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Building a Better Bridge: The Quest for Blessing in an African Folk Islamic Context

by Alan Howell

After multiple miscarriages, Fatima finally gave birth to a healthy baby girl. This young mother desperately wanted to protect her baby and one day she heard a radio announcement that a famous healer would be coming to town. She could probably scrape together the money necessary to buy an amulet for her only child. What should she do?

Abudu wanted to have a better harvest this year. He saw that many of his neighbors had more than enough food to eat and sell. Some of his friends had been using conservation agriculture techniques to increase production. But, his brother-in-law suggested that Abudu should purchase an amulet from the local Imam. What should he do?

Fatima and Abudu share a common desire: they long for blessing. The quest for blessing is a universal one and despite predictable cultural differences, there is a remarkable similarity in the kind of blessing people yearn for: status and honor, a long life, material prosperity, protection from disasters or malevolent spirits, safe births, healthy children and grandchildren able to care for one who reaches old age, the approval of God and eternal life.¹ But even when people do all they can to secure a “good life,” there is no way for them to guarantee it.² So much of a person’s life is beyond his control. Therefore, in the face of such problems and challenges, the essential question for many is this: “How can they assure themselves of prosperity, and safeguard themselves against such misfortunes?”³

Living in northern Mozambique, among the Makua-Metto people, we have been surprised by the power that folk religion possesses to shape culture and behavior. I’ve come to believe that two main functions of popular or folk religion help explain the breadth of its influence: guidance in a quest for blessing, and help in response to suffering. These aspects are so interrelated and connected that we could almost think of them as two sides of the same coin. Our Mozambican friends spend large portions of their time and treasure in the quest to find blessing

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and to confront suffering. While these desires for a constructive response to suffering and for the procuring of blessing are certainly driving forces within folk religion, that does not mean that they are inherently evil. Throughout the biblical texts,

these two aspects—deliverance and blessing—are found together. They are both part of God’s activity in the world. We cannot have one without the other.⁴

Since these two impulses are present in the story of God’s saving action in Scripture, we should not ignore their potential to provide powerful points of contact with the target culture as well. I have explored how the Makua-Metto folk religion responds to suffering in an earlier article in this journal.⁵ This article will concentrate on the search for blessing in the Makua-Metto context.

The concept of blessing has been largely ignored in the Western world. Sophisticated North Americans or Europeans may give lip service to God as the source of blessing, but most act as if blessing comes exclusively through education, entrepreneurship, and sweat equity.⁶ Blessing has been regulated

to formulas people use to pray before eating or to express concern for one who has sneezed. Even in the Church, the word “blessing” often has the connotation of simply signifying the end of the worship service.⁷

And the training cross-cultural missionaries receive in Western universities and seminaries does little to correct this blind spot. Students are often taught to “see evangelism as dealing with the cosmic issues of high religion, not the immediate problems of everyday life.”⁸ This notion of blessing is

neglected or rejected because of magical, superstitious interpretations or ties with animism that many missionaries have given it.⁹

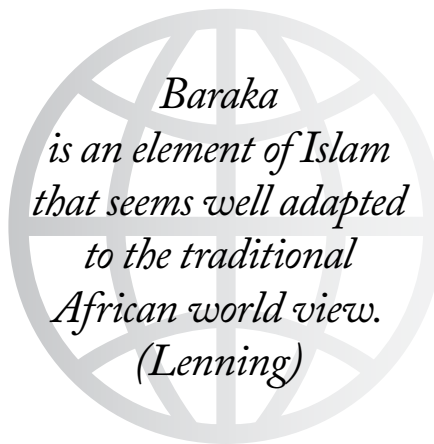
The combination of these factors means that often the quest for blessing is disregarded as a potential avenue for folk Muslims to encounter the gospel.

This neglect has forced me to lean on a small cadre of missiologists whose work can orient how we approach African situations like my own.

Initial Thoughts: Who Needs this Bridge of Blessing?

