likely to benefit the local community. For example, in a poultry project, even if all the chickens die before laying any eggs, builders, salesmen, farmers (who have obtained manure), owners of hardware stores and the wives of all the husbands who found employment will already have benefitted. Thus, a village that uses funds 'corruptly' on a failed project will become wealthier than a village that refuses funds because it knows that the proposal is not viable. The desire to please a donor may preempt contextualization, effectively resulting in a totally non-contextualized intervention.[26] The degree of likely contextualization of an intercultural mission or development intervention might thus be limited by the degree to which a recipient is prepared to refuse the will of a donor.

IV. The Pincer Effect

Intimate familiarity with local ways of doing life can enable missionaries or development workers who have spent several years living and working in a community to be in a helpful position in the planning and implementation of development projects. Unfortunately, such people can end up caught in a pincer between local leaders and donors.[27]

On one hand, local leaders are eager to say and do whatever they believe pleases the donor so that funds will continue to flow. Donors who are eager to give, especially if they want to avoid being perceived as neo-colonialists, often want to acquire understanding directly from local people. Hence the long-term missionary or development worker can be left out of conversations. If the donor wants to talk with the local person, and if the local person is trying to maximize income by saying what the donor wants to hear, then the experienced long-term workers can become the enemy of both; the donor doesn't want them interfering with funding decisions, and locals don't want them to threaten a valued source of income.

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26 Byang H. Kato provides a simple definition of contextualization as 'making concepts or ideals relevant in a given situation'. Kato, 'The Gospel, Cultural Context and Religious Syncretism', in *Let the Earth Hear His Voice: International Congress on World Evangelization, Lausanne, Switzerland,* ed. J. D. Douglas (Minneapolis, MN: World Wide Publications,

1975), 1217.

27 Jim Harries, 'Building Castles in the Sky: A Case for the Use of Indigenous Languages (and Resources) in Western Mission-Partnerships to Africa', *Global Missiology* 3, no. 13 (April 2016), http://ojs.globalmissiology.org/index.php/english/article/view/1883/4192.

The result is a missed opportunity for insights that could bolster a project's chances of success. Also, long-term workers find that they are digging a hole for themselves whenever they open their mouths.

Western models of implementation and evaluation contribute to the pincer effect. When success is defined as quantified behaviour(s) observed in a relatively short period of time, the focus is on short-term facilitation. Donors and short-term personnel who implement projects emphasize efficient use of time, resources and personnel over a limited time frame. In many kinship-based majority-world cultures, however, timelines for accomplishing tasks are less relevant.[28] Instead, the focus is on maintaining good relationships among members of a community. A long-term worker or missionary who understands this dynamic is often hard pressed to gain a hearing from short-term project facilitators who must deliver the timely results expected by donors.

Majority-world peoples understand this clash between Western timelines and maintaining good relationships. When asked for his opinion of a particular method of strategic planning, a Papua New Guinean once said, 'I can use [this method] for my own planning and for relating to [the NGO]. But when I go to the village, I will wait until my people are ready to do things!'[29]

A Westerner familiar with the local context who can explain what is needed to donors is often considered a less desirable source of information, even though the Westerner has the advantage of translating from the unknown culture to the known one as discussed above. The Westerner who lives in the local context and speaks the vernacular may be in a better position than locals to discern aspects of the local culture that are concealed by their use of English. Ignoring these kinds of insights is a sign of residual colonialism, one that can be very costly.

V. Why Bad Things Happen: Two Views

An important disconnect between Western and majority-world people's ways of living concerns the Western concept of the 'material' with all its implications. This disconnect affects development initiatives in various ways.

'Witchcraft' is widely acknowledged as a 'problem' in many parts of the world.[30] I want to briefly consider the origins, foundations and impact of witchcraft beliefs on the scenarios we are considering above. For the purpose of this discussion, I assume that the power of witchcraft arises from interpersonal relational tensions expressed as mystical powers.[31]

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28 Frustration with locals who don't show up on time to do project work is a recurring theme in casual conversations with Westerners who work in majority-world countries. There is a reluctance to say or write anything officially about this, however, because it could sound racist.

