Deliverance Ministry in an African Cultural Perspective

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Abstract

The wide spread of witchcraft beliefs in Africa results in peculiar tensions in the running of Christian institutions. Some impacts on life of the fear of witchcraft and ancestral spirits are articulated in this article. Western wisdom in deliverance ministries that seeks to avoid extremes in spiritual warfare through consideration of 'truth encounters' is found to be of limited pertinence in many indigenous African churches. Western missionaries who fail to carefully consider the extra-enlightenment and highly spiritualised African context can easily end up spreading an understanding of the Gospel oriented to prosperity. This can best be avoided through an orientation to 'vulnerable mission' by Westerners – that is, by mission using languages and resources that are local to Africa.

Introduction

This article examines the vexed question – of the nature of appropriate deliverance ministries in the African (i.e. sub-Saharan African) context. It points out that a consideration of ministry context is essential, alongside Biblical study and spiritual awareness, to the design of appropriate practice. The article does not provide answers but direction-markers to those concerned about practices of Christian deliverance from malevolent spirits.

An African Context

The small rural theological college in the heart of Africa had a new Principal from the USA. The new Principal noticed some tensions. He decided to investigate them. It seemed appropriate to give all campus members opportunity to tell him how they felt about things. So he and the deputy Principal invited them in small groups to meet with them in afternoons over a cup of tea.

This process turned out differently than had been anticipated. The Principal had expected to find a few areas of difficulty, and that they could be ironed out. Instead – mistrust and suspicion seemed to be rife and to be everywhere! Teachers were plotting against students. The previous Principal was a tyrant. Students were in opposing factions. Grounds-crew were accused of theft and subversion. The senior administration was presented as if they were adulterers who were busy filtering school money into their own pockets.

Deeply perturbed the new Principal felt like a friendly soldier walking through an enemy camp. Where was God in all this? People seemed to be at each other's throats. It took him a while to realise – that is how contexts governed by witchcraft work. Yes, people need each other, so they are together. But this may be far from trusting each other. This was far from what he had known in America. In the USA people work in carefully thought out ways for the common good. Here in Africa people were reasoning in a way just as complex to protect themselves from the bad spiritual forces emanating from the very colleagues they also needed the most. Before realising what was

going on, the new Principal had already backed attacks on various parties who were in American terms totally innocent, but who got caught up in the 'witch-hunt'.

Less institutionalised theological education programmes can suffer related difficulties. An initial flush of enthusiasm for something new is unlikely to last. Suspicions soon set in. Someone seems to be making money unjustly out of the process concerned. Others are wary that they are not getting their rightful share of whatever money is available. People are getting tired and are less enthusiastic about the commitment that they made initially. They need an excuse to get out. Someone is blamed for something and the teaching programme declines, and then grinds to a halt.[1]

The untidy nature of the contents and surroundings to African homes is often noticed by Westerners. Brown and dirty colours are often found inside houses; such as damp slightly rotted thatching grass and earth floors and/or walls. When walls are painted, they still tend to be grubby. Things are not pristine. Outside the house, available land is likely to be used for maize or other crops. The immediate surroundings of a house are a night-time urinal. Chickens and other animals plus babies not wearing nappies contribute to smells and unseemliness around the house. Refuse is likely to be thrown around untidily. Grass is not cut regularly, windows are washed infrequently, etc.

Included in the reasons for the above is the desire to give an appearance of poverty, so as to deter witchcraft attacks by the jealous. Things being too clean, tidy, and organised would imply someone's having too much spare time and money – which would be interpreted as too little time and money to look after friends and especially family. Such a person could be considered selfish. Dirty wild ground seems though also to have other roles; it seems to provide a haunt for spirits. Straight lines, clean cut hedges, mown grass and tidy borders would be antagonistic to the presence of wandering spiritual entities.