Baraka is the Arabic word for “blessing,” and

is widely used throughout the Islamic world to denote a mysterious and wonderful power, a blessing from God, indicating holiness or “blessed virtue.” *Baraka* ... is possessed by saints and the prophet Muhammad possessed it in the highest degree ... *Baraka* is seen in miracles, holy places and people, prayers, blessings, and curses.¹⁰



It is “an element of Islam that seems well adapted to the traditional African world view.”¹¹ *Baraka*, in many places in Africa,

is believed to be fundamental to one’s faith and religious practice. While the power of *baraka* is sometimes used in questionable ways, such as magical methods of healing, its misuse does not negate or reduce the impact it has had and continues to have on Islamic life and outreach in Africa today. Its influence touches people at every significant transition point and moment of crisis in their lives.¹²

Since the concept of blessing is a central one in African folk Islamic contexts, by offering a ministry of blessing,

the church could build a bridge that is appealing to African Muslims.¹³ Establishing blessing as a “natural redemptive analogy”¹⁴ is one of the best ways that the church might be able to bring “together the focuses on salvation and the abundant life that Muslims seek.”¹⁵ At the same time, though, it is important that the Church be careful “to distinguish between blessing (*baraka*) that has its source in God and animistic *baraka*.”¹⁶ While this potentially difficult distinction might seem to be a hindrance, it could become an opportunity because a folk Muslim’s openness to the power of blessing may be just what eventually draws him to decide to walk with Jesus, the source of all blessing.¹⁷ Lenning notes that blessing

can become an effective instrument of witness and bridge building because of its centrality both in biblical and Islamic Scriptures and in the everyday life of the believers of the two faiths. Such commonality can reduce or eliminate confrontation or hostility. A Muslim hearing a Christian describe the blessing of God will not reject him. The blessing of God brings Muslims and Christians into a common arena where, hopefully, effective two-way communication, witness, and dialogue can take place.¹⁸

Now that we have looked briefly at the importance of *baraka* in folk Islam, we will begin to examine how the quest for blessing takes shape in our specific context in northern Mozambique.

In investigating the role of blessing in the Makua-Metto culture, I was told that *baraka* is a kind of luck that affects multiple aspects of one’s life. While God is named as the source of *baraka*, the primary ways for acquiring blessing are by making offerings to an idol or a tree or by going to the grave of a blessed person known locally as a saint. Women typically seek a blessing if they want to get married, are unable to have children, or are concerned for their children’s health, whereas men will look for a blessing when they need a wife or are trying to secure employment.

A common refrain, though, was that a person would need to use his or her blessing wisely or it would be wasted. And while people agree that those who have a bad or corrupt heart may be able to arrange a temporary blessing, the assumption is that eventually one's evil deeds will catch up with him. Even good people who possess baraka will suffer, though, and it is a common belief that in order to get a blessing you have to sweat and expend a lot of effort; you cannot get a blessing without it costing you something.

Powerful magical practitioners such as traditional healers or Islamic teachers are seen as sources of blessing, although there is skepticism among some in this society who express a lack of faith that a magical practitioner who doesn't even own a car himself would be able to produce magic powerful enough to conjure up a car for another person.

Wouldn't he have used the magic for himself first? Also, why would he make a charm to help my son succeed in school if his own children have not completed their studies? If he has baraka at his disposal, why doesn't it seem to make his life better?

When I asked if this skepticism was widespread, I was told, "No. Many, many people still look to traditional healers and witchdoctors for a blessing. Where else can they go?" The African folk Muslim context is a confusing mix of Islam and Animism. In order to build an effective bridge, it is useful to categorize the specifics of our host culture's approach to blessing and the connection points it makes in the lives of its adherents. While the common categories of "white magic and black magic" might be helpful,

a functional analysis reveals four types of magic practiced among a wide array of folk Muslims: 1) productive magic; 2) protective magic; 3) destructive magic; and 4) divination.¹⁹

This categorization provides helpful distinctions for understanding the Makua-Metto practice. While the last two types

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(destructive and divination) are generally related to suffering,²⁰ I believe that the first two types of magic (productive and protective) are mostly used in the quest for blessing. We will use the distinction between productive and protective magic to frame our exploration of Makua-Metto belief and practice.

Surveying the Terrain: The Blessing of Production

According to Rick Love, folk Muslims often pursue blessing in terms of

prosperity, fertility and success... At the most practical level, they seek blessing in order to pass exams at school, find a mate, bear children, have a plentiful harvest or succeed in business. In these pursuits, they often turn toward what could be described as productive magic for success.²¹

Among the Makua-Metto, in order to get this kind of blessing, many make sacrifices in the hopes that their ancestors will improve their production. Others may travel great distances to sacred sites or trees or even make their requests at the graves of deceased kings. People will purchase a magical amulet in the hopes of enhancing their position at work at the expense of others. Years ago, our family employed a guard who buried a magical charm in our yard that was supposed to make me displeased with his fellow workers.