29 Amy Pagarigan shared this anecdote

with me.

30 Robert J. Priest, 'The Value of Anthropology for Missiological Engagements with Context: The Case of Witchcraft Accusations', *Missiology: An International Review* 43, no. 1 (2015): 27–42.

31 Jim Harries, 'Witchcraft, Envy, Development, and Christian Mission in Africa', *Missiology: An International Review* 40, no. 2 (2012): 129–39; George M. Foster, 'The Anat-

Something happened between 1400 and 1700 that changed the face of Europe and is still changing the face of an increasing proportion of the rest of the globe.[32] At the start of this period, Western Europeans were evidently essentially monistic (understanding all causation as arising from one source). By the end of it, they were dualistic—separating religion from secular explanations and seeing more and more causation in the material realm. Thus, the newly invented concept of religion was pushed into a private realm.[33] Over many generations, this change has left Westerners virtually ignorant of the previously dominant worldview.

Consider, for instance, a scenario where all causation is rooted in relationship, as Rasmussen and Rasmussen suggest is the case in many parts of Africa.[34] Then achievement is credited to and non-achievement is blamed on relationships. Knowledge of what constitutes good or bad relationships may well be defined through many generations' prior experience.[35]

In relationally oriented communities, relationships may be extended from people who are present to those who are absent, the dead, and those not yet born.[36] Once a tradition has developed that seems to provide a level of success in life, people are reluctant to let it go. This includes understandings of ways in which the living, dead and unborn play a role in determining the general prosperity of the living.[37] By way of contrast, in the West the dead and unborn are not considered part of a community, so there is no assumption of an ongoing relationship with them.

An outsider coming from a tradition in which causation is understood in Newtonian and not fundamentally in relational terms is likely to be particularly slow to perceive African community life. *Whether that outsider is 'right' or not is irrelevant* for our purposes*. Even if the Westerner is 'right' from a scientific or other viewpoint, a few outsiders are unlikely to be able to impose their understand-

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omy of Envy: A Study in Symbolic Behaviour', *Current Anthropology* 13, no. 2 (April 1972): 165–86.

32 William T. Cavanaugh, *The Myth of Religious Violence: Secular Ideology and the Roots of Modern Conflict* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 58.

33 Cavanaugh, *Myth of Religious Violence*, 58–122.

34 Steven D. H. Rasmussen and Hannah Rasmussen, 'Healing Communities: Responses to Witchcraft Accusations', *IBMR* 39, no. 1 (January 2015): 13.

35 The Luo people of Western Kenya are guided by an extremely complex, orally transmitted law code passed down over generations. For details, see Paul Mboya, *Luo*

Kitgi gi Timbegi (Kisumu, Kenya: Anyange Press, 1997, first edition 1938) and Jacktone Keya Raringo, *Chike Jaduong e Dalane* (n.p, n.d.).

36 John S. Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy* (London: Heinemann, 1969), 105.

37 See Kevin G. Hovey, *Before All Else Fails … Read the Instructions! A Manual for Cross-Cultural Christians* (Fort Worth, TX: Harvest Publications, 1995), for the same view in Papua New Guinean cultures. Naomi M. Scaletta, 'Primogeniture and Primogenitor: First-born Child and Mortuary Ceremonies among the Kabana (Bariai) of West New Britain, Papua New Guinea' (1985), https://macsphere.mcmaster.ca/handle/11375/5883, gives an excellent description of how honouring the dead is intricately integrated into firstborn celebratory feasts among the Bariai people.

ing on a whole community that does not grasp where they are coming from. A 'right' in absolute terms may be a wrong in local terms.

