

# Theological Education in Africa Using Indigenous Languages

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## Abstract

My research finds that theological education in English in East Africa creates several problems: 1) It keeps indigenous believers from communicating their faith directly in their heart-language. 2) It does not account for variations between regional dialects of English. 3) English may be used only to ensure orthodoxy to satisfy Western patrons. 4) Thanks to use of English, theological education can be perceived as a path to financial or 5) spiritual power. 6) Use of English positions “*Africanness*” as a failure and does not deal honestly with the African context. To overcome these problems, I advocate for theological education in Africa in indigenous languages.

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## Introduction

*Ok nonyalore, naneno mano chon.*  
(It was not possible, I saw that long ago.)

A friend of mine, the bishop of a church in Kenya, said this to me in 2013, two years after we closed a theological education by extension program. We had run this program using indigenous languages. I was the only expatriate teacher; all the others were indigenous. I had become fluent in Swahili and Luo, the languages we used. I had taught in that program for eighteen years. But I was not surprised by what my friend said. Instead, I asked – why did he not tell me that eighteen years earlier? The answer is that eighteen years earlier I could not have heard him. Now, all those years later, I had come to a new understanding.

Why could our program not succeed? I believe that locals would not attend this program because it held no prospect for material advantage. When I say “material advantage,” some readers may think “prosperity gospel.” That is right. But we should not forget that, in Africa, many people do not draw stark lines between material and spiritual prosperity (Harries 2015; Maranz 2001). Theological education programs in Africa provide material reward by two means: outside resources as rewards (generally from foreign missionaries), or indigenous means for wealth acquisition. These two means often overlap. We offered neither. Until we did so, the program could not succeed.

We lacked another factor that might have rescued us: English. If I had taught in English, I might at least have helped people learn English through exposure to a native speaker. In today's Anglophone Africa, English is inherently valuable – unlike indigenous languages. English often has to be acquired with money (Maina 2009), so offering free English classes is like giving someone money. English is the language of valued certification. And English can open a student to the Western world. It can give access to millions of pages of writing. However, knowing English does not help students understand themselves, their traditions, their ancestry, or their tribal past. Use of English prevents students from contextualizing what they learn. If English is the language of theological instruction, it is difficult to know whether learners are valuing theology or English.

Furthermore, use of English allows teachers to use Western materials (Ndjerareou 2012). On the other hand, Westerners teaching in an indigenous language learn the language in the process. The desire to know how to teach in the local language orients them to local churches, to local people, and to local events. They are inspired to help the process of contextualisation in ways a teacher confined to English cannot.

Thus, theological education in English in Africa can combine three benefits for students: acquiring English; learning “proper” Christian discourse; and transforming perceptions. The last benefit is valid, but in addition to it, theological education in Africa often implicitly trains students how to talk correctly and how to explain what they know in ways that please foreigners but may not benefit other local believers. In these cases, students may be motivated by a desire to benefit from Western wealth – not from a desire for heart change that, in turn, will change their cultures.

As I reflected on these facts, I began to be alarmed. In addition to the extension program mentioned above, I had taught theology part-time at an American-run Bible college using English. What exactly was I doing? I wasn't converting people to Jesus – young people who studied with me were already believers. I wasn't starting a church – their churches were already running. I wasn't engaging deeply with what believers were doing – I was too distant culturally to understand the dynamics of church life. Instead, I was enabling people to express their faith and practices as if they were Westerners. Indeed, as I realized that African Christians can gain money from appearing to be Western, I became very concerned – had I trained theological students to be conmen? Had I taught them to imitate my language in order to make money out of the West?

This problem seems to have been created by Western missionaries, or at least to be a problem to which Western missionaries should respond. Rather than asking “What are African Christians doing wrong?” we should ask “How will we – Western missionaries, theologians, missiologists, scholars – respond to this situation?”

Grounded in my experience in Kenya, this article considers the use of English in

theological education. It argues that sustainable and appropriately contextualized theological education must happen in indigenous languages. From my experience in East Africa, I have identified six issues with using English as the primary language of theological education. I will discuss these below and then look briefly at some case studies to offer an alternative.

## Some Problems Deriving from Teaching Theology in English in East Africa

### 1. *Students do not learn how to translate theological terms into their mother tongue (MT).*

When speaking to a local audience, indigenous pastors/teachers/speakers who share a MT with their audience may still prefer to speak in English because they do not know how to translate what they want to say into the MT. Lacking MT theological vocabulary from having learned theology in English, indigenous teachers are left with the choice of giving their message in English or not at all.

