

# **Mother Tongue Theological Education in Africa: A Response to Jim Harries' *The Prospects for Mother Tongue Theological Education in Western Kenya***

by Andrew Wildsmith

## **Introduction**

Once Jim Harries' article focused my attention on the need for Mother Tongue Theological Education (MTTE) in Africa, I was astonished that it had taken me so long to see its importance. The last time I felt that way was at Moffat Bible College when Phillip Morrison introduced an idea for a new course, The Multi-Church Pastor.<sup>1</sup> He stated the obvious point that many of our students will pastor more than one church, but the other half of the equation, that *all our courses assume the Western model of each church having at least one pastor*, was an ice cold bath. African multi-church pastors need to minister to three, four, ten or more local congregations as effectively as possible rather than just cope with that difficult situation as best they can.

Similarly Harries points out the obvious fact that many students in our Bible colleges and seminaries studying in English or another globalizing language will often, if not always, be ministering in an African language. But the other half of the equation is that *their English-based education does not always adequately prepare them to minister in African languages*. For me, the other shoe dropped at that point and I saw how true that was at times. I have tried to state the last situation as charitably as possible, but I agree with Harries that a good MTTE is usually much better than an English-only education.<sup>2</sup> The lack of MTTE isn't the only reason for pastoral ineffectiveness when it occurs, but I believe it is an important factor. I also believe that the level of spiritual maturity of ordinary church members in Africa would be increased if their leaders were trained to minister more effectively in MTs as well as in national languages like Kiswahili and global languages like English.<sup>3</sup>

The Church and mission agencies devote lots of personnel, time, energy and money towards translating the Bible into MTs, with the eventual goal of translating the Bible into every tongue and language. If we believe so passionately in the need for all Christians to have the Bible in their own language, then why would we not emphasize the application of that MT Bible in pastoral education just as strongly? I don't have a good answer, do you?

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<sup>1</sup> For more information see [www.multichurchpastor.org](http://www.multichurchpastor.org) for The Multi-Church Pastor Institute, which is part of Africa International University's Institute for the Study of African Realities (ISAR) in Karen, Kenya.

<sup>2</sup> For more information on Jim Harries, his work and other resources see [www.jim-mission.org.uk](http://www.jim-mission.org.uk) and [www.vulnerablemission.org](http://www.vulnerablemission.org).

<sup>3</sup> When I mention English alone in this essay, I also mean other globalizing languages.

### MTTE: Adding Another Tool to the Educational Toolbox

Andrew Walls reminds us that theological education in English and other globalizing languages enables African church leaders to contribute to and benefit from the world-wide Church.<sup>4</sup> The fact that African churches and foreign mission organizations have invested heavily in pastoral training institutions that function in English means that language will continue to dominate theological education in Africa for many years. Among other things, English theological education equips African Christianity to influence Christianity elsewhere. Several other benefits of using English could be easily cited, including the fact that it is often the only language that all the students and all the lecturers have in common. It is not the use of English that is my prime concern - it is that English often completely replaces MTs in pastoral and theological education<sup>5</sup> in many institutions. Harries' article explains why, beginning from his viewpoint and experience in Western Kenya.

If MTs are essential to continuing and enhancing Christian maturity in Africa, and if Harries is correct and the emphasis on English in pastoral education is connected with dependence on financial aid from outside Africa and connected with the rejection of MTs as a medium for material and educational progress, then the value of MTs as educational mediums has to be re-established regardless of their potential to attract or repel foreign investment. And the benefits that would arise from MT education are not limited to the religious realm. As Harries notes, the "use of MTs in education including theological education is in this article found to be essential for the future of the prosperity of the African continent".<sup>6</sup> Ministry in MTs should be another important tool in the toolbox that graduates learn to use during a good Bible college education in Africa.

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<sup>4</sup> Personal conversation at Prof. Walls' special lecture, *The Cultural History of Conversion*, Thursday, 26th January 2012 at the Centre for World Christianity, Africa International University.

