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Issues of Race in Relating to Africa: linguistic and cultural insights that could avoid traps

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By Jim Harries

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Introduction

This article has been motivated through the observation that degrees of racial mixing vary between Western and Sub-Saharan African contexts. Major efforts at promoting racial mixing and equality in the West have achieved a large degree of (at least apparent) success. That is, Western communities are populated by people of many different shades of colour with similar standards of living and working closely side by side. This does not seem to have been achieved in Africa. This article asks whether it is possible that policies regarding race relations in the West are antagonistic to the African context of race. It makes some suggestions on how race relations policies could be designed on an international rather than a Western-focused basis.

The research methodology used in this article is modelled on that used by Blommaert and Verschueren in their study on Belgian people's attitudes to Muslim immigrants (1998). Discussion is based on implicit and not explicit communication. The difficulties of doing this in oral communities using non-Western languages have been overcome by drawing on the author's (subjective) insights acquired in almost two decades of exposure to rural life in African.

This article orients Western workers going to Africa to know how to most effectively engage in the cultures that they are meeting so as to achieve maximum long-term benefits for the native people. While also of great value to non-believers, it is particularly oriented to Christians who are concerned to make the Gospel of Jesus more widely known and more deeply a part of the lives of African people.

The author's experience in Africa has been acquired largely in Western Kenya, but also elsewhere in Kenya, Tanzania, Zambia and beyond. The African context explicitly referred to in this article is sometimes 'Kenya', at other times 'Africa' and sometimes 'Luo' (the name of one of the ethnic groups originating in Western Kenya). This is because sub-Saharan African countries have much in common (Magesa 1997:26), and also because:

- a. I understand much of this essay to be widely applicable to much of Sub-Saharan Africa.
- b. I do not want to imply that the Luo people are singularly different from other African people.
- c. By way of acknowledging that my research population has not been continent-wide.

My use of the term 'Black' for African people is not intended to be in any way offensive. I apply it to people of African origin wherever they are now living. I reserve 'African' for those Black people who are living in (and are assumed to have been born and raised in) Africa.

1. Understanding the Discourse of Race in the West and in Africa

This article utilises insights in pragmatics as the basis for its research. Pragmatics can be defined as the "study of the relations between language and context that are basic to an account of language understanding" (Levinson 1983:21). Or according to Bach: "Pragmatics is concerned with whatever information is relevant, over and above the linguistic properties of a sentence, to understanding its utterance ..." (nd). Researchers such as Grice (1971) discovered that the meaning of words arises largely from the context of their use. Scholars have since attempted to define the boundary between semantics and pragmatics in the derivation of meaning. That is, to define the extent to which meaning arises from words themselves, and the extent to which the meaning arises from the context of the use of words. The implicit assumption in modern academics that 'words mean things' of themselves has been challenged. Words have been found to have meanings only in contexts. (I have considered this in more detail in Harries 2007.)

In fact human beings instinctively search for contexts that make words meaningful, and then derive relevance from them as a result. If a voice says 'come here', my mind will consider who is speaking, where they are, whether I need to follow the instruction (perhaps not if they are a child or a mad person), how I am to travel (by bus if the person is far away, by walking towards them if they are in the room), in what time frame I need to follow the instruction, and so on. The first question that will come to me on hearing a voice coming from the sky calling me to 'come' will probably be 'who has spoken?' Without contexts, words are meaningless.

A comprehension of a context is therefore a vitally important part of acquiring meaning from any discourse. Because words do not have meanings apart from contexts, users of words invariably speak into contexts and expect their words to be understood by someone who has an awareness of a context. Sperber and Wilson have looked at this in depth in what they call 'relevance theory' (1995a). They suggest that on receiving a stimulus (words) a listener selects from an almost infinite possible set of meanings of a given set of words (or discourse) through their understanding of context – including cognitive (their own mind), social, immediate, historical, relational and so on. Sperber and Wilson tell us that a person will decide on the meaning for them of a particular set of words by considering that which has, for

them, the “greatest possible cognitive effect for the smallest possible processing effort” (Sperber and Wilson 1995b).

My analysis of the discourse of ‘race’ in this essay is modelled in part on a book written by Blommaert and Verschueren (1998). In their words; “one of the basic premises of a pragmatic approach is that every utterance relies on a world of implicit background assumptions, supposedly shared or presented as shared, which combines with what is explicitly said in the construction of meaning” (1998:32). In other words “all forms of communication are accompanied by more or less hidden meaning systems which determine the interpretation of what is said” ... therefore ... “it is impossible to find utterances which express their full meaning fully explicitly” (1998:32).