An example from the Luo people of western Kenya may clarify my point. When the Luo plant crops, older people must plant before younger people. If younger people do otherwise, they show disrespect, which can bring misfortune. Elders who are already dead contribute, through their 'spirits', to producing this misfortune.[38] The apparent benefits of early planting can thus be outweighed by the risk of exposing oneself to a curse.[39] Problems arise if the older people delay, forcing the younger ones to delay. Early planting of crops has been scientifically proven to give the best yields, but to the Luo, that does not in itself make it a desirable practice if it is also associated with a curse.

Missionaries who promote God's word tend to threaten long-held traditions. For example, they may encourage someone to ignore restrictions on early planting, either because they seem rooted in a belief in the continuing influence of ancestors (i.e. gods[40]) rather than faith in the one eternal creator God or because research shows that delayed planting results in a reduced yield. If local people believe that the taboo must be upheld to avoid misfortune yet missionaries are calling for its removal, then to local people the missionary is promoting risks that will bring misfortune.

In an actual development situation, a Westerner is unlikely to be criticized for encouraging young people to plant before their elders, as long as the Westerner is channelling funds into a community. That flow of resources constitutes, in the eyes of locals, the source of the voice, authority and power of Western missionaries and development workers. Such immunity to criticism can end when funds are no longer coming.

If development workers or missionaries were to contextualize what they are doing, donors might lose faith in them and outside funding could slow or stop altogether. Local people, having lost the tangible benefits arising from donor funds, might now blame the foreigners for preventing local people from prospering.

VI. The Essence of Power

Let us look further at the issue of mystical power as a source of benefits for a community. When Paul commanded a spirit to come out of a slave girl in Philippi (Acts 16:18), he was exercising the power of God. According to the Bible, this slave girl was predicting the future by the power of a spirit who possessed her (Acts 16:16). Presumably her predictions were coming true, or at least were perceived as coming true, or her owners' business would not have been profitable. Paul used God's power to defeat another kind of power. This provoked the owners to attack Paul (Acts 16:19–24), because they perceived that he was undermining their ability to make money by exploiting people's faith in certain spirits.

The Pharisees levelled a similar accusation against Jesus: 'It is only by Beelzebub, the prince of demons, that this fellow drives out demons'

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38 I have put 'spirits' in quotation marks to emphasize that this English word falls far short of doing justice to the African concept thereby described.

39 Mboya, *Luo Kitgi gi Timbegi*, 185.

40 Healey, *A Fifth Gospel*, 146.

(Mt 12:24; see also Jn 8:40, 48). By interfering with the Jewish taboo system, such as the rules on keeping the Sabbath,[41] Jesus was in their minds interfering with Jewish people's prosperity.

Similarly, in the Gentile region of the Gadarenes, Jesus cast out demons from two men who lived among tombs. The townspeople, when they discovered what Jesus had done, pleaded with him to leave (Mt 8:28–34). Their request indicates a belief that Jesus' presence would undermine their well-being, as the death of their pigs had already demonstrated.

A difference between these biblical examples and contemporary missionaries is that the latter have resources to back what they are doing. Those very resources can enable the continuation of a colonial pattern. The resources mitigate opposition, as long as they continue to flow. Outside resources thus give contemporary missionaries a certain immunity to criticism as well as momentum, which can be built up whether their message is reaching people's hearts or not.[42] Serious opposition to the contemporary missionary might arise only when outside money and technology stop coming. On the contrary, opposition to Jesus and Paul was more immediate, as it had no relationship to foreign funds. Not having (or not using) the option of reaching into their pocket,[43] Jesus and Paul could acquire a following only by touching people's hearts with their message.

Implications for the creation of dependency are clear. Because Jesus and Paul did not have foreign resources with which to validate their ministry, their words were put to the test immediately. Whereas contemporary missionaries' use of outside funds can guarantee impact regardless of the nature of their message, Jesus and Paul were immediately vulnerable to contextualizing forces. If their work had not been contextually pertinent, Jesus and Paul could not have attracted an appreciative audience. When they engaged in activities perceived by locals as destructive, such as healing on the sabbath, local opposition ensued. Unlike many contemporary missionaries, for whom failure is deferred or put off as a result of the subsidy that stands behind them, Jesus and Paul were subject to the presence of mystical forces that threatened to cause immediate failure.