One church leader told me that he was used to preaching in English. He read theological books in English. He knew theology in English. But he did not know how to translate everything he knew into the MT. So preaching in English was much easier, even to his own people. I told him, “But then you are leaving the most difficult task, translation, to someone else. That ‘someone else’ is probably much less well informed than you. Yet that someone else is the one forming the message received by most of your congregation.” Why should someone choose to talk in a way that they know that their audience will not understand? This preacher appeared to use English for convenience, foregoing an opportunity to touch hearts, because he had learned theology in English and did not know how to translate that theology into a language his congregants could understand.

### 2. *Western English and Kenyan English (or other regional English dialects) are not always equivalent.*

For many ESL speakers, English exists as a layer over their MT. Even when locals speak in English, they speak it in ways that are not “Western” but that have local concepts in mind. For example, when a Luo speaker says *house* in English, what s/he has in mind is *ot*. Yet *ot* carries vast amounts of content that the native English term *house* does not. For example, *ot* is used to represent “family” (i.e., the family of one wife, so a polygynous man has more than one *ot*). An *ot* must be constructed in a particular location and facing a particular way in relation to the *ode* (the plural of *ot* is *ode*), the houses, of other family members. To do this incorrectly is to invite a curse resulting from the displeasure of ancestors who came up with the required building plan. On the flip side, the English term *house* has much content that *ot* does not typically have. For example, it is bought and sold on the open market; it has sophisticated indoor plumbing; it includes a kitchen (in the case of an *ot*, the kitchen is typically a separate building).

Or, similarly, when Luo people say *Lord*, they are thinking of *ruoth*. *Lord* in English (outside of Christianity) implies perhaps a slightly pompous man who received an honour bestowed by royalty. The term is very little used. The term *ruoth*, while similarly being quite rare in Luo, differs particularly because the term it translates from Swahili (which is very widely used in Luo-speaking areas), *Bwana*, is common and can mean *mate, husband, lord, boss, colleague*, and so on. *Ruoth* has other implications of having been a ruler in the bad old days when social structures reflected internecine warfare.

As these two examples show, theological education designed in the West can ignore key cultural questions – such as location, facing-direction, and design of someone’s house – factors that may easily bring confusion (for example, is the implication that the builder of the house is cursed?) or that may omit vital context, such as the need to build a new house should someone take a new wife. The statement *Jesus is Lord* implies a wealthy White beneficiary. *Yesu en ruoth* implies that Jesus has taken charge of local community affairs, perhaps overriding the need to follow all the usual stipulations when it comes to housebuilding.

This problem plays out in many ways in theological education. Overall, theological education in English creates an aura of “wanting to be European / American.” It is something for young and urban people, who have little clue about the real issues faced by their societies or about their origins (for example, in declarations of prior generations of ancestors).

### 3. *Students prioritize maintaining an appearance of orthodoxy.*

When an African speaker knows that Western theologians are in his audience, he will be concerned about orthodoxy. The same concern could arise if a listener might report what was said to a Western authority (a supporting mission organization or denomination, for example). Someone who has received formal theological training will be aware that theology can be expressed in right ways and wrong ways. Sometimes the line between right and wrong can be quite thin. A competent theologian knows how to negotiate that line so as not to create problems, but the very fact of this difficulty can make people wary of speaking in a language that, they feel, is less precise.

The pastor I mentioned under Problem 1 had two choices. Either preach in English or in the MT. If he used English, his sermon would be translated into the MT. If he used the MT, it might be translated into English. At that point, I perceived an underlying danger beyond simple convenience. If he shared using the MT, he would rely on someone else to translate into English. If the translator translated inappropriately, anyone listening to the English might question his orthodoxy. As the minister of a church linked to the West, wrong teaching on his part could be quite serious. Any official evaluation of what he said would be conducted in English. Because more power resided with English-speakers, communicating

deeply to locals was not his main concern. He had to be careful that what he said would be pleasing in English. Having a translator into English would be risky. It would pin his reputation on the whim of someone else's choice of English terms to translate his MT words.

At a very basic level, for example, in Luo, *wach* is the usual translation for *word*, but *wach* could also mean *problem* or *issue*. An inept translator from Luo into English translating *wach Nyasaye* as “problem of God” instead of “word of God” could introduce theological error.

