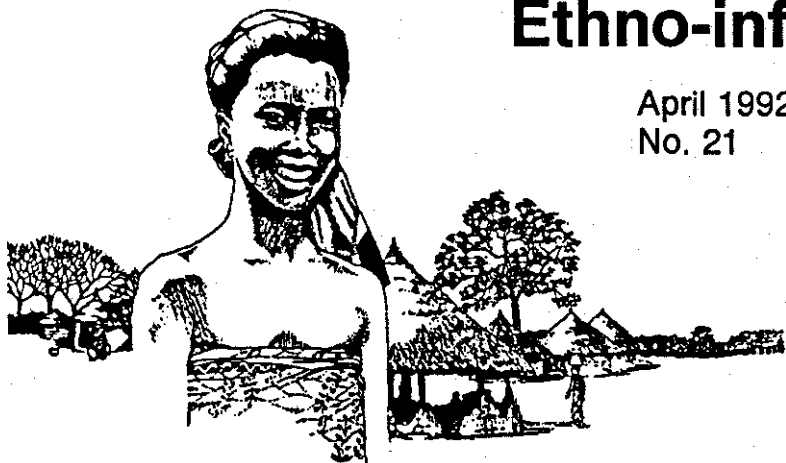


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Roots Are Good Medicine

by Jon Arensen

Furloughs are usually anything but restful—what with rushing from place to place, living out of suitcases, and trying to always have the children mind their manners. This past furlough we had the opportunity to do things a little differently. A friend loaned us a twenty four foot motor home which included a refrigerator, stove, table, bathroom and beds. We were totally self-sufficient and planned a leisurely trip from New York to Washington State and back again. We wanted to visit some friends and churches in Washington, but otherwise the summer was our own.

The trip was a good one for family time and it was an excellent way for the children to see the U.S.A. However, little did I realize that in using a motor home we were stepping into a new culture—the culture of the Wealthy Nomads. For some naive reason I expected that having a motor home meant that we could park and spend evenings together in a quiet and secluded setting. Instead we ended up spending our evenings with other motor home owners. Even if a camping location was mostly empty the manager would line us up side by side with other motor homes so we could lis-

ten to their music, TVs, and conversation. With the exception of myself, motor home owners seemed to like this arrangement. They were most friendly and would walk around and compare their motor homes with the other ones in the lot. I learned lots of new facts about things in which I had no interest; such as holding tank capacity, flushing locations, miles per gallon, mobile TV antennas, etc. I also learned how many months a year people lived in their motor homes and how many hundreds of places they had visited. I also learned something else—people did not talk much about themselves. Conversation seldom included their names or what they did in real life. Instead people usually talked about peripheral things. I had a feeling that people were lonely and filled this void by running from place to place. In one sense they were successful Americans—they had earned enough to buy expensive motor homes. However, I felt these people did not want to put down roots. They did not really want to form relationships with those they met on the road but preferred to just be friendly and keep things on a surface level.

This experience made me start thinking about roots. For many years

we worked with the Murle people of the Sudan. These pastoral people living in the flood plains often use words on two or more levels. Every word has a primary meaning but often a word can also have one or more extended meanings. An example is the word *agero* which means 'roots'. The primary meaning of this word refers to the parts of a plant which are underground. These roots are seen to fasten a plant to its location and also to provide nourishment and water to the plant. However, the roots of various bushes and trees in Murle land are also known to have medicinal value. Most roots with these medicinal properties are located in the hills about 90 miles away and the fire doctors, mostly elderly women, make occasional expeditions across the scorching plains to go collect these roots. The roots are gathered, dried, and prepared in various ways to be applied as medicines. The Murle word for medicine is *agero*. In fact when the word *agero* is heard in Murle it almost always refers to its secondary meaning of medicine. This word *agero* is also currently being used to refer to Western medicine. A Murle now goes to the clinic to procure pills, capsules, or even an injection—all of which are referred to as *agero*. To a Murle all medicines are roots and roots are good medicine.