<sup>5</sup> "Theological education" could be better described as "pastoral training" in educational institutions that aim to prepare people for pastoral ministry in local churches - if the curriculum is designed to train pastors for dealing with African pastoral issues and African settings instead of importing Western curricula. Rather than discuss that aspect, I merely want to point it out that in this essay I use the terms "theological education" and "pastoral training" or "pastoral education" as synonyms.

<sup>6</sup> See page 13 of this issue of AJET. In addition to Harries, a theological rationale for using African languages, and the importance of African languages in the development of African Christianity, both in theology and practice, are discussed by Kwame Bediako, *Christianity in Africa: The Renewal of a Non-Western Religion*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1995, pp. 109-125; Lamin Sanneh, *Translating the Message: The Missionary Impact on Culture*, Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1989; Andrew F. Walls, "The Translation Principle in Christian History" in his *The Missionary Movement in Christian History*, Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1996, pp. 26-42.

**Missionaries and MTTE: An Ideal Component of a Larger Solution**

Harries highlights the role of missionaries in this quest for the revival of MTs in education, including theological education. Any missionary who has managed to learn enough of a local MT to greet people at church will testify to the instant smiles (and sometimes laughter) that accompany his attempts. A theological lecturer who understands the local MT, the local world-view and the culture based on it, as well as having the Biblical and theological expertise to contextualize Christianity, will be more effective than one who does not.<sup>7</sup>

In the past I have made organized, but relatively brief, attempts to learn Ibibio (south-eastern Nigeria), Kikuyu (or Gikuyu) and Kiswahili (Kenya), but without gaining much ground, never mind fluency. I have not been alone. It has been my experience in Nigeria and Kenya over many years that missionaries in theological/pastoral education who teach in English rarely have time to learn a MT to the point of fluency, even if they have a gift for languages and the desire and determination to achieve fluency in the first place. Most missionaries I know who have achieved fluency in an African language had an extended time for language study, something that is much more likely if their first ministry was not in theological education. As in my own case, it is usually the college that hands the newly arrived missionary a heavy course load, and some administration, and then adds as an afterthought, "Ah, yes, we're assigning you to a local church so you can get a sense of the culture and learn something of the language." Even when the church, college and mission do create time and give support for the missionary to learn the local MT or Swahili or Hausa unencumbered by college duties, he/she will sooner or later get his heavy load of courses and administration and progress in the language may stop or even reverse. For a missionary lecturer to become fluent in a MT he almost always needs to live in a village for as long as it takes to achieve his goal before doing anything at the college, and then make a deliberate effort to keep his hard-earned fluency alive. In other words, he has to make some of the same sacrifices that Jim Harries has made if he desires to become and stay fluent in an African language. Only an exceptionally gifted and determined person can achieve fluency any other way, especially if he has a family.

Moreover, it is now much harder to recruit career missionary lecturers, and how many new recruits understand the need to learn a MT, never mind have the desire to do so? The need in many mission-founded African churches for more missionary Bible College teachers, especially in schools where the MT would be most useful, far outstrips the ability of missions to recruit them. Insisting on MT acquisition before ministry starts will very likely further reduce

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<sup>7</sup> For a fuller discussion of the value of MT acquisition by missionaries and what inhibits it, see Allison Howell, *A Daily Guide for Language and Culture Learning*, revised edition, Bukuru, Nigeria: Nigeria Evangelical Missionary Institute and Africa Christian Textbooks (ACTS), 2002, pp. 7-17.

the number of candidates a mission can successfully recruit for African Bible colleges. Meanwhile the schools are screaming for more lecturers just to ensure their survival at a time when many of them are also seeking to upgrade to university status without enough money and personnel to easily do so. A missionary lecturer, especially one with a qualified spouse, means less money spent on salaries, and colleges tend to depend on the budget space created when the missions pay the missionaries' salaries. It is ideal, though difficult, for missionaries in pastoral training schools to model a commitment to MT pastoral education. Therefore I believe that the remedy to the illness requires an additional medicine - a made-in-Africa prescription.

