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Editor: Jim Harries, PhD, Chairman of the AVM

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The Alliance for Vulnerable Mission encourages some missionaries from the West to engage in their ministries using local languages and resources.
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This edition contains analysis and perspectives contributed by AVM supporter John Cheong from Malaysia. See below.

This is a special edition with a focus on covid-19.

Contents

The Review

Review of ***Consuming Mission: Towards a Theology of Short-term Mission and Pilgrimage***. Robert Ellis Haynes. Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2018.

Reviewed by John Cheong, PhD.
Research Associate at the Asian Centre for Mission.

Before the 1950s, 'mission' was a term "used to mean the sending of one to work in a distant place, the activities of those missionaries, the designated areas where the missionaries were at work, the agency that sent them, or the object of the Christian work of conversion" (p.3). Since then, a new phenomenon, 'short-term mission' (STM) has emerged, and introduced new meanings and motivations of mission. In addition, there has been little foundational theologising by its lay workers. These call for critical examination and into this, enters Robert Ellis Haynes.

Leaning on his Wesleyan heritage to mine its mission theology and historical practice as an organising frame to conduct his analysis (ch 3-4), Haynes conducts many interviews with workers who served under the umbrella of the Methodist Church, USA. He does so to understand how STM projects are planned, promoted and administered to uncover its inner logic and dynamics as it is run by them.

In general, international STMs are "often billed as a way to increase participation in mission in the home church, reduce ethnocentrism, and raise awareness for the plights of others". However, it can also "overburden receiving communities, missionaries and hosts and distract them from other important work" (pp.70-71). In his research, Haynes finds many aspects of STMs that are both reassuring but also disturbing. Firstly, he notes that many STMers do embark with desires to serve – some even stressing shared misery as key to team-bonding when leaving their comfort zones (p.99). Secondly, many go intending to build relationships with their hosts and thirdly, to learn a different and more uplifting spirituality from them, coming back with changed heart and minds.

Such expressed desires to learn from and to serve their hosts rather than evangelising contrasts greatly with evangelical Christians who tend to bring pre-set evangelistic programmes and presentations (often without consulting their hosts for cultural appropriateness). However, the root of this lessening of evangelism lay in two causes: (1) their bible illiteracy than a holistic theology of mission (pp.104-106) and (2) denominational underprivileging of evangelism training (p.151). STM leaders were similarly inexperienced in evangelism as the main criterion for leading was expertise in trip logistics (p.96). Elsewhere, group expectations to learn from their hosts were also undercut by the lack of evident face-to-face encounters with their hosts such as joint bible studies or any

memorable spiritual conversations. Due to their inability to communicate in the hosts' language, STMers were reduced to smiles (as evidence of hosts' satisfaction), gestures and polite phrases (p.129). (This is presumptuous for a smile has different meanings across cultures; among the Chinese, it can signal a polite gesture of disagreement.) Ironically, language barrier barely troubled them because they hired local translators while ignoring local missionaries already present there (p.90). More disturbingly, they undervalued the expertise of local doctors and indigenous knowledge; they preferred their team doctors (p.145) and erected buildings on their own timeline. On one occasion, this proved counterproductive when seasonal insects attacked a structure built against the hosts' advice (p.93).

In a lengthy middle section of the book (ch 5), Haynes convincingly uncovers what many of us in missions (whether as long-term missionaries, missiologists or mission pastors) suspected – much spiritual dross is mixed in with purer motivations to serve others. Even though STMers held motivations to go "serve a need", underlying it was a desire for "personal fulfilment" (p.115). Damningly, Haynes links this to the postmodern condition to satisfy the self. In this light, STM trips or projects become another 'package' like tourism – serving as 'experiences' for the self. In an enlightening section (ch 7), Haynes unpacks how STM also is a form of pilgrimage – a desire to find personal transformation and faith change in an individualised journey (of mission) while overlapping with characteristics of tourism (e.g. a place to experience the exotic other and satisfy the self in vacationing).

Lastly, whether done as a 'mission' project or 'pilgrimage', any spiritual transformation or servant attitudes of the STMers that were evident during or after a STM trip "faded over time (p.71) due to "poor follow up" (p.89). More concerning, their original STM seemed to addict them towards more STM experiences (p.113) while neglecting community involvement their *own* contexts (pp.126, 160).

Consuming Mission offers many important and sobering lessons for all involved in missions. Among them: don't send any STMers unless they plan to return to the same place consistently and learn their language to understand and serve their hosts better. Bible literacy and teaching for trip participants to understand God's heart for mission are foundational. However, I suspect their bible illiteracy may be more endemic among mainline denominations than evangelicals, who are more biblically conversant and zealous in evangelism (but to the extent of undercontextualising their evangelistic messages). Another proposal is to include more seminary teachings on a biblical theology of STM. Left unsaid is the costly state of STMs today (USD 3 billion) (p.67) and how Christians can continue justifying such expenses ministering in already Christianised contexts (p.143).

In conclusion, STMs are here to stay whether we like it or not. Instead of anecdotes, Haynes offers us its stark realities. We do well to read this book, understand its promises and pitfalls and heed his advice on steps for remediation. Mission deserves better, in service to God and the people whom we serve.

WEA launching free online journal

The World Evangelical Alliance's Evangelical Review of Theology is becoming a free online journal, starting with its August 2020 issue. WEA leaders and other prominent Christians will address issues of contemporary concern to the global body of Christ, in a style suitable for general readers.

To become a subscriber, send an e-mail to ERT editor Bruce Barron at bruce.barron0@gmail.com with "ERT subscription" in the subject line, including your name, e-mail address, country, and (optional) institution. You won't get any ads or unwanted communications, just a thought-provoking journal at least 4 times a year. Article submissions and ideas are also welcome.