In Western thinking the concept

of roots can have an even wider application. People put down roots and these roots give them a sense of belonging. All people have a deep sense of need when it comes to belonging. Within the world of S.I.L. most of us have come from a place that we can call home. Usually this place involves a house, parents, and friends. This environment provides us with roots so we can thrive and grow and feel at peace with ourselves. However, when we move overseas to a new country and a new culture these roots are pulled up. Many of us resist this, and even though we live overseas we try and keep our roots in the home country. We try to live and work without putting down new roots—and then we wonder why life is so difficult for us overseas.

This need for establishing new roots is especially important when it comes to language teams who are assigned to work in a new and different culture. A language team needs to realize that it is going to spend many years in this new place. A new team therefore needs to make a tremendous effort to become at home with the new language and culture. The language team needs to make friends and feel comfortable with the local people. Only when a team establishes a home and puts down real roots can it really have an impact on the people in the com-

munity. However, this can be a painful process and, sadly, I am sensing that fewer and fewer of our language teams are willing to spend the time and emotional energy it takes to really put down the necessary roots. It is much easier to have one's primary home in the neighboring city or SIL center. In time the language location can become just a place the team goes to gather language data. There are many good arguments for basing in a center such as consultant help, extended computer time, children's education, buying supplies, modern conveniences,—the list goes on and on. But the end result is that roots are not put down in the language allocation. To the local people the SIL team are just Wealthy Nomads. They pop in for a short time with all their Western goods to sustain them, talk about peripheral things—like words

and language—and then move on again. Proper relationships and friendships with the local people are not developed. The Bible translation—if it is ever finished—is a product. But has the message of Jesus Christ been lived out through the life of the language team? In addition the team has never experienced the real joy of sinking their roots deep into Africa and its peoples. Instead they have lived on the periphery—just trying to get the job done.

Roots are good medicine for the soul—they give a sense of belonging. But those of us in SIL must consider the cost of sending our roots deep. It can be a painful process but is worth it. A person with deep roots is like a tree planted by rivers of water. He will flourish and bear fruit. ●

Transplanting—Putting Down New Roots

by Marian Hungerford

If I had been more involved in raising poultry and ducks I might be into bonding as a model for missionary work. Instead I am a gardener and the model which speaks to me of crossing a culture and immersing in a new world view is that of transplanting.

Nobody wants to transplant a

weed. A gardener transplants because a plant is valuable and he wants it to continue growing, but to grow somewhere else. Maybe he removes a bigger plant so it does not overshadow smaller ones and block their growth. He may take smaller plants from under a bigger one so they can get more light and grow big-

ger without competition. Perhaps the gardener is moving and wants to take a favorite plant with him. Transplanting takes place because the beauty or fruitfulness of a certain plant is wanted elsewhere.

The gardener who wants to ensure a successful transplant moves the plant at the right time. For a long established tree the first step is to dig a trench around the tree and sever the side roots. Then the shovel is driven under the tree and severs the tap root. The soil is held carefully around the remaining roots; often using a burlap bag to keep the soil in place. This forms a root ball which is the minimum transportable part of the roots.

The gardener next prepares the new spot. "Dig a ten dollar hole for a five dollar rose," illustrates the idea well. The soil is aerated and fertilizer is incorporated down into the soil where the new roots will grow. The gardener then peels off the burlap, further prunes damaged roots, and positions the tree in the prepared hole. He muds the hole well and adds rich soil until the tree is placed at the exact height—which is when the soil level from the original spot is preserved in the new spot.

The tree is then pruned severely. The gardener cuts off branches and leaves so that wind cannot whip the weakened plant and dislodge the new roots forming underground.

With few branches and leaves the new root system is not overtaxed trying to supply water and nourishment to too much superstructure. Broad leaved trees that have just been moved go through a process which gardeners' call "transplant wilt"; a time of extreme stress as the plant struggles to adjust to its new environment.

The gardener also places poles and guy wires to firmly hold the young tree in position until he observes that it is growing straight and tall on its own and that the roots have penetrated deeply enough to hold the tree in the wind. He is careful not to keep these helps in place too long or they irritate the bark and cause other problems, but these supports help the tree during transplanting.

Some plants are designed to be potted plants and come in their own pot. A gardener can move them around the house to sunny windows or set them on a balcony. In good weather a potted plant can be set in a hole in the garden, pot and all, and it looks like it grows there. If the garden has poor soil, it does not matter. The roots of a potted plant never touch the real soil. They carry their own soil around with them. They are quickly moved back inside if frost threatens. However, plants like these often become top heavy and they frequently become root bound.