Another version of productive magic involves purchasing a piece of string or cloth that has been infused with magical powers and turns into a snake that secretly steals money from random people and brings the riches back to its owner. Others do this kind of magic through personal contact. By touching someone's shoulder or shaking hands with them, the money is transferred magically from that person's pocket secretly to their own.

An even darker version of this productive magic (*dondozi*)—what many would call an outright curse—must be done at the expense of one's own relatives. The purchaser of this type of magic sits in front of a mirror in the presence of a magical practitioner. He or she "sees" family members in the reflection and then the magical practitioner pokes the mirror indicating which family member is the one who must die in order to get the buyer a financial blessing. The act of "poking" the image is typically seen as enough to kill the person, but sometimes their death actually happens at the hands of the one requesting the blessing of production. Also, the person who is killed must be from one's own flesh or family or it doesn't count: it can't be a stranger or foreigner because that wouldn't "cost" the person anything. This magic is believed to make the "killed" person disappear while a "fake" body of theirs remains in its place. They are said to become invisible zombie slaves who work as slaves in the farms of their new master or carry wealth from the market to their owner's homes. When I asked a local Imam about the ethics of this practice, he told me that

stealing is always bad—no matter how you do it. But, making someone into a zombie slave is even worse because the suffering one inflicts happens over a longer period of time.

The abuses that come from the use of magic in the quest for a blessing of production stem from a warped vision of the blessed life. In conversations about baraka, there were two related terms with the distinction between them at least initially difficult to pin down. The word *mpuha* describes a blessed state in terms of material possessions, while the word *nnema* describes a state of grace and peace, a life that is blessed relationally and spiritually. When I

inquired about the intersection of baraka, nnema, and mpuha, I was told that baraka or blessing is the source of both mpuha (material blessing) and nnema (relational grace or peace). One person might have nnema without mpuha (they will feel sympathy for others, and will be willing to share even though they may not have much to share), while another person might have mpuha without nnema (the individual might have the means but might be unwilling to share). The longing for material wealth (mpuha) divorced from its relational component (nnema) stems from the root cause of productive magic: *nttima* (greed and jealousy).

Surveying the Terrain: The Blessing of Protection

Among folk Muslims, “protective magic is possibly the most developed or comprehensive” form.²² While the root cause in productive magic is greed and jealousy, the overriding emotional cause related to protective magic is fear. People are afraid and their hunger for “supernatural measures to overcome these fears” leads to a plethora of charms.²³ A charm, or amulet, is

an object containing supernatural power to protect or bless people. Through power rituals, shamans empower (literally “fill”) a normal object to turn it into a charm.²⁴

This is true in the Makua-Metto culture where the dominant form of protective magic comes in the form of charms or amulets. The most common form is the *alupatiri* or *ihirrissi*, a cord worn around the neck or hidden on one’s person. Made from twisted rope, it usually holds a small pouch that contains a word of blessing in Arabic, a root with magical properties, or the hair of a lucky or blessed person, such as a saint. Interestingly, a Mozambican imam and other practicing Muslims here have told me that the name *ihirrissi* comes from the Arabic word for defense and that is exactly what this magical object is expected to provide:

a defense against evil. Another protective charm is the *ikulula* which is made from traditional rope and worn around the waist. It is very common to see children wearing these as a defense against evil and sickness.

A second way that Makua-Metto people acquire blessing is from a traditional healer: through the purchase of magical medicine that is then applied to one’s person. For example, a root with special properties is cooked and the one who bathes with that water is believed to have acquired a blessing. In another practice, the traditional healer makes an incision and places crushed root powder under the skin to protect against illness or bad dreams.



Some will pay an Islamic teacher to write words in Arabic to invoke a blessing over the house when it is placed over a door. Others will offer sacrifices at holy sites, and if what they desired comes true, will need to take an additional gift back there as thanksgiving or payment. Traditional healers serve as priests at these special places to receive those who travel from far away seeking blessings of both production and protection.

The driving force behind the desire for protection is fear. The Makua-Metto people live in an environment saturated with fear and suspicion, and spend their time and resources in often futile attempts to find protection.