(The ERT has published many articles related to vulnerable mission. Please consider being a subscriber, telling your friends about this, and writing articles for them! Jim)

- To get this post, **What if we don't come back?** By Alaguibe that reflects on covid-19 request to this whatsapp number: +54 9 223 513-6820

"If we don't go back to work like we used to? We have a car in the garage at home. It's been there for a month. What if it's better to leave it there? Take it out just for the extreme case, once every many days. If we worked as hard as

we had to? To get food, health, a coat. If we declared the rest expendable? The clothes for almost never, the antidepressant called shopping. The frivolous, unnecessary trips, the presumptuous selfies, the night out, the molded fun, the money spent on denying loneliness. What if the part of the job that some people leave out is an opportunity for others? …"

Spanish original can be found here.

- **Reflections on a president's speech: Whose Lang was it anyway?** Is the title to a blog by Brett Fish in South Africa, discussing the choice of language in speeches by their president, Ramaphosa. "*Because listening to the president speak to me in my first language, I hadn't thought for a second* how this message might be received by the majority of the country. One of the aspects of privilege to recognise and acknowledge is that in the majority of spaces that I occupy, people will speak to me in my first language [this is not true for the majority of people in the country!]" shares Brett, in this very intriguing and dynamic post.

- Mali | gesellschaftliche und linguistische Beobachtungen zur Genderfrage Click on this link for this article, in German.
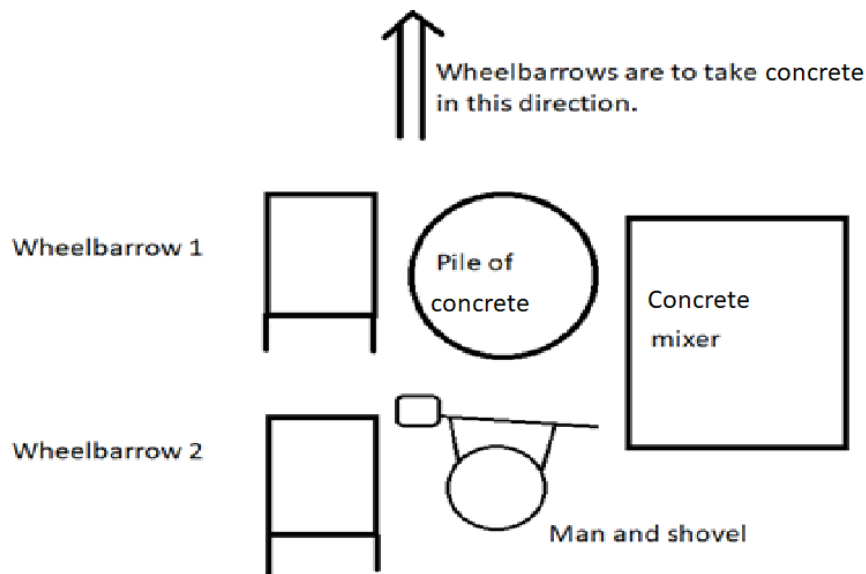
Covid-19 in Africa: life without economy, efficiency, truth, and optimization.[1]

By Jim Harries (PhD), May 2nd 2020.

Session on academia.edu, 2nd May 2020.

"Disease and drought have both hurt the economy. … But it is not the virus that has got Zambia into this [economic] mess. It is the president."[2]

Wheelbarrows are to take concrete in this direction.

Wheelbarrow 1

Pile of concrete

Concrete mixer

Wheelbarrow 2

Man and shovel

I observed the behavior of some men at a building site in Africa. Wheelbarrow 1 was being used by man-1. Man-2 with the shovel was using wheelbarrow 2. The objective was to take concrete in the direction of the arrow, where it was being used to lay a floor. After the concrete had been poured to make the pile, man-2 with the shovel first filled his wheelbarrow, before filling wheelbarrow 1 of his colleague. That struck me as irrational. First filling wheelbarrow 1 would have allowed man-1 to move quickly to where the concrete was required, after which he should have filled his own wheelbarrow.[3]

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[1] I define these terms roughly as follows: economy – a way of organizing life that is cognizant of principles and rules that are causative of prosperity. Efficiency – something one has in mind when engaging in a process, that seeks to maximize output over input ratios. Truth – something that exists regardless of who receives or perceives it. Optimization – evaluation of an input into a system that seeks to maximize desired output from it.

[2] *The Economist's* blaming the president is trying to ignore his context. https://www.economist.com/middle-east-and-africa/2020/05/02/zambia-was-already-a-case-study-in-how-not-to-run-an-economy (accessed 1st May 2020)

[3] This example is an illustration. My reader could add to the context to argue that man-2 was not behaving irrationally. For example, man-2 might have first filled his own wheelbarrow to clear the concrete on the ground so to give him easier access to wheelbarrow 1. I believe that this kind of argument does not detract from the point I am making in this article.

The situation above illustrates inefficient work. One might think that surely someone should have told or encouraged the man with the shovel to first fill the wheelbarrow that was in the front of the queue, then to fill his own. Before doing so, the person telling him would have had to weigh the pros and cons of offering such advice. Speaking up could have sped the transporting of concrete. But it could have offended the man with the shovel. This might have led to an argument, a falling-out, people despising each other … witchcraft. Efficiency of operation depends on the certainty of (or unimportance of) maintaining harmoniousness in relationships. In some Western countries the requirement for efficiency in work is so habitual that insisting on efficient work practices is normal. In much of Africa, fear of your fellow man may render it not so.

According to Western analytical thinking, a task such as that above has a physical aspect, and a relational aspect. In the African worldview, these two are not distinct – a phenomenon called holism. **Economy, efficiency, truth, and optimization** are in traditional Africa subsumed to a *holistic* fear-of-man. Even should such concepts be there in the way people talk in Africa (African countries use European languages), the concepts themselves may be absent in practice.[4]

I suggest that the writer of *The Economist* cited at the start of this article should stop being surprised at ways in which the demonstrated behavior of African people, in this case the president of Zambia, is different to that of Europeans. The impression that the president of Zambia is an 'outlier,' exceptionally incompetent, is probably simply wrong. He may well be behaving as would a 'typical Zambian.'