Blommaert and Verschueren’s 1998 study examines the discourse of tolerance in Belgium in respect to Islamic immigrants. Explicit negative references to Muslim immigrants were hard to find in Belgium, but Blommaert and Verschueren found that this was because of “the majority’s ... self perception, rather than being indicative of a basically positive attitude vis-à-vis the ‘other’” (1998:54). Explicit positive references to immigrants were either dressed in the language of economic reasoning, or were very generic, they tell us. For example, some Belgian people would say that they should learn from the immigrants way of looking after their aged. Others suggested that migrant workers were helping the Belgian economy by being willing to perform tasks that the Belgians themselves did not want to do. Blommaert and Verschueren did not find implicit positive references to immigrants. This was an ominous sign to them as in pragmatic reasoning the implicit can be more important than the explicit. They did find many implicit negative references to immigrants. For example, some people would say “I am not a racist but ...” (Blommaert and Verschueren 1998:72).

Blommaert and Verschueren found a conference being arranged entitled “towards a liveable multicultural municipality”. This conference’s title implicitly indicates that the current situation was *not* ‘liveable’ (1998:34). What immigrants did was ‘culturised’ by the Belgians. This contributed “significantly to the abnormalisation of the foreigner” (Blommaert and Verschueren 1998:93). In fact “the sense of superiority which comes along with an unquestioning confidence in ‘Western’ lifestyle and values is to be found even in the most magnanimous and benevolent attempts to show tolerance and to educate people for life in a multicultural society” (Blommaert and Verschueren 1998:57). Blommaert and Verschueren concluded “the basic problem [to be] ... that the tolerant majority only imagines its own tolerance” (1998:120).

In this article I want to ask what the outcome would be of applying a comparable system of analysis to ‘race relations’ between Whites, Blacks (and other ethnicities) in Africa today by comparison with the West. I will focus on Kenya, drawing particularly on the communities with which I am most familiar in Western Kenya. I will make practical recommendations to Western mission and development practitioners by drawing on the results of my findings.

The kind of assumed desirability of inter-racial equality that underlies Western society has not always been there. The years of slave trading (1502 to 1807 according to Amistad nd.) illustrate that clearly. So do Old Testament prescriptions that instruct the Hebrews to have different standards for themselves than for non-Hebrews (Deuteronomy 15:3). Conquering armies have through history frequently enslaved invaded peoples. Notions of inter-racial equality are foreign to many people around the world also today. Inequality against non-Muslims is enshrined in the Scriptures of Islam (for example 9:29: “Fight those who do not

believe in Allah, ... and they are in a state of subjection” (Koran 1997)). It is very overt in the practices and beliefs of Hinduism (known as the caste system, (Ross 2005)). It need not surprise us that inequality is implicitly acceptable even to those who claim to hold tightly to notions of democracy and human rights, described by Blommaert and Verschueren as “the names for a noble intention and a commendable objective ...” (1998:107). How then are overtly followed but implicitly ignored ideologies of inter-racial equality impacting inter-ethnic relationships in Africa today? What should be done as a result of perceiving the reality on the ground?

Parts of Europe and North America appear to be successful in integrating Blacks into their communities. In my secondary school in the UK in the late 1970s there were three black children amongst the 1500 or so pupils. They successfully started and finished the school programme. Many schools and colleges in the West these days have a smattering of Black, Indian, Chinese and other ethnicities amongst their staff. Walking up and down the road in many cities of Western Europe and North America, one can meet a mix of Black, White, Chinese, Arabic and other ethnicities. The UK has Blacks in parliament, the USA has a Black man (Senator Obama’s mother was American born and his father was a Black Kenyan) vying for Presidency. The church seems to be leading in the promotion of inter-racial mixing. All Nations Christian College (a missionary training college in the UK) until recently had a Black Principal (Joe Kapolyo, 2001-2006). The Evangelical Alliance in the UK has a Black general secretary (Joel Edwards). The second highest post in the Church of England (archbishop of York) is currently occupied by a Ugandan-born Black (John Sentamu).

The principle of ‘positive discrimination’, it would seem, underlies some of the above appointments. “The UK government is considering denying multimillion-pound contracts to companies that fail to employ enough black and Asian workers, ...” says Davenport (2006), discussing a frequently contested but widely implemented policy. Many Blacks living in the West are certainly supportive of such policies: “... the negro’s conditioning has steered him into that perpetual state of suspended tension wherein 95 per cent of his time and energy is expended on fighting prejudice in whites” explains Cruse (1967:364). Davenport’s complaining that “the idea of job quotas based on physical appearance, rather than on skills and experience, goes against how the labour market operates” (2006) does not prevent this system from continuing. One is forced to question how real and how natural racial integration that is seen actually is, if it has to be legislated?

But then, what about on the African Continent. Are similar policies being applied? How many of the researchers concerned with race issues in the West take time to examine what is happening outside of the West? Is inter-racial equality and integration part of non-Westerners’ ideology? If so, is this only explicitly the case, or also implicitly? What effect is it having on communities in Africa? What about non-Western churches, in places like Kenya – are they concerned to ensure that their leadership represents the ethnic diversity found amongst its people? Do African governments insist that the workforce of companies reflect the ethnic makeup of an area? Is the African church, for example, promoting Whites into its leadership structure on the basis of ‘positive discrimination’ as the Western church is doing with Blacks? What is the impact on Africa of the ‘positive discrimination’ occurring in the West?

