Two Sports as a Model for Intercultural Mission and Theological Education

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INTRODUCTION

Trying to explain a sport such as soccer or tennis to someone who only knows about the other of those sports can provide a model to help understand the difficulties involved in communication between cultures. What are the implications of using this model for facilitating intercultural communication in the realm of theology and mission, especially between the West and Africa? Africans do not have the same cultural and historical background as Westerners, yet they are required to use a Western language when they talk about theological and other issues. Just as soccer players using tennis language may not comprehend what tennis terms actually refer to, Africans do not understand Western concepts and language in the same ways as Westerners do. To compensate—and please their Western teachers and financial supporters—Africans may well imitate what Western missionaries and teachers coach them to speak or think, as a result of which they don't learn to think for themselves. Africans are unable to come to their own culturally appropriate conclusions using Western languages and educational means. This leaves them dependent on Westerners to figure out how to live in a way Westerners will approve. It is hard to accurately describe a soccer match (African ways of life) using only tennis terminology (cf. English). Africans are encouraged to continue with this dysfunctional way of living—imitating Western ways using a Western language—as a result of the incentive of outside finance, better jobs, etc.

In a parallel with our sports analogy, the solution would be for Westerners, as tennis players, to thoroughly immerse themselves in the unfamiliar (to them) sport of soccer, before trying to teach African soccer players how to play tennis. This would enable the Westerner to grasp misunderstandings by soccer players (people rooted in African culture) about the game of tennis (Western ways of life and thinking). Western missionaries thoroughly immersed in African culture and languages without Western financial subsidy, would be able to see how Africans perceive Western theological and societal concepts. Then missionaries could encourage people to think for themselves in their own languages so as to find culturally appropriate ways of living out biblical truths.

BEING FRANK AND HONEST ABOUT COMMUNICATION PROBLEMS

Frank honesty sometimes cuts across things we believe to be true. Yet to identify truths that are at loggerheads with Western ways of thinking may benefit the Gospel. High levels of mutual misunderstanding plague relationships between missionaries and African nationals and, to my understanding, many Western missionaries find this embarrassing. I taught 15 years part time at an English medium degree level theological college in Kenya. Grading essays was always challenging. Students arranged words in roughly required ways. They didn't seem to be able to explain things as Westerners would or as I, as instructor had done. If you read their English carefully, many bits of arguments and key terms were included. To fail work because the parts didn't quite make sense, seemed wrong. I did what I think every other Western Bible college tutor does, to give the benefit of the doubt to the African. That avoided appearing racist or implying that African people are not very intelligent. So, I might have awarded, say 80%, to a student who didn't seem to have grasped what they were writing about.

As another example of mutual misunderstanding, sometimes a community may need some program or action to solve a perceived problem, such as shortage of food, or lack of theological education of its leaders. As a missionary you want the plans for resolution to come from the Africans who will implement the plans. You engage the people, often with what to you are open ended questions. You want them to take initiative and be in charge, yet they don't seem to come up with what to a Western missionary seems obvious. They look to you to take the initiative. Eventually, after more probing, and on the basis of what they seem to have said, you suggest a particular direction. They agree, but the reality is, they would never have come to that course of action if you had not been involved and if funding had not been available. Yet, for your publicity, you might well say 'it was their idea'.

Another example of a disconnect in communication is that as a missionary in Africa, I tend to think of ways in which we should work efficiently. But when I pay close attention to translation, the term 'efficiency' is routinely translated into African languages by a term that seems to mean 'good'. On investigation I discovered that efficiency is not a known concept in African ways of life. A key means that helps me to make decisions (the desire for efficiency) is beyond the African community's comprehension! How can that be? What should I do about it?

Whether they like it or not, (Western) missionaries routinely have authority arising from the funds they

have and use to "help" people.[1] Their advice is sought and they give it—I mean, that's the point of being a missionary—to help other people comprehend how best to live as a Christian. But for reasons already alluded to above, locals don't understand Westerners and their advice very well. The reason they go along with the need for formal theological and other education may be because it offers prospects for salaries and prestige, rather than it, being something they might think to do of their own accord. Theological education on offer is rooted in Western contexts. Many churches reward people who have engaged in theological education. For some, it is mandatory so as to be a pastor.

The above are some of the puzzling scenarios that I want to address in this article. My understanding of them is profoundly affected by ways I experience the reverse. My own ways of thinking are often received as strange and improbable by my African hosts. That is even after 37 years of my living in their community. For example, my way of examining processes so that they be efficient, perhaps to save time, seems to African colleagues to come from Mars.