The massive dominance of relational-factors in Africa may be hard for a Westerner to comprehend. What Westerners consider to be a 'physical objective' (e.g. moving concrete), can appear to blur into the background in African engagements. The hazard of risking damaged relationships can outweigh losses in **efficiency**, rendering it, along with **economy, truth, and optimization,** non-existent. Subsequent misfortune, including that arising from failure to correctly or quickly complete a task in hand, can be blamed on relationship breakdown. Relationship breakdown may quickly translate into accusations of witchcraft. Bewitchment builds on relationship-failures; such as

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[4] I.e. people may use these terms when imitating Western discourse, or on the basis of understandings different to those generally held in the West.

if the man with the first wheelbarrow had castigated his colleague for operating 'inefficiently'. Traditional African life is lived in constant fear (or terror) of provoking anger or envy that could activate witchcraft forces.[5]

The way of life that searches for a witch to blame for failures is in Africa being displaced. The revolution displacing it is faith in God. To connect with contemporary African people at depth one either needs to realize the degree that people live in fear of one another, or to comprehend their faith in God that overcomes that fear. To ignore these is to ignore who people are. To ignore these could be to ignore ways in which advocates for institutions and practices like colonialism, efficiency, truth, or economy can be perceived as witches. What has made Europe and N. America different, is centuries of habituation that enable them to conceptually separate two realms. This difference is impacting on anti-coronavirus strategies.

It is my perception that many Westerners are helping themselves come to terms with lock-down and fear of death by drawing on a knowledge and experience of God. I perceive a lot of mutual sharing and uplifting based on God's word going on in highly stressed and fearful locked-down communities in the West. This orientation to God may not be directly impacting anti-coronavirus strategies. In Africa, God is not kept distinct from anti-viral strategies. To ignore the role of God, who has recently pulled African people out of pits of despair associated with constant witchcraft fears,[6] is to misunderstand Africa. To communicate honestly with African people requires Westerners to undo a centuries-long (misleading) habit of ignoring God's role when discussing 'strategies' that relate to **economy, efficiency, truth, and the countering of covid-19.**

God is the elephant in the room. His presence underlies what the West presupposes, including its overcoming of fear-of-man. Yet he goes unmentioned. God has, by enabling Westerners to overcome their fear of the next-man, facilitated the practice of **economy, efficiency, truth, and**

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[5] I take envy as being the powerhouse of witchcraft. (Harries, Jim. 2012. "Witchcraft, Envy, Development, and Christian Mission in Africa." *Missiology: An International Review* 40(2): 129–139.)

[6] A book I recently read, about Zambia, that well illustrates prior ways of life is Melland (Melland, F.H., 1923, *In Witch Bound Africa: an account of the primitive Kaonde tribe and their beliefs*. Philadelphia: J.B.Lippincott Company, 52.) who (I mention this to illustrate how fraught life was under witchcraft-rule) points to infant mortality rates of 60% to 90% in pre-Christian times.

optimization, the kinds of things that have underlain counter-covid-19 strategies.[7] Not to make this overt in communication with Africa, is to deceive.

In short, foundational concepts that underlie Western thinking, like **economy, efficiency, truth, optimization,** are absent in large parts of Africa.[8] African people often approach tasks, like transporting concrete, running economies, and tackling disease pandemics, differently than do Westerners. Their approach reflects a determination NOT to go back to those horror filled days of witch hunts. Holding witchcraft at bay is tenuous – fending it off is a continual and active process. This is where often-booming African churches are engaging. The West's ignoring God's singular role in battling witchcraft in Africa, similarly drawn on in the West in so-called 'private realms,' is in rampant covid-19 times too dangerous, serious and blinkered an omission to condone.

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[7] Profound faith in God's power and ability clearly reduces fear of your fellow human.

[8] Of course, the terms may be in use because these countries use European languages. The concepts underlying them though are largely absent.

Covid-19 in Africa: "science-talk is not intercultural" – a reflexive perspective.

By Jim Harries, 30th April 2020

Bio. Jim Harries (PhD, University of Birmingham UK), adjunct faculty William Carey International University, California, originally from the UK, has lived in East Africa since 1988. In addition to missionary work walking with indigenous churches, Jim engages a lot of research on African culture and ways of life. He is single. He cares for 12 local orphan children in his Kenyan village home.

Abstract

This reflexive short piece, written by a 30-years missionary in East Africa, considers the evidently irresolvable incommensurability between Western scientific worldviews (secularism), and African approaches to life. The author's realizing that 'science' is a poor foundation for sense-making in Africa endeavors to fill-out the crisis he lives with in his mind, through reference to key life experiences. He relates his findings to ways in which scientifically-based advice in the current covid-19 pandemic finds little fit in Africa, where life is rooted in other-than-science. Strategies for countering disease that simply ignore the basis on which people are living leave deep tensions, and can have an overall negative-impact, especially when donor funds urge doing what makes little or no sense locally. Practical recommendations are made on the way-forward.

Keywords: covid-19, worldview, reflexivity, Africa, Christian mission, secularism.

- Reference to Africa should here be taken to be to sub-Saharan Africa. Reference to secularism should here be assumed to be 'Western secularism', which morphs as it is applied in non-Western contexts.

Earlier today, I sat down to write an account of covid-19 in the Swahili language. I ran into a rock, in my mind. What I would like to share with Swahili speakers about the covid-19 crisis is of a totally different order to what I am

hearing in the media, news and scientific outlets from the West.[9] I want to explore why this is so.

My own background is scientific. Through my teens and into my 20s, I was enthralled by science. Science seemed to offer all the answers. An undergraduate thesis of mine looked at the application of artificial intelligence in dairy farming. The notion that biological processes could be explained by chemical and physical laws, gradually being discovered through careful research, seemed to me to point to the way forward for mankind.