Relations with other people also tend to be antagonistic. Close family and neighbours form ones closest relationships (in rural areas of course the two tend to coincide). They are also the first to be accused should some evil be perpetrated. For example, should food be stolen, a house be broken into, animals become unexpectedly sick etc. – the first to be suspected of causing such are immediate family and neighbours. Ones family are ones enemies! This may be striking to a Westerner, but it is very normal in parts of Africa.[2]

Recent media attention given to child witches demonstrates that Africans are as wary of the evil in their children as they are of the same elsewhere. Children are loved, at the same time they are feared. They are rarely seen as 'innocent'. Their potential for 'evil' is related to the troubles they can cause to their parents once they've grown – boys beating their mothers or girls who can embarrass the family should they become sexually promiscuous. But it is more than this. Children may be considered inherently evil, and therefore inherently needing to be oppressed, put down, and

[1] The content of this paragraph is given on the basis of 16 years of experience of running a Bible teaching programme in rural Africa.

[2] I have noted this in Harries (2007:233). It has been striking to me how frequently when some evil arises in the communities with which I am familiar in Western Kenya, a neighbour or other local person is considered to be responsible. For example should a thief break in to someone's house, few will suspect him or her to have come from a distance. They will immediately suspect a close neighbour, even though that neighbour is likely to be a relative.

sometimes tortured or even killed. They easily become dangerous to the wellbeing of the family through being witches or sorcerers.[3]

My purpose for mentioning the above features of African life is not to bamboozle my readers. Neither is it to put Africans down. It is to point to a context that ought to make a Westerner think before rushing into a deliverance ministry. Before going on, please note that I do not claim objective truth for the above account. The search for objectivity has, it seems to me, been too unhealthy a straight jacket for academia too long – that has kept too much actual 'truth' out of view. Not every African person will agree with all of the above. But many will, I believe, strongly identify with its general thrust.[4]

An important question is – how a missionary from the West (and I presume my dominant readership to be Westerners) should respond to the above context, and contexts like them? Will or should such contexts affect the way in which one ministers?

Missionary Responses to the African Spirit World

The time is one in which the spiritual awareness of many Western churches is rising. That is, there is an ever growing charismatic/Pentecostal movement or emphasis, amongst Western churches.[5] Because this is 'new and exciting' for Christians in the West, Westerners can be the most enthusiastic about transporting the same to the 'mission field'. A question needing to be asked regards the importance of the difference between the way deliverance ministry can be applied to such an already spiritualised context and the secular context with which many Western missionaries are familiar.

The following are just a few components of deliverance activities by African churches that I have personally witnessed: The possessed person, typically girl or woman, may have the almost undivided attention of a group of three or more men shouting at demons to leave for some hours. A patient can be thumped with a Bible, soaked with water, hit with leafy branches and possibly other objects. The patient may be stood in the middle of a circle of people and spun around till they are so dizzy that they keep trying to fall, but instead of falling are thrown back and fore by members of the circle. The person may be tied by a rope, covered by a sheet and soil, wrapped in a grass mat, rolled backwards and forwards over a 6 or 8 yard distance. They can be ordered to run around the church. They can be made to hop and jump. An incision can be made in their skin and a 'substance' or object sucked out.

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[3] This has been carefully articulated in relation to Nigeria in a *Dispatches* special shown on channel 4 on November 12th 2008. This gives instance after instance of children being physically abused the course of attempts to drive witchcraft from them. All this is considered to have been inspired particularly by Helen Ukpabio's film entitled 'End of the Wicked' (nd). The blame for such abuses of children is often laid at the feet of Christian pastors. Phiri reports on children in Congo being accused of being witches (2009).

[4] There are many issues with this kind of 'reporting' of the African context. Not least, questions of what terms to use in English to refer to things that are African such as 'witchcraft'. Sometimes an English term could be used that could seem to be inappropriate in certain African uses of English. Many 'differences' between African and Western ways of life that are visible to Westerners may not be easily visible to Africans, but does that mean that they are not there? Sometimes the multitude of such questions can have scholars minimise or even pretend to do away with differences that are very real.

[5] Pentecostal (2006) reports this for the UK. The growth of Pentecostalism is known in many countries around the world.

Advice being given in deliverance ministry in Western nations is quite different. Bernard tells us that "Neil Anderson, now one of the widest read authors and acceptable to those of a charismatic and conservative evangelical position, emphasises truth and faith, alongside self-deliverance from demonic spirits" (2001:64). Anderson says the following: "therapists should be getting their information from the Holy Spirit, the spirit of truth [as it is] … truth that will set them free … Setting a captive free is better understood as a truth encounter … it is never our responsibility to defeat the devil; Jesus has already done that …" (2000:124). Judging by these and other Western writers on deliverance – many African practices of deliverance seem to be marginal, or even beyond the pale.

