

Jigger Fleas, Spirits, Inter-cultural Theology and the Development of Africa



*The Jigger Flea*¹

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For the purposes of this article, 'Africa' should be taken to refer to sub-Saharan Africa. Terms such as fear-of-spirits, superstition and animism are used largely inter-changeably.

Abstract

Theologians are required to consider global issues of justice, here compared to questions of how to treat feet. Endemic jigger flea infections in tropical Africa and the way they are likely to be given insufficient attention by the West are considered in relation to 'superstitious' beliefs that are concentrated in the same region. The use of European languages as official languages in Africa combined with economic and political control from the West is found to be a disaster in the making. Simple but far reaching and infrequently considered implications of the inter-cultural use of one language are articulated. It is advocated that some Christian missionaries from the West attempt to provide a way around the above dilemmas by practicing *vulnerable mission* in their ministry to Africa – defined as mission carried out through the use of the languages and resources of the people being reached.

Keywords: intercultural, Africa, witchcraft, Christian, linguistics, superstition.

Introduction

In this article I argue that the future well-being of the native people of sub-Saharan Africa is dependent on their developing and using their own languages. Hence it is important that outsiders who want to work in such a way as to bring sustainable benefit to African people should communicate using African languages, as far as possible from within an African cultural

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framework. This is best achieved through ‘vulnerability’; here defined as Westerners working with non-Westerners using the languages and resources of the latter in their key activities.² By this means Westerners can begin to become sufficiently sensitive to non-Western contexts to be able to interact intelligently with them.

I compare an aspect of the physical world that is peculiar to Africa, with aspects of the ‘spiritual realm’. The jigger flea, a common parasite of feet in the tropics, is the physical feature with which ‘superstitious beliefs’ are compared. Both are painful in their impact, both can result in stigmatization,³ and both are relatively unknown or little understood in the West.⁴ It is suggested that ignoring these in the West, given the globalisation of communication in the world today, puts Africans in a dilemma: how to respond to that which is not supposed to exist? One outcome of this dilemma is deception and suffering not in view to the West, but no less painful.

Christian theologians are in the world but not ‘of the world’ (John 17:14). They are concerned for the world. They believe that it is right to be concerned for the world, to reflect God’s concern, who when he made the world considered it to be ‘good’ (Genesis 1:10, 12, 18, 25, 31). In this globalising age theologians must no longer be content to consider God’s relation with just one people and one worldview, as discourse is increasingly global in orientation and spread.

A Christian theologian, and presumably any other theologian who seeks to communicate, begins with an assumption of having some privileged access to information, which he/she seeks to share with others. The conviction as to the importance of sharing this information comes, presumably, from God. Such knowledge has never been only ‘a pie in the sky when you die’. Christian theologians respond to ‘worldly wisdom’. Hence the Archbishop of Canterbury is concerned for climate change (Archbishop 2007), and books are written on the interaction of theology with recent discoveries in other disciplines such as psychology (Anderson et. al. 2000).

The gross material inequality found in today’s world is one of the issues that concerns theologians. This is typically emphasised by comparing countries such as the UK and Australia, with those in sub-Saharan Africa (from here on simply referred to as ‘Africa’). Theologians are asked to turn their attention to the resolution of enormous disparities that have become increasingly visible in this age of global communication.⁵

The nature of the solution to be found to a particular problem will always depend on the nature of the problem. That is – the origin of the ongoing inequality. I propose that we compare dirty or infected as against clean and healthy feet. That is, if the West has clean feet, then what is the nature of the feet of the poor? Is the problem that they are dirty, sweaty, and smelly, or could it be also that they are infected – with the jigger flea?⁶

People have a fascination with feet. They may be considered the dirtiest part of the body. Jesus famous statement indicates that cleansing of feet is in some way a cleansing of the whole body (John 13:10). Uncovered feet are often considered a sign of poverty – it was striking to me when I first went to Zambia in 1988 to find some people going to church with bare feet. Shoes can receive an inordinate amount of attention. They need to be polished frequently, whereas other clothes merely need washing. Clean, healthy feet covered with a good pair of shoes represent a cultured and prosperous people.⁷

A question that arises today, is how to change Third World feet so that they resemble First World feet. I want to consider two main options. First, to treat Third World feet like First World feet in order to enable them to resemble First World feet. Second, to treat Third World feet differently from First World feet in order to enable them to resemble First World feet.

