

Of Patrons, Clients, and Piety

By Biep and Evelin Durieux (Mali)

As regular customers at this market stand, why have we sometimes paid a higher price than one-time customers?⁴ And why does that woman address her husband as “big brother”? These, and many other issues from daily life in Africa cannot be understood without insight into a type of relationship that has largely disappeared from the Western world, but that is still quite alive in Africa: the relationship between a working client and a care-giving patron. This relationship is created naturally in the family: a young child depends for all its needs upon the parents as patrons; they have the duty to take care of him or

⁴This happened to us twice in Cameroon. Marion Hungerford explained the system to us. The vegetable seller asked more, and later gave a big gift that more than offset the extra money we had paid.

her. The child, as client, has the duty to do whatever his parents ask without grumbling.

The terms *patron* and *client* come from Latin. The correct behavior within such a relationship was called *pietas* in Latin. *Pietas* has come into modern English in two forms: piety (from client to patron) and pity (from patron to client).

Patron-client relationships color all aspects of African life. If one hires a housekeeper in Africa, one shouldn't be amazed if she comes regularly to complain about financial problems, or if she asks for all kinds of goods she needs. Doesn't she work (as a client) for her boss? Therefore, the boss is her patron and has the duty to take care of her like a father. If she doesn't have any problems, she probably will make one up, to honor her patron. She also will easily address her boss as “patron”, “daddy”, or “big brother”, to clarify that bond. A patron-client relationship here is usually expressed in family terms. One of the first things that we had to learn as Westerners is that relationships are hardly ever formed simply on business terms. You cannot make a deal such as: “You do this for me, I pay you, and that is all.” Such a relationship undeniably makes one a patron and the other a client, with resulting expectations and duties.

But what about that price at the market? Well, if in the market one patronizes a seller, it is logical that the seller, if he has a financial problem, tries to solve it through this patron. On a subsequent occasion it is returned with a reduction, or even better, in kind.

Sometimes people try to maneuver you into an instant-patron position. Handicapped people would easily address us as “patron”, or “big brother”, to give us the feeling that it is our duty to care for them. To play their game, we can give them various assignments: “Watch our car until we return”, “Show us the way to the fish market”, or “Buy some bread for us somewhere”. When they return with the bread, we give them a bit more money than the bread costs, so that they have worked for us and we took care of them.

Of Gardener and Mason

In a village close to Dogonland in Mali, we rented a house from a missionary-on-leave. A handyman and gardener were included in the rent. When the first missionary had settled in the village she was greatly helped by the Christian headmaster of the local agricultural school. This man had found a mason to build her house, and when we came he still

worked there regularly. Later, when she sought someone to keep the yard, the headmaster had found her a boy from his own family ready to take this job. So, immediately we had two clients.

We got along with the mason right away. Whatever we asked him to do he did with care, and in return we could help him with an advance on his salary or transportation to town. We felt like accomplished patrons. However, our relationship with the gardener didn't run smoothly. He didn't do what we assigned him to do, made problems about everything we asked him to do, and often interfered with the mason's work. We just let it take its course, because we didn't want to ruin the situation for the missionary when she returned. Nevertheless, the difficult relationship bothered us.

This lasted more than five months, until the boy, during a small conflict with us, suddenly flared up and formally ordered us out of the garden. This was improper behavior for a client, so according to the rules we called on the "big brother", the head of the school and the family. Big brother arrived and accepted his role as judge. A judge here is something quite different than a judge in the Western world. In our society the role of the judge is to determine who is guilty and award the appropriate punishment. The task of a judge in West Africa, however, is to reconcile the two parties, so that they will go their way in peace, without resentment.

After hearing both our versions, he gave a speech. To us, he made clear that his "small brother" didn't work here because of the money, but because of the relation that he, the school principal, had with the missionary. He had solved the missionary's problem by sending a family member to work here. Even without an income, the boy would have worked here. To the gardener, he also spoke for some time about good relationships. After that he spoke to the three of us as if to small children: "Let me hear no more bickering. Apologize and let that be the end." With that the argument was solved.