A basic difference seems to be that the West perceives 'truth' to be other than confined to the spiritual realm. 'Truth' as Anderson perceives it, is presumably historically-known truth about Jesus Christ, that is confirmed by the Scriptures. The West has a strong notion of absolute or objective truth. Not so Africa, or at least Kenya according to Blunt (2004:318) who points out that for Kenyan Pentecostals "the senses can no longer determine the true nature of things or people". An encounter of truth with spiritual forces is likely to be much less significant for an African, for whom that which has the greatest spiritual force in the light of demonic or other attack may be thereby considered to be 'the truth'.

A question immediately arises – about what is the appropriate procedure for deliverance? In this article I suggest that an appropriate approach for secular Westerners may not be appropriate for lively and noisy East Africa with its numerous witches and spirits. A populous accustomed to elaborate rituals (such as those mentioned above) and vigorous dancing to the beating of noisy drums in hot sweaty rooms, may not be impressed by the quiet tone and smile of an orderly Western deliverance event. For all the political correctness of Western teaching, it will be second class by comparison to that to which Africa is accustomed.

So then how should deliverance be practiced? Perhaps we ought to say that practices related to casting of demons in East Africa are 'all wrong'? That sounds rather imperialistic. Perhaps they are 'wrong' in the West, and Africa has got it right? Of course both may be 'wrong' – but is one side more 'wrong' than the other? Perhaps we need to recognise that it is important to consider the context in deciding what means are appropriate. Then we must concede that teaching on deliverance ministry in Europe arises from an understanding of the Scriptures acquired through a particular context and is appropriate in a particular context. If this is the case, then for Europeans to teach Africans how to carry out deliverance ministry is to mislead them. Frankly, the alternative is to say that the African church is misled, not guided by the Holy Spirit, junior in status, or ignorant. The latter positions may well keep the European / Western church in the position of tutor and the African church as tutee for many years to come. If the African church is 'apprentice church' and not capable of (with God's help) guiding itself – then can it (in Protestant terms) be considered to be church at all?

How many demons is one to cast, and how frequently? Particularly amongst African women – it has been my observation in parts of Africa with which I am familiar, that demons can often be found with relative ease by a skilful preacher. They normally 'lie low' and have relatively low-level impact on someone's life, but if stimulated they can manifest. This is classically a problem at girls' secondary schools – where Pentecostal preachers can create chaos if given a free reign. On the other hand – it is also quite possible to preach at a girls' secondary school without evoking any demonic manifestation.

The same principle applies outside of Girls' schools. Western missionaries who want to make a stir in Africa often do so by provoking the spirit world. Bonnke's preaching is clearly of that ilk; he makes no bones of the fact that spirits and witchcraft are there, and need to be overcome by the power of Jesus; "For Bonnke … human beings are totally evil and depraved … 'witchcraft' is the only category which Bonnke can treat of [African culture]" (Gifford 1992:162-163). Hoffman has explained that to have an impact on a village, one's entry should take the form of a powerful prayer aimed at untoward spirits. He 'enjoyed' much demon casting in Zambia and 'planted' many churches in the process. To him, when he arrived on the scene, the Zambians had "finally found someone who knew how to cast out demons" (Hoffman 2008).

One problem with the above approach, I suggest, is that it tends to be less than honest. Not that people tell untruths as such. Rather dishonesty arises because Whites have a reputation for being wealthy and Africans usually take an interest in what they have to say with the prospect of material gain in mind.[6] Western Pentecostal style preachers displaying wealth (coming in a vehicle, telling about relatively affluent ways of life overseas, owning a computer, etc.) and then advocating deliverance are implicitly strongly suggesting that deliverance is a means to wealth; "American missionaries in Zimbabwe almost automatically seem to be preaching a prosperity Gospel even if this is not their intention …" (Reese 2005:37). Sometimes the claim is made overt even by Westerners, but certainly by Africans.