Although it was God who called me to Africa, I did not intend to slam Africans with the Bible. My UK upbringing had taught me to know better than that. I thought that, even as a Christian, I could best help them by enabling local people to benefit from my scientific and technical knowledge. At the beginning (for a few months) of my experience of co-running a secondary school farm in Zambia, that seemed to work. Then I found that my Zambian colleagues weren't tracking with me. My mind went into a crisis, from which it has not yet emerged![10] The covid-19 pandemic's impacting Africa has revealed some of the raw flesh of that crisis, and has re-aggravated it. Now, 32 years later, still living in Africa, the scientific discourse on covid-19, and my local knowledge arising from integration into African community, battle against each other in my head.

Allow me to illustrate this scenario from a conversation I had some years ago. A Kenyan scholar-colleague who had already amassed a couple of post-graduate degrees, told me that some Kenyan people were abandoning faith in Christ in favor of secularism. That discourse would have made sense to my Western mind, had we left it at that. Instead of concluding that obviously my African scholar-friend had been 'enlightened' by his Western education, I decided not to close out on the issue. I let him carry on talking and explaining. Before long, I realized that his understanding of 'secularism' was essentially 'that which is contrary to Christian teaching.' To him this meant that to be secular is to value one's own tribal traditions over and above the Gospel.

From the above paragraph, but of course also from wider experience of living and operating in Africa, I suggest that: schooling (education) does not transform worldviews. There are many reasons I still find that conclusion to be broadly correct. Essentially, because the success and legitimacy of formal education in Kenya, as in the rest of Africa, continues to depend on keeping as

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[9] I have looked at some pre-prints of scientific papers related to the covid-19 crisis.
[10] I think my missionary colleagues were at the time amazed by my constantly raising issues with them …

short as possible an umbilical cord connecting it to the West. Formal education in Kenya is like a ladder trying to reach the West, the highest points of which that the populace aspires to in-country, being those closest to the original, e.g. schools staffed by Westerners. Schooling then, is imitation of the White man. African innovation in education is corruption of education.[11] [12]

Perhaps the most sobering way of realizing the above quandary, is to learn to use an African language as African people use it, then to try to use the same language to wax lyrical on scientific issues, without breaking African 'usage rules.' (The reason the problematic of doing so is so little known, is because very few Western people these days take the trouble to so-learn any African languages.) Perhaps my linguistic innovation here is to identify 'usage rules' of a language! What I mean is; that indigenous uses of a language implicitly respond to presupposed contexts, and that to use a language (even with good vocabulary and correct grammar and so on) that ignores that context, is to abuse it.[13]

Even putting aside 'usage rules', African languages not having scientific vocabulary[14] makes it impossible to express scientific things, or to express things scientifically. (Specialists are busy expanding terms in languages like Swahili, other languages simply borrow an increasing set of words from European languages. Either way vocabularic innovation does not in itself transform anyone's worldview or comprehension of ontological-reality.)

So, this morning, considering 'what could I write that will help Tanzanians better understand covid-19', I realized that to be true to them would be to do very little differently from the way I normally preach from God's word (the

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[11] It is because education in Africa is an aspiring to be Western, that the covid-19 crisis is threatening its legitimacy. The crisis has revealed structural weaknesses in the West that as of now has millions hiding fearfully in their homes. The West's willingness to run their economies into the ground apparently disregarding everyone else's dependence on them further illustrates the fraught nature of the umbilical cord Africa has been depending on for decades.

[12] "African innovations … have for a long time been viewed as errors," (Muthwii, Margaret Jepkirui, 2007, 'Language Planning and Literacy in Kenya: living with unresolved paradoxes,' 46-62 in: Liddicoat, Anthony J., (ed), 2007, *Language Planning and Policy: issues in language planning and literacy.* Clevedon: Multilingual Matters Ltd., 53-54.) Although Muthwii here refers specifically to the English language situation in Kenya, I suggest that innovation generally in an African country that claims to be 'secular' is seen as error, because the 'ideal' being sought for is foreign and little understood.

[13] Going contrary to usage rules can result in metaphor, e.g. 'my friend is a lion.' Legitimate use of metaphor however requires that breaking of usage traditions adds to profundity of understanding. Scientific language in Africa frequently does not do this. An example that might make sense (by not making sense!) in the West: 'a child's birthday celebration should include the slaughter of a sheep.'

[14] My reference to science here is to ways of thinking invented in the West, especially post-1650, arising from historical developments in which African people had no part.

Bible).[15] Perhaps this has some think that I'm a 'God-freak' and that I threw my rational brain out of a window of my life too long ago! Imagining people condemning me in this kind of way adds further levels of unsettlement to my mind. In other words: I am British enough to realize the sense in what they might be saying were they so to condemn me.[16]

In the midst of covid-19 lockdown (as far as this can realistically happen in Africa) a missionary colleague suggested that I use handing out of free face-masks as an 'excuse' to justify my moving around the villages, so as to be able to at the same time share the Gospel. On careful consideration, after 30 years of never giving special 'clever' handouts, I concluded that doing such now would amount to telling people: 'Look. I've been in favor of Jesus as number one all these years. This crisis though is beyond him! The scale of this crisis is such that we need to put Jesus aside to save our skins.' Yet, once we take that approach, conceptually speaking, Jesus has been demoted. Once Jesus has been demoted to a 'peace-time divinity,' then post-covid-19 we might as well give up on going to church, as if (magically and instantly in a moment of crisis) covid-19 had divested the Gospel of its relevance.