### **Rich Missionaries in an Age of Dependence**

Before suggesting possible roles for African theological lecturers in MMTE, it may be useful to comment on Harries' experience as a missionary fighting a lonely personal battle against the pressure to aid and abet a Bible college's financial dependence on outsiders. As Maranz notes, relationships in Africa have a financial component.<sup>8</sup> This makes Harries' stand against dependence a very difficult position to be in, just as he describes in his article. Most missionaries have always been relatively rich compared to most Africans they minister to, and the tradition of missionaries sharing their wealth is as long as the history of the missionary movement. But from personal experience it is extremely difficult to know how to behave properly as a rich Christian in a setting where the problems are always deeper than any missionary's pockets. And it is very difficult to share without inadvertently causing dependence or occasionally being taken advantage of. There are social norms that govern the financial aspects of a relationship in Africa, but most missionaries don't know them and Africans don't always recognize the extent of the missionaries' ignorance. This often causes grave problems and misunderstandings. As Harries has testified, the tradition of missionary generosity can trigger African expectations of missionary financial aid as a matter of course. If these expectations become the governing motive for desiring missionary involvement, then the African social norm of mutual support in a relationship is easily open to abuse. And this happens from time to time, though I have never experienced the sort of institutional pressure Harries testifies to. Hopefully such pressure is rare. Discouraging financial dependence while fulfilling the Biblical mandate to help fellow believers is neither easy nor susceptible to a formulaic solution. I believe striving for some kind of balance is essential, but Harries sees the situation differently. He believes the missionary should provide no foreign funds at all because these inhibit indigenous ministry and create dependence.<sup>9</sup> Neither path is easy to travel.

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<sup>8</sup> David E. Maranz, *African Friends and Money Matters: Observations from Africa*, Dallas: SIL International, International Museum of Cultures, Publications in Ethnography, Publication 37, 2001. I refer to the Oasis International edition, pp. 63 ff.

<sup>9</sup> See also Jim Harries, "Deliverance Ministry in an African Perspective", on his website.

**MTTE: A Made-in-Africa Prescription Illustrated****1. The New Principal**

Imagine the newly appointed African principal of a Bible college anywhere in English-speaking Africa. He wants to improve the college and see it progress, and he wants to leave his mark on the institution. But one aspect of his vision seems somewhat odd to most members of the governing board and to the mission-founded church that owns the college. He sees the future of the college as moving in two directions, expanding outwards from offering its traditional B.Th. into selected master's level courses in Biblical studies, theology, Christian education, missions, and counselling and chaplaincy and also expanding into diploma and certificate level courses. In addition, he must initiate a curriculum review of the existing B.Th. programme. None of these ideas cause anyone any discomfort because the curriculum review is long overdue, and the denomination consists of both urban and rural churches, the former desiring reliable and capable master's level pastors and the latter still struggling to find trained pastors who will minister to more than one church.

What his church leaders find hard to understand is that the new principal, a former rural pastor himself and educated in Africa and overseas, seems bent on emphasizing the role of African languages as well as English in the new courses and in the revised B.Th. curriculum. Four things convince the governing board and the denomination to give him a chance to implement his vision. First, while he was overseas earning his PhD in theology he forged strong ties among the churches affiliated with the mission that had brought the Gospel. Indeed the mission broke with its long tradition of not accepting Africans as missionaries so it pays his salary. In short, he is an affordable principal. Second, the college governing board and the church leaders know and trust him because he has served faithfully in every local church where he pastored, and has proved himself to be an able administrator within the church hierarchy. Third, in a joint meeting of the college's governing board and the denomination's executive committee he arouses their pride as Africans and as Christians, starting with his ability to greet each person by name and in that person's own mother tongue. He then extols the virtues of African mother tongues and the national trade language as mediums for teaching theology, as well as the utility of English as a global educational language. His impassioned oration reminds them of their African roots as well as their place in the worldwide church. Fourth, there is no one else of the right age, social status and proven godliness who is as capable of doing the job. They are prepared to give him a chance despite his odd ambition to include African languages in the education of future church leaders.

