A socio-cultural and linguistic analysis of postcolonial Christian naming practices in Zimbabwe

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Abstract

The study of African personal names has interested a number of researchers from diverse fields. Focus on Christian beliefs in the postcolonial period and on the linguistic forms and the meanings communicated through these forms provides revealing insights to the relationship between language use and its socio-cultural context, itself the concern of anthroponomastics. Zimbabwe's political independence in 1980 represented a more robust Christian tradition and provided a framework for linguistic freedom that resulted in dynamic and creative ways of expressing Christian faith. Naming assumed exciting dimensions. The present study reveals the revitalisation of the traditional culture where naming is a specific, conscious and deliberate linguistic act intimately linked with values, traditions, hopes, fears and events in people's lives. The data discussed in this article shows how black Zimbabwean parents communicate messages reflecting these dispositions through names that they create for their children in insightful, inventive and systematic ways in the postcolonial period.

Introduction

Naming practices in African societies often reflect socio-cultural and ideological realities of these societies. Writing on naming practices in Malawi, Moyo (2012, p.10) says that these realities are "reflected as a powerful force in naming practices." The Christian religion represents an ideological reality that has had extraordinary implications for onomastic traditions in Africa, Zimbabwe included. In the colonial period western missionaries provided black converts with a ready-made template for naming their children. The template involved English biblical names. Hence, the adoption of these names is generally attributed to the coercive power of Christianity and colonialism (Dube et al., 2007, Neethling, 2003). Neethling (2003, p.47) says of the Xhosa of South Africa, "… English names were bestowed upon Xhosa children by missionaries (at baptism) and by teachers (at

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school). These were often referred to as 'church' and 'school' names." In the case of Zimbabwe, however, the missionaries invariably doubled as teachers, making the church name the same as the school name. To most black parents the generic Christian name, John, Jacob, Mary or Esther, simply carried a symbolic significance as did the cross hung on their necks or the Bible laid on their dinner tables. The missionaries had suppressed their linguistic power and freedom to idiomatically and idiosyncratically celebrate their gift of a child in the traditional way through naming.

The country's attainment of political independence from British colonial rule in 1980, therefore, ushered in prospects of a new identity to the unborn child and provided to the parents power to either reclaim the lost tongue (indigenous idiom) or to create a new tongue (indigenised English). Children born after 1980 in Zimbabwe are commonly referred to as 'born free'. Among the varied semantic references of this term could be reference to the freedom to be called by any other name, thus rendering the old Shakespearean adage "… a rose by any other name could smell as sweet" invalid. This study reveals that freedom to black people also meant regaining the power to use language as a deliberate and conscious act typical in pre-colonial society, where naming reflects the power of the [spoken] word, to identify the person, send a message [to God or the community], express a hope or prayer and to legitimise a certain course of action or decision (See also, Alford, 1987, p.51).
This study seeks to answer the following questions:
(1)   What are the dynamics that occurred in the Christian religious landscape that influenced certain naming patterns?
(2)   What are the lexical and morphological patterns dominant in the postcolonial naming practices? And
(3)   What range of meanings do these names communicate?
This study will demonstrate, among other things, from the repertoire of names discussed here, the idiosyncratic nature and the creativity that the names reflect. In fact, the level of creativity gets more exciting as the naming pattern moves from the use of more complex lexical forms such as *Kuzivakwashe* (God's will), to very truncated forms such as *Anopa* (God's choice) and to indigenised English compounds and adoption of ordinary English words with religious references, such as *Lordwins* and *Fellowship*, respectively. It is clear from the ensuing discussion and data presented that the three decades of political independence in Zimbabwe have stimulated enough religious robustness and onomastic ingenuity to wet academic appetite.

Zimbabwe's postcolonial religious landscape and its implications on naming practices
In order to appreciate the creativity demonstrated by young black Zimbabwean Christian families in naming their children, there is need to understand that the whole area of naming has been a "site of struggle." Across different cultures, the naming of children and places has been the result of religious, political, ideological and other concerns. In the specific case of Zimbabwe, names have been highly contested and they reflect the country's political and religious history (Mashiri and Chabata, 2010). Whereas many missionaries and colonialists tended to destabilise local cultures by encouraging foreign names, many indigenous people employed various strategies of resistance and promoted indigenous names. According to Magudu, Muguti and Mutami (2010, p.29):

The settlers used names for subordinating and assimilating the indigenous people, by undermining the use of their culture bound African names and thereby eroding the African value system, identity and self esteem. In turn, the indigenous people used names and nicknames to express their resentment to settler brutality, oppression, repression and exploitation, as well as to express that they were a distinct people with a heritage they took pride in.

Against such a background, Christianity has struggled to gain acceptance as "an African religion," especially in the face of trenchant critiques by African cultural nationalists. It has been accused of sponsoring "cultural genocide" by alienating Africans from their indigenous beliefs and practices. Christianity has been associated with arrogance and off-hand dismissal of African spirituality. For example, many African creative writers are highly critical of Christianity (Mugambi, 1992). They charge that Christianity collaborated with the colonialists in the assault on African identity. The contention that African culture represented a dark phase that had to be overcome by the light of Christianity had seen many missionaries placing emphasis on English names. In such a scheme, Shona and Ndebele, for example, names were associated with the "past" that had to be overcome by the "present" Christian era. Conversion to Christianity essentially entailed making "a complete break with the past" (Meyer, 1998). The following observation, made in the context of Batswana, is equally applicable to Zimbabwe and we cite it at considerable length as it communicates our central concern:

> When Batswana converted to Christianity they could not be baptized in their African names even when their names were religious. The church, especially the Roman Catholic Church, required all converts to choose a name of a patron saint. In this manner Batswana got a set of foreign names from the Bible to serve as Christian names. The Christian name had a purpose, to brand the converted and to show that they ha[d] been spiritually transformed...In the same way that an individual can acquire a new name to mark a new status such as marriage or parenthood, the church or baptism assigned a new name to mark a spiritual transformation in an individual's life. The name that one got at birth that reflected the socio-cultural circumstances in which one was born was not applicable in church (Bakwasi, 2012, p.125).