I often consider this case in economic terms, that apply globally, but are especially astute in Africa. If for 6 days in a week people occupy themselves to 'make money' (or 'utility' as economists might use that term), and that is all that counts, then why should they pay a tithe to the institution that they attend for an hour or two on a Sunday? If we say, well, if they were rational, they would cease to pay that tithe, this implies that 'modern' man has a unique corner on universal truth, which our European ancestors were ignorant of as little as 100 years ago. The words of anyone who claims that true wisdom began with their generation, should be interpreted with care. Certainly in Africa, in which the West has invested heavily from its 'secular self,'[17] the church stands out absolutely singularly as that institution 'from the West'[18] that millions of African people invest in voluntarily, using sweat, money, time, dedication, commitment, passion, sacrifice, over and beyond any other second-place institution to a multifold degree!

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[15] I do a lot of Bible teaching in Kenya and further afield, using the Swahili and Luo languages. I do not claim to have made great strides in how I contextualise my teaching, but I certainly approach it very differently as a result of local understanding.

[16] I can enjoy reading the *Guardian*, until sooner or later I am jolted into re-appraising it by lacunae in the understanding of its journalists.

[17] Many projects, aid, investment and so on into Africa from the West runs on a 'secular basis'.

[18] In so far as it was brought by Western missionaries.

At one end of a continuum, we have anthropology, a system that thrives on governance by Western scientific worldviews.[19] The discipline of anthropology in some respects seeks to displace the Christian church.[20] Yet, even the smallest African villages typically boasts one or more churches that are loved by locals, whereas I have yet to see an association of anthropologists in Africa that isn't evidently there to look for links to outside funding. I certainly don't see such associations in any villages! As anthropology doesn't get traction, neither often does science. I think it is very hard for Westerners to realise that any science in Africa that fails to get one-on-one linkage to immediate benefit, can quickly be devalued.[21] Medical science would be a case in point here. Kenya has recently been rocked by repeated long strikes by key medical workers. Doctors' striking causing mortality rates to mushroom doesn't seem to have seriously troubled them.[22] Failing to attend an important family funeral might be considered a much more serious omission.[23]

Science is simply not as obvious to Africa as the West thinks it ought to be. Hence social-distancing and handwashing, very obvious strategic methods of countering viruses, the effectiveness of which are easy for Westerners to picture,[24] just are not obvious ways of deterring illness in today's Africa where misfortune is associated with witchcraft and ancestral displeasure. This determined stickiness of African perception of the source of wellbeing, is suppressed by media and academia today, I suggest, because it contradicts foundations of secularism on which the West wants to build.

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[19] The position of anthropology as "social science" is "complex" because the "culture theory" that it espouses "challenges the … polity within which [it] subsists," (Boggs, James P., 2004, 'The Culture Concept as Theory, in Context,' *Current Anthropology* 45(2), April 2004, 187-209, 197.)

[20] Anthropologists built on Christian missionaries' interest in non-Western people to build an extra-Christian concept of culture. Harries, Patrick and Maxwell, David, (eds) 2012, *The Spiritual in the Secular: Missionaries and Knowledge about Africa (Studies in the History of Christian Missions)* Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 8. Gelder, Craig Van, and Zscheile, Dwight J., 2011, *The Missional Church in Perspective: Mapping Trends and Shaping the Conversation*, Grand Rapids Michigan, Baker Academic, 126.

[21] The science underlying use of the internal combustion chamber is to me an example that gives clear immediate benefit in enabling people to travel quickly, comfortably and cheaply. Much medical practice is much less clear-cut.

[22] Long drawn out strikes by members of the Kenyan medical profession have been common in recent years. For example see: https://www.standardmedia.co.ke/health/article/2001331108/confusion-as-doctors-continue-with-strike

[23] Funerals are "key cultural events" of often enormous scale. (Jindra, Michael, Noret, Joeel, 2011, 'Funerals in Africa: an introduction,' 1-15 in: Jindra, Michael, Noret, Joeel, (eds), *Funerals in Africa: explanation of a social phenomenon.* Oxford: Berghahn Books, 1.)

[24] In covid-19 times, I hold a picture in my head of microscopic particles caught up in spit being expelled from someone's mouth as they talk or sneeze. Such 'physical' presence of microbes appears to be conceptualised differently by my African colleagues.

I draw this short article to a close by giving three conclusions:

1. African countries are offered financial assistance on condition that they follow scientifically-based recommendations like social-distancing in order to counter covid-19.[25] Such linking of finance with strategies designed with the benefit of non-indigenous worldviews can, by pre-empting local initiative and dummifying indigenous understanding, be counter-productive.

2. We need, urgently, to realize that Western secularism is neither easy to adopt or transparent in its workings for the rest of the world.

3. Countless efforts over decades based on the unfounded assumption of the immutable universality of (Western) secularism have occluded an urgent need for alternative avenues of thinking. To date, formally, approaches to African worldviews are almost universally rooted in the secular. The opposite, formal research in approaching the secular from African worldviews, is virtually non-existent. To enable it, we desperately need active and formally recognized debate, thinking, publishing, and engagement with contemporary issues using African languages rooted in African worldviews. This requires some Westerners to immerse themselves intelligently into functioning African communities.[26]

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[25] Large amounts of funding are still available to "countries most in need of help," https://www.who.int/emergencies/diseases/novel-coronavirus-2019/donate That funding will inevitably come with scientifically-based strings attached.

[26] This can be enabled by the following of 'vulnerable mission' principles; see vulnerablemission.org .

Covid-19 and the Historical Disregarding of Important Intercultural Communication Principles between the West and Africa

By Jim Harries (PhD), May 4th 2020.

"A goat has corona, ... pawpaw has corona, a bird like a quail has corona ... many questions need to be asked,"[27] President of Tanzania.

In this article, I use the terms Westerner and European interchangeably. Reference to 'Africa' should be taken as being to sub-Saharan Africa.

The BBC, as other media outlets, make sure we get some news from Africa. Perhaps, should Africa become the new 'epicentre of coronavirus', as has frequently been predicted will happen, we will hear even more. I want here to consider, though – just how selective the process of getting information from Africa to us will be. I suggest that an inherent powerful filter in today's global intercultural communication system will screen out much of the truth.