Treating Feet

The way to look after feet is, in the West at least, often considered to be ‘known’. Chiropodists scattered around the population are experts in this matter. It is known that feet need regular washing that shoe sizes for children should not be such as to distort natural foot growth, that feet should usually be protected by shoes, but that shoes should be made in such a way as to allow aeration so as to avoid such infections as athlete’s foot. The above is common knowledge.

I would like to draw on personal experience with my feet. I recently made a trip to the UK from Africa. About two weeks into my stay, I developed a painful swelling on one toe. Previous experience told me that this was caused by a jigger flea. (Jigger fleas live in dusty/dirty houses in much of the tropics. Females jump onto bare human skin, then bury themselves under the skin. The female body becomes a sack of eggs, and itches and can be painful as it grows. If nothing is done about these eggs, they will burst open to the surface, then the eggs will hatch into fleas that extend infection further to the same or other people (Jigger nd.). Fortunately, I was able to tell the nurse at the ‘emergency clinic’ that I attended at my local hospital in the UK, what this was. She had never heard of a ‘jigger flea’, and had certainly never seen one. She called her fellow nurses saying ‘look at this. I have a patient who has come with ... what is it again?’ she asked me. ‘I think it is a jigger flea’ I explained. ‘Well’ she told her friends ‘I have never heard of a jigger flea. Come and have a look!’ I sat in embarrassed silence as my toe became the highlight of the day’s events. I guess many husbands heard that night from their nurse-wives that ‘someone had come to our clinic from Africa with something called a jigger flea in his foot.’

Instead of carefully hooking the flea/sac of eggs out of its hole with a needle, (as almost every other person in rural Africa knows to do) the nurse had to gauge it out with a scalpel. Admittedly she did give me the option first of going to a Hospital of Tropical Diseases – which would have meant a trip to London a few days. I told her to go ahead and gauge it out. Life went on thereafter with a hole in one toe, which fortunately in due course healed up.

What struck me on reflecting on this incident was how inappropriate conventional wisdom on foot-care would have been for me at the time. The nurse could have ignored my claim that I had a parasitic infection. She had never come across it before after all. She might have insisted that I wash my feet more often, change my socks every day, and wear proper leather shoes. Meanwhile the little jiggers would have had a field day multiplying and breeding in my shoes until my feet became full of them!⁸

My prior experience with jiggers in Africa has been made the more unpleasant by the reluctance of African professional medical personnel to help with them. Some clinics I have approached with this problem have rewarded me with laughter and derision. After a quick perusal, they have told me that there was no jigger in my foot. A few days later I would prove that it was there and

someone else would help me to remove it. The presence of jiggers in this part of Africa is associated with the poor, the ignorant, and the mad. I obtain jiggers because I frequently visit the poor, and do so while wearing open shoes – i.e. sandals. I guess it is not a nurse's favourite occupation to have to work on some old man's feet. It might have become too embarrassing to admit that I had jiggers – if it had not been for the pain that I was seeking relief from.

It is possible to 'treat oneself' if one has a jigger. Fortunately, I have never had to do this. I have always managed to find someone to help me. The thought of trying to hook a flea from its hole within one's own feet with a needle while crouching painfully, is not attractive. Many who do try to 'treat themselves' can make matters worse for themselves, especially if they use a blunt and dirty instrument to remove the jigger.⁹

There is no 'alternative treatment' for jigger flea attack – other than to remove the flea. The sac of eggs must be removed (Jigger nd). Simply killing the flea while it is still buried in one's skin can result in an infected wound. There is no known alternative to poking around someone's dirty, smelly feet.¹⁰

Feet and Peculiar Third World Problems

Could the humble jigger flea represent the nature of some Third World problems? Could it be that transfer of Western knowledge (of looking after one's feet) could aggravate Third World problems through its ignoring of real local issues – the jigger flea?

