

# **Africa's Metaphors Are Essential to Its Functioning and Identity: Ignore Them at Your Peril**

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## **Abstract**

Secular Western development interventions in Africa have largely failed to change Africa much for the better because they have, first, failed to engage the metaphors by which Africans perceive life; and, second, not supplied alternative metaphors which Africans find compelling. Outside interventions have failed to engage African metaphors because of a bias against their “unscientific” (spiritual, theological) nature. The bias is not against the metaphors themselves but against watered-down translations of them, which are straw men easily demolished. That bias prevents the West from taking the metaphors seriously enough to engage them in their own languages, process them in dialogue with biblical metaphors, and collaborate with Africa for the compelling, reformulated, genuinely African metaphors that can not only help lead Africa toward understanding itself, but free the West from its biased secularism toward a more Christ-centered, way of life.

**Key Words:** Africa, metaphor, Bible, story, indigenous, secularism

**Note:** The reader of this article should ignore the capitalisation, or otherwise, of the term God / god.

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## **Introduction**

This article begins with a study of metaphor. It links an understanding of metaphor to recent rising interest in cognitive studies. Research into human cognition, including into metaphor, is here shown to be foundationally theological. This article suggests that it is necessary to displace secularism and replace it with the Gospel as central value in the mainstream West as a prerequisite to global flourishing in the years ahead.

## **Choice of Metaphor Determines Course**

Crime has escalated in your town. You talk to a friend about it. “This crime in our town is a real beast,” you might say. Alternatively, you might prefer to say; “crime is spreading in our town like a virus.” The split-second decision on what to say, beast or virus, is according to Thibodeau and Boroditsky (2015) very significant. The choice you make of metaphor to describe your town’s predicament will affect your friend’s perception of possible avenues of resolution. This applies even if you are unaware of the full significance of your choice of terms. Even if escalation of crime in your town is somehow ascertained as factual, something real, something that has been statistically or otherwise verified, the metaphorical way such reality is presented can have even more impact on how people respond to it than do its objective parameters, or means used to ascertain them.

Where does the difference between the two metaphors, beasts and viruses, come from? Is it scientific? Is it objective? Is it learned – do we have classes in school that tell us whether crime is a beast, or crime is a virus, or neither? I suggest that the choice of metaphor we use to articulate our context is not scientifically determined, but scientifically-speaking quite arbitrary. What is likely to influence it is the kinds of stories we hear and come across in our

lives. Someone who has immersed themselves in accounts of wild animals struggling to overcome one another by brute force, is not likely to come up with, as they will not be familiar with, causation by a virus that rapidly multiplies and spreads surreptitiously. In the same way, a worker in a laboratory used to hearing stories about how pernicious viruses spread through the body, may be less likely to consider crime to be a beast.

If choice of metaphor is critical to interpretation of data, then it is important to ask which metaphors are the most helpful, appropriate, and ethical, in describing, for example, problematic situations such as that of a rise in crime in a city. If crime is a beast, this implies the need to empower the police force. If crime is a virus, it implies a need for education. What are the other options? One might be that crime is a sin, then it requires repentance. Crime is a dirty habit, then it requires cleansing, and so on.

The question of metaphor of choice has political ramifications. Presumably that is why George Lakoff, who became renowned for his research on metaphor (Lakoff and Johnson 1980), sought to educate America's politicians (Lakoff 2008). Despite the critical importance of the choice, there is no objective basis to choice of metaphor in a particular situation. It is a choice that people, or political parties, or interested groups, could wrangle over. Ignorance over just what is under dispute, which metaphors are making alternative courses of action more or less favourable, can result in wrangling without solution. Lakoff argues that politicians may argue vociferously, without realising that the cause of their dispute is rooted in their choice of metaphor (Lakoff 2016).

In our case of crime in the city above, perhaps both of the given metaphors should be avoided, and another chosen instead? Or the use of metaphors should be avoided – if that is possible? I do not think it is possible, because things can always be said in different ways with different combinations of words, and the choice of words affects how one will be understood. Take for example 'close the door' and 'put the wood in the hole'. These alternative phrases behave like metaphors.