My questions to conclude this section: What is going on? What do we need to do about it?

CULTURES AS SPORTS

Perhaps it would be helpful to make an extended comparison of cultures to sports, like soccer and tennis, and their respective languages. One person's culture and language is tennis, someone else's is soccer. What happens in the translation process?

Translation Experts

Scholars and philosophers have long turned their attention to inter-lingual translation. Cicero (106-43 BC) suggested that translation should be 'sense for sense' rather than "word for word."[2] (Perhaps that was the beginning of a slippery slope?) St. Jerome (AD 347-420) suggested word for word translation for the Bible, but "sense for sense" for other texts.[3] Martin Luther is known for having advocated use of a common language to help people understand the Bible. According to Nida, translation should work by dynamic equivalence, focusing on the effect on a reader rather than the words themselves in the original.[4] Reiss suggests that the dominant function of the source text should determine translation method.[5] Others, such as Juliane-House and later Venuti, advocated that a translation should sound 'foreign'.[6]

From the above we can realize that well-known experts on translation emphasize intercultural transmission of meaning or sense. This is for obvious reasons; many actions are interpreted culturally. Translators reason that it is the meaning of an act that counts, and that meaning or impact is what should be translated. My readers may well metaphorically nod their heads at this. It seems to make absolute sense. Unless, that is, if *what is actually done is more important than what it might seem to mean.* Different examples could be used to illustrate this. If someone asks you, "please get me some flowers as a gift to my wife," then, if flowers are not available, you may think that it is appropriate instead to acquire a box of chocolates. (Meaning based translation would indicate that what is important is to have something that is acceptable as a gift for one's wife.) But then your friend might explain, 'no, she has a vase, and wants something to fill it." Chocolates are not appropriate. You were required to take the need for flowers literally. This raises the possibility that meaning based translations might be misguided.

For example, we might say a kiss is a sign of love, stamping one's feet indicates anger, squeezing a tube of toothpaste expresses wanting to brush one's teeth, slumping in front of a TV for hours indicates depression. So then, instead of saying, "he kissed her," we could say, "he loved her"; instead of "he stamped his feet," he was angry; instead of "he squeezed the toothpaste", he wanted to clean his teeth; and instead of "he slouched in front of the TV," he was depressed. This assumes the nature of the action performed is unimportant when it comes to translation. It is its meaning that is important (love, anger, wanting to brush one's teeth, etc.). But what if the nature of the actual action is what is important?

Intercultural Translation

Let us try doing intercultural translation between sports using the sense or meaning of what is happening. For a serve in tennis to make sense to a soccer player, one can't talk about rackets, as there are no rackets in soccer. A serve is a means of propelling a ball that opens a game. To translate that sense, we might say that a serve is something like a kick-off in soccer. The problem with this translation process is that serves are frankly very different things to kick-offs! This problem will be apparent to a person familiar with both games. Beyond sports, a kiss may be a sign of hatred rather than love, as when Judas betrayed Jesus. To stamp your foot may be to ask for sugar in tea, and to squeeze a tube of toothpaste may be to declare that it is "time for lunch"! If this might be the case, then "abstracting" actions into meanings or sense in order to translate them might be to entirely miss the point.

I had fun talking to AI on this. The AI bot I used

1. Jim Harries, "Rethinking Generosity" (E*vangelical Missions Quarterly*, in press).

2. Y. Guo and Y. Wan, "Retracing the History of 'Word for Word', 'Sense for Sense' Translation—Confronting and Inheriting of the Ancient Roman Translation Theories," *Open Journal of Modern Linguistics* 12 (2022): 568-77, https://doi: 10.4236/ojml.2022.125042.

3. Guo and Wan, "Retracing the History," 568-77.

4. Eugene Nida, *Toward a Science of Translating* (WordPress.com., 1964).

5. Katharina Reiss. *Texttyp und Übersetzungsmethode* (Scriptor Verlag, 1976).

6. Venuti, Lawrence, The Translator's Invisibility: A History of Translation (1995).

insisted that translation between soccer and tennis was straightforward. So, in soccer to hit a ball with your foot equals in tennis to hit it with a racket. In soccer for a ball to go into a net is equivalent for it to go over the net in tennis. In soccer a throw in is like a tennis serve, and a pass is in tennis a return in soccer. So simple! Let's see how this works.

In a soccer match there was a throw in. A player passed the ball to a fellow team mate, who had a shot at a goal.