I suggest that this can happen, and is happening. When Western medical personnel are 'on the ground' and familiar with the whole of life of a people concerned, they are likely to perceive such omissions. This can be compared to the 'early days' of missionary activity, when there were many missionaries from the West in Africa, and when the language of interaction was predominantly the African language. In those days medics, amongst others, had a close familiarity with African ways, circumstances and problems.

More recently, an observable trend has been for coal-face roles in Africa to be filled by Africans themselves. This presumably applies also to other regions of the so-called Third World. This means that Westerners have drawn further and further back from 'the coal face'. At the same time the West and its language continue to be the fount of knowledge on which many poor countries are drawing in formal contexts. This means that information and prescriptions from the West are becoming more and more detached from the reality on the ground in the Third World. Such detachment coincides with escalating levels of globalisation: resulting in phenomenal spread of Western languages, technologies, advice and cultures. That is, taking our example above, a massive spread of information that disregards the impact of jigger fleas (superstition) on people's lives.

What are people to do if they are infected by jigger fleas? They know that conceding as much will earn them laughter and derision. Unless they are peculiarly adept at bending their own legs and back so as to treat their own feet, they are in trouble. Should they be capable of doing such, the need to search out a secret hidden place in which to 'treat oneself' does not seem to be an ideal solution.¹¹ More and more people may be following all the formal advice being given – washing

their feet frequently, changing their socks daily and polishing their shoes thoroughly, while their feet themselves suffer increasing pain from being mutilated by the embarrassing and therefore unacknowledged fiend; the jigger flea.

This 'allegory' is broad in its potential application. The jigger flea could represent almost any 'despised' problem found in the Third World that is not found in the First World. Such 'difference' comes increasingly to be ignored as globalisation gallops on at an ever increasing rate. My particular concern here is with theology. This is a key concern, remembering the once acknowledged role of theology as the queen of the sciences.¹²

There are striking parallels between jigger fleas, and some 'superstitious fears'¹³ for which Africa has historically been renowned. Both are helpfully 'removed' in order to help an African person to live a contented and fulfilling life. Both are likely to be concealed through fear of stigmatisation should one confess that one is being troubled by them. Both can continue to fester, to trouble, and to grow and expand their jurisdiction and hold over someone's life in ways that may be concealed, if nothing is done about them. Both can easily hinder productivity, economic and otherwise.¹⁴

Issues of Globalisation

The advantages of globalisation are often seen as including the spreading of the 'better life' being lived by Westerners, to poor parts of the world. English being a 'component' of globalisation, is a very powerful language to know. Those in the Third world (certainly commonwealth Africa with which I am somewhat familiar) who have a good grasp of English get the best jobs with the best remuneration (Musimbi 1991:404). In order to acquire and maintain such lucrative positions, someone must speak and act in such a way as to please the West. The West is 'pleased', as are people in general, by those who value them and become sufficiently 'like them' so as to communicate deeply with them. The African person who is generally valued by the West, therefore, is the one who can 'interact' like a Westerner. That is, in other words, the one who puts aside (or conceals) peculiarly African problems and issues; such as jigger fleas and 'superstition' or fear of 'spirits'.

The above should be making plain at least one outcome of globalisation; that it raises the level of ignorance of the periphery by the centre. Compare again the situation one hundred years ago of a missionary who reported back to the UK after twenty years of interacting with people on the African field using the African language, with that of today. Such Christian missionaries knew the people to whom they were communicating profoundly, having had to live close to them. They were able to perceive 'differences' between their own people and those they had gone to. As a result missionaries were in those days able to communicate 'back home' what ought to be done to improve the lives of 'those people'. (Assuming that Western ways of life are somehow 'better' than traditional African ones – an assumption that is extremely widespread implicitly and often explicitly.)