Building the Bridge: Proposing an Alternative Quest for Blessing

While the previously described search for blessing in Makua-Metto culture could certainly lead one to despair, there is hope that as blessing is strategically incorporated into the rhythms of church life—theological, missiological, and liturgical—perhaps effective bridges can be built into the Muslim communities all across Africa.²⁵

One of the first steps in building this type of bridge is to develop a shared understanding of the need for it. To initiate that kind of conversation with our Mozambican friends, we used the image of a tree to visualize the methods used and the subsequent consequences of the search for blessing in Makua-Metto culture. On the left side of the drawing of the tree we listed the different types of productive magic, writing them on the branches. Then we drew a stick figure of a person using those practices who was picking fruit off the tree. This person was probably thinking that he or she would receive a productive blessing that would last. On the right side of the tree, we listed the protective magic practices. We drew a stick figure there, as if someone were taking refuge from the sun under those branches. This person was assuming that by following those practices the blessing of protection would last. As we named each of these practices, Mozambican participants had lively discussions where people shared stories of how these practices had affected the lives of their friends and family. Then I drew everyone’s attention to the roots of that tree and pointed out how it grew out of both fear (*wova*) and jealousy or greed (*nttima*). Since most of the Makua-Metto people we work with are subsistence farmers, it was easy to get them to imagine the destructive result that would come from a plant growing in poisoned soil.

Next, we imagined what would happen to these two people later on. The person

who trusted in the blessing of production, ate the fruit and started feeling stomach pains. He painfully regretted the evil he had done and realized the folly of the fleeting wealth gained from productive magical practices. The person sitting in the protective shade of the tree was hit by the same branch that he trusted to bless him. Then I asked participants to imagine looking into the branches above the individuals and spotting serpents, representatives of Satan, hiding there, looking gleefully down at the people they had deceived. These images encouraged lots of conversation and helped our Mozambican friends affirm the fleeting benefits and ultimate futility of magical practices done in search of blessing.

Then we turned our attention to a third image, one that helped initiate conversations about how the church could harness the longings for blessing in healthy and holy ways by searching for blessing in the Kingdom of God. Instead of a tree filled with magical practices, we asked them to imagine a different tree, the cross, rooted in *nnema* (the grace and peace of God) whose horizontal beam offers both lasting production and protection to Christ's followers. The striking contrast between the two trees highlighted the ineffectiveness of Makua-Metto folk religion's attempts to find blessing and provided a solid place to begin talking about blessing in the kingdom of God. In the next two sections, we will explore how the church might respond effectively to the host culture's ways of searching for blessing and how it differs with the kind of blessing we find in Jesus.

Fortifying the Bridge: The Blessing of Production in the Kingdom of God

Followers of Jesus should share basic core convictions about how blessing functions in the kingdom of God. First of all, God is "the source and giver of blessing."²⁶ Secondly, blessings are not

Instead of a tree filled with magical practices, we asked them to imagine a different tree, the cross, rooted in *nnema* (the grace and peace of God).

understood only as ends in themselves, but ideally they lead us to live holy lives.²⁷ And thirdly, it is instructive that in Jesus' most famous speech, the Sermon on the Mount, he began by redefining who is able to receive the blessing of the kingdom of God.²⁸

That redefinition of who is blessed in God's kingdom, especially who is able to receive a blessing of production, is an important distinction since blessing in the host culture may often be seen as the result of destiny. Jesus' encounter with the Samaritan woman in John 4 is particularly useful in reframing this topic. From an African folk Islam perspective, this woman did not have *baraka*. Being a Samaritan, a person of questionable lineage, she was despised by Jesus' people, the Jews. The Bible says that she arrived all alone at the local well at noon. While modern readers may find these details insignificant, my Mozambican friends, farmers who mostly draw or hand pump their water from wells, assumed that this woman probably didn't get along well with others, otherwise she would have made the trek to carry water in the cool of the day with the rest of the women of her village. As her conversation with Jesus progressed, we also learn that this woman had been married multiple times and was now living with a man who was not her husband—something truly scandalous in Jesus' day. So, in the eyes of the world, this woman was not blessed at all. She was of the wrong nationality, of a despised religion, flagrantly immoral, a social outcast—and most likely destitute; otherwise, she would have paid someone to fetch water for her in the blazing sun. And yet, she providentially bumped into Jesus and after a short conversation, she abandoned her bucket there at the well and ran back home. Amazingly, when this Samaritan woman did return to the well she literally brought her whole

village to Jesus. So, this woman started out with miniscule (we might even say, negative) influence, but she ended up using what little she had to bless others. Jesus invited her to participate in the Kingdom of God, and offered her an internal spring of water that wells up to eternal life. When she was blessed by Jesus, she was not selfish with it, as one might be with a merely productive or material blessing (*mpuha*), but instead, in her joy, she freely shared with others the blessing of grace and peace (*nnema*) she had just received. This story has been very helpful in reframing the concept of blessing for Makua-Metto disciples.