Paul Ricoeur laments how thinking on metaphor has, since Aristotle, got stuck on the level of *word* (1977:50-57). Perception of metaphor at the level of sentence, paragraph, story, and in fact every other level is thus clouded. Even should metaphor not to be used at word-level, it is elsewhere. "There is no non-metaphorical standpoint from which one could look upon metaphor ... as if ... [use of metaphor] is a game played before one's eyes" Ricoeur tells us (1977:19).

One might argue over which kind of stories presenting which kinds of metaphors are most helpful for resolution of a particular case, such as that of crime above. One could also ask – what are the kinds of narratives in which people should be immersed, in order to give them the most helpful combinations of metaphor for the most universally advantageous human thriving?

Research on metaphor has only recently raised questions like those above. When problems are identified factually and resolved rationally then objective analysis, and not story, is important. The worldview presupposing such an objective approach is "at odds with the scientific facts from the cognitive and brain sciences" (Lakoff 2016:kindle version).<sup>1</sup> So what if the key to the solution of problems is in correctly identifying the story(s) of which they should be seen to be a part, so they be approached with the most helpful metaphors? Then things look rather different.

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<sup>1</sup> Note here my unease with the term 'cognitive science'; how can science undermine science?

Biblical narratives have been and continue to be a great favourite by many for the above purposes. Forefathers of Western nations immersed themselves in Biblical narratives. They understood that to be the means of identifying an appropriate metaphoric-foundation to live by. Such wisdom was more recently questioned.<sup>2</sup>

The Bible, acknowledged to be a ‘perennial favourite’ even by its detractors (such as Sapolsky 2017:406), might be considered the global front-runner when it comes to choice of narratives. The biblical narrative is not constrained by science. That is, it does not confine itself to the ‘real’, in a modern ‘real verses not real’ contrast, or to the material or natural, or to the supernatural. In the biblical narrative, the supernatural and the natural intermingle, until one might wonder where the line between them ought to be drawn. In other words, the biblical narrative points to an extra-scientific role for God in appropriate derivation of metaphors that enable human thriving. If this is the narrative that is the most appropriate for humans, something for which there is endless evidence, then this implies a key role for God in human thriving.

Many contemporary narratives are dependent on an upholding of the natural versus supernatural, or real versus unreal distinction. By way of example, psychology, “the science of mind and behavior,”<sup>3</sup> a discipline that has arisen in modern (secular) times, would be undermined if mind and behaviour were found to be other than scientific, were people directly connected to a transcendent being.

### **Evidence from Cognitive Studies**

What I term cognitive *studies* is more commonly referred to as cognitive *science*. I consider that to call the study of cognition a science is misleading. The nature and breadth of what cognitive ‘science’ explores results in it having much in common with religion.<sup>4</sup>

Cognitive Studies has taken advantage of recent technological innovations, such as advances in computing, to do research on human cognition. Some cognitive ‘scientists’ have gone back to question recently-presupposed ‘Western’ philosophy (Lakoff and Johnson 1999). They have uncovered, and are uncovering, radically new ways of looking at human comprehension. Students of cognition have realised that human cognition is not merely a perception of what is already ‘out there’. Instead cognition itself gives what is ‘out there’ its shape and identity. Cognitive studies show that humans, have a human-specific way of looking at the world, with all that such entails. Instead of starting with the world around people as if it could exist without them, and then looking at how people perceive it, cognitive studies looks at ways people’s cognition of the world forms how they perceive it in the first place (Harries 2018:22). Hence choice of metaphor to use in describing something can have a more critical role in achieving understanding than the supposedly ‘real’ thing that it articulates.

### **Politically Grounded Resistance to Truth**

The West’s reluctance to acknowledge God’s activities in human society is, I suggest, not rooted in logic, scholarship, or common sense, but is political. That is to say – it is about people not wanting to allow threats to paradigms that have become foundational to many

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<sup>2</sup> Cummins 2016, cited below, tells us that post-reformation and enlightenment times were dominated by Christian belief.

<sup>3</sup> According to *Miriam-Webster* at <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/psychology>.