There are some principles we

can learn from transplanting that can help new missionaries (and veterans) as we think about crossing from one culture to another. God is the one who has a given missionary born at a certain time and in a specific culture. Every person is ethnocentric in one way or the other. It is not a bad thing to have a system and a grid with which to evaluate and interpret the world around us. But we need to realize that it is wrong to equate the home culture with Christianity.

There are many ways to use an analogy and it can often be stretched too far. But it seems that the root ball of a fruit tree has many points of comparison with the godly character that the missionary developed in his last ministry. That character and that relationship in union with Christ are part of the roots that transplant from one place to the next.

At the time of transplanting there is often severe purposeful pruning. It is so easy to overtax a new root system, a new network of relationships, by clinging to familiar things. Roots are pruned before the move and after the move. Branches are also pruned both before and after the move until the plant starts growing again in the new place. It is so easy to blunt sensitivity to God's growth time by holding possessions (leaves) too dear. This does not mean a person must be anti-possessions or anti-relationships. The tree

had leaves and branches before transplanting and will grow them again after transplanting. However, for the actual transplanting, while new roots are growing, too many leaves and branches are a curse and a hindrance and often topple a newly moved plant if a wind gusts before the roots are strong enough to hold.

Soren Kierkegaard observed, "When the prosperous man on a dark but starlight night drives comfortably in his carriage and has his lanterns lighted, aye, then he is safe. He fears no difficulty, he carries his light around with him and it is not dark close around him. But precisely because he has the lanterns lighted and has a strong light close to him, precisely for this reason he cannot see the stars..."

Eugene Peterson adds a thought on pruning and changes the analogy, "People are at the center of Christian work. In the way of pilgrimage, we do not drive cumbersome Conestoga wagons loaded down with baggage. We travel light. The character of our work is not shaped by accomplishments or possessions but in the birth of relationships. We invest our energy in people."

A.T. Wilmot brings the point home to Africa when he says, "The successful missionary is not the one who regards himself as a temporary aid to a national church which will cease to need him one day so that he

can go home and retire. The successful missionary is the one the local Christians regard as one of themselves. Let me quote from a missionary conference report.

Young missionaries were saying, 'We are the temporary people. We are here to help the African stand on his own feet, then we shall go... We are merely the scaffolding, you are the building... We are temporary, you are permanent.'

But the African leaders said, 'If this is your understanding of your task, it is better that you go now rather than later... We are not interested in an African church. We are interested in a church in Africa and we regard you as part of the church. We want the missionary who will come here, live with us, work with us, die with us, and lay his bones here in Africa.'

What do these illustrations show us? They illustrate the need for a growing, godly character and an enlarging network of relationships. What about that mysterious, scary thing called culture shock? Livestock get shipping fever. Trees get transplant wilt. People are not so different. This is why learning cultural sensitivity is so important for S.I.L. support people as well as village workers who are supposed to be "doing anthropology". Culture stress is related to feelings of "foreignness" and "mixed-upness" that we feel in

entering a new culture. It is exhausting because we have to consciously think about what is happening—old habits and subconscious patterns do not match anymore. But in recognizing new things and familiarizing himself with the new place, the missionary finds that the shock and the stress diminish. He is growing out of the root ball and putting down roots in Africa.

"This is what the Lord Almighty, God of Israel says to those I carried into exile. Build houses and settle down. Plant gardens and eat what they produce. Seek the peace and prosperity of the city to which I have carried you into exile. Pray to the Lord for it. For if it prospers, you too will prosper." Jeremiah 29:5. I like poultry and ducks. They provide good ideas for bonding. But when I think of commitment, sticking with it over the long haul until the job is done, the model I choose is transplanting and the goal I am stretching for is bearing abiding fruit. Root deeply! Spread branches wide! Fruit will come in season.