Ultimately, however, to effect a real change in perspective of productive blessing (related to prosperity, fertility and success) we will need to address the negative roots of the problem: greed and jealousy (*nttima*). There are four key affirmations that Makua-Metto followers of Jesus should internalize to assist them with these powerful temptations.

1. *We will NOT do productive magic.* Leviticus 19:26b plainly states, "Do not practice divination or sorcery" (NIV). This simple prohibition has become an oft-quoted text among Makua-Metto Christians who are committed to resisting the temptation to engage in productive magic. These believers talk about the importance of obeying God's commands and of trusting in him to provide the blessing. But, simply telling someone to stop doing magic in their search for blessing is not enough. This commandment works best as a deterrent when its truths are held alongside other convictions that can help combat the potentially destructive emotions of greed and jealousy.

2. *We value a contented life marked by grace and peace (nnema) more than one defined simply in terms of material blessing (mpuha).* Financial prosperity has a limited impact and is not the determining factor of whether one has a good life.²⁹ 1 Timothy 6:6–11 is a useful text as it points to the importance of contentment and reminds us that even the extravagantly rich will not be able to take the financial blessings of this life with them when they die. Paul reorients our perspective to wealth by telling us that “godliness with contentment is great gain” (1 Tim. 6:6 NIV). Verse 10 is a strong reminder that jealousy and greed can lead one to wander from the faith and fall into a trap where one ends up “piercing” himself. Interestingly, that specific word makes a powerful allusion to a practice of which the Makua-Metto people are painfully aware. As discussed earlier, magical practitioners use a mirror to “pierce” and, by extension, to kill family members of those who are purchasing a blessing. Paul’s words sound a warning that to define one’s life in terms of material possessions is dangerous as it could lead someone to practice witchcraft and to eventually fall prey to his own evil practices. Instead, the text reminds us to pursue blessings that are good and life-giving.
3. *We count on the blessing and riches Christ has stored up for us.* Ephesians 1:3–14 tells us of the great blessing that God graciously prepared for us before we were even born. Through Christ’s sacrifice, he has secured a rich blessing for us. So, while in the Makua-Metto culture (where there is a common assumption of a “limited good”) some people will kill even their own family members in an attempt to secure a blessing of production for themselves, Jesus models a completely different way as he

sacrifices his own life to secure a blessing for others. As noted earlier, the cultural expectation is that a blessing must cost you something. Incredibly, for those of us in God’s kingdom, the price has been paid by Christ and we then in turn will have to die to ourselves as part of the blessing bargain.³⁰

4. *We live as the truly blessed people we are—like firmly rooted trees who produce abundantly in season.* In Psalm 1, we are given a picture of a man who looks to God as the ultimate source of production (or fruitfulness and abundance) and protection. Instead of delighting in wickedness and wealth, this



blessed person delights in the riches of God’s words and is said to be like a tree planted by a river that consistently produces fruit in season (implying then that there may still be seasons of want). The end of the psalm contrasts the image of a blessed man, securely rooted like a productive tree protected by God, with the wicked who are at the mercy of passing breezes and blown around like trash. Our Makua-Metto friends laughed as they imagined that those who trust in productive magic are just chaff, floating off through the air because they lack real weight and substance.

Fortifying the Bridge: Blessing of Protection in the Kingdom of God

Now we turn our attention to how to appropriately respond to the search for the blessing of protection and how to best address the root problem of fear. A helpful story that addresses fear and also animism’s failed quest for protection is the tale of Balaam from Numbers 22–24. The story opens with Balak, King of Moab, having called together the elders of his people to deal with a problem. The Moabites were deathly afraid because the Israelites, a numerous people, had escaped from Egypt and had camped nearby. Balak summoned Balaam, a powerful magical practitioner, with the intention of cursing Israel, but on the road to Moab, Balaam had his famous conversation with a donkey and an angel warned him not to give in to greed nor to deviate from God’s will. While we usually stop the story at this point, the text goes on to tell us how Balak built altars and offered great sacrifices in the hopes that Balaam would curse Israel, but each time God turned Balaam’s words into a blessing for his people instead. This story confirms what we’ve noted before, that fear is the underlying reason for using protective magic. Balak was terrified of God’s people and used every means at his disposal to curse them. While the king of Moab assumed that

blessing was a magical formula or power... as the story unfolded, blessing was shown to be a prerogative of God. Balaam did not possess a magical power to be used without regard for God.³¹

