

**Vulnerable Mission in Africa:
Why Some of Today's Intercultural Missionaries
Should Restrict Themselves to Local Languages and Resources**

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Abstract

Intentionally rooting this article in a church visit by the author connects to African contextual reality. Interpretation by the author may be unlike indigenous African interpretation, that will be affected by financial and other dependencies, and arise from contextual presuppositions unfamiliar to the West. Practice of vulnerable mission (use local languages and resources), implemented with determined conviction, is proposed for a Westerner to acquire eyes and ears in indigenous contexts. For Westerners to communicate good sense in the light of indigenous realities is difficult. God's love is universal, but how his love is understood is not.

Key Words: Africa, donors, language, mission, Vulnerable Mission

Introduction

A typical statement by a short-term mission team member on a trip to Africa might be, "Isn't it wonderful, the mission work we can do in Africa these days. A small amount of money can help so many people. So many Africans now understand English. It is really easy to make a difference!" How do we make sense of this?

On recently visiting a small Pentecostal church, about 23 miles from my home near Lake Victoria in Kenya, I discovered that the pastor either did not know me, or about me, or at least did not recognise me. On that basis, I assume that, when I walked in late and sat down, he treated me like "just another white man" (i.e., someone from Europe or America who has little local cultural or linguistic knowledge, who may well be searching for a way to invest foreign funding into helping Africans).

The pastor chose to use English, and have his daughter translate into Luo, rather than the other way around. There are many reasons for this common choice. (I assume, although I might be wrong, that had I not been there only the Luo language would have been used.) Despite the fact that his using the indigenous language would undoubtedly help him to connect more effectively with members of the congregation, use of English adds to pastors' prestige. Because in sub-Saharan Africa the orthodoxy of what someone says is formally assessed in a European language (Harries 2019), the process of translation into English may introduce "error," that tarnishes the pastor's reputation. Foreign visitors, who may well be generous donors, typically relate closely to English speakers. For a visitor to relate to a translator, rather than the pastor, is embarrassing and may lead to financial loss.

The pastor reminisced with his congregation, how they once "had white people" and how at that time the church (i.e., denomination) possessed a Toyota and two motorbikes. Moreover, they often gave out rice or *Brufen* to people. Thus they acquired the name of being "the church of rice" or "the church of *Brufen*." Those days were gone, he told us. But they were better off as they are now, he emphasised: supporting themselves. To draw on foreign donors is desirable. But it is also feared, due to its likely divisiveness and other negative outcomes.

I assume the above helps to explain the pastor's uncertain tone as he asked me to share. In my understanding, he had little choice but to give me opportunity to speak; surely everyone in the church (perhaps 30 people) would be wanting to hear me say something, to know who I am, and for me to explain why I was there. Had he only asked me to tell my name and where I am from, he may later have been accused of closing a door on a gift, had I come with the intention of offering financial support.

To avoid misunderstandings, it is good for a visitor to concentrate on the "spiritual." Even then, the expectation that a white person will want to help financially is deeply rooted. (Locals may see euphemisms where they do not exist.) The holistic ways of life in Africa makes church experience very different from that in Europe. Many African people are reputedly searching for churches where they can make money. By contrast, Westerners (when at home) tend to search for finance and material things outside the church, but when in Africa they see churches as channels for funding the poor. Hence the popularity of holistic mission (shown by the success of organisations like Micah Global) (Micah Global 2022). A visitor should be encouraged to speak about finances to the whole congregation instead of only with the pastor, to avoid accusations of corruption.

It was against that backdrop, then, that the pastor, evidently warily, invited me to stand and share whatever message I had. The tension that had been building up in the church turned into a kind of elated relief when I spoke the indigenous language (Luo), and shared a message from the Bible, with no mention of wanting to initiate any project. (I take this as having been "elated relief," because people were being saved a headache, although it is hard to know. Some people present may have been disappointed that I was not offering any money.) Later I learned that some members of the congregation did in fact know me, or at least of me, and of the fact that I relate closely to a nearby family, the late man-of-the-home having lived with me for three years or so when he was still a schoolboy over 20 years before.

The Context We Are Entering

The above account is my subjective interpretation of a visit I made to a church congregation one Sunday. Historians know that how we interpret the past is always a set of choices. If someone tells you "It was like this and like that," then unless that interpretation comes directly from the Holy Spirit we should know that that person has a "human" agenda. My interpretation of the above events is not based only on what happened on that day. It is based on my upbringing as a Brit, followed by my 33 years of living in Africa in a vulnerable way. It is definitely my interpretation. I did not ask an African to interpret what went on on that day. Had I done so, his interpretation would quite likely have been presented in a way that drew attention to the need for foreign money.