A word about pot plants—

There are many missionaries, even in SIL work, who have never let a root-let touch, really touch, Africa. Surrounded continually by an environment that is always comfortable, always familiar, they move from place to place, bloom where

they are planted, and sometimes even bear some kind of fruit. But they take a lot of an administrator's time because they they need to be

watered constantly if there is a lot of heat. They have shallow roots. They topple in high winds and often get root bound and are afraid of newness. ●

Politeness In Language *The Case Of Interrogatives*

by Inge Egner

It was a national training course. My SIL colleague had a big hand of sweet bananas that she wanted to give to the participants. She went into the classroom and put them on the table saying "Who wants bananas?" The young men started to giggle and talk in the vernacular. None came forward to take bananas. I heard them saying "She is asking us. That's not how one talks." Then I said "Here are your bananas!", upon which they laughingly started helping themselves saying "There you go! That's it!"

A Swiss friend, who is teaching refugee children, was complaining to me about feeling ordered around by the children when they say "Madam, come here!", "Madam, do this for me!", "Madam, give me that!", instead of asking politely. (I am sure you know what I am talking about!) She was interested to learn that these children were not being impolite, but that African languages do not use questions in these situations (Could you please...?).

The problem in these two instances of cross-cultural communication is the inappropriate use of a linguistic structure in a given situation. In the following, I would like to draw your attention to some differences in the use of interrogative structures in African and European languages.

Even within one language, a grammatical structure like an interrogative structure can be put to different uses. In English, for instance, you can formulate a question not only to make a request for information, which might be called its default purpose, but also to express other speech act values such as reproach.

The why-question is a case in point. It is used for asking information, more specifically a reason (like the kind of why-questions with which three-year-olds exhaust their parents' patience!). However, a why-question in English can also be used to express a reproach (Why did you do such a silly thing?), and finally a

polite suggestion (Why don't you come along?).

What is true within one language is even more so between languages, even between such closely related languages as English and German or French. Thus the use of the why-question for a suggestion is far from obvious to German and French speakers. A French speaker was telling me how, when first living with Americans, she felt rebuked by their why-questions until she realized that they were not critical but meant as suggestions.

However, in many European languages, the interrogative structure is commonly used for action, (Could you help me with this piece of baggage?), for offers, (Would you like some water?), or invitations (Would you like to join us?). These usages are very ingrained in us as polite, so that when we come here to Africa and start interacting in an African language we take it for granted that they are the same. As it happens, precisely the three above-mentioned uses of the interrogative structure do not exist in any of the African languages that I know or have inquired about. I should be greatly amazed (and very interested indeed!) if you could report on an interrogative structure being used for offers, invitations or requests for action.

If you encode a request for help as an interrogative structure in an

African language, the interactional consequences do not seem to be very heavy. At worst, you run the risk of the hearer interpreting your utterance as a request for information about his physical ability, in about the same way as the patient interprets the doctor's question "Can you lift this book?". Moreover, the situation will mostly make it clear that you expect help.

However, things are quite different if offers and invitations are worded as questions in African languages, since they are likely to hamper further interaction in a more serious way. The reason for this is due to the unfavorable inferences drawn by the hearer to such a question. These have been confirmed to me by Africans from several different African languages and different countries, which seem like enough evidence to make one believe that there is something more general and systematic involved.

Before trying to give an explanation, let us first try to think about why we believe wording an invitation as an interrogative is better than wording it as an imperative. Well, it's more polite, isn't it? But what is it that makes an offer like "Would you like some more?" more polite in English than "There's more coffee!" or "Have some more!". By asking a question, you do not impose on people, but consider them as free

agents able to decide for themselves. In other words, you respect their liberty.

Suppose, however, that the reasons just given are culturally based, liberty of action being one of the exalted values in Western culture. Let us now find the rationale for NOT asking a question when making an offer or invitation. The reasons given to me by the Africans I have asked so far go something like this: If you want to give something to someone else, you do not ask him or her if he or she wants it. First of all, that makes the addressee think that you do not really mean the offer, in which case it seems safer to refuse it (see the first example in the introduction). Also, an offer worded as a question ultimately puts you into the position of requesting something from the other person, while what makes an action an offer is precisely the fact that you are given without asking!

The same type of reasoning holds for invitation. If you invite an African to eat with you by saying "Would you like to eat with us?", the answer is likely to be negative. First, why would you want to inquire about whether the person likes to eat with you? And second, how could the person admit to actually being hungry and wanting to eat with you? "Come eat with us!" will most certainly have a different effect, being understood as an invitation.