At the first college faculty meeting, he surprises all the faculty members by greeting each of them by name and in their own language. He wears the authority of his new position like a well-tailored jacket, naturally and without a hint of arrogance or pretence. The new principal starts the meeting with a

short devotional and opening prayer. His audience finds these to be both relevant and encouraging. As they turn to the day's agenda, the new principal listens carefully and says very little as his vice-principal and the academic dean competently walk through the usual preparations for the start of the new academic year. The vice-principal reminds everyone that the governing board and the church leaders have approved the need for a B.Th. curriculum review and for the addition of masters and lower level courses. Then he turns the meeting over to the principal who assures the faculty that their voices will be heard and that their advice and ideas are welcome. He then invites everyone to his house for the pre-term faculty dinner.

After the dinner when everyone is comfortably settled in his sitting room, the principal hands out one page of questions for the faculty members to respond to if they wish.

## **2. The Principal's Paper**

1. If translating the Bible into African languages is important enough for NEGST at AIU in Kenya to create a PhD in Bible Translation, then how important are African languages for preaching and teaching in local churches where members use a MT as their primary or only language?

2. How well can our students handle English in their studies, in preaching, in assignments, tests and exams, field research papers and in writing library research papers? Is there room for improvement? Is there a desire among those who apply for admission to get help in improving their English? Is the curriculum so crowded with courses that students find it hard to cope with the workload in English - which is their third or fourth language for many of them?

3. How well can our graduates apply what they learn in English to the lives of their church members who don't speak English? How well can our graduates minister in their mother tongue in churches where they must do so? Is there any benefit to including in our new curriculum a course on how to apply key Biblical and theological truths in African Mother Tongues?

4. What do your answers to the following questions reveal about your attitude towards African languages? Do the questions make you angry?

Do African languages lack the ability to adequately translate the original Bible written in Hebrew and Greek?

Do African languages lack the ability to adequately communicate the Gospel in today's cultures?

Do African languages lack the ability to adequately do theology and Biblical study at advanced levels?

Do African languages lack the ability to adequately prepare people for ministry in the church and its mission?

Do African languages lack the ability to adequately train Africans for work and participation in today's world?

5. Is there any wisdom in including Mother Tongue Theological Education (MTTE) as well as English in training students in this college? What might MTTE look like? What might be the benefits of MTTE and what problems might arise if we tried to introduce it?

6. How would our missionary lecturers respond if the college offered to reduce their workload enough to enable them to become fluent in the national trade language or the local Mother Tongue, if they had a desire to do so? Would they be interested in such an offer?

The faculty respond to the principal's paper by asking him to clarify some of the questions. Then they give their own opinions and ideas. Finally someone asks the new principal why he presented this paper to the faculty.

"Ah, thank you, I was waiting for someone ask that question." He then shares his vision for the college with great skill and eloquence. When he finishes, even those who are sceptical about aspects of the vision feel how deeply the principal cares about the spiritual welfare of the people in the pews of the church their college serves. Their new principal obviously cares about the students and about the faculty and their opinions. Like the governing board and the church, they are willing to give him a chance.

### **Suggestions for Implementing MTTE in African Bible Colleges**

This fictional story suggests some principles and activities that could guide the practical and gradual implementation of MTTE in Africa's Bible colleges, seminaries and Christian universities. These are intended to stimulate thinking on this topic, so they make no claim to be the Ten Commandments of MMTE.

1. The character, reputation and leadership skills of Africans and missionaries promoting MTTE must draw stakeholders into understanding and sharing in the vision for MTTE. While these personal characteristics and skills are always part of the recipe for successful leadership, they are especially required for introducing such radical concepts as MTTE. The more African college or church leaders are like Jesus, the more the godly authorities they report to will trust them with new and radical directions.