Translated into tennis-speak: A player served, an opposing player passed the ball to his colleague (assuming doubles was being played), who hit it beyond the end of the court. (As a goal in soccer is at the end of a court that is obviously the same as a pitch—or soccer field in American English!).

The AI bot didn't realize the problem with this kind of translation. I was not able to explain the problem to it. The outcome of the translation of what happened in a soccer game could simply not be a description of a tennis match.

In our sports analogy, what happens if Westerners are tennis players and are trying to advise and instruct African people who are soccer players? Westerners' talk of the occasional use of two hands on a tennis racket, for example, will seriously baffle soccer players! Carefully translated advice can make little sense of actions that are specific to particular sports. What Westerners say is simply not what Africans will hear.

Linguistic Conclusion: Different Cultural and Historical Backgrounds

This not making of sense reminds me of ways essays written by my theological students in Kenya did not make sense. To students in the Kenyan theological college at which I taught, their essays were okay. They did not know what they did not know. I realized they were not engaging with the presuppositions on which I was basing my teaching, such as that cause and effect are linear, or that words are used more to express meaning than power.

They knew that the same applied to me, and it would not help them to write to me with respect to their own people's ways of life. For example, their people's ways of life are often guided by ancestors ready to curse those who break taboos the ancestors had put into place. They knew that I could not properly understand that. This no doubt contributed to their discouraging me from teaching in the light of who they were. It was harder for them to realize (or concede) that as I did not understand them, they did not understand me either.

Instead, they tried to write with respect to presuppositions with which they were unfamiliar. They were soccer players who were expected to articulate things in the light of tennis, of which they knew little. From a position of being unfamiliar with Western culture, they were expected to articulate theological truth in a way that would make sense to it. They could not do this, as they were unfamiliar with the presuppositions they were supposed to be engaging. Presuppositions such as that efficiency is needed in church management, and that the role of spirits (ancestors) should be disregarded. In our sports analogy, presuppositions by the Westerner that the African was unaware of could be that a ball was to be hit by a racket, and that the net is located in the middle of the pitch (court).

I believe Westerners need to carefully consider many implications of the above thoughts and conclusions. Leaving Africans dependent on Westerners to figure out how to apply God's Word in their context can lead to culturally inappropriate solutions to issues African's face, such as envy and witchcraft. In the West, not believing in witchcraft is achieved by undermining faith in the supernatural. In Africa known to me, witchcraft in many ways is simply an outworking of envy.

Being unfamiliar with Western history and culture, students who wanted to succeed in their classes were forced to copy (plagiarize) or guess. They were playing soccer, even while I was trying to teach them how to play tennis! The difference is important. Intercultural translation wasn't working. They weren't going to admit that, as to them they were doing what was expected, and could be rewarded handsomely for doing so (positions in the church, salary, and so on). But was I helping them to think for themselves, or to follow me blindly?

PRESCRIPTIVE CONCLUSION

I believe Westerners need to carefully consider many implications of the above thoughts and conclusions. Leaving Africans dependent on Westerners to figure out how to apply God's Word in their context can lead to culturally inappropriate solutions to issues African's face, such as envy and witchcraft. In the West, not believing in witchcraft is achieved by undermining faith in the supernatural. In Africa known to me, witchcraft in many ways is simply an outworking of envy.

The reason for Westerners' widespread assumption that their English theological education is appropriate for intercultural use—if necessary through translation,—may be because it comes with all kinds of (often hidden) subsidy. Engaging with people relevantly where they are without incentivizing them to follow someone else's lead, is much more difficult.

Unfortunately, the very subsidized education the West provides can draw attention away from relevant indigenous ways of engaging issues, fossilizing African practices. I experienced this graphically myself when a more indigenously guided theological education program using local languages was squeezed out of existence by much more lucrative foreign-funded English-language alternatives.

To say, "just leave locals to do education and problem solving for themselves," is not good enough. This is because the Western-subsidized version is more and more widely available, and more and more widely taken as the norm. African people won't ignore the West. They need to imitate Western education so as to be accepted in the global system. In East Africa one hears murmuring that governments will insist that to be called a church pastor one must have undergone Western theological education using English. African pastors need money that Westerners often have access to.

The question arises whether there ought not be a place for education that is other than Western-subsidized, so that people can learn to think for themselves and build on what they are thinking. I believe it is vital for Westerners to bite the bullet and commit themselves to seriously engaging contextualization while in situ, using indigenous tongues, while a part of local cultures. This is called Vulnerable Mission. Only then can they begin to make deep and helpful contributions to local contexts, and avoid being distractions who are followed for their money.

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