One impact of positive discrimination in the West on Africa, is the concealing of cultural differences to African people. If (especially African born) Blacks were not acquiring key leadership positions in the West, African people would continue to assume that there were

significant differences between Blacks and Whites. Because Blacks do successfully acquire powerful positions in Western nations that difference, which makes Whites wealthy while many Blacks remain poor, is promoted to another level of mystery. That is, Black's holding key leadership positions in Western nations gives implicitly communicate that they are as effective in those nations as are native Whites. This appears to contradict the widespread observation in Africa that Whites must have some special abilities that result in their being a lot more wealthy than Black people. Because fellow Blacks can so easily rise to it, African people assume the wealth of the Whites to arise from some source other than their unique intelligence or culture. As a result, it is not only their intelligence or culture that is to be imitated in order to acquire wealth. There is clearly some other less visible missing key to success and wealth in life that African people are looking for. In many churches the assumed form of this is the 'prosperity Gospel'.

My own experience tells me that many African communities are uniformly black. While Blacks are being integrated into white communities, it is less common for Whites to be integrated into Black communities. Chinese, Arabic, Indian and Latin people are also less likely to mix closely with African societies? Why is this? When will this change? What are the repercussions of this?

Kenya is one of the African countries that has been greatly exposed to the West. But there are many places in Kenya where one can travel for miles without meeting any non-Blacks. Certainly if one meets any they are not likely to be integrated into Black communities. The Black partner of mixed marriages tends to move towards a Western lifestyle. Kenyan universities, I understand, are run entirely by Blacks. (I cannot be certain of this information.) This has been my observation at Maseno University in Western Kenya. Despite this having been a large mission centre staffed by White missionaries in years gone by, the whole academic institution is apparently now operated by locals. Apart from a small smattering of Indians the students are Black. (Personal observation.) I have been told that there are very few (if any) non-Kenyan students. This all seems strongly ironic considering that a very high percentage of the content of the curriculum of places like Maseno University is coming from outside of Africa (the West). (Statistics indicate that one percent of the Kenyan population is of non-African ethnic origin (About nd.).)

In the larger townships and certainly cities, one finds people of Indian extraction running the sizeable businesses. Arabs, Chinese and other ethnicities are economically active in smaller numbers. The Mayor of Kisumu city, Cllr Shakeel Shabbir, is of Indian ethnicity (Odhiambo 2004). The reason I am frequently given for this by people I talk to in Kenya is that when Blacks are put into this office they die very quickly through being bewitched by jealous colleagues. This is the exception – most public offices are held by Blacks.

Foreigners are apt to conceal themselves behind local (Black) people. This is certainly the case with many NGOs. Those pulling the strings and providing finance for NGOs in Kenya are often people of European or American extraction. But because being seen as 'boss' is bad business for foreigners in Africa, front-line visible personnel are usually African. This is not an objective fact, for which I have statistical evidence. The whole point is that people conceal this practice. One only becomes aware of it over time. One wonders how local people get the funding to do what they do in NGOs, only to discover that foreigners are in charge – even if from outside of the country. One wonders why Africans are doing things that appear contrary to their culture and traditions, only to find that they are being directed to do them by non-locals. On meeting foreigners, one finds that they are often not 'at the coal face', but a few

steps back, and having local people do the front-line work which they direct. Sometimes Africans are in charge, but raise funds from overseas. Then the people overseas seek to control the Africans they are working with through accountability structures.

Many local people who I interact with in my living in Africa recognise that these things are happening. They consider themselves to be different from outsiders. African people who I meet are often very surprised to hear me speak their language. They tell me that someone with White skin cannot be their fellow tribesman. (To suggest that someone who is Black cannot be English would be seen as very offensive. But local people in Africa do not consider that there is anything wrong with saying that a White man cannot be a member of an African tribe. I acknowledge that tribe is an ethnic description based on a common ancestry, whereas 'English' is a description based on a geographic area suggesting certain linguistic and cultural traits. That in a sense is the whole point – that in much of Africa unlike in the West someone's key identity is rooted in their ancestry.)

People of European origin are both ashamed and proud of their origins when they meet Africa. The guilt that many European people feel for African poverty suggests that they consider themselves responsible for it. Hence Westerners hand out money or goods and 'do good' in ways that they would rarely consider in their home communities. African people going to Europe or America are often looking to get 'things'. Even if they do not set out with this intention, Western people's deeply ingrained habit of understanding Blacks as being poor, soon has them under pressure to do so. For a European or American person to share in the lives of Africans is seen as some kind of exciting adventure, that is usually engaged in for a short period (hence the popularity of short-term mission). The way that Westerners talk about 'living in an African village' is very different from the way that Africans talk about 'living in America'.

This opening section has shown how insights gained from pragmatics have unveiled some race issues inside and outside of the West. The 'truth' of a community's orientation to issues such as race often being implicit rather than explicit, and the implicit of Africa being largely out of reach to Westerners because it is contained in an oral discourse in non-Western languages, has meant that I have had to use considerable licence arising from personal long-term exposure to languages and cultures indigenous to Africa to explain what is 'actually going on'. (More details on this below.)