2. Promoters of MMTE must try to help the Church and theological institutions regain appropriate pride in African languages. African leaders might do this by using African languages well and by encouraging others to use them well. But individuals must be *willing* to learn a new African language or use a MT in theological education because these cannot be forced. Stories abound of educational authorities forbidding the use of MTs on campus in favour of English, especially in days gone by. But if both English and MTs are useful in different settings and purposes, then colleges need an atmosphere that respects and encourages both. Advocates cannot expect 100% faculty and church acceptance of the vision for MMTE, but must not be discouraged by

this. The process of creating acceptance for MMTE may be long and difficult because English is such a dominant factor in African pastoral training today.

3. African Bible colleges already teaching in MTs should integrate MMTE into the new curriculum if they decide to “upgrade” the college by adding “higher levels” of credentials and by beginning to teach in a globalizing language.

4. Recognize and express the value and contribution of globalizing languages to pastoral training in Africa, but also recognize and express the value of African languages, whether MTs or trade languages like Kiswahili. This is simply a question of attitude. If many Africans regard MTs as “bush” or unfit for educational purposes as Harries finds they do, then like Harries, we must work hard to change that attitude through inspiration and example. If missionaries from outside Africa learn an African language, it will delight and encourage many Africans. This is one reason behind Harries’ plea for missionaries to learn MTs. This suggestion overlaps with the two previous ones.

5. As much as possible, African college and university principals could support missionary lecturers who volunteer to learn African languages. This probably would entail reducing the lecturers’ load and ensuring they have a plan and skilled language tutors to help them towards MT fluency and cultural literacy.

6. MT speakers can contribute to the development of African languages by inventing the necessary words to express Biblical and theological terms in MTs. English became a globalizing language after centuries of borrowing and inventing new terms and expressions. Its vocabulary and structure changed over time as needed, and continues to develop today. All languages can develop a larger capacity to communicate new things, even be re-born, as the state of Israel resurrected and adapted Biblical Hebrew to the modern world. If we believe that God’s word can be translated into any language, then there is no reason to denounce African languages as being incapable of discussing and teaching the Bible and theology (or anything else). It will take time, planning, commitment, effort and creativity to continue the development of African languages, but it can be done, and it should be done.

7. One of the ways to contribute to the development of African languages is to make use of modern communications technology. Mobile phones and the Internet have changed and are changing communication opportunities for Africa.<sup>10</sup> African advocates for MTTE can harness these tools in new and imaginative ways. In addition academic journals in Africa, such as AJET, could make it a policy to publish articles in African languages from time to time, though AJET will remain an English language journal for the foreseeable future. Other MT journals can be created and posted on the Internet as free,

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<sup>10</sup> See this BBC article for how communications technology is being used to help preserve MTs in danger of dying out. Accessed 2012.02.18 at 8:28 PM.  
<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/science-environment-17081573?print=true>



downloadable, on-line resources without publishing a hard copy at all. In the beginning, these MT journals may remain a labour of love, rather than a source of income, but as ministry tools, they can help promote and develop MTTE and MTs in general.

8. Launch a pilot project, perhaps an elective course on transposing theology learned in English into a series of sermons or Bible studies in a church that uses the local mother tongue. This could be done as part of a structured and supervised field education assignment. Don't be afraid to start small. One small step taken towards the goal of MTTE is better than a large step that no one dares to take. Good evaluation and good results from a pilot project will allow you to make adjustments and give you a foundation for taking the next step. The next step could be an elective course, and later on a required course, in the theory and practice of ministering in MTs in African churches. Other courses could be added. Possible course titles might be something like: *Preaching in Mother Tongues* or *Preaching Narrative Sermons in Kikuyu* or *Principles and Problems of Mother Tongue Bible Interpretation* or *Christian Counselling in African Languages*. These sorts of courses should have a field education component so students can experience the theory being put into practice. Colleges and universities implementing MMTE will need to hire lecturers able and willing to meet the needs of the various MTs spoken by the students enrolled in programmes that include a MTTE component.