Given the extent to which Africa is already imitating Europe, and given also the holistic African lifestyle/worldview – there is an important sense in which African audiences expect preachers from the West to be revealing to them the secret of how to acquire wealth. The indigenous African view is that there are spiritual forces at work that prevent wealth accumulation. Good things like wealth in Africa come by default (Harries 2006a). Therefore an indigenous economics generally assumes wealth to come not by careful thinking, planning, hard work, accounting, business sense etc., but by deliverance from the spiritual powers that are preventing it. Is this a view that Westerners should encourage?

Westerners do not always realise the ways in which the presence of and ways of dealing with spirits are tied in with people's traditions and customs. Knowledge of understood circumstances of possession, or at least likely understood circumstances, will assist in the dealing with untoward spirits. For example, let's take the care of a lady who has been married for two years and has not yet given birth coming for prayer. Whereas 'waiting' for two years, may be very normal in the West. She may be at crisis point in Africa. If the girl's family has a history of barrenness she may be sure that deceased barren female relatives are causing her problem. An exorcist who recognises this will, presumably, be greatly helped in his or her task.

A Western missionary who engages in deliverance ministry in Africa could very easily end up 'alone'. That is, their relative ignorance of the details of local conditions pertaining amongst other things to the spiritual realm, will handicap them in their approach to spiritual warfare. Unless, that is, they back their ministry with foreign money – an option that I will consider in more detail below.

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[6] Maranz explains that in Africa "a disinterested friendship is something without sense" (2001:65). Maranz goes so far as to say apart from their resources, Westerners "lack most other qualifications for meaningful relationships" (2001:9).

Some readers may find some of the above to be excessively humanistic. Why is the above discussion so strongly rooted in the African way of life, rather than in the Scriptures? I can give two reasons for this:

1. African people will themselves read and understand the Scriptures in the light of their own way of life (as of course do Westerners). This is the background to people's reading. Setting a foundation for African theology must be on the basis of the same African view of Scripture.
2. A lot of Christian ministry in the West is closely tied in with humanistic thinking. Hence counselling services are often found in churches; church ministers study psychology, missionaries study sociology and so on. The above study I see as the equivalent to Western humanism, but drawing on African thinking instead of Western psychology etc. It can be misleading to try to apply a more purely Biblical model to ministry in Africa than we ever do 'back home'. The bible is always read from within 'a culture'.

From the above we can say that African contextual knowledge is required in order to minister in the African context in a way that makes sense to and so can be built upon by African people. The final section of this article will consider how such contextual knowledge can be acquired.

Acquiring Contextual Knowledge

It has become normal for Western missionaries in Africa to invest money from 'home' into their ministries. In a 'poor' continent such as Africa, this has contributed to the flourishing of whatever ministry has outside links, and the neglect of truly indigenous activity. Perceiving this, some funds nowadays seek to support indigenous ministry. Unfortunately the strings with which money are tied being ever-present, 'indigenous' ministries can become Western oriented to ensure the ongoing flow of funds. The same funds tend to corrupt indigenous ministries.[7]

In both the above cases, dependence on foreign funds aligns ministry to the context of the origin of the finance concerned. I have considered the question of whether strings can be removed in Harries (2006b). In essence I conclude: they cannot be. While donors can make some efforts at aligning funds with what is 'truly indigenous', such alignment is of necessity very limited. In much of Africa recipients and potential recipients of donor funds have discovered that what is important in order to succeed in today's donor-dependent world is not their aptitude in the recipient (i.e. their own) culture, but the ability to relate to the donor culture. It is the ability at writing a proposal, relating amicably with Westerners, English comprehension, computer literacy, and enhancing the feelings of esteem and self-importance of Westerners that differentiate success from failure in Africa today.

Many questions asked by the West in relation to the rest of the world's people pertain to how to use the West's abundance of resources to benefit the rest of the globe. The above paragraph points to some real difficulties in this process. I suggest that there is an important need for some Westerners who blankly refuse to enhance their ministries using resources that they get from the West. Such missionaries reject the privileged status of bountiful funding for their 'projects'. What they gain instead includes:

[7] Many factors contribute to donor funds' encouraging corruption. For details see Harries (2009).