2. Black Rule in Africa

The African scene is of course complex. It is vastly different from that in Europe or America. It is likely to be much less understood by Western academics that are the target readership for this article, than the contexts of their own communities. This therefore requires me to fill in more background.

This study cannot as easily be done on the basis of written texts as has that by Blommaert and Verschueren. This is for various reasons. One is that Kenyan society is very much more oral than is the West. Also because the dominant language for writing in Kenya is English, a colonial language. The dominant writers therefore are those who have had heavy doses of Western exposure and education (so as to acquire a sufficient grasp of English). What is written in English is oriented to an international readership, deeply rooted in Western ways of expression, and often designed to attract donor funds. Instead of drawing on this, my research

is rooted in personal observation and learning resulting from 19 years of close exposure to African communities, interpreted through wide reading.

My experience in Africa began through living in the North-West Province of Zambia between 1988 and 1991. Since 1993 I have lived in a village in Western Kenya amongst the Luo people, but have also ministered more widely amongst many different African ethnicities, including significant periods of time spent in Tanzania. Linguistically, I was once fluent in *Kikaonde* of Zambia, and am now a fluent speaker of *Kiswahili* and *Dholuo*. I have over the years intentionally avoided powerful positions and an identity as a donor or proponent of superior Western goods and culture. My role in the Luo community in which I live is as a Bible teacher, as someone interested in their churches and ways of life, and as someone who loves their children, some of whom stay with me in my home.

The designers of policy for Western nations are its own citizens, who therefore have a profound understanding of their own people. They also use their own language. On the contrary policy design in Africa is increasingly determined from the outside by those who are ignorant of local conditions. That is in the case of the church by foreign missionaries, donors and short-term visitors from the West. In the case of secular organisations, by donors and foreign experts. In the case of governments, by multinationals such as the World Bank, IMF (International Monetary Fund), UN (United Nations – especially in the Millennium Development Project) and so on. Biased reporting of events in Africa (to the West) is widespread as these organisations attempt to justify their interventions. Donors and project-implementers over the continent are investing vast amounts of money, and then are pushed into the corner so as to defend their reputations from ruin when their objectives fail to be reached. Underlying this failure is a deceptive screen of apparent ‘Westernisation’ emanating from Africa, arising particularly from African people’s use of Western languages.

Through following the research methodology described above (the only one that I consider legitimate, although obviously with its own limitations), I can say that there is little official ‘positive discrimination’ in favour of people of non-Kenyan origin in the Kenyan system. One reason for this is clearly that people whose ancestry is not Kenyan anyway have a disproportionately large share of economic power and influence in the country. Instead of ‘positive discrimination, there is rather ‘negative discrimination’ – that is, overt and implicit efforts are made in the formal sector at having enough of the majority peoples (Africans) in key positions. The powerful formal sector of the country not being indigenous, but an outside-transplant means that foreigners are often the most adept at operating it. On the contrary the problem with the informal sector, is that foreigners have little interest in engaging in it. It would be hard to find a sufficient proportion of non-indigenous people ready to participate in informal activities to fill any ‘quotas’ that may be devised. This being the bulk of peoples occupations and activities, means that much of people’s family and personal lives occur within the circles of their own and closely related African ethnicities. Foreign people rarely having interest in indigenous languages or ways of life, means that the gap between locals and foreigners typically remains large.

Other related considerations can be added. Many Kenyan people’s give great esteem to their dead (Mbiti 1975). Because as a result it is yesterday’s people who rule today’s communities, ‘success’ is considered to come to those who follow the commands and recommendations of the ‘living dead’. (The term used by Mbiti to refer to ‘ancestral spirits’.) That is to say that life is not guided so much by rationality and ethics, as has long been the case (at least to a large degree) in Western nations, presumably arising from the influence of the ancient Greeks

through the enlightenment. Instead, as the dead rule so tradition rules in the informal sector, and this tradition may be of little relevance to non-locals.

At the same time, very much of Kenyan formal society these days officially acclaims what is foreign. Hence Kenyan children are forced to spend the prime years of their lives learning foreign things in a foreign language such as English in school. Constant praise and attention being given to the foreign and little understood, results in its acquiring an almost divine character, as is well illustrated by the widespread popularity these days of the prosperity Gospel in Christian churches. Foreigners have themselves almost become gods (i.e. pseudo ancestors) in African eyes (see also Harries 2006).

An aspect of 'Black rule' that I will consider again in more detail below, is that of the apparent duplicity that is an inevitable part of it. That is, in order to acquire international recognition and respect in this day and age, countries and organisations have to be run in a Western way. Such is also required in order to obtain donor funds. It is always difficult to do something in someone else's way. Sometimes impossible. African governments and leaders of all kinds are therefore under intense pressure to appear to be what they are not, that is to be less than honest. Not to be less than honest, (i.e. to be honest) can be sheer folly – because it will lose them their international standing and funding. In other words, honesty is often impossible because of the mismatch between African and Western cultures.