9. Do everything possible to ensure that the college library has copies of the Africa Bible Commentary (ABC) in Kiswahili or Hausa (when the latter is published) as well as in the most useful globalizing languages in your area. For example, in Kenya the ABC is available in English and Kiswahili. Other useful resources are also available in African languages, such as Phillip Morrison's *The Multi-Church Pastor* in Kiswahili. Check the Internet for other resources. Write your own MT textbooks and resources, and seek college or church help in publishing them for students to use in college and when they graduate, even in small quantities with do-it-yourself comb bindings.

10. Train Bible college students and local church elders and other leaders to read their MT Bibles aloud with passion and clarity in church services so the audience can more easily grasp the meaning of the passage. Although the oral interpretation of the Bible in MTs is a topic worthy of a separate study, this is a fairly simple project that can demonstrate the value of MTs in the Church and instill pride in the MT used. Where the MT Bible translation no longer reflects everyday MT speech, as in the case of the original Kikuyu Bible (which has been written in what some call 'King James Kikuyu'), then a new version is required, a *Revised Kikuyu Version*, for example. Bible translation and re-translation is usually an academic specialty beyond the resources of a single Bible College, but MT theological lecturers could be resource persons for a revised translation project initiated by the national Bible Society or other organizations doing Bible translation as their primary ministry.

## Conclusion

English and other globalising languages are, and will remain, primary teaching languages in many African pastoral training institutions, but certainly God values Mother Tongues and has no reservations in using them for His purposes. I am not the first to notice Acts 2:1-11 in this regard.

“When the day of Pentecost came, they were all together in one place. Suddenly a sound like the blowing of a violent wind came from heaven and filled the whole house where they were sitting. They saw what seemed to be tongues of fire that separated and came to rest on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit enabled them.”

“Now there were staying in Jerusalem God-fearing Jews from every nation under heaven. When they heard this sound, a crowd came together in bewilderment, because **each one heard them speaking in his own language**. Utterly amazed, they asked: ‘Are not all these men who are speaking Galileans? Then **how is it that each of us hears them in his own native language?** Parthians, Medes and Elamites; residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya near Cyrene; visitors from Rome (both Jews and converts to Judaism); Cretans and Arabs - **we hear them declaring the wonders of God in our own tongues!**’ ”

I have been blessed from talking with experienced and mature African pastors and students, gleaning from them many cultural insights. But my inadequacies, especially my failure to learn even one African language properly, seem overwhelming sometimes. If the missionary impact on African theological education is inevitably limited, John’s eschatological vision of Revelation 7:9-10 will inevitably be fulfilled:

“Baada ya haya nikatazama na hapo mbele yangu palikuwa na umati mkubwa wa watu ambao hakuna ye yote awezaye kuuhesabu. Kutoka kila taifa, kila kabila, kila jamaa na kila lugha, wamesimama mbele ya kile kiti cha enzi na mbele ya Mwana-Kondoo. Walikuwa wamevaa mavazi meupe na wakiwa wameshika matawi ya mitende mikononi mwao. Nao walikuwa wakipiga kelele kwa sauti kubwa wakisema: ‘Wokovu una Mungu wetu, Yeye aketiye kwenye kiti cha enzi na Mwana-Kondoo!’ ”

“After this I looked and there before me was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and in front of the Lamb. They were wearing white robes and were holding palm branches in their hands. And they cried out in a loud voice: ‘Salvation belongs to our God, who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb.’ ”

Redeemed humanity’s eternal destiny is praising God together, perhaps in everyone’s Mother Tongue. What if Babel’s curse is removed when we sing God’s praises in a multitude of MTs that *together* form the heavenly language? What if heaven’s language is incomplete without the full range of MTs decreed by God? It is only speculation, but perhaps MTs are more valuable and enduring than we can possibly know this side of eternity.