<sup>4</sup> While approaches to the study of cognition may be guided by science, to say that cognition itself is scientific is erroneous. That would be comparable to calling analysis of a football match ‘the science of an inflated rubber sphere’, as if actions of human players were irrelevant.

contemporary human endeavours. More specifically, I here refer to Western secularism.<sup>5</sup>

One historic foundation for the West's ignoring of God in its scholarship has already been widely recognised as faulty. That is, the foundation of positivism. Although we could say that positivism has officially been discredited, 'unofficially' it continues to hold much sway. Positivism claims to do away with the need for God.

The second foundation, related to the above, is the belief that to be credit-worthy, God has to prove himself to be supernatural. Deason unearthed the origins of this belief, as being in certain Protestant circles in the 16<sup>th</sup> Century (1986). At the time the notion that there might be 'laws of nature', was still very new (Zakai 2007:136). Before many of what today might be considered foundational laws of nature were discovered or devised, certain Protestants considered that genuine faith in God, i.e., an exemplary faith in God, would best be demonstrated by believing that God could reveal himself independently of nature. Those who advocated such did not at the time realise how research by scientists would result in a 'closing in on' God, as a result of nature being defined in ways radically different to those originally envisaged. What started as a challenge to having greater faith, has become delegating the task of determining the boundaries of 'faith' to scientists. I suggest that we should cease expecting God to be super-to-nature in order to believe in him.

A third foundation for contemporary intuitive atheism is the belief that the West has got to where it is on the basis of an understanding that is built on objectivity. That is; many Westerners consider that the achievement of the West in developing science and its applications has been a product of reason and rationality. Whatever exactly constitutes reason and rationality,<sup>6</sup> this claim ignores the absolutely pivotal role that Protestant Christianity has played in making the West what it is today.<sup>7</sup> There should be no excuse for such omission – the evidence is so blatant – but the evidence is habitually ignored. Enlightenment figures were almost all devotedly Christian: the development of science was “dominated by Christianity. We're not going to get away from that,” (Cummins 2016). Even those few scholars who might not have professed Christ, clearly lived and thought in a context very much dominated by Christianity. Protestant countries dominated in the initiation and the expansion of modernism from Europe to the rest of the globe. Christian teaching and principles, especially of the Protestant variety, can still easily be traced as having originated from numerous so-called secular principles of life and living (see for example Ingram 2015 and Berman 1983). So we can say that: metaphors used in the development of the West have clearly come from the Christian faith.

A fourth reason some give for ignoring God's impact on people's lives through the Gospel, is the myth of world religions. Masuzawa demonstrates how in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century Western people began to believe that there are various world-religions in addition to Christianity (2005). This belief in polytheism, clearly contrary to orthodox biblical faith, meant that Christianity is taken as just one of many truths. The fact that there were thought to be other apparently equally credible alternatives to Christianity became an excuse not to take the claims of Christianity seriously (Troeltsch 1923). For why such does not hold water, see Harries (2016).

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<sup>5</sup> Western Secularism is very different to other non-Western Secularisms (Calhoun et al., 2011).

<sup>6</sup> Reason and rationality have been much discussed elsewhere. I do not have space to go into their nature in detail in this article.

<sup>7</sup> The case that the Bible is foundational to the soul of the Western world is made especially well by Mangalwadi (2011).

The above four supposedly foundational positions provided justification for belief in Western secularism. Enormous global bodies, such as the EU (European Union) are built on the same foundations. Contemporary global-wide policies assume 'religion' to be a private affair. To acknowledge the singular truth of the Gospel would require severe back-pedaling, which not all officials in Western governance are in a hurry to engage.

### **'Gods' Determine Choice of Metaphor**

Having identified the pivotal influence of choice of metaphor on life's activities, it is only a short step to look at what determines that choice. The nature of God is clearly important here. This discussion gives us an alternative foundation to the modern debate about whether or not a god is real, that is rooted in the false dualism mentioned above of natural versus supernatural in which 'real' = natural, and 'not-real' = supernatural. God provides the metaphors we live by. 'Gods' are a means for people to acquire identity and direction that are necessary to remove human society from arbitrariness.