Allow me to try and illustrate this by reversing it. I ask my Western readers to imagine that they were living in a community dominated by African culture. (This is obviously difficult for a Western readership who are not familiar with deep African culture – a difficulty that I constantly face in writing this article – so I can only ask for patient efforts.) How would a Westerner respond to questions or rhetorical questions like:

- How many cows did you give in exchange for your wife?
- No one would disagree with the wisdom of going onto your farm in the morning before attending to your professional occupation.
- That was horrific – they did not even bring their dead son home (i.e. to the grounds of the house in which they live) to be buried!
- Any thinking man would avoid shaking hands with his mother-in-law!
- And so on.

One option in response to such statements is of course to deny the 'objective' of the question concerned. Such as to say 'I don't give cows for my wife' or 'I don't see the problem in shaking my mother-in-law's hand.' After a while though, it would get wearing having constantly to explain a position that is at odds with the dominant culture, so it will be tempting just to give the answer that pleases the questioner. This especially if the questioner's generosity is dependent on your apparently having accepted his/her culture. This is unfortunately a little deceptive.

3. Traps to avoid in mission, aid and development assistance

I have attempted to illustrate above how the current global climate *forces* African leaders of all kinds into hiding those actions and dynamics that are very different from those in the West, some of which come to be considered immoral or corrupt by the West. Because this position is *forced* onto them, in my opinion it is in the end the West and not the African leaders concerned who are to blame for this.

Section one has shown how, using the research of Blommaert and Verschueren (1998) as research model, learning about a situation through explicit communications can result in its being grossly misunderstood. This is because true understanding depends on a knowledge of the context through which texts and discourses need to be comprehended. That is: “every utterance relies on a world of implicit background assumptions, supposedly shared or presented as shared, which combines with what is explicitly said in the construction of meaning” (see above). Blommaert and Verschueren’s study shows how an apparent orientation to the integration of migrant workers in Belgium was actually concealing a strong antipathy on the side of Belgian people to the immigrants. The Belgian people themselves are aware of this apparent contradiction. It is therefore not deceptive for them to share about migrant issues in the way that they do with their fellow countrymen. But, it would be incorrect for an outsider to assume to have understood the Belgium people’s position in relation to immigrant workers on the basis of only explicit references to them.

With respect to Africa and the West, we have a situation in which the West is exerting more and more control, especially through holding purse strings, while guided almost entirely by explicit information. The implicit remains invisible because it is in unfamiliar languages, oral rather than written, and hidden rather than public. (Maranz points out an additional reason for knowledge about African life not being widely available: “Africans readily share space and things but are possessive of knowledge ... [whereas] Westerners readily share their knowledge but are possessive of things and space” (2001:30).) I argue in this section that the understanding arising from such a dynamic has resulted in African and Western people respectively putting themselves and each other into traps, from which they will not later be able to escape, and that act against the best interests of both.

The system under which much of Africa is controlled by donors, very quickly and easily results in a serious confusion between what is ‘good’ and what is ‘bad’. While the basis of this may be the difference between Western perspectives on good and bad verses indigenous African ones, it very soon grows larger than this. By way of example, let’s imagine a typical project that is initiated from the West. Well meaning conscientious Westerners begin with their understanding of ‘what Africa needs’. They then popularise that understanding in their sending country so as to raise money for it. On moving onto the African field, they begin to implement.

The implementation unfortunately does not work, but by this time it is hard to know what to do about it. The Westerner is in confusion, struggling to understand the context around them, perhaps suffering from depression, confronted with the prospect of ‘failure’ and so on. Some Westerners will go home in despair and try to forget their bad experience. (These never of course get the same exposure when their ‘project’ is quietly being buried as they had when it was first launched.) Others will plod on and continue to hope that somehow things will work out, despite the contradictory messages that they are getting. They may adjust the ways in which they are working, although such adjustments may be minimal because their course has in many ways already been set. (For example, once a purpose built structure has been erected it is an embarrassment not to use it for its intended purpose.) By beginning from a position of already knowing which way they are heading and investing in that, rather than putting themselves into learning and vulnerable positions, Westerners frequently put themselves into a trap. They may no longer consider what they are doing to be ‘good’, but are forced to continue to do it to save face. Similarly, African people may be committed to a project the

impact of which is 'bad' because it is being funded, if the benefit of the funding outweighs the negative impact of the project.

Even those Westerners who attempt to listen closely to the people, unfortunately usually have not sufficiently considered their prior experience. Many African people in most African countries already have experience (or have heard accounts) of visiting Westerners. They therefore have considerable understanding of their culture, and likely behaviour. Many are aware that Western missionaries or project workers going to Africa frequently already have money set aside that they intend to spend. Even if a missionary is wise enough not to commit him/herself too quickly, sooner or later money is bound to flow. The key for the national is to be persistent in working on relationship with the Westerner concerned so as to maximise the chances of being the beneficiary (or at least one of the beneficiaries) of those funds when they eventually come. Care must be exercised in the giving of advice to the missionary or potential donor. Good advice should only be given to the extent that will not encourage the visitor to choose to take their money elsewhere, for example to a neighbouring community. The local person who's honesty will result in the missionary's investment going to their neighbour's territory instead of their own will be a laughing stock. The reputation that Westerners on the whole already have in Africa has already put their potential advisors into a trap before new visitors have even spoken their first word.