1. In due course, the cessation of expressions of interest in one's project by those who are really only after money.
2. Setting up of an activity that from the beginning is rooted in local resources. This will ensure that it will remain sustainable in the absence of foreign subsidy.
3. Not having to be oriented to please donors, participants in a project can give genuine priority to local concerns and sustainable culturally aligned ways of resolving problems and building capacity.
4. The absence of donor funds does away with the fighting, disputes, jealousy, gossiping, discord and witchcraft often associated with donor money (Harries 2009).

Putting aside the option of 'buying success' has various implications for missionary service. Whereas the availability of finance can compensate for a lack of local wisdom, if finance is not available, an alternative means of drawing attention to one's activities must be found. On a level playing field the foreign missionary is forced to compete on equal terms with local actors. The latter are by default closely integrated into their communities. A missionary will have little choice, but to also acquire skills in communication and understanding that pertain to the context being reached. This requires, at the very least, knowledge of local languages.

It has been remarkable to discover how many missionary efforts are strongly in favour of 'learning local languages', but how rare it is for it to be advocated that ministry actually occur using those languages! One can ask; how easy is it to learn a language profoundly and accurately without regularly using it? Also, how much are 'local people' going to be impressed with a missionary's knowledge of a local language, if when push comes to shove all important mission business is carried out using foreign languages? It is only a close knowledge of an indigenous language and its associated way of life that will truly enable a missionary to begin to perceive where people are coming from in their approach to the Gospel, or whatever project is on hand.

Because in order to be internationally acceptable formal discourse in a language such as English has to follow prescribed conventions, it is extremely difficult to learn details about a non-English culture using English. An example may illustrate this. The Luo people of Western Kenya have something called *chira*. A large number of deaths are regularly attributed to *chira*. *Chira* is a wasting away of the body caused by an angering of ancestral spirits that results from a breaking of traditional taboo. There is no known English equivalent term. The closest contemporary English word that is these days as widely used as is *chira* amongst the Luo, is AIDS (and its translation to *Dholuo*; *ayaki*). A further drawback of the use of *chira* is that people are not supposed to believe in it. In formal circles those who 'believe in it' are considered primitive. As a result, Luo people are likely to attribute people's being sickly and dying to Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome (almost impossible to translate long-hand into *Dholuo*), while unbeknown to the casual observer attaching all the deep and profound content of *chira* to the same word.

One reason Westerners are often kept from 'the coalface' in ministry in Africa, and confined to offices in the roles of receiving and dispersing of funds and other administration, is because they are poorly informed of what is going on 'on the ground'. As a result if they get too close, they are most likely to upset things. A necessity to overcome such and to begin to comprehend life then interact with life as local people do it is the use of local language in one's ministry.

Native-English speakers should realise that they are at a disadvantage by comparison with locals if they use their English in ministry outside of the native-English work. Locals may understand one another pretty well using English, as they presuppose content to words such as AIDS in the example given above. A native English speaker will however, be misguided to suppose that locals will grasp the content he/she assumes to be in words by drawing on *his / her* native context.

Taking this look at deliverance ministry as a case study, we have found that appropriate sensitivity to context for the establishment of a sustainable groundwork for deliverance will only be achieved if a foreign missionary engages in ministry using local languages and by depending on local resources. These are the two bases of vulnerable mission. More can be learned about vulnerable mission by reference to www.vulnerablemission.com.

Conclusion

A key question identified for consideration of what is appropriate deliverance ministry in this article, is that of the cultural-status of the African church as against the Western church. The linguistic and financial domination of the Western church can give the impression that Christianity in Africa is still in 'apprenticeship' and needing constant guidance from the West. If this is the case, then it could be questioned whether it is a 'church' at all. If it is a 'church', and doing things differently from the Western church due to its peculiar context, then an important place for context must be left in the planning of deliverance ministries for Africa from the West. Presumably then, styles of deliverance that are inappropriate in one context may still be appropriate in another, and vice-versa.

Once the important of contextual knowledge in ministry is accepted, an important question for Westerners wanting to contribute to the growth and development of the African church, is how this is to be acquired? The 'distorting' impacts of the use of non-indigenous languages and resources are articulated in this article. The 'way forward' in ministry inter-culturally is found to be for some missionaries to confine themselves in ministry to the use of the languages and resources of the people being reached.

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