



SPEAKING MY LANGUAGE

Cross-cultural worker DAVID JOHN (name changed for security reasons) reflects on the necessity of learning and understanding the language and culture in order to share the gospel.

Pictures:

Women in Malawi ask the ancestors for rain and dance at the rain prayers
(photos: David John and Mark Holt)

When people think about ways to empower indigenous communities I am sure that few think that learning another language is a key component in this endeavour. There are, however, several reasons why learning another people's language is a vital part of empowering local communities. First, people's situations are more complex than they appear. When we first enter other societies it is a mistake to believe that people see the world largely as we do and that our differences are only surface level. **Only when we are able to speak with people and listen to their stories do we discover that we have entirely different ways of looking at the world, which in turn influences the way we live our lives.** Ludwig Wittgenstein, a language philosopher, says this rather more succinctly when he says, "The limits of my language mean the limits of my world".¹ For those of us who work cross-culturally, this means that our understanding of people is greatly enhanced by learning their language and greatly reduced when we don't.

For those of you who are not that enamoured by German philosophers, an example from our work with the Yawo (people group in Malawi and Mozambique) might help explain this idea further.

One part of our holistic expression of Christ's love is to empower the Yawo to meet their own food security needs. In this regard, the Yawo practice of clearing and burning foliage in their fields in preparation for the next growing season is known to be detrimental to the soil's fertility. Agriculturalists would prefer the Yawo to dig the foliage back into the ground so that it can decompose and add to the soil's fertility.

When we listen to the Yawo's stories and observe their rituals, however, we are able to understand why the Yawo are reluctant to stop burning the foliage in their fields. Burning foliage is not just an

arbitrary farming technique for the Yawo, but is tied to their understanding of how rain is produced and how fertility is obtained. It is commonly believed by the Yawo that their ancestral spirits play an essential role in rain production and causing fertility. They believe that the ancestral spirits move up into the sky in the smoke from the fires, which in turn accumulates and forms rain-bearing clouds. The ancestors then return to earth in the life-giving rain, which soaks the ground and makes the crops grow.

It is only by understanding and speaking another people's language that we are able to hear their stories, enter their world and understand the complexities of their life situation. It is only after we hear and understand another people's stories of how the world operates, that we can tell them an alternative story, which can challenge them and hopefully enable them to make the changes required for their own development.

But learning another language is also an empowering tool because it allows people to connect with God and his Word directly, rather than going through other people or using a foreign language to do so. Yawo Muslims conduct all of their prayers and worship of God in the Arabic language, which is a requirement of Islam. The problem for many Yawo is that they don't understand Arabic. Because of this, many seek assistance from their ancestral spirits with whom they can communicate in their own language and who they believe are in a better position to intercede with God on their behalf.

Chief Litete, a Yawo Muslim village headman was like this. He is responsible for several hundred families in a village in the Mangochi District of Malawi. Several years ago I was introduced to him and it was obvious even after our short conversation that he desired to know God more deeply and that he desired the same for his people.



In our conversation that day, we talked in Ciyawo (the language of the Yawo people), about some of the titles given to the prophets who are common to Islam and Christianity. At the end of our conversation I left him with some parts of Scripture, which we had produced in Ciyawo. Little did I know at the time how much of an impression this conversation made on him. It was not so much what I had said, but how I had said it. **He was excited about hearing someone talk about God in his own language.** When we sat down again at another time he immediately began to lament to me that although every person in his village was a Muslim, not one of them could understand Arabic, the language of all religious ceremonies in Islam. Chief Litete said that they would all go to the Mosque to pray five times a day, as prescribed, and they would recite their prayers, all in the Arabic language, as prescribed, but none of them could really understand anything that was said. They would go to the Mosque and come home no closer to knowing anything more about God.

So deep was Chief Litete's desire to hear about God that he asked if we would start teaching the Word of God in his village in Ciyawo, starting with him and his brothers. Our meetings continue to this day. When we meet, if a new person is present for the first time, **it is Chief Litete who tells them, "Here we learn about God in our own language, Ciyawo, because God speaks the Yawo language and understands it as much as any other language."**

Telling people God's story in their own language is empowering because it means that the whole community can have access to God's story and not just the religious elite. It also gives people another explanation of how the world operates; an explanation which challenges the rule of capricious spirits and leads people to a relationship with Jesus who can help them with their deepest fears and needs. **Hearing God's story in Ciyawo also says something profound to the Yawo; it says that they are loved, that their language is valid and that knowing God does not require them to use another language.** Yes, God really does speak Ciyawo.

¹ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-philosophicus*, (tr) C. K Ogden, New York: Cosimo, 2007 edition, (1922), p. 149.

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PROJECT PROFILE

Ciyawo English dictionary project

Project Code: MLdi413

This project aims to develop a 6,000 word bilingual dictionary in Ciyawo and English. The focus of the dictionary is primary school aged children who need to learn English in order to be eligible for secondary education. The dictionary will also assist cross-cultural workers who are learning to speak Ciyawo.

Project Value: \$11,700

Gifts to this project are tax-deductible

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