Nowadays the West, including the UK, is increasingly informed about Africa by people born and raised in Africa. Many such people's unfamiliarity with the West at depth means that they do not have a detailed understanding of how their words will be understood in the West. (Although they know English, many of them will have a limited understanding of how English is used in countries

like the UK, i.e. of the pragmatic rules of Western English.) They do not have a deep understanding of what makes a country to 'be developed' (assuming that those who 'are' developed know more about what it is to be 'developed' than those who are not). Such people do not have the freedom to talk about 'them' (i.e. Africans) in any kind of objective way,¹⁵ because they are 'one of them'. Because no-one really enjoys standing and talking to a group of people in such a way as to earn their derision, African people prefer to 'impress' their audience by convincing them as to how similar (or even 'more advanced') Africa is by comparison with the UK, even if this requires some compromises to 'truth'.

Having heard 'from the horse's mouth' that neither jigger fleas nor fear of spirits are really a 'problem' in Africa (see above paragraph), listeners in the West are left with a dilemma. Either they must contradict (i.e. disbelieve) what the English-speaking native African has said to their face, or they must consider the 'old missionaries' who told about 'primitive' Africans to have been telling tales,¹⁶ or they must accept that somehow by magic (it seems) the problems of superstition (or animism, as of jigger fleas) have *disappeared!* In practice, a combination of the above three are occurring. That is – the old missionaries are under suspicion, the African is believed (but not quite) and jigger fleas and superstition are in a strange tension in Western people's minds of being – both there and gone.

This same scenario can be considered linguistically as a process of translation by asking – what happens to differences between cultures if the language of communication between people from different cultures is common? In the current globalised and globalising world – the UK and USA are insisting that the non-West present its issues to them according to the categories of Western thinking – i.e. in English. Anything else is becoming less and less acceptable in the mainstream.¹⁷ In the course of this, jigger fleas and troublesome spirits disappear from view. Meanwhile in Africans' implicit understanding of the same discourse they convert Western concepts into African ones. Inevitably, African people often understand words of foreign origin as if they are translations of familiar ones from their own contexts.¹⁸ This underlies the so-called prosperity gospel, through which 'science' is incorporated into African people's magical worldview.¹⁹

One outcome of the points summarised in the above paragraph is that the West struggles to interact intelligently with African issues, and Africa with Western issues. One outcome of this is that people of African origin try to put European languages like English into a strait-jacket, not liking the implication that they are different because they realise that for Europeans 'different' often implies inferior.²⁰ Meanwhile the wealthy West imposes solutions to 'unkempt feet' in Africa, that simply do not fit.

The Need for Local Jurisdiction

Smart shoes can conceal smarting pain. Jigger fleas could be flourishing under the cover of shiny leather. So can fears of ancestors and witches be rampant under the cover of 'modernity'. Surely in both cases – these things need to be attended to. But as long as the West provides the language and sets the agenda – they may not even be recognised. The wearer of the smart shoes, or the liver of the apparently modern life, is suffering. The suffering is such as to thwart envisioned 'progress' that from surface appearance ought to be easy to achieve.²¹

The things being concealed needn't be oriented to 'suffering'. If European languages are the preferred choice in debate, and if Western theological and other agendas determine what is the appropriate set of language uses, enormous amounts can be missed in the course of formal inter-cultural or international discussion. Assumptions can be made that frankly are incorrect.

That being described in the above paragraph is inherently difficult to explain, as it is claiming that there are things that go beyond 'ordinary' explanation. A means is needed to articulate the kinds of difference that can exist between languages or cultures. A good illustration is sports. Let us take two sports as two different 'cultures' and the two different cultures as having two different 'languages'. For example, we have a sport of football and a language of football and a sport of cricket and a language of cricket. Being confined to the language of one sport when trying to explain another would certainly be confusing:

In the case of a game of football, a 'goal' could be 'translated' into cricket-language as 'run'. Offside could be a 'catch'. A penalty kick could be a fast bowl, and a normal kick at goal a spin bowl. Hitting the cross bar could be said to be hitting the stumps. A header sounds like a catch that failed. A hand-ball could be translated as 'a catch', and half-time would have to be a change of over. (See Table 1 below.) Just imagine the confusion that would arise if the commentator of a football match were to use such terminology to describe what happened in a football match to someone only familiar with cricket. Yet when English is used to describe African ways of life, because that is all that native English speakers have ever heard, they may not even bat an eyelid when such things happen.