VII. Contextualization, Language and Fiscal Accountability

Let us suppose that English is the language used in the planning and ongoing implementation of a project, but that local participation in the project is sought. (These are typical conditions for project initiation and implementation.) Missionaries and the donors standing behind them tend to receive feedback from communi-

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41 Many of Jesus' healings recorded in the New Testament were performed on the Sabbath. This fact particularly troubled the Pharisees and the teachers of the law.

42 I am not questioning the motives of missionaries. I am attempting to show that laudable motives do not always line up with the perceptions of others.

43 There is no biblical evidence that Jesus or Paul ever made the kind of donations towards development that characterize much of contemporary mission.

ties they are reaching through translation from the indigenous language into English. Because few outsiders these days are acquiring a deep understanding of indigenous languages, this translation will typically be done by locals, in our case Africans—who also wish to please current and potential donors.

Local people may speak English, but as African natives they will use English differently from a native Westerner. This fact is generally difficult for a monolingual speaker of English to grasp, yet it is crucial. Local people typically learn English as a second language, so they understand English words as translations from indigenous language terms. Because there is never a complete overlap in meaning between a word in the source language and its analogue in the receptor language, translation will always have a distorting impact. The more the cultural contexts of the two languages differ, the greater the likelihood of incomplete overlap.[44]

A native speaker of English from the West uses English in ways that are consistent with his or her own cultural background. An African who learned English as a second language may be expressing his or her heart language, even while speaking English! As a result, the two may mean vastly different things by the same words. Deep confusion and disagreement about what the other person really meant to say can occur for this reason.

I will offer a few examples.[45] In Africa, the term *God* has a much stronger implication of 'the provider of all my needs and wants' than in the United Kingdom. Whereas *spirit* in the West seems to imply a disembodied being, in Africa it refers to outcomes of actions by an embodied being. In many African languages, short and abrupt requests can be *polite*, whereas in English a multitude of words are needed to communicate politeness. Whereas the *world* in Western English implies a physical thing, in Africa it may well imply a community of the dead. The self-sacrificial context of *love*, learned by the West from centuries of Christian belief, may not necessarily be carried over into African understandings of the word. Translations from the English term *believe* into African equivalents tend to imply agreement rather than belief.

An African who recognizes these

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44 Youssouf Dembele, 'The Concept of Corporate Personality in Ancient Israel: Its Contribution to the Understanding and Translation of the Bible' (2015), https://map.bloomfire.com/posts/944585-the-concept-of-corporate-personality-in-ancient-israel-its-contribution-to-the-.

45 I have done in-depth study in this area. For a study of the use of the term 'bad' in the Luo language of western Kenya, see Jim Harries, 'Pragmatic Theory Applied to Christian Mission in Africa: With Special Reference to Luo Responses to "Bad" in Gem, Kenya' (PhD thesis, University of Birmingham, 2007), http://etheses.bham.ac.uk/15/. For a study of the use of the term 'God', see Jim Harries, 'The Name of God in Africa and Related Contemporary Theological, Development and Linguistic Concerns' in Harries, *Vulnerable Mission*. For use of the term 'Spirit' see Jim Harries, 'Understandings of Pneuma in East Africa That Point to the Importance of "Vulnerable Mission" Practices from the West', in *The Pneuma Foundation: Resources for Spirit Powered Ministry* (2010), http://www.pneumafoundation.org/resources/presentations/JHarries-VulnerableMission.pdf;jsessionid=33DDC7DABC4E84183C1F257006799616.

kinds of differences in uses of English would invariably have to structure his or her language differently to communicate what a native English speaker would mean.[46] Conversely, culturally Western donors who think they have understood the English of someone who is culturally African have almost certainly misunderstood it.