Let's reconsider the content of the above paragraph in different words. The options on how-to-live are, for a particular generation of human society, diverse, if not infinite. Just by way of example – sexual urges that result in production of babies do not in themselves dictate or determine the relationship between mother and father. Endless alternatives are available. There is a choice, *e.g.* between polygamy and monogamy or polyandry and wife-swopping. A woman can choose to consider the man who has made her pregnant her protector, her lord, her partner, soul-mate, best friend, beast, lover, one-night-stand, piercer, or ... ? The choice of metaphor chosen dictates much of the structure of the rest of life. Such metaphor choices are widely recognised as being 'religiously' determined.

Do problems often considered to be plaguing contemporary Africa also arise from choice of metaphor? That seems likely. We could ask, if that is the case, can the West perceive it? These days most Westerners who are knowledgeable about Africa make their discoveries using Western languages. If what is peculiarly African is to do with peculiar African linguistic metaphors, how will such peculiarities be translated? Will African people be heard only in English translation? Much that is peculiar about African people is lost in translation. This explains the inadequacy of the West when it comes to understanding or solving African problems.

Let us take a classic example, that African people are considered to believe in *demons*. *Demons* is an English term originating in Europe and not in Africa. How many metaphors of critical importance are subsumed by translation into the term *demons*? How many Western scholars have the kind of depth of knowledge of African languages to be able to begin to make a scholarly analysis of metaphors in use in Africa? If indeed metaphors are important in directing courses of meaning, how much of understanding of African ways of life is lost if it is only to be understood using translation into English?

From the time of Abraham, or even Abel or Seth or Noah, the bible talks of a God who wants his people to be *set apart*. Later, for Israelites in the Promised Land, set-apartness became a matter of maintaining a distinction with the Canaanite inhabitants that preceded them (Deuteronomy 18:9-13). God clearly wanted to correct the *erroneous metaphors* of the Canaanites. I believe God is still interested in bringing the metaphors of different people around the world into line with his wisdom. For example, for Christians: death is non-permanent, love requires self-sacrifice, revenge is God's and not mine, enemies are not enemies, God's grace is extended to the underserving, and so on.

From my having learned the Luo language of Western Kenya,<sup>8</sup> and having used it daily since 1995, here are some of my observations on metaphors that (1) are lost on translation into English, and (2) God may be interested in transforming.

*Jachien*, typically translated into English as the devil or satan, is a haunter, where the metaphor for a haunter is someone who comes to you from behind. *Oira*, easily translated into English as he bewitched me, is more literally ‘he-to-me’ or ‘he something does-to-me’. For example, the person may push some *medicine* to me in order to harm me. *Juogi*, that might in English simply be given as spirits, sounds in the Luo language very much like ‘those people’. To refer to *juogi*, seems to be to ‘blame others’. A term translatable into English as brother or sister is *nyathiwa*, yet more literally *nyathiwa* is ‘our fellow child’ or ‘our child’ in the sense that we are children together. The term translated into English as God in Luo literally refers to “the spreading fertility that results from beseeching someone” (Harries 2017:182). *Chunye* is literally ‘his liver’, but is considered the seat of emotions, so is used to translate *kardia* in Greek as is heart in English. Yet *chun* is also to force, implying that *chunye* may be ‘it’s forced him,’ implying that our emotions force us into things. *Liel* is commonly translated into English as funeral, but actually is metonymic, as *liel* refers to shaving the head. We could add numerous examples, such as *chwora* (my husband) is ‘he who pierces me’, *nyara* (my daughter) is ‘my fertility’, *lokruok* (repentance) is ‘turn around’, and so on. I suggest that the content of this paragraph represents the tip of an iceberg.