If there is an objective way of recalling or telling anything, philosophers and historians have been unable to find it. We who are not African should not expect African people to do what we cannot. Presentations, interactions, answers to questions, in fact any communication by an African person to a Westerner (even if the Westerner is only an anticipated possible over-hearer) will reflect local dependency, or anticipated relationship with, foreign donors. The way to reduce bias from those seeking either to benefit from western financial and linguistic largesse is for Westerners not to offer such things (i.e., consistently not to offer either help with a European language or resources originating abroad).

When entering an African context, there is much we should bear in mind. Most of the things we should bear in mind cannot, I suggest, easily be acquired from formal training, but only through

long habituated experience. Here is a shortfall of “formal” education: “knowing” things because you have read of them is different from engaging a context in which those things are live. Reading—about Africa, or anything or anywhere else—cannot substitute for extended living under indigenous circumstances. Living in one context while being educated about another invariably results in the “foreign” being domesticated as we learn it. The next foreign thing we learn will be received into what remains largely the same familiar context, and so on. In an exam, we may be able to recall ten peculiarities of “another culture,” but we will not be able to know what it is like to live in a place where those ten peculiarities are all live unless we live there. Hence a potential missionaries’ time could be better spent living and learning language in the context in which they hope to minister rather than in preparatory training “back home.”

The need to be aware of the absence of notions of objectivity in people’s thinking is acute in trying to get to grips with a foreign-to-you way of life. Time is only a particularly visible example of how communication can create confusion; African cultures may be renowned for late-coming, i.e., not reading time “objectively,” e.g., a meeting to begin at noon may be understood by all concerned as starting a few hours later. This interpretational flexibility extends to other realms of communication beyond time – quantifiable or otherwise.

The contextual particularity of human thinking and communication, as just sketched, largely delegitimises foreign-designed or foreign-language-based education in Africa. Acquiring such education becomes primarily, if not almost entirely, useful only for an African wanting to take a subordinate position in a foreign initiative (i.e., to imitate the foreign). The mass of local contextual difference renders trying to apply formal education to indigenous ways of life in Africa fatally flawed.

A fundamental feature of African life is African Traditional Religion. One basic aspect of African Traditional Religion, unknown to inexperienced outsiders (no matter how thoroughly trained or educated), is that of evasion: When evil spirits out to “get you” are all around, then expressing what we in the West call “truth” can be the practice of a dangerous naivete, similar to a soldier operating undercover in enemy territory telling the truth when addressed. Hence what African people say may not align with how we Westerners describe or recount things in our orientation to “objectivity.” To get the correspondence between what happened and what is said requires repeated personal observation of something that happened, followed by hearing how what you would have explained in your way, is articulated by “them.” In the absence of this ability of translating their talk into your versions of reality, your grasp of what is being articulated by indigenous people will be limited.

The truth of the above unfortunately negates supposed advantages gained by allowing people to articulate themselves, in preference to taking your own people to be the experts on who they are and what they are like. For a Westerner to inform themselves of, say, an African context through what they are told by an African is faulty.

A simple example might illustrate these interactions inherently fraught with misunderstanding. Western English works on notions of “objective truth” interpreted dualistically—whereby the impact of spiritual realms is shelved. (See Paul Hiebert and the “excluded middle” (Hiebert 1982).) This Western blind spot arises especially from the long impact of positivism on the West, on the basis of which people endeavour to reason as if “spiritual” forces are non-existent, a philosophy that continues to have a very deep effect on Western thinking (Feigl 2020). After prayer for healing, if the sick person is asked, “Are you better?” Westerners expect an answer that reflects

the “real” and not the “spiritual” side of life; stated negatively, Westerners do not expect the sick to say they are better because they feel that they ought to, but only if their malady is resolved. Hence there is often much consternation among Westerners over the question of whether prayer brings healing. But while in the West those who are sick will often answer “No” if asked if they are better after prayer, in Africa the answer always seems to be “Yes.” As one African pastor explained to his congregation one day in my hearing, “If you have been prayed for, then say you are healed.” Thus he explained this dilemma! “If you say there is no change, or that you still feel sick, that shows a lack of faith in Christ, so no hope for healing,” he clarified.

One outcome of Africa’s holistic ways is that, although this may sound ironic stated in English, “spiritual healing must be real”: Only a dualistic spiritual-versus-physical distinction can enable someone who is healed spiritually not also to be healed physically. In practice Westerners, not realising Africans’ holistic universe, wrongly question African claims for physical healing or acquisition of wealth as a result of prayer. In Africa a “spiritual” impact must have a physical manifestation—and a physical manifestation must have had a spiritual source.