A persistent question that throbs in the hearts and minds of disciples of Jesus in folk Muslim contexts is whether or not it is possible for God’s people to be cursed. Numbers 23:23 is a key verse in this story and one that is meaningful even today. It states clearly that no magic or divination can be done by other human beings against God’s people. Believing that promise of protection,

though, is certainly easier said than done and as we look at how to address the root issue of fear, there are four affirmations that can both help that conviction to take root and assist followers of Christ to faithfully look to God alone as the ultimate source of protection.

1. *We will NOT put on protective magic; instead we will wear the armor of God.* Ephesians 6 is a key text for followers of Jesus in any context, but especially for believers in contexts saturated by magic.³² This text challenges our Makua-Metto friends to lay aside magical items and to put on the armor that God has given us to wear. Those who continue to wear amulets reveal their allegiance to the enemy. And verse 12 reminds us that ultimately our battle is not against the people who are trying to use magic against us, but against the spiritual forces that have deceived them. The best response of Christians under attack from evil, even the evil of witchcraft and curses, is prayer (v. 18).
2. *We will trust that God is faithful and true to his promise to bless and protect us.* God's consistent message to his people—the most common command in the Bible—is this: “Do not fear.” Isaiah 41:10 says succinctly,

So do not fear, for I am with you; do not be dismayed, for I am your God. I will strengthen you and help you; I will uphold you with my righteous right hand.
3. *We have the right to choose between blessing and cursing for our own lives (Deut. 11:26–28), but Satan has no power to steal our blessing (1 John 4:4).* These two texts provide a foundation for Makua-Metto believers to discuss another key question about blessing in this folk Muslim context: Can a disciple lose God's blessing? The conclusion that fits best with the overall message of the Bible is that while

The Old Testament is clear that the reception of blessing required obedience. Otherwise, the blessing would become a curse. (Lenning)

we can lose our blessing due to our own disobedience, we should not be afraid of other people, or even the demonic powers, because they are unable to curse us and take the blessing of God away from us.

4. *We will follow Abraham's example of obedience and remember that, like our great father in the faith, we too, are blessed to be a blessing (Gen. 12:1–5).* Abraham obeyed God's instruction to leave his home and to journey to an unknown land, trusting in God's blessing to provide and protect.

Lenning notes that

the Old Testament is clear in its assertion that the reception of blessing required obedience. If obedience was missing, the blessing would become a curse.³³

But, beyond that, it seems clear that obedience is a crucial part of blessing because a man is blessed not only when God has done something for him, but when through obedience, he is able to do something for others.³⁴

It is important for followers of Jesus to understand that we have been blessed in order to be a blessing to others.

Crossing the Bridge: How Can We Engage the Holistic Dimensions of Blessing in Powerful Ways?

Effectively adapting the concept of blessing as “a bridge” for reaching African folk Muslims will require us to move beyond the realm of ideas to include re-envisioning the practices of the church. This is additionally important when we recognize “the strategic centrality of ritual” in the lives of Africans.³⁵ It takes great courage and wisdom to re-examine the forms of

Christianity that we have inherited and cultivate rituals that harness the redemptive aspects of blessing for that context.³⁶ This is a crucial part, because otherwise, Christianity's impact will be mediocre, at best.³⁷

Successfully implementing non-Western forms and rituals of blessing as part of a holistic strategy for reaching African folk Muslims is certainly a daunting undertaking and one that requires much more than this space allows. That being said, how shall we find our bearings? I think that an appropriate place to begin is with the idea of power. One of the reasons that the influence of Folk Islam is so prevalent in Africa is that it promises blessing from a variety of sources: power persons, power objects, power places, power times, power rituals.³⁸ So, one way for the church to systematize a holistic response to the quest for blessing is to offer healthier and holier alternatives for each of these sources of power.