Table 1 Translations between Football (soccer) and Cricket

| Football (soccer) term | Cricket translation (assumed) |
|------------------------|-------------------------------|
| Goal | Run |
| Offside | Catch |
| Penalty kick | Fast bowl |
| Kick | Spin bowl |
| Hitting the cross bar | Hitting the stumps |
| Header | Failed catch |
| Handball | Catch |
| Half time | Change of over |

Imagine then how this account of a football match:

Before scoring, number 9 caused an offside. Later there was a penalty kick, giving a better chance than a normal kick at goal, but the ball hit the crossbar. A player tried to head the ball, but unfortunately touched it with his hands. Just then the whistle blew for half time.

Would translate into this account of the same match using the language of cricket:

Before getting a run, number 9 caught the ball. There was a fast bowl then a spin bowl, but the

ball hit the stumps resulting in a failed catch but later a successful catch. That was the end of that over.

The latter will not assist listeners either to improve on their cricket, or to understand the game of football. It is not a basis for helping the people concerned to play better cricket – because what is being played is not cricket but football. The conclusion that we are moving towards is frankly that intercultural understanding is in profound and important ways impossible.²²

Turning to theology we find a peculiar thing that has happened in Western academic circles in recent centuries. That is ‘God’ has consciously been removed from the equation in examining human existence (Johnson 1995). This has necessitated the development of numerous disciplines to compensate for his absence in debate; psychology, psychiatry, evolutionary theory – to name just a few. By such means God is called by any name but God while his actions are rendered meaningless by the language in use.²³ Ironically, it is such ‘secularised’ languages that Christian missionaries now like to promote around the world. Such a secularised language as a medium of communication makes it all the more difficult to appreciate the spiritual dilemmas and issues being faced by those in the Third world.

Exclusion of God from academic discourse has not solved all of mankind’s problems, or brought peace and meaningfulness to people’s lives. This need not surprise us, because the question of the reason for someone’s existence is an open question that troubles almost everyone and that can only be answered with reference to God.²⁴

The role of ancestral spirits in the lives of people, as the action of jigger fleas should, I suggest, not be laughed at or ignored. Someone’s response to the pain caused by a jigger flea in their toe can dwarf the importance of any of the rest of life’s activities. It is difficult to concentrate on anything else when there is a flea painfully manoeuvring in a hole in one’s toe. Untoward spirits similarly cannot just be ‘ignored’ by someone who ‘believes in them’. The best approach to fear of spirits which I propose, that has had an enormous impact to the good on the West over many centuries, is to seriously consider the claim of Yahweh to being Almighty God as propounded by Scripture and Church. No amount of washing of feet will get rid of a jigger flea. No amount of ‘secular education’ will do away with troubling spirits and people’s innate desire for fulfilment that only a relationship with God can satisfy. The jigger flea needs to be hooked out and not ignored. The same applies to superstitious beliefs, and the way to do the latter is called theology.

Conclusion

In this article I expose issues in inter-cultural relations that have for pragmatic reasons been ignored for decades. Those reasons having been rooted in pragmatics, and especially in justifying domination by the West, need urgent attention so as to enable positive change and development in Africa. I argue that as feet infested with jigger fleas need different treatment to those not so infested, so places where beliefs in spirits are rampant need different ‘treatment’ to the secular West.

A complex un-intended deception has occurred as a result of the Western domination of Africa. Newly independent states’ peculiar circumstances resulted in an almost across-the-board adoption

of European languages for official purposes. The advance of globalisation is preventing adaption of these languages, notably English, to local contexts. African governments have found that the economic benefits associated with use of European languages have had repercussions. Amongst these has been enormous pressure to ignore peculiarities of African contexts, and to make decisions *as if* contexts are European/Western.

In this article I have examined this communication dilemma with respect to theology by drawing an analogy between African 'superstitions' and a human-parasite found in poor parts of Africa called the jigger flea that is not found in more temperate climates or under more hygienic conditions. As Western guidelines for foot-care are wanting in the light of this 'unknown' parasite, so it is suggested, approaches to the encouragement of development in Africa will be wanting unless or until a means can be found to counter a deeply ingrained fear of untoward spirits that is largely unknown in the West.