Two Principles

My above explanations have, I hope, begun to elucidate the need for some Western missionaries to Africa to confine themselves in their key ministries to local languages and to the use of local resources. (The use of local resources does not mean that the missionaries concerned are not supported from the outside, but that they not use that support to acquire advantage in local contexts. In other words, missionaries must in key ministry areas seek for local people not to relate to them as a foreign donor, potential donor, or European-language-speaker.) Only thus can they begin to understand and to share in a way that makes home-grown sense, rather than encountering the indigenous like a bull in a china shop. These are the two principles underlying what we call *Vulnerable Mission*:

Vulnerable Mission = Some Western missionaries use only local languages and resources in key ministry in the majority world (Vulnerable Mission 2022).

The above:

- Is your (the missionary’s) choice. In my experience, if you were to ask local people, “Should I be vulnerable” (“Should I use only local languages and resources”), they would answer “No.” Some reasons for their disapproval of your decision may be obvious, particularly the likelihood that they will lose out on foreign donations.
- Needs to be practiced consistently. Use of English in one church, or in one context, but not in another, will easily cause envy that will bite you, whether you know it or not. Generous English-speaking Westerners in Africa often do not seem to realise how their movements, activities, and communication easily set African communities into a destructive spin. In sensitive contexts dominated by what the West knows as poverty and witchcraft (the root of which is envy; Harries 2012), all eyes and ears turn to the potential donor. When a potential donor shows up, all other plans may well be shelved, postponed, or put on hold. People hang on to foreigners’ words. They discuss, argue, and fight over what was intended. Hence I suggest that someone practising Vulnerable Mission needs to be consistent. If it is not using English with nationals, then that should always be so. If it is not being “generous” financially, that should always be so. Only thus can locals begin to

trust a Westerner. So then, essentially, Vulnerable Mission is *always* local languages, and *always* indigenous resources.

- May well preclude you from “important positions.” Most formal roles in today’s Africa use European languages. A vulnerable missionary may well not be perceived as influential or as a key player.

A Western missionary may be able to “be generous” in a carefully defined context, for example in looking after needy people, in a way that does not overly skew key ministry relationships. (In my case, I do take care of orphan children, which requires me to eat African food, live in a local way, use a local language with them, and so on.) A missionary living amongst the poor who is not giving handouts to his neighbours is not ungenerous if, even if unbeknown to them, he is contributing to other causes. Leaking finances to one’s friends and colleagues is, I suggest, inseparable from becoming “the boss,” or at least acquiring power. Unlike pioneer missionaries who found African people without the gospel, clothes or money, and so on, today almost all over Africa complex engagements with modernity are happening. Yet those engagements are different from those in the West and are impossible for Westerners to understand (Comaroff and Comaroff 2004). Because Westerners’ grasp of what is going on is very limited, they should avoid taking authority. Because donors acquire authority, Westerners’ generosity should be directed to recipients who are other than friends and colleagues in the local context.

Indigenous Language

I often remain baffled by the basis from which my African colleagues are talking. As a result, I cannot participate in serious conversations without appearing to be a dimwit. (By way of example, I realise that local people speak with an awareness that they are being overheard, basically by their departed ancestors. How exactly that overhearing impacts ways people share is hard to tell.)

I thus must ask myself about the basis on which I converse. Then I realise that in my talking I as a Westerner presuppose a great deal, for example:

- The spiritual is largely distinct from the material, and the latter is dominant.
- I feel guilt more strongly than shame (or fear).
- I see blessing as coming from correct implementation of principles underlying capitalism, not from ancestors.
- I carry a deep understanding that people should side with victims.
- I consider truth to be in some important ways “objective.”

We Westerners can begin to get an idea as to how weird (“Western, educated, industrialized, rich, democratic”) we are, by reading a book like *The WEIRDest People in the World: How the West Became Psychologically Peculiar and Particularly Prosperous* (Heinrich 2020) in reverse, i.e., to realise something of the normality (not a Western normality) that is extant in the majority world.

I can only assume that African people are likely to be as baffled by me as I am by them. I have reached the point whereby, in public contexts, I prefer only to share God’s Word. (I am sure that doing so on the basis of Western presuppositions still baffles local people, but at least I am on track!) My message is of the love and grace of God.

Christians' faith in the Bible should have them realise that God's grace and love are necessarily universal. That is not to say, however, that English-language ways of using the terms grace and love are universal. What *is* universal is that God reaches all people with something like "grace" and "love." Christians believe, in other words, the Bible to be unique literature. This is an important foundation to the universality of the church. It is therefore helpful, so as to communicate clearly and Christianly, to base all one's communications on the Bible and on the life of Jesus, while minimising one's own people's peculiar interpretations of the same.