Donors who want to make sure that there is accountability bring more traps. It is easier to make someone accountable for some actions than for others. Funds being made available for actions that are more transparent, regardless of whether they are the most important or helpful, results in these actions being the most frequently implemented, and certainly distorts many donor-dependent societies in Africa. Funding schools using English, for example, will be preferred to those using local languages that donors do not understand, no matter how badly local people understand English. Many donors prefer to cover capital rather than running costs because capital projects result in clearly visible items such as buildings, and (supposedly) do not interfere with the ongoing sustainability of what is happening. While in simplistic terms accurate, the fact that operating funds may dwindle while project balances are buoyant, can result in a serious temptation to misappropriation of the funds concerned. What is the use, after all, of a new building, if the whole school (hospital, farm, church, etc.) is on the point of collapse? Such funding policies' giving the impression of health and wealth in situations that are strapped for funds, can certainly result in frustrations (variously vented) for employees or others who feel that they deserve a greater reward for their contributions to the apparently prosperous project concerned. Managers of such projects must either be corrupt, or are trapped into an appearance of being 'mean'.

The fact that outside funds come to those who are familiar with foreign languages, easily traps people into choosing ignorance in preference to being enlightened. That is; foreign languages are preferred and used to engage in activities that could much more effectively be carried out using local tongues. Such self-imposed linguistic handicap anticipates that in the end the foreign will bring a greater reward than the indigenous could have mustered. (Compare this with a coach advising his team to *loose* a football match because the booby prize is better than the winner's cup.) A country (or community) that appears to get its act together using a local language may well end up worse-off (in a certain time-frame) than another that accepts chaos and a Western language. The latter 'chaotic' community, both because it is higher on the scale of poverty, (aid by its very nature is graduated; i.e. is more generous for poorer than for wealthier people) and because its citizens can communicate to those who are the source of aid, are more likely to be recipients of generous Western charity.

Any Western charitable contributions that favour African nationals who have a good knowledge of English aggravate this. Hence organisations involved in charity who have the people's long term interests at heart should not operate in Western languages. By using people's own language(s) the charity may be enhancing, or at least not as seriously undermining, people's own social, economic and instrumental capacity.

Being 'trapped' into the use of Western languages creates real difficulties when it comes to discussing important issues for a certain people whenever (and this is frequently the case) the foreign language concerned cannot adequately accommodate it. For example, English is a poor language to use in discussing important issues pertaining to polygamy for at least two reasons: (My comparison is with *Dholuo*, a language of Western Kenya.)

a. It does not have the terminology needed to discuss the issue. Polygamy (or strictly polygyny) for the Luo people is an integral part of their traditional way of life. The name given for a polygamous household in *Dholuo* (the language of the Luo) is *doho*. Unlike the term polygamy in English, *doho* is a respectful Luo term. The same term *doho* is also used for the home(stead) of an influential community leader that is the site for important community meetings. 'Marriage' often being referred to as *nyombo*, which also means to take cattle in exchange for a woman, supports the institution of polygamy. This is because to *nyombo* one woman does not preclude the option of *nyombo* another if a man has sufficient cattle. *Nyombo* makes divorce more difficult than does *marry* because divorce requires the return of cattle to the girl's parents. Other factors also making divorce difficult, means that men who take a second wife usually cannot get rid of the first (unlike men in the West through 'divorce'). A man's first wife may be known as *chi dala* (the wife of the family). Hence a man may marry a second woman so as to have his own wife. (*Chi dala* implies that the first wife is married by the family, so can be called *chiwa* or 'our wife', which is not a familiar language usage in English.) A woman going to marry is said to *dhi tedo* (go to cook), which defines her role in the man's home much more clearly than does the English 'she has got married'. There is nothing to stop two wives from cooking separately for their respective families, providing they have their own kitchens. If she goes back to her parents a woman is known as *migogo*, a shameful term that does not even exist in English.

Another reason for either taking or not taking a second and subsequent wives is connected to *chira* – a term for a kind of curse that English does not have. Breaking *kwer* brings *chira*, but *kwer* does not translate into English except perhaps as 'taboo', which native English speakers do not use to describe their own relationships. Widow inheritance again does not translate, as an inherited widow is neither a wife, a mistress or a concubine in the English sense (Ojore 1995:158). *Chi liel* (widow) in *Dholuo* literally meaning 'wife of the grave' illustrates how a Luo widow is still bound by her 'marriage' after the death of her husband. 'Re-marriage' requires an undoing of that prior relationship by the process of *ter*, often translated into English as inheritance, but whereas 'inheritance' implies an acquired piece of property, *ter* describes a cleansing process. So *jater* (the widow inheritor) actually may not 'inherit' the widow. To turn to the side of the widower for a moment, a widower should *leko chiege* (dream of his wife) before he remarries. But to 'dream of' your wife in English means to have fond memories of her, whereas for the Luo *leko chiege* is to have her 'ghost' revisit and sexually stimulate the husband. The landscape of English as it considers *polygamy* is, I suggest, so different from that of *Dholuo*, so as to preclude intelligent discussion about it in relation to the Luo people's own culture.