Or take another example: An African church called their leaders *Omukambi*, a Luyia word that could be translated *priest*. They needed a title for the overseer who led the *Omukambi*. They called him *Omukambi mkuu* – the main *Omukambi*. No one had an issue with this – until *Omukambi mkuu* was translated into English as *high priest*. At that, Western theologians threw up their hands in horror, declaring that there is only one high priest, Jesus Christ!

So, in today's global English-speaking Church, what a local intends when s/he uses a particular term is not important. Rather, because English is usually the language of evaluation, it is preferred, regardless of what will be understood by indigenous listeners. (I consider related issues in more detail here: “Magic, Divine Revelation and Translation in Theological Education in the Majority World Today (With a Focus on Africa),” *Missionalia* 47.2 (2019): 165-176, <https://missionalia.journals.ac.za/pub/article/view/265>.)

#### 4. *Students misunderstand theology as a route to financial wealth.*

To exacerbate the problem with English being used to please Westerners, for some African students, theological education can be a “game” in which one can “win” money. Many African churches benefit financially from relationships with Western churches; those relationships hinge on apparent similarities between Western and African churches. These similarities include expressed doctrinal solidarity, so not only is English important for maintaining an appearance of orthodoxy for the sake of evaluation, but it is also important because positive evaluation often leads to Western-based funding. Theology's value comes to lie in its “foreignness” or its “correctness” leading to money.

I once attended a theological seminar in Kenya, put on in English, on AIDS among youth in Africa. All the Africans at the seminar were invested in English theological education because their livelihoods depended on it. In that seminar, my Kenyan colleagues were learning to talk the talk that was necessary to maintain Western-facing relationships. Whether what was said was right for them in their own communities was not the point. What counted most was whether it maintained their relationship with the West.

This problem can also surface within indigenous contexts. Some

prosperity-oriented churches seek to attract local wealth. The means they use to do this is “knocking out” impediments to wealth and prosperity. These impediments come in many shapes and sizes – as in my house-building example above. If failing to build correctly is diagnosed as being the source of someone’s failures, then the local means to wealth include suggesting that the person rebuild their house, and/or that they carry out a ritual to compensate for bad building. Or, to take another example, someone might perform an exorcism in order to solve the problem of troublesome ancestors (exorcising the troublesome ancestor). If these kinds of solutions move people to be generous to the church, the church will often advocate for them.

While English preaching can be oriented to solving the above kinds of indigenous problems, it obviously lacks precision. At the same time, use of English and familiarity with English-speaking circles brings more hope of acquiring either a windfall or some regular support from a concerned foreign (American or European) contact.

##### *5. Students misapply theology for spiritual power.*

As well as financial gain, some students of theological education may seek spiritual power, treating education as a magical process. Saying the right thing in the right way in the right language can be perceived as “spiritual” or “godly.” For example, some indigenous churches maintain a liturgy borrowed directly from Catholic or Anglican prayer books – even though their other practices do not reflect belief in that liturgy. The liturgy might talk about one God, but the church’s practices might be oriented toward paying attention to ancestors. The congregation values “saying the right words” not to understand or live them but to invoke spiritual power.

I know that the question of whether insights acquired during English-language theological education can be effective against “traditional” evil forces can be contentious. My guess is that English-language theological education can sometimes be perceived as “dumb” because it does not engage with actual problems. For example, if a problem arises because someone has built their house improperly, can a Western textbook on theology written without knowledge of housebuilding issues really help? This is comparable to ways in which money from certain sources, e.g., sale of land, can be considered “bitter” (Shipton, 1989). This money appears to be equal to money acquired from other sources, yet it will bring problems in its wake. So English may apparently be able to solve problems, but spiritual help’s effectiveness depends on a language that correctly articulates what is going on.

From an African point of view, theological education in a MT could easily be interpreted as watering down theology, reducing its ability to help one acquire the power that comes with links with donors that are generated by expression of Western theology.

*6. Use of English can imply that Westernness is “right” and Africanness “wrong”.*

Worst of all, teaching theology in English does not help the African Church contextualize the Gospel – and it positions African Christians themselves as the barrier to the Gospel. Because dominant English discourse is Western, when African cultural problems are discussed in relation to theology, those problems can seem to arise from ways in which Africans differ from English-speaking Westerners. African culture makes African Christians into “wrong people.” Thus, use of English in church contexts backs African believers into a corner: in theory, African culture is being transformed by a contextualised Gospel, but in practice, what is African has simply become “wrong” and gone into hiding.