Notice that if I use English in Africa, a language African people are learning from "us," I am "number one." If I use their language, they are automatically number one and I am "number last." Getting to a position where I can use their language itself speaks volumes about my commitment to them. (Africans who learn English may be wise, as it is the language of money. But for me to learn the Luo language?) Frequent use of their language helps me to begin to grasp some areas they have content where English is blank, and to realise that in many places where English has content, they are blank.

"Efficiency" is an example of a concept in English that dictates a great deal of Western behaviour but is absent in Luo thinking. An example where English is blank is *chira*, a key word in Luo. *Chira* is a kind of curse that results in people who disregard commands given by the ancestors becoming thin, and weak, then dying. The need to avoid *chira* dictates much of what Luo people do. The conceptual or linguistic equivalent of *chira* is absent from English.

Indigenous Resources

The church I visited, as described earlier, had evidently in the past been manipulated by Westerners providing food and medicine. This history presumably contributed to the pastor's telling us that in his view the church was in a better position without foreign donors. He seemed to be in favour of a missionary moratorium.

I have learned not to assume that I understand such statements by Africans. Pastors who have said things like that, that they no longer want to be dependent on foreign donors, have subsequently pressed me for money. It seems to be very difficult for African churches to stand up to foreign donors, be they current or potential. Outside generosity is an almost unstoppable force as far as local churches are concerned—or at least so it seems. Hence my suggestion that the foreign missionary has to be the one to make the decision *not* to be a generous donor. This is an instance in which one cannot rely for one's wisdom on "listening to the African."

I do not take the above as being contrary to any Biblical injunction to be generous. One can be generous in ways that are not self-glorifying! Today's Western thinking about Africa seems to be that the generosity that is required by Westerners is to donate financial resources to their African friends, colleagues, and neighbours. Such patronage lifts up the Westerners, makes them powerful, and has people praise them. It may also resolve them of the guilt of living on the upper side of inequalities. One alternative I suggest is to give to one or more of the many charitable organisations looking for your money. A Westerner can be generous to them in a way not known locally (Matthew 6:3).

I am suggesting that there ought to be some, preferably more, Western missionaries who operate without "buying" their colleagues, neighbours, and people they relate to with the gospel. That way, people can be enabled to be more honest. Then a Westerner is better enabled to listen

to what they are saying. The Westerner can begin to be a role model who can be imitated. A Westerner can become a part of a community other than as a benevolent but ignorant patron. Westerners can avoid wielding power while culturally very ignorant (a practice that easily acquires enemies as well as friends, sometimes more enemies than friends). Thus they can begin to grasp what is going on at depth and how to interact without causing upsets. I believe that Westerners have much to offer to Africa. Our money and language usually get in the way, however, becoming the screen through which we are seen. Leaving money aside can enable Westerners to witness about what Jesus has done for them and how he has transformed them into the kinds of people that local African folk might also realistically aspire to be, in a way that can begin to be locally understood.

There is these days a widespread, and in many ways helpful, understanding that Western mission efforts in Africa and elsewhere should be under the authority of local churches and be led or guided by local church leaders. At the same time, many of the reasons a majority world church may be very enthusiastic to have a Westerner work with them—get money, Western education, sponsors, English, etc.—are cancelled by Vulnerable Mission. For this and many other related reasons, a Western missionary should not expect Christian nationals amongst the people they are reaching to support their orientation to vulnerability. The foreign missionary must decide to adopt such an orientation and then to stick to it despite locals encouraging him/her to the contrary.

Conclusion

While Western missionaries in the majority world need to be guided by locals and to work “under” local churches, thinking they understand what they are told when they arrive and when people talk to them in English will easily make them into a burden rather than an asset to an indigenous church. Comprehending what someone is saying requires a grasp of the context(s) from which they are speaking, as well as the categories they are assuming as they communicate. Such categories include the pressure they are under to “speak for money.” Only then can a Westerner respond wisely and remain vulnerable to ongoing open communication.

If you are the one called to reach a people, then you must also be the one to decide how you are going to do it. You need to continue to do so while listening, all the while appreciating that many of your assumptions are not being understood and that you are missing much that underlies what is being communicated to you. If the message you want to communicate is to be about God, then I suggest it should not at the same time be advocating for foreign money or for English.

Our history has made us (Westerners) into a singular, perhaps WEIRD people (Heinrich 2020). Awareness of that background can help us to put it aside when relating to majority world cultures. Sharing about Jesus with majority world people requires as far as possible getting to where the people we are attempting to reach actually are, so that we can begin to share an unknown, that originally was unknown to us, from a grasp of what is known to them (Harries 2020).

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