I suggest that a predominance of taboos in the West is a major problem for African studies today. That is, anti-racism efforts in the West, that have become globalised, have labelled it as undesirable if not immoral or even illegal to name many features of African ways of life that are different from those of European peoples. For example: if one says Africans are more or less of this or that, with any moral implication that is different from that of Europeans, one can be condemned for being racist. “On this topic the media fall prey to a form of inverted racism ... terrified of standing accused of panding to colonial era stereotypes if ‘Africa’ and ‘witchcraft’ appear in the same sentence” (Gifford 2014:123). As a result many features of African ways of life are concealed to the West. Even then, despite that, many analysts see sub-Saharan Africa as a backwater if not basket-case with respect to many features of international comparison. Despite apparently enormous efforts by Western and other nations, Africa remains economically and educationally behind (Packtor 2015). Some say that the gods of Africa are holding it back. Perhaps though it is its metaphors that need transforming. The Christian gospel is about transformation of metaphor, as Christians endeavour to benefit from accounts of Christ’s life and other biblical narratives, that are ways of understanding teleology as purposeful and hope-filled, to eternity. Taboos such as that of recognition of apparent racial difference in the West, and other political correctness’s, prevent such from happening.

To re-iterate the above in other words, many African tribal groups previously struggled greatly with problems that the light of the gospel has since enabled them to overcome. Despite Gifford’s comment above, I will not fear to say that many African traditional ways of life are in need of transformation to godliness. Not to say so, while as a Westerner I benefit from centuries of Christian history amongst my own people, is to be selfish, uncaring, and thus immoral. Much so called secular Western wisdom, that overtly conceals reference to teleology, conceals vital components of African development. The full scriptural message of the whole gospel is needed for Africa, as elsewhere. To suggest otherwise, and to act otherwise, is immoral and unjust.

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<sup>8</sup> I regularly use the Luo and Swahili languages. I was once fluent also in the Kaonde language of Zambia.

## European Eyes Needed

We seem currently to have a major standoff between Europe/the West and Africa. Some of this I have already mentioned above. I suggest that a basic cause of this is Europe's refusal to recognise the depth of impact of culture on African people, under the misguided understanding that differences between African and European people are racial, i.e. genetic, in origin. Fear of accusation of 'racism' has resulted in neglect of numerous aspects of African cultural ways of life that need urgent attention.

Africans in the West must, by law, be treated as if they are Europeans. The same increasingly thanks to globalisation, applies even in their African homelands. African scholars, to succeed even in their home countries, must be expert at European languages, use of which excludes and ignores their local cultural predicaments! Meanwhile African people's own ways of life remain economically and in other ways, on a global scale, retarded. All the above, I suggest, is rooted in powerful people's determination to defend Westerners' beloved secularism. Powerful Europeans deny African people the teleology that would help them, through fear that to focus on it would uncover the theological rootedness of their own ideologies. The latter would force them to return to faith in Christ and immersion into Christian Scriptures. That taboo-creating fear constitutes a massive injustice.

The above paragraph can be and should be interpreted to mean that there is a critical need for European minds to engage African issues. The current taboo over African reality might just be helping African elites, but it can leave their masses with enormous unpleasant circumstances. Expecting only Africans, almost invariably those heavily invested in European financial pies divided based on assumptions of similarity between Africans and Europeans, to speak for their compatriots, is a major injustice. These days much aid and many projects come to Africa. (Almost?) every one is designed and run using European languages, and makes incorrect assumptions (see above) about cultural similarity between Africa and the West.

To break this trend, Westerners are desperately needed who will invest in Africa using indigenous languages and resources. By confining themselves to working with what is local, such people can begin to see real local problems, and sustainable (not-foreign donor-dependent) ways of tackling them. They can search for how to tackle them through the introduction of helpful narratives, thus metaphors, learned from the life of Christ.

## Conclusion

Recent revival in appreciation of the role of metaphor, facilitated especially by advances in cognitive studies, has rendered foundational wisdom used to date by the West to relate to Africa obsolete. Secular foundations to international communication ignore the enormous power metaphors hold over understanding. Contemporary wisdom remaining riven-through with taboos arising from prior eras, particularly the taboo in the West on theology and faith in Christ, frequently bypasses key issues. This article pushes for urgent overcoming of taboos about African 'difference'. Such overcoming will bring the Gospel, already openly prominent in Africa, to central-stage globally. Upsets that such might cause are a necessary cost for the long-term good. Open acknowledgement and free discussion on teleology are necessary to enable mutual understanding between the West and Africa.

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