My observation regarding the 'screening out' of truth arises from my own relating to African people from within African community since 1988. I am enabled to relate closely by the following of two principles, known as the 'vulnerable mission principles.' That is, I relate to them using indigenous language, and without providing subsidy from overseas. For more on this means of communication see vulnerablemission.org

Those reporting to the English-speaking West are either those of African ethnicity who are very good at English, or Westerners who receive their key insights from people of African ethnicity who are very good at English. I give some somewhat random examples from the media:[28]

BBC report on Malawi, 29th April 2020, name of reporter: *Peter Jegwa.*[29] BBC report on Tanzania, 4th May 2020, names of reporters: Basillioh Mutahi and

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[27] John Magufuli, President of Tanzania, 3rd May 2020.
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wfzIaXLn9Kk (my translation). This citation is from a speech given by the President of Tanzania intended to discredit the efficacy of covid-19 tests. Testing animals and plants revealed them to be infected with corona virus.
[28] I have not made a comprehensive survey on the way all media brings information from Africa to the UK, or to the West in general. The cases I look at below illustrate the pattern I am referring to, that I believe to be very widespread.
[29] https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-52471276

Athuman Mtulya.[30] BBC report on Ghana, 4th May 2020, name of reporter Salley Lansah.[31] BBC report on Kenya on 20th April 2020, name of reporter Basillioh Mutahi.[32] BBC report on Uganda, 4th May 2020, name of the reporter Patience Atuhaire.[33] BBC report on Nigeria, 23rd April 2020, name of the reporter Adaobi Tricia Nwaubani.[34] Judging by their names, I assume all the above reporters to be Blacks, i.e. from Africa. It seems that the BBC relies on indigenous reporters to bring its Africa news. The *Telegraph's* African affairs reporter, Will Brown, went to West Africa from India in 2017.[35] On that basis, I assume that he has no in depth understanding of African languages. Adrian Blomfield, also a telegraph reporter on Africa, includes English in his list of 'skills', but no other languages.[36] I assume therefore that he also has to rely on English-speaking Africans for his insights.

Rod Chavis claimed in 1998 that journalists "dump negative news materials and information when reporting, communicating, or disseminating anything concerning Africa."[37] His thoughts are further developed in the text below:

The complaints about negative coverage in Western media are not new. Media negativity and its consequences have been bemoaned the world over, but perhaps nowhere more than in Africa - where the prevailing perception is that foreign media, and Western correspondents in particular, have gone out of their way to portray the continent as the nadir of human civilisation. A dark continent of unspeakable "tribal" savageries, unmitigated suffering, horrible epidemics and child-like helplessness.[38]

The above critiques of journalism about Africa may be responsible for the BBCs utilizing only, or at least predominantly, journalists of local ethnicity to report on the continent. They could certainly easily result in a situation where white

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[30] https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-52505375

[31] https://www.bbc.com/news/av/world-africa-52503049/coronavirus-ghana-s-dancing-pallbearers-become-covid-19-meme

[32] https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-52326316

[33] https://www.bbc.com/news/live/world-africa-47639452

[34] https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-52372737

[35] https://www.williambrownjournalist.com/ Gaining competence in an African language would have taken him at least 2 years. It seems clear that he began reporting on arrival in West Africa.

[36] https://paydesk.co/journalist/adrian.blomfield

[37] http://www.africa.upenn.edu/Workshop/chavis98.html

[38] https://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/problem-negative-western-media-coverage-africa-190708100429209.html

journalists 'walk on eggshells'.[39] Kowal encourages us not to overvalue indigenous people's views.[40] Doing so can quickly result in a departure from the truth. Yet we have discovered that European and African journalists in Africa must be careful about reporting things as Europeans perceive them: If from a European perspective Africa appears 'primitive', this must not be revealed. Assuming this appearance to exist, reporters have to filter what they write. As a result, people in the West receiving reports from journalists on Africa will receive a 'cleansed' version of what they actually observe happening. They will receive something different from truth in Africa as it would appear from Europe. Assuming their cultural background to be similar to that of the European journalists; they will receive information other than how they would have perceived the situation had they been on the ground.[41] Such mis-information is I believe introducing enormous bias in academia and popular opinion as well as in the media. The fact that the process that I am here noting is going on, should have us questioning the notions of 'truth' on the basis of which the West supposedly operates. It seems we are being fed un-truth about Africa. **If the West's understanding of Africa is not based on 'truth,' then I would like to ask; with what legitimacy does the West advise Africa regarding strategies to counter covid-19?**

In order to avoid giving offence to African people in today's Western-dominated world, what is reported on Africa, is routinely what is in Africa that is also valued in Europe, or as-if it is the same as in Europe. Africa is given, in other words, so as not to report 'negatively', a European skin.[42]

The above biased picture is a little more complicated due to activities of accountability-seeking Western donors in Africa. The West (Europe and America) invests much finance into Africa. It cannot do so without a means of

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[39] See comment here: Kowal, Emma & Franklin, Hayley & Paradies, Yin, 2011, 'Towards Reflexive Anti-racism', 133-152 in: *Directions and Intersections: proceedings of the 2011 Australian critical race and whiteness studies association and indigenous studies research network joint conference.* Published by the Australian Critical Race and Whiteness Association, December 2011, 139.

[40] Kowal, Emma, 2015, *Trapped in the Gap: doing good in indigenous Australia*. Oxford: Berghan, xiii.

[41] I here assume that new information is always comprehended on the back of existing knowledge. As a result, understanding is the closest to truth when the informer has similar presuppositions (a similar worldview) to one's own.