Power persons. As has been seen in the history of the Church in Africa, when leading well, charismatic individuals can have a positive impact in their areas of influence. Some denominations may need to rethink and contextualize models of Christian leadership to better fit their African folk Islamic contexts. What if leaders of Christian communities in these settings looked less like pastors from the West and instead functioned more like holy men or even the patriarchs of old? It seems clear that,

the emphasis in the Old Testament is on blessing as a holistic power working in the lives of his chosen, obedient servants. Abraham as the first of the patriarchs is one (but a key one) of many such blessed people. Because they represent God, they are gifted with the power to bless others.³⁹

An effective evangelist to folk Muslims will then

exhibit the power of blessing which he has received from God. The holy power of blessing evident in his life will communicate to Muslims that he represents Jesus Christ, the King of Kings and Lord of Lords.⁴⁰

While other religious practitioners in the community may hoard their access to blessing or use it for financial gain, Christian leaders should be counter-cultural as they aide every member of the body of Christ to become the priests and kings they were created to be.⁴¹

Power objects/words. Unfortunately, in many contexts followers of Jesus use Christian symbols in ways disconnected from their source in God, and they act as magical amulets, in and of themselves, to bring blessings of production and protection.⁴² Even the Bible, instead of being honored as “a guidepost pointing to God,” is sometimes seen as a powerful magical book.⁴³ Since there is so much inherent danger in power objects, it seems wisest to concentrate on contextualizing a use of power words. In oral societies everyday speech, even words offered in jest, are believed to have the power to bless or curse. In our context, Christians have augmented the traditional greeting of peace (*Salama*) by greeting each other with the “peace of Christ.” By filling their everyday speech with words of blessing, followers of Jesus can grow their influence and power for good in their community.

Power places. Understanding blessing as a bridge to the Kingdom of God should reframe our view of place. I come from a faith tradition that downplays an emphasis on respecting the sanctuary, but this neglect of a theology of place may hinder the advancement of the gospel among the Makua-Metto people. Lenning notes that

not only must respect for God’s holiness be present in the sacraments and worship setting, but the place of worship must also be guarded and preserved as

a holy place. In this way God’s blessing is present. If the Christian Church does not care properly for the house of worship, its neglect will destroy its witness to Muslims.⁴⁴

Since Makua-Metto believers are an extreme minority, decisions about removing places of traditional worship are not even on the table. Instead it seems best for them to carefully consider how their own places of worship can contribute or detract from the influence the church can have in a ministry of blessing to its community.

Power times. In the Makua-Metto context, funerals are the times that hold the most potential for revealing the church’s power to bless. When a death occurs in the family



the Church has a strategic opportunity for witness and for bestowing the blessing of God. While the funeral customs vary from area to area, the Christian pastor serving in an Islamic region needs to be viewed as a man of blessing who is involved in the total death and mourning process.⁴⁵

I have personally seen how churches which have mourned well and blessed bereaving families have then experienced new growth through conversions, but when churches have done funerals halfheartedly they inevitably decline. Funerals are important times for showing that the church or the community of believers is an agent of blessing that lovingly cares for orphans and widows.⁴⁶

Power rituals. Rituals can help believers leave behind magical practices and therefore

“deliverance” should be an important part of discipling new believers. Folk Muslims who come to Christ have been immersed in the world of spirit powers, charms and amulets. We cannot simply ask them to repent in a general way and believe that is sufficient.⁴⁷

Baptism can serve as a ritual of exorcism⁴⁸ because it serves as an initiation rite where people make a break with their former way of life. In the Makua-Metto context, people possessed by evil spirits practice daily ceremonial washing with water. Baptism into Christ by contrast is a one-time washing ritual that declares our acceptance of a different kind of spirit—God’s holy spirit who empowers us to live a blessed life under the reign of our Lord Jesus.

Using these six power sources can be an effective way of integrating blessing

into the ministry, worship, outreach, and theology of the Church... (which) will increase the African’s receptivity to the Gospel... In this way, it has tremendous potential for the Church in its holistic mission and ministry to the people of God.⁴⁹

To make the search for blessing into an effective bridge, the church among the Makua-Metto might use mental categories like production and protection to fight underlying causes, but it also needs to address the desire to live well through power persons, words, places, times and rituals that affect everyday life.

Conclusion

Many evangelistic approaches geared for Muslims attempt to address the teachings of Muhammad and his heirs with apologetics, in a confrontational, head-on manner. They engage Islam in what adherents would perceive as points of strength by looking at their doctrines and calling them to reconsider the words of the Qur’an. While that approach may be helpful in certain settings, I believe the kind of bridge proposed in this article is a more effective

method for evangelizing and making disciples in folk Muslim areas of Africa. By initially side-stepping “Islam” and directing the approach towards elements that are normally considered to be in the category of “folk” or felt needs, the church can concentrate on opening a path for people who are the most dissatisfied or disillusioned with their current systems of procuring a blessing.