Above I mentioned a seminar on AIDS taught in English in Kenya. A Western missionary arranged the seminar. Apart from him, I was the only Westerner in attendance. Because the event was in English and papers were likely to become public, the main speaker, a figure in the international theological world, felt he had to “cover his back” to satisfy absent Western colleagues by proposing solutions to the AIDS epidemic that fit with Western culture. In other words, the presentation he gave us, pretty much word for word, could as well have been given by a Westerner.

As a result, the Kenyans in attendance, who were not participants in Western culture, became the problem. The message became clearer and clearer: “The problem preventing you from countering AIDS or getting closer to God is who you are.” “Demon casting,” the valued local problem-solving strategy, was discussed, but not written down. (The small group in which I participated discussed this but did not mention it in the report that was later presented to the plenary.) To write of it would have been to risk falling foul of Western critique.

After the seminar, a small-group discussion focused on young people’s susceptibility to AIDS. A Kenyan member of our group, realising that Kenyan believers were not doing the things that would be expected of Western believers that might have helped them to keep AIDS at bay, said, “I keep wondering if we are Christians.” This comment did not surprise me. Our language was English, and our model for being Christian was Western, but my colleagues were not Western Christians – they were African Christians. This meant that they fell short of the model of “what a Christian is” that we were assuming.

A focus of our discussions was young people going to university and getting AIDS; how could we help them to avoid this? We could not, because “acceptable solutions” assumed a Western culture: Africa is known to be a leader in AIDS infection rates. Much of the spread is said to be through heterosexual sex, in which especially young people are engaging. It was clear that to prevent or reduce sexual exposure would require conditions more akin to boarding secondary schools than to Western university campuses (for example, forced separation of dormitories for men and women). Yet, given the globalisation of education and of

contexts in which young people acquire higher education, making the standard different for Kenya as against the rest of the world would be unacceptable. Levels of self-control for various (cultural) reasons being lower amongst Christians in Kenya than those in the West meant that students were exposed to relatively high levels of sexual temptation, that, according to our discussion participants, would clearly result in a great deal of fornication that would in turn spread AIDS. Western solutions to AIDS infections had to presuppose levels of sexual freedom that for Kenya are problematically high.

The above is related to the widespread contemporary understanding in the West that a woman's body belongs to her, and that she can and should defend it. As always, ways in which Africa is different are concealed for the reasons discussed in this article. (Implying that African people are different can be seen as accepting inferiority and questioning the relevance of the very donor funds that people are hoping to acquire.) Yet it seems very clear to me that, in Kenya, men (male family members) are to a greater extent responsible for protecting their women's bodies. Because universities are contexts in which family protection is ineffective, women are left particularly vulnerable to seduction by other men.

As this example demonstrates, often, theology in Africa is not only taught in English but developed on the contours of Western culture. Western theology "works" for Western people; where it does not "work" for Westerners (many of whom are leaving the Church), those problems are Western problems. In my experience, when theological problems arise, they always seem to center on African culture: reasons for sin or failure always go back to "African culture." Yet when African people changed their theology to fit their own situations, they were often condemned by Westerners for doing so.

Something parallel to the above arises in indigenous churches – as in the case of a British visitor to an indigenous church here in Kenya. This British visitor used to endeavour to give simple messages in the church. What really grated on him was the noisy shouting that for Kenyans constituted an integral part of repentance. Similarly, a clearly stated focus of the church was healing. Efforts at opening a clinic faltered quickly, however. Local people did not have in mind biomedical healing by biomedical means. The Swahili term *pona* (heal) is helpful here. It derives from *poa*, to cool. Healing, in local cultural context, is cooling. That which needs "cooling" is the friction created by envy and anger by community members; it is often translated into English as witchcraft attacks sent back and forth among groups. British English does not reveal this connection. African culture caused the healing project to flounder.

In such situations, Africans may be taught about a loving God. Then the more astute ones realize that because of who they are, they cannot follow this God in the way prescribed. That is soul-destroying, because it can be taken to imply, "For you the African, because of who you are as an African, there is no salvation."