[42] We should be reminded of Fanon's famous book: Fanon, Frantz, 1986 (1952), *Black Skin, White Masks.* Translated by Charles Lam Markmann, London: Pluto Press.

checking whether its finances are appropriately used. The means used to do this checking, is these days known as 'accountability'. The kinds of consideration already mentioned in this article, i.e. the need to avoid being seen as too 'critical' of what goes on in Africa, means that typically a simplified physical means of accountability is sought. For example, if money is for buildings, then donors will want to receive regular pictures illustrating the progress of the building project. If it is orphans, they will want pictures of orphans, letters from them, receipts used in the project, and so on. In other words, today's accountability focuses on the visible, the physical, the 'secular' (even the spiritual is measured by the physical, e.g. how many baptisms, number of people attending church, and so on). This physicality of accountability I suggest adds to ways in which Africa comes to be perceived by the West as 'secular'.[43]

I believe a new intercultural-communication model is needed to bring a corrective to the filtering processes described above. Figure 1 illustrates what is happening today in diagrammatic summary form. Figure 2 illustrates what a 'new model' should look like.
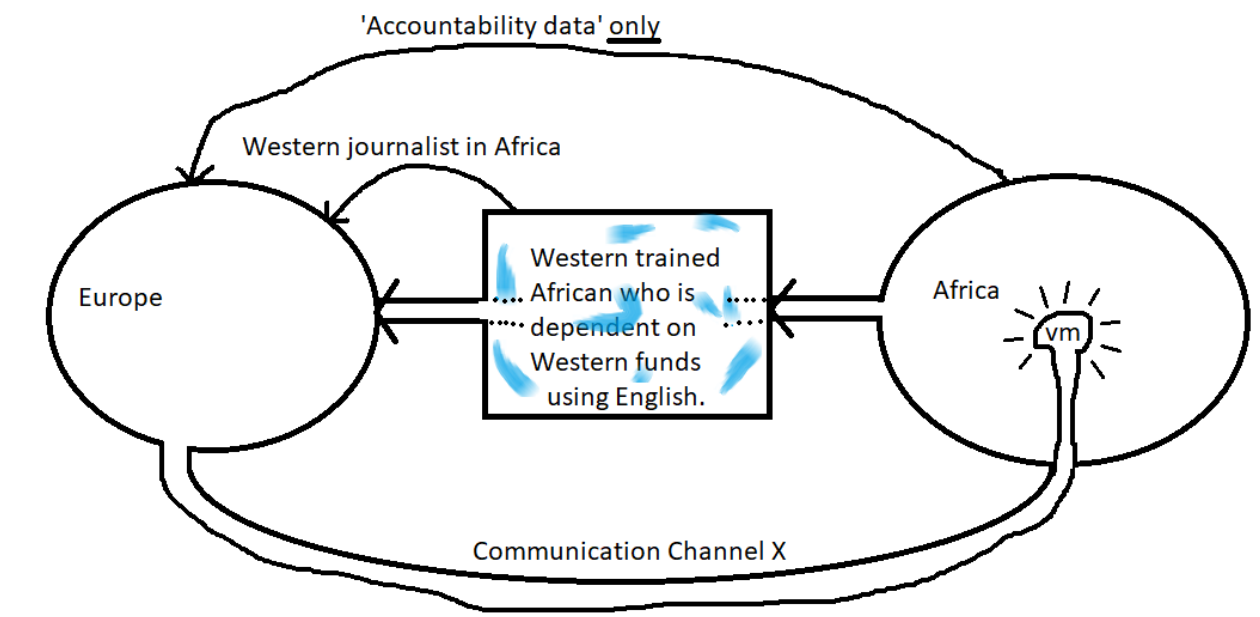
Figure 1.
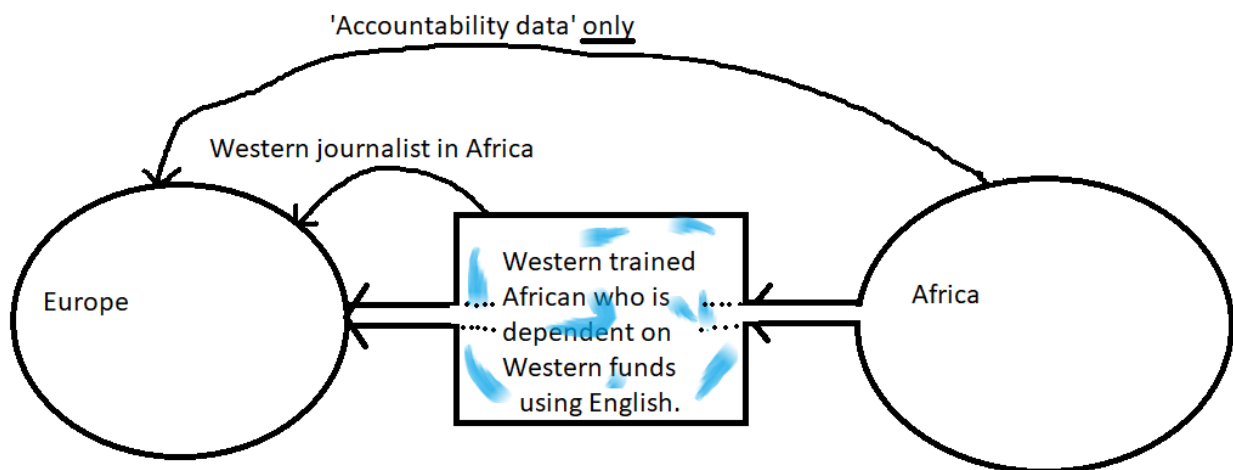
Apart perhaps from accountability-data, all formal communication of Africa with the West goes through the screen of English via Western trained (i.e. fluent English speaking) Africans who are dependent on Western funds. This

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[43] Where the secular is the non-religious, i.e. it ignores complex affective, social, and other non-physical / chemical aspects of human living.

includes cases when a journalist (or academic researcher) is on the continent. What this adds, and what this screens-out, results in the 'unknown' we are looking at in this article. Certainly, things 'added' are those that please donors. Certainly, things omitted includes those over which Africans are 'embarrassed,' given today's supposed modern world. Hence we get the massive miscommunication to the West already referred to above. Figure 2 below illustrates, in simplified terms, our proposed improvement on this communication.