b. The dominant English-speaking community does not consider it a worthwhile or an important issue. Because polygamy is not practiced by them, texts on polygamy will remain minority texts in the dominant English speaking world. Hence polygamy will not be considered in depth in school or college curricula, libraries, the internet etc., even though it may be one of the most discussed issues in Luo households. The terms associated with it, such as polygamy itself, wife inheritance and widow cleansing are in English not ‘nice’ terms, but carry implicatures of primitiveness. Those people for whom such issues are important may still prefer not to address them in English to avoid the stigma of association with such ‘primitiveness’.

The above indicates that sensible in-depth debate about this issue, while critically important for the Luo people, is in effect impossible using English. We may ask ourselves – what happens if an important issue such as this is simply removed from the agenda? Allow me to illustrate this by reversing the process, and assuming that Luo language and culture were dominant in the West. One effect of this would be to force debates about science, budgeting economics, birthdays and so on into decline, either because these topics *cannot* be discussed in *Dholuo* vocabulary or syntax, or because they are not considered worthy of discussion by the Luo. If native-English speakers would not want their culture to come under attack in this way, then why force the Luo into incompetence in discussing their issues by imposing a foreign language onto them?

Some may argue that because of the advantages of monogamy, that it is in the long term best interests of the Luo people for polygamy to cease. But, assuming monogamy to be a better system than polygamy, does not in itself mean that discussion on issues connected with polygamy should not happen, because the very discussion may be the best means to come up with this result! If there are two ways of orienting a people from polygamy towards monogamy, and one is by ignoring the issues resulting from the changeover while the other is by allowing them to discuss, debate and find resolutions to those issues, the latter route may be the more helpful one. This at the very least because the discussion will allow for an intelligent well-thought out way of altering the people’s way of life, rather than the chaotic alternative that will hurt a lot of people in the process.

In other words, simply ignoring the ramifications of a move from polygamy to monogamy will leave an ‘incomplete way of life’. It will in turn require adjustment in many areas for the family and society. For example: how will the ‘spare’ ladies who remain single be cared for? What will happen to widows who would otherwise have been inherited by married men? How will the man live in town by himself if he has to be there to earn a wage but does not have sufficient income to pay rent and food for his whole family? Who will care for the homestead if the wife has to live in town with her husband? If (as I am suggesting is the case) issues of polygamy and the associated widow inheritance are very much discussed, this is for an important reason, and their removal from the debating table will therefore leave a critical and damaging gap. Such a gap may result in a crisis and breakdown of society. Is it good to force someone’s society to a state of ‘breakdown’? Perhaps the best way to answer that question is to ask whether Westerners would like that for themselves? I suggest that it is more helpful to allow people to intelligently adjust and alter their own ways of life, than to trip them up and leave them (metaphorically) helplessly squirming. This requires them to freely use their own language (or a closely related language), knowledgeably and intelligently.

I am therefore suggesting that over-extending English and other foreign languages to artificially make them the language of ‘success’ for African people through the use of outside

subsidy, is a potentially very harmful attack on the foundational sensibilities of the African communities concerned. My emphasis is here on *subsidy*. Languages and people always mix and rub-off onto each other. The way this happens in much of Africa today though is unique and artificial (in a historical timeframe) through the aid of technology and outside charity. For example, before the advent of the printing press languages were spread by interpersonal contact, but nowadays they can increase in their influence, via technology, through foreign donations alone. Universal primary education using English would be unthinkable for the Kenyan government without a lot of foreign aid. Providing foreign aid on condition that it is used to support education using English is putting Kenyan politicians into a trap that they cannot refuse. A harmful effect of the current state of international relations therefore, is the trapping of many African peoples into the widespread use of languages that increases their incompetence in running their own lives; preventing critical issues that a people are facing from being addressed.

Another trap exists here for the foreign native English speaker. The ease of communicating in Anglophone Africa in their own language, makes it more difficult for native English speakers to learn indigenous languages. This means that many important issues (that can only helpfully be learned and discussed in indigenous languages, see above) pass them by. This perpetuates the foreigner's ignorance, and means that the understanding of African people on the side of the international academia is rendered seriously deficient. It also makes it almost impossible for Westerners to integrate closely with African communities. Because the deficiency described above is not recognised, neither are the difficulties of mixing Western and African ways of life known or acknowledged in, for example, written documents. Instead, when a Westerner attempts to live closely with an African people, s/he will condemn that which s/he does not understand – with apparent licence from the academia (that is in Western English).

Such difficulty in integration means in effect that, whereas the West is recruiting from Africa and elsewhere in the globe for help in discussion about its ways of life and assistance to its peoples, Africa is on its own. No-one else can assist them, because no-one else has the necessary knowledge or linguistic acumen. This is foundationally why African people can travel to and be incorporated into Western communities (albeit with difficulty), but the reverse does not apply, and African societies are left struggling unassisted in their efforts to adjust to 21st Century ways emanating from the West and spreading around the globe.