I address this article to Westerners, and suggests that some contemporary interventionary strategies from the West into the Third world, particularly Africa, are immoral. For the church; the benefits of short-term mission activities and those based on European languages are challenged. The alternative mission model advocated is one of long term 'vulnerable' exposure by Western Christian missionaries. 'Vulnerable' is here defined as being – using the languages and resources of the people being reached in ministry and projects.²⁵ Western Christian missionaries are by such means enabled to sensibly consider relevant and pertinent theological and other inputs into 'poor' parts of the world – such as much of Africa.

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¹ Illustration from <http://www.jigger-ahadi.org/jiggers.html> (accessed on 25th November 2009)

² For more information on this see www.vulnerablemission.org

³ People attacked by jigger fleas are 'stigmatized', according to Jigger (nd.).

⁴ Those doubting the prevalence and pertinence of superstitious beliefs and witchcraft in Africa could do well to read Omari (1993) and Haar (2007).

⁵ The appearance of injustice is aggravated by massive increases in recent years of the wealth of the West and parts of the 'East', and increases in the visibility of poverty elsewhere.

⁶ For more details of the 'jigger flea', see below.

⁷ I have been told on numerous occasions in the course of ministry in Western Kenya how important it is for a preacher to be respected that he wear nice looking polished black shoes.

⁸ There are a number of people walking around in my home area in Africa whose feet are covered in jiggers. Typically they are mad people or those who take no account of hygiene in their homes.

⁹ This can easily cause an infection.

¹⁰ Of course feet can be washed and needn't be smelly. I refer however to the general hesitation shown by people in attending to someone else's feet, by comparison for example with should it be their hand, back or arm that needs attention.

¹¹ A secret place would need to be found to avoid stigmatization. Even 'modernised Africans', it is widely said, make secret trips to witchdoctors if they have problems (Omari 1993:60-61).

¹² 'In part of his essay [R.R. Reno] noted theology's position in the academy in pre-modern times and traced its journey as it relinquished its lofty position as queen of the sciences' (Mars Hill 2009). Theology's role as queen of academia is less widely recognised than it once was. Although this is now changing – both in psychology and theology.

¹³ The English term 'superstition' is only a crude reproduction of what is going on in Africa.

¹⁴ It is hard to be productive with a painful jigger in one's foot. 'Superstition' will orient someone to use time and resources in countering witches.

¹⁵ i.e. a way that the West considers to be 'objective'.

¹⁶ 'The missionaries planning a 'dialogue between Christianity and animism' waste their time' says Okot (1970:44) 'because there is no such religion as animism in Africa.'

¹⁷ English is becoming more and more prevalent as the language of international scholarship and communication, and for many the only language of scholarship.

¹⁸ Okot explained this clearly in the case of Western descriptions of African gods. 'The Hellenic armours with which African deities were clothed were not primarily for their protection, but to make them appear like the Christian God.' he says, before urging that such 'dressings' be removed by Africans (1970:105). What Okot strongly advocates in this polemic, is anyway an inevitable part of translation, as a people cannot help but understand what is foreign by using their own terms.

¹⁹ Balcomb talks of the 'African ability to integrate diverse elements without the contradictions raised by the more dualistic thinking of the West' (1996). I use the term magic metaphorically to represent something that is beyond the comprehension of standard English, and not with the implication that what is going on in Africa is that which native-English speakers pre-understand by the term 'magic'.

²⁰ For example, see Okot's attack on the use of terms such as 'tribe' and 'primitive' to describe Africans (1970:9-16 and 40-51). His and other similar attacks attempt to deprive English of terms that can be used to describe the 'other'.

²¹ 'Inability to carry out normal day to day activities (work)' is one of the outcomes of jigger-flea infection according to Jigger (nd.).

²² For more on this theme, see Harries (2011).

²³ In so far as meaningfulness is connected to God, as explored by Ken (2008).

²⁴ 'God' could of course be variously defined or understood – which is the stuff of theology.

²⁵ See vulnerablemission.org