Figure 2.

The addition labelled as vm, in Figure 2, represents a 'vulnerable missionary'.[44] This could be a journalist, a development worker, an anthropologist, a Christian missionary, etc. This European person differs from contemporary Westerners relating to Africa in two important respects: 1. They understand, hear, and locally exclusively use, an indigenous African language(s). As a result, they begin to appreciate the categories within which African people think. 2. They do not act as donors to the people with whom they relate. This enables their African colleagues to express themselves freely to them, instead of having to be careful how to communicate so as to please patrons or potential patrons. The person receiving an issue in its complexity from Africans (in a local language used as it is in local context) is a Westerner. The latter then has to

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[44] Vulnerablemission.org

decide how to translate, i.e. communicate, what they experiencing back to the West.

In Figure 2 above, the person labelled vm engages translation from Africa to the West. Unlike the dominant contemporary means of communication also illustrated in Figure 1, here it is the Westerner (European) rather than the indigenous African person who phrases things into English. This has various implications. Many of these implications are important to enable the West to learn in an honest way about Africa. The outsider not being related to indigenous people does not have to speak in favour of money flows to them, or to please indigenous communities, so can speak of things as they are.[45] Being Western, their opening-perception will be similar to that of the Westerners who are the target audience of their reporting.[46]

An intricate yet important truth here relates to the direction of translation. An African person while arguably having 'the best understanding of Africa,' will not always appreciate how what is happening in Africa is perceived by the West. Their knowledge of Africa does not prepare them to know how what is happening in Africa will be understood. A European person will have a lesser understanding of Africa. But they will have a much greater understanding of how what is communicated to Europe will be comprehended by Europeans. I have previously argued that the latter is more important than the former.[47]

It should be noted that the equivalent to the communication channel I have advocated for above, that I have labelled in Figure 2 as communication channel X, practiced by a vm (vulnerable missionary) already exists for African's learning from the West. Means by which Africa learns from the West are illustrated in Figure 3.

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[45] I.e. as they appear to a Westerner.

[46] Those who claim that the media simply communicates truth that is universal and equally relevant and honest to all, are unfortunately misguided. Communicators are always selective in what they communicate. That selectivity is guided by their history, culture, background, traditions, interests, and so on.

[47] Harries, Jim, 2017, *The Godless Delusion: Europe and Africa.* Eugene, Oregon: Wipf and Stock, 136-140. See also:
http://www.academia.edu/attachments/40216815/download_file?s=portfolio

Figure 3.
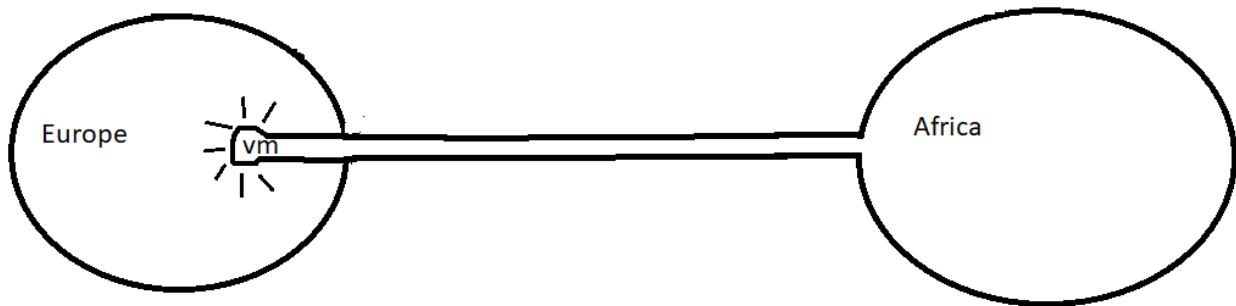
There are many African people living within Western countries. They are often very familiar with Western languages, such as in this case English. Their activities in Europe are not dependent on funds they get from Africa. Hence, they are already what we are calling 'vulnerable missionaries' from Africa to Europe, as demonstrated in Figure 3. Enabling Europeans to do what we have outlined in Figure 2 using 'communication channel X', is simply enabling them to do what Africans are already doing in relation to Europe.

Whereas the absence of vulnerable mission (vm) in today's world prevents Europe from effectively learning from Africa, the reverse is not the case. The 'problem' in Africa is not that the above means of learning do not exist. Difficulties in Africa are different. A big problem for Africa I suggest is that because the alternative to vm, whereby the West 'instructs' Africa using European languages is formally very dominant, insights acquired by African people exposed to Western ways remain an almost insignificant part of the whole picture. The way forward for Africa must, in order for information from Europe to make better sense to them, be a demotion of formal Western structures in Africa. In short – government, education, the Church and other key sectors in African countries should begin to function using an African language(s), with respect to indigenous categories and not foreign categories. It follows that: the West ought to stop using subsidy to force its languages and institutions onto Africa.[48]

The failure to date to apply the above wisdom to intercultural communication between the West and Africa, underlies the tensions and contradictions we are experiencing in considering ways to tackle covid-19 on the continent today. Much humility is currently required by both sides to try to come to grips with sheer difficulties in producing open communication channels. Although the

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[48] The use of Western languages, institutions, and wisdom of all sorts in Africa, is usually heavily subsidised.

changes here advocated to global communication are profound, their immediate implementation is essential in order to address today's communication issues. These include issues such as whether social-distancing is relevant to Africa,[49] whether covid-19 tests are reliable (as doubted by the President of Tanzania, Magufuli),[50] and ways in which *Covid-Organics* should be used as a treatment for covid-19.[51] Efforts towards achieving the above communication model, Figure 2, should be made urgently.

[49] https://phys.org/news/2020-04-social-distancing-big-african-countries.html
[50] https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/05/tanzania-president-questions-coronavirus-kits-animal-test-200503174100809.html
[51] https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-52519853