In this final section, I will look briefly at demon casting. Demon casting is the process by which a person's troubles are chased away by getting a lot of attention – laying on of hands, hands shaking the possessed person's head, gesticulations, noisy prayers, and so forth. My impression is that Westerners consider demon possession to be an exceptional, frightening instance in which an “imagined,” bodiless, foreign being takes over a person's consciousness. By contrast, to try to approximate the African attitude, I could say that demons represent ways of encapsulating one's issues into a removable form, like putting your problems into a disposable container. The demon becomes a surrogate and, therefore, somewhat relieves the sufferer of responsibility for the origin of the problem. Dramatic attention received in the process of exorcism confirms the sufferer's relevance or importance to their community.

I would like to relate the six above-listed problems deriving from teaching theology in English in East Africa to demon casting. Christian Western practices approximate the act of demon casting with psychological counselling. But this correlation makes Western terms untranslatable into African realities and obviously creates a gap between Christian counselling and Kenyan Englishes that follow demon casting practices. Students engaged in theological education in English quickly learn to speak it in a way that suggests theological orthodoxy, in which counselling is considered more appropriate than demon casting. Their speaking this way may not tally either with their heartfelt convictions or with truth on the ground. Furthermore, they may assume that because English-speakers seem to be materially prosperous, their own use of English ought to improve their economic standing. Yet this dispenses with the situations that demon casting addresses and that have no true parallel in English. Because Western English seems to lead to prosperity, Africanness – its language and practices – must be “wrong,” or impoverishing.

In the AIDS seminar, the speaker suggested that African Christians should do less demon casting. A little local knowledge, however, would have revealed that on the contrary, even churches that traditionally disregarded demon casting were moving toward more demon casting. This topic illustrates another way in which knowledge of a language without appreciation of its context can be misleading (Bassnett 1980/2002). Churches were moving towards demon casting because local indigenous theology valued it. Had the seminar been taught in a MT, demon casting would simply have been assumed to be part of the content. But because the seminar was in English, a deep tension existed between local practice and theological education. I had the strong impression that there was a kind of mutual agreement among the Africans present not to make demon casting an issue, presumably arising from prior experience when its becoming a prominent concern simply fouled relationships with foreign donors.

The very categories inherent to Western English mean that demon casting will

probably not be taken seriously by English-speaking theologians. In Western English, *demon* connotes a disembodied spirit. Westerners associate belief in demons with primitivism. Western media and academia highlight cases of exorcism with negative consequences (Davis 2016). Because *demon* itself has unhelpful connotations and appears in negative contexts in English, talking about demons in the African context is difficult. And therefore, a practice that has therapeutic benefit for many Christians in Africa is anathema to English speakers. Once again, English as the “language of theology” hinders contextualization of Christian doctrine.

## Conclusion

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The above six points and the case studies given direct us, I believe, to some basic problems with the use of English as the language of theological education in Africa. I suggest that these issues make a clear case for the necessity of using indigenous languages.

Western scholars have mostly ignored these problems. In many cases, scholars lack the dual language/cultural skills that would allow them to perceive these problems. And some scholars who have perceived them have, perhaps, chosen to remain quiet because solutions would threaten their livelihoods. The use of a Western language for theological education in Africa would be appropriate if and only if we were insisting on Africans becoming Western before they became Christian. If that kind of totalitarian need for complete culture transformation as a prerequisite for accepting the Gospel is not our aim, then the use of English for theological education in Africa is problematic.

Am I recommending that donors withdraw support from all English-language theological programmes in Africa? Are we to do that even if African people, for many obvious reasons, would very much like to maintain those programmes? No, not necessarily. But I would like to see less of the “rule of the foreign donor.” Given the situation’s complexity, I advocate for more modest changes that at least acknowledge cultural paradoxes. These changes include:

- Supporters of English-language theological programmes valuing (and never belittling) the innate superiority of theological education in indigenous languages.
- Westerners investing their lives more than their money into indigenous-language theological education
- Missionaries spending a minimum of two years learning the MT and culture of the people they will serve before they begin teaching those people.
- Missionaries doing that training among the people themselves, not in a classroom.
- Some theological training being offered without foreign subsidy (direct or

indirect).

I acknowledge that these modest suggestions leave deeper issues brought by English-language theological education unaddressed. But if Western attitudes change even a little, perhaps serious indigenous theology can at last begin to arise in Africa.

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