The logic of African reasoning is just as good as its Western counterpart, but it makes different values come into play. In learning an African language, we must know about these values and be sure we respect them in our interactions and the linguistic structures we use to express our intentions. In other words, we must not only aim at grammatical competence but at what has been called social or communicative competence. ●

BOOK REVIEW

African Traditional Religion In Biblical Perspective

by Richard J. Gehman *Reviewed by Jon Arensen*

Early books about missionary work in Africa are almost inevitably negative about the traditional religions

which the Africans were practicing. Missionaries of that time did not study the traditional religions and as

a result they did not understand them. African Traditional Religions were considered to be evil, Satanic, and something that had to be totally rejected by its adherents if they were to become a Christian.

However, in more recent years a reaction has set in against this totally negative position. A number of Africans went overseas for further training and upon their return to Africa began to study and defend African Traditional Religion. They focused on the good to be found in these religions rather than on the negative. Many books have been written by these men proposing a number of different points of view. Some propose that African Traditional Religion is equal to Christianity and therefore that Christianity has little to offer the African people. Others propose that the good aspects of African Traditional Religion can be a base upon which Christianity can be built. Still others state that although there is good in African Traditional Religion, Christianity is quite different and stands apart.

However, the people holding above positions have one thing in common. They all call for an African theology. What is meant by an African theology is a Christianity which fits Africans—one which meets both their spiritual and cultural needs. The Pan-African Leadership Assembly in 1976 made the follow-

ing statement: "Imported Christianity will never, never quench the spiritual thirst of African peoples." There are a number of books written about the need for a solid application of Christianity in Africa but there is little consensus on how to go about this. What needs to be the basis for such an African theology?

This book is unique in that it is not vague about the basis for such an African theology. Dr. Gehman states categorically that the basis for any such study is the Holy Scriptures. Other authors study African cultures and desire to start there and to build Christianity from that starting point. However, Scriptural norms, not cultural norms, are the basis for this book.

When a person who originally practiced a traditional religion becomes a Christian, there are a number of issues he or she must deal with. It is not realistic to tell this new Christian to ignore the spirit world, to stop venerating the ancestors, and to stop going to a diviner unless specific reasons are given to do so and unless the church offers functional substitutes for these practices.

In this book Dr. Gehman shows that he has a good understanding of African Traditional Religion. He spent 17 years teaching and as the principal of a seminary in Kenya. This gave him access to a large body

of material written by the students who did research papers on the subject of African Traditional Religion. During this time he lived in the Ukambani region of Kenya where Akamba religion was a focus of his studies and he shows an in depth knowledge of his subject.

The author also has a deep knowledge of the Scriptures and this book draws on his understanding of both subjects: African Tradition Religion and the Scriptures. In this book he deals with specific aspects of African Traditional Religion and then looks at the Scriptures to see if this activity is in line with Scriptural teaching. This is an approach that has been needed for a long time and one that I find particularly useful.

I recently saw a situation where newly converted Christians were wrestling with issue of divining the future. They were asking whether or not a Christian could still go to a diviner. The missionary in that area was both sensitive and insightful and would not give them the typical answer—"We Christians don't use diviners so neither should you." Instead a Bible study was organized to see what the Scriptures had to say about the subject and then the African Christians decided for themselves what they should do based on the Scriptures.

In such a situation this book will be most helpful. Dr. Gehman has not

avoided sensitive issues but deals with them fairly and in the light of Scriptures, with plenty of Scriptural evidence for his conclusions. Of course African Traditional Religions vary a great deal within Africa and there are many aspects which are not covered in this book. In one religion a certain practice may have positive ramifications which can be incorporated into Christianity, whereas in another area a similar practice may be inappropriate. Even though a reader may not agree with all the author's positions on certain issues, this book will cause him to grapple with the issues in a new way.

I feel that this book has been needed in church and missionary circles for a long time. African church leaders need to take an honest look at the church in Africa and see why they have gotten so far away from their cultural roots. Missionaries need to be made more aware that much of what they teach is not Christianity but Western culture. Hopefully both can learn from the contents of this book and thereby promote the growth of God's church in Africa: a church that is both true to the Word of God and meets the deep spiritual and cultural needs of the African peoples.

This book may be purchased direct from Richard J. Gehman, PO Box 21010, Nairobi, Kenya •