This is an enormous affliction to the African people. African communities can remain exclusively Black; because others are ignorant, and remain ignorant as long as they use Western languages in their interactions with the African people. The great good that could arise from inter-cultural mixing and mutual assistance is precluded. A Ugandan can become a Bishop in the English Anglican church, and a Black man could become the President of America, but for a White man to become a leader in Black Africa in other than an 'oppressive' way, is almost impossible. What a loss for Africa.

4. More on 'How to Help Africa'

I have above pointed out some very real difficulties in current efforts at inter-cultural communication between the West and Africa. It is also true that Christians and others in the West are concerned with the plight of the African people. This concern is a great thing. I want to say something about how, in the light of the discussion above (and see also other articles at www.jim-mission.org.uk) this concern can best be channelled so as to be of real 'help'.

I write as a Christian. I believe that God has created the world, and holds it in his hands. This means that His wisdom is always greater than man's wisdom. It was the godliness of the forefathers of Western nations that got them to where they are now. The most important thing that Westerners have to share with the people of Africa is therefore their knowledge of God; in word and deed. But, cross-cultural sharing of God's word is no easy thing. As God is committed to humankind, and was ready to give his whole life, so the Westerners who intend to share God's word with the people of Africa need to be committed and to give their whole selves. The West needs to find those young people who are prepared to devote themselves in service to God's purposes in Africa using African languages and without creating the traps mentioned above, and then support them with much wisdom in that calling.

'Helping someone' is no easy task. The people who are usually the greatest help to us in our lives are those (such as parents, spouses, siblings and devoted friends) who stick with us through thick and thin. They are also the ones who accept us as we are. Those are the qualities needed of missionaries and Western workers going to the African people. This aspect of accepting people for who they are inter-culturally seems to have been neglected in recent decades. Instead, the emphasis on changing people to be more Western has been a critical stand, that suggests the inferiority of those being reached who do not become Westernised. They perceive this, and that perception creates problems, including a desire for people to deny and devalue what they are while constantly desiring and valuing the foreign, i.e. what they are not!

God's word cannot be shared without regard for a people's culture and language. Efforts at doing so quickly hit the rocks. Love also often cannot be shown 'from a distance'. It must be communicated proximally. Otherwise love expressed may not be love received.

That is not to say that one does not desire for people to change. None of us are perfect, and we all need to change more and more so as to be worthy of a glorious God. But, "while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us" (Bible. King James Version. Romans 5:8) and so Christ's people are also to love their fellow human beings while they are yet sinners. Christ incarnated (Wikipedia nd.) to be man. He walked and talked with the Jewish people in their language. He taught them through parables. He was ready to put his life on the line for the sake of the people whom he had come to love. He was vulnerable to the people he was reaching. He did not 'buy followers' using foreign money. Missionaries need to follow his example.

What should have become clear in this essay, is that helping a people includes making an effort to get to where they are. That makes it possible to come from where they are coming from. It certainly includes using their language, and knowing how they use it. Then teaching them through parables, stories and the Scriptures as Jesus did, that they too may come to a knowledge of God and salvation in his name.

The nature of the help being proffered these days is precluding many alternative options that actually have good potential. In brief, 'help' being rooted in financial contributions, by maintaining the distance between African and Western peoples, leaves the latter sufficiently ignorant as to have made it impossible for them to work more closely with Africans. Hence African societies, unlike others certainly including Western ones, are left to face their issues alone. The solution is simple, albeit difficult – to have Westerners relate to Africa using the

African people's own languages and without relying on their own resources in their activities. That is, linguistically and economically not to be 'set apart' in relationship.

Conclusion

Pragmatics has been used to acquire insights into the race-scene in Africa and Europe / America that would not be accessible by other means. An adaptation of Blommaert and Verschueren's (1998) research methodology has been followed, which emphasises the importance of looking for implicit rather than explicit texts. This is particularly difficult to do in an African society that is largely oral and in its informal sector operating in other than European languages. It must be done by those Westerners who have a deep vulnerable exposure to African ways of life and languages. It is more quickly fruitful in Western nations where appearances of racism are carefully concealed by practices such as positive discrimination.

This research suggests that Western nations have been more successful in racial integration than has Africa, and that Africa's lack in this regard is due to particular Western policies that can force African rule to be rooted in deception, secrecy and corruption. 'Traps' resulting from inappropriate policy on the part of the West have been unpacked in detail in this article. Current practices are denying African communities the opportunity for intelligent partnerships in grappling with truly African issues, or from benefiting from the enlightenment. Suggestions made to rectify this situation, through appropriate intervention from the West, include that at least some of the foreigners who come to the Continent be determined to operate in local languages without heavy assistance from outside resources. In the long term, resolution of race as well as economic and social issues in Africa requires the use of indigenous languages. Policies originating from the West that discourage the use of indigenous African languages are found not to be in the best interests of African peoples in African nations.

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