It was only later that evening that we started to realize what he had really said. He was the patron of the missionary, and therefore also of us, which is why he could address us as little children. The missionary had a problem, and he, as patron, had solved that problem by sending one of his family members to work for her. That family member represented big brother, and so in that function was the patron of the missionary, and thus also of us.

No wonder the gardener interfered with the work of the mason, for wasn't he, as patron, responsible for what the man did for us? No wonder he didn't accept any assignments from us. A client can't possibly tell his boss what to do. No wonder also that he made a problem of everything: a client goes to his patron when he has a problem. The gardener was trying to show us that he took our problems seriously as problems, no matter how small they seemed to be.

This experience showed us yet again how being raised in the Western world can make us blind to the reality: who would expect that the boy who takes care of the yard is your boss?

Of Big and Little Brothers

In many African languages no single word exists for "brother": there are only separate words for "big brother" and "little brother"—that is how different those roles are. This has consequences for Bible translators. For example, which word should be used in John 1:40–41? In Acts 1:16? This again clearly shows how every adds or deletes things translation out of necessity.

It can be even more difficult. Try translating the story of Jacob and Esau and the birthright, in a culture that names the last-born twin automatically the elder! On a dangerous journey a big brother will, as a patron, always follow the little brother, so that he can keep an eye on him. This is so common in West Africa, that with the birth of a twin the second born can only be the eldest, who allowed the younger to go first. Who's oldest: Jacob or Esau?

Of Wordlists and Village Elders

Another aspect of the patron-client relationship is respect. A patron derives respect from his clients, and a client may never harm the respect of his patron. This can lead to unusual situations. As language surveyors, we take word lists to different villages and compare them to discover the relationships between the languages. Once we were in a village under the meeting roof with the village chief and the village elders, while a group of young people surrounded us. Some of these young people had gone to school and knew French. One of them was named to be the translator.

We asked our first word: "eye". The translator neatly gave us the local word in return, but then the village chief suddenly spoke, and said something completely different. He didn't know French, but felt that he

understood what we meant. The reaction of the translator and the bystanders was such that we immediately understood that the village chief was wrong, but nobody wanted to give us the correct translation; that would be disrespectful towards the chief. The same happened with the next word and after that again. In the meantime the translator waited politely until the village chief had spoken. It was clear that we'd have to repeat this word list in a neighboring village.

Now we do it differently: we present the translation of the word list as a dull chore, for which we ask a "kid" who knows French. In this way it is work for a client, and the village elders keep themselves far removed from it. The young people can correct each other without showing disrespect, which improves the quality of the list.

Of a Father and a Big Brother

In the biblical culture as well, patron-client was the normal relationship between free people. One of the radical aspects of Jesus' message was that we children might be clients of God—no longer slaves for whom only the livelihood was provided, but clients who may bring all their problems to their patron. We may address God as Father, and Jesus is our Big Brother (Romans 8:29), in other words, a patron who is entitled to our obedience and respect, and who is personally responsible to make sure that our problems are solved.

In the Western world the image of Jesus as brother sometimes clashes with his position as Lord, but those two images go together naturally here in Africa. A big brother is always lord, and in that respect entitled to all honor. We experience it as very refreshing to read the Bible with an eye to patron-client relationships, from Paul's call on the emperor as patron of all the Roman citizens to Jesus' changing relationship towards his mother Mary. First, as a child, he was submissive. During his bar mitzvah, he received a new patron (Luke 2:49, 51). As an adult, he switched from being Mary's client to being her patron. When she wanted him to perform a miracle (John 2:3), he pointed out to her that he would decide himself when he would start his miracles. On the other hand he knew he was responsible for her problem, and solved that as well. When she wanted to call him out of his serving, he refused to obey (Mark 3:21, 31). And finally, on the cross, he turned his patron responsibilities for her over to John (John 19:26–17).

Every Easter we celebrate that our Patron, out of pity, went to the very end; may we learn to live as clients deserving of Him, looking up to him with piety.

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