Returning to the two stories at the beginning of the article, we could ask: What if someone shared with Fatima a different way to bless and protect her daughter? What if a follower of Jesus were able to help Abudu find a good and holy way to bless his family through increased production (or prosperity)? Using “blessing as a theological bridge to Islam” has the potential to touch every area of people’s lives and allows the church to have a “holistic impact on the individual and the community.”⁵⁰ And as the African folk Muslim’s worldview incorporates a more integrated understanding of the sacred and the profane, he is primed for a faith that incorporates the biblical ideas of blessing. From the Old Testament ideas about “fertility, prosperity, health, wholeness, . . . power, peace, and holiness” to the New Testament teaching that Christ reveals and fulfills the promises to bless his people, the biblical texts point to the way reframing blessing can positively impact the whole person.⁵¹ A commitment to steer clear of the dangers of the “health and wealth gospel” should not blind us to the fact that God longs to bless us and show us how to live well. The God and Father of Jesus Christ

did not deliver his people only *from* slavery and sin; he also delivered them to a new life, a new state of blessing that was designed for growth, prosperity, enrichment, and maturity.⁵²

That is a message of blessing that the Makua-Metto people want and need to hear. That is the good news that has the potential to touch lives in meaningful ways and serve as a sturdy bridge for African folk Muslims to find their way into the Kingdom of God. **IJFM**

What if Fatima learned a different way to bless and protect her daughter? What if Abudu were taught a holy way to bless his family?

Endnotes

- ¹ Paul Hiebert, R. Daniel Shaw and Tite Tiénou, *Understanding Folk Religion* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1999), 133.
- ² Ibid.
- ³ Ibid.
- ⁴ Larry Lenning, *Blessing in Mosque and Mission* (Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 1980), 68.
- ⁵ Alan Howell, “Turning it Beautiful: Divination, Discernment and a Theology of Suffering,” *IJFM* 29, no. 3 (Fall 2012).
- ⁶ Special thanks to my wife, Ladye Rachel Howell, for this insight.
- ⁷ Lenning, 9.
- ⁸ Gailyn Van Rheenen, *Communicating Christ in Animistic Contexts* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1991), 60.
- ⁹ Lenning, 16.
- ¹⁰ Ibid., 10.
- ¹¹ Ibid., 48.
- ¹² Ibid., 65.
- ¹³ Ibid., 122.
- ¹⁴ Ibid., 66.
- ¹⁵ Ibid., 122.
- ¹⁶ Ibid., 113–114.
- ¹⁷ Ibid.
- ¹⁸ Ibid., 113.
- ¹⁹ Rick Love, *Muslims, Magic and the Kingdom of God* (Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 2000), 26–27.
- ²⁰ Howell, 129–137.
- ²¹ Love, 27.
- ²² Ibid., 27–28.
- ²³ Ibid.
- ²⁴ Ibid., 30.
- ²⁵ Lenning, 133.
- ²⁶ Ibid., 70.
- ²⁷ Hiebert, 136. (see Matthew 25:31–46; Acts 3:25–26; Heb. 6:7–15; 1 Peter 3:9).
- ²⁸ Matthew 5:1–12.
- ²⁹ See Proverbs 15:16–17 and 16:8.
- ³⁰ See Romans 6:5–11; John 12:24–26; and Mark 8:34–38.
- ³¹ Van Rheenen, 202–203.
- ³² For more on how Ephesus was a major center for magic in the ancient world, see Clinton E. Arnold, *Power and Magic: The Concept of Power in Ephesians* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 1989), 5–40.

- ³³ Lenning, 70.
- ³⁴ Ibid.
- ³⁵ Ibid., 134.
- ³⁶ Ibid.
- ³⁷ Ibid.
- ³⁸ Love, 24.
- ³⁹ Lenning, 70.
- ⁴⁰ Ibid., 121.
- ⁴¹ See 1 Peter 2:9.
- ⁴² Van Rheenen, 229–230.
- ⁴³ Ibid.
- ⁴⁴ Ibid., 130.
- ⁴⁵ Ibid., 131.
- ⁴⁶ See James 1:27.
- ⁴⁷ Love, 160.
- ⁴⁸ Ibid.
- ⁴⁹ Lenning, 133–134.
- ⁵⁰ Ibid., 117.
- ⁵¹ Ibid.
- ⁵² Ibid., 68.

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