Moreover, a project proposal written by a Westerner who has become contextualized in an African culture may not be understandable or acceptable to a Westerner whose thinking is rooted in Western culture. Crucially, though, neither the writer nor the reader may be aware of this fact, because they assume that they are speaking the same language. When the contextualized worker goes back to the West and explains what should be done, how and why, Westerners are likely to think that he or she is mistaken. In fact, the missionary who is on the right track will be comprehensible to neither Africans nor Westerners.

There is a solution to the above apparently inescapable dilemma of mis-comprehension. Missionaries should not be condemned for using their own language when reporting about the majority world when back in the West, provided that they (implicitly and explicitly) engage in a process of translation. If they use English, it should be Western English in the West and African English when in Africa.[47]

I have found that it is very difficult to hold two distinct Englishes in one's head at the same time. I suggest that missionaries' knowledge of African English will invariably affect their use of Western English and vice versa. This is one reason why, to avoid residual colonialism, it is important to use African languages for planning and implementation of projects in Africa and Western languages while in the West.[48] Using different languages will help missionaries to maintain a distinction in their engagement with dissimilar cultures.

VIII. Empty Seats at the Academic Table

Since Western English is the language of academia, other forms of English that don't fit or don't work with the West are quietly invalidated. This exclusion of non-Western participation results in a lopsided scholarly community.

Western scholarship about Christianity in Africa should be recognized as exactly that—*Western* scholarship, not universal scholarship. It is *not* the 'reality' of Africa. In fact, this real-

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46 More accurately, something must be stated 'wrong' in one English to have the possibility of being 'right' in another English.

47 I here go along with Wittgenstein's suggestion that learning a language is learning the 'outlook, assumptions, and practices with which that language is inseparably

bound and from which its expressions get their meaning'. A. C. Grayling, *Wittgenstein: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), 97.

48 Although the cultural gaps between different African or different European languages are much smaller than those between African and European languages, parallel issues are identified within Europe by Jennifer Jenkins; see Lennox Morrison, 'Native English Speakers Are the World's Worst Communicators', BBC, 31 October 2016, www.bbc.com/capital/story/20161028-native-english-speakers-are-the-worlds-worst-communicators.

ity cannot be discovered by Western scholarship. This is why Westerners create plans for 'development' based on the wrong linguistic categories. Western scholarship must always be 'wrong' for Africans.

IX. Vulnerable Mission: A Path to Success

Mismatches between peoples' views of causation, misunderstandings resulting from inadequate translation, and the pincer effect all contribute to failures in mission work and in development programs. As a result, church mission efforts can look like a game of blindman's buff where the missionary is the blind man, and efforts to promote sustainable development can be reduced to a farce.

Happily, the situation can be redeemed. The first step towards doing so is to ask some Western workers to avoid the linguistic and resource traps described above. Some missionaries or development workers from the West need to carry out their ministries (or at least some key activities) using only local languages and local resources from the start. This is the essence of vulnerable mission. Because alternative approaches do not produce sustainable, indigenously powered African development, a vulnerable mission approach deserves careful consideration.

In the context of African mission and development, there is intense rivalry for the money, prestige and power that come through relationships with the West. If outsiders do not recognize and sidestep the intense search for wealth in which they are implicated, mission and development initiatives can be subsumed in a destructive morass of jockeying for position by locals. Limiting one's generosity, as advocated by some, leaves intact the problematic dance in which Westerners' ill-informed influence over when and what to give leaves them with too much effectively neo-colonial power relative to their limited local understanding. Contextualization can occur only insofar as donors do not require standard versions of accountability.

Furthermore, African views of causation that include active roles for the dead and the unborn make a confusing mix with Westerners' determined adherence to Newtonian physics. In biblical times, missionaries did not ignore but engaged with mystical powers, while remaining vulnerable in ways that kept them sensitively on track, even if their actions were apparently contrary to the thriving of indigenous people. The gaping disconnects in language and worldview between Western and African cultures suggest that the belief that a single form of English can be a good fit in Africa while simultaneously satisfying Western reasoning is a delusion in need of serious attention.