However, the attainment of political independence had a radical effect on naming trends. As was the case with other African states, independence brought up renewed confidence in indigenous Zimbabwean culture and this had a direct effect on naming trends. Whereas Christianity had been dismissed as "a foreign religion," that promoted alienation through a skewed naming system (Maenzanise, 2008), the attainment of independence in 1980 led many to embrace Christianity as "an African religion." In response to the question, "whose religion is Christianity? (Sanneh, 2003), many black Zimbabweans could confidently respond, "ours!" As they had worked on Christianity, converting it to the African worldview, Zimbabwean Christians could, like the Samaritan woman, declare: "We no longer believe because just because of what you said; now we have heard for ourselves, and we know that this man is really the Saviour of the world" (John 4: 42).

While efforts at indigenising Christianity had started prior to the attainment of independence (Chitando, 2002), this independence gave Christianity an African

face, a new impetus. The confidence that surged from becoming masters of their destiny catalysed black Zimbabwean Christians' creativity to establish new naming trends. Furthermore, the liberalisation of the spiritual market brought about by independence facilitated the expansion of the Pentecostal movement. Whereas older Pentecostal churches such as the Apostolic Faith Mission (AFM) and the Zimbabwe Assemblies of God Africa (ZAOGA) had been in existence prior to the attainment of independence, political freedom saw the rapid expansion of Pentecostalism.

Although theoretically, Pentecostalism preached a gospel of radical confrontation against indigenous beliefs and practices, in practice it was quite tolerant towards some aspects. In particular, Pentecostalism brought a notable shift in naming trends in Zimbabwe. To begin with, Pentecostals have a penchant for Hebrew names and concepts. Specifically, Pentecostals have been keen to use the Hebrew names and titles for God. Through songs, prayers and declarations, these names have become an integral part of Pentecostal vocabulary. Thus, *El Shaddai* "God Almighty" (Genesis 17: 2-3), *Jehovah-jireh* "Jehovah will provide" (Genesis 22: 11-14), *Jehovah-rapha* "Jehovah who heals" (Exodus 15: 26), *Jehovah-nissi* "Jehovah my Banner" (Exodus 17: 16), *Jehovah-shalom* "Jehovah is Peace" (Judges 6: 22-24), *Jehovah-tsidkenu* "Jehovah is our Saving Justice" (Jeremiah 23: 5-6) and *Jehovah-Shammah* "God/He is there" (Ezekiel 48: 35) have been used widely in sermons by Pentecostal preachers. Gospel musicians from the Pentecostal stable have popularised these names in their songs and some non-Pentecostal Christians have since become more familiar with these Hebrew names.

In turn, these Hebrew names and titles for God have bequeathed a legacy of distinctive personal names in Zimbabwe: Shalom, Shaddai, Shammah, Jire and others. In most instances, these names are used without the definite article, "El." These are complemented by other names derived from the Hebrew Bible (Old Testament) such as Ebenezar, Ethan, Shekinah and others. This popularity of Hebrew names among Pentecostal Zimbabwean Christians raises a number of interesting perspectives. First, it carries forward the African cultural conviction that names are not just empty labels to differentiate one individual from the other. The shift that occurs is that the meaningfulness of the names is now deriving from the Hebrew Bible. Here, parents seek to demonstrate their Christian commitment by giving their children biblical names. What is striking is that the names are not from the New Testament, but from the Old Testament. These names speak of the abundance and faithfulness of God, God's security and presence. They are in keeping with the Pentecostal gospel of prosperity widely preached in most Zimbabwe Pentecostal denominations. This is the message that God wishes to ensure that all converts should succeed in their earthly pursuits, enjoy good physical health and financial prosperity (Togarasei, 2011). Pentecostals "look for correspondences between their own life situations and the Bible, and expect Biblical texts to have practical relevance and problem-solving potential (Burgess, 2008, p.32).

Secondly, there is need to acknowledge the significance of generational differences ushered in by Pentecostalism in Zimbabwe. The sheer creativity, confidence and willingness to stretch the limits in naming patterns brought by Pentecostals calls for attention. As we shall highlight below in our discussion of

Shona Christian names, it is young couples who have been keen to outdo each other in selecting new and impressive names for their children. By selecting Hebrew names, young couples are declaring themselves to be direct inheritors of the promises of God to the ancient Israelites. If previously Africans were outside the commonwealth of Israel, they have forced their way in and demonstrate this by embracing and deploying Hebrew names. Christianity no longer becomes "their religion" over there, but, "our religion" right here!

Third, while the use of Hebrew names suggests a certain level of being comfortable with Christianity, it still smacks of an inferiority complex. It disregards the translatability of the Christian faith (Sanneh, 1989) and communicates the idea that God looks down upon African languages. By insisting on Hebrew names, Pentecostals create the impression that indigenous African Christian names are unable to fully express the depth of their faith. In such a scheme, Christianity would be operating like Islam which is uncompromising in upholding Arabic as the "language of faith." Hebrew would become the most appropriate language for expressing one's faith and African languages would only be utilised as an inferior and last resort. Fourth, it is critical to acknowledge the popularity of "English Christian" names among young Pentecostals in Zimbabwe. Alongside the use of Shona (and Ndebele) Christian names, they have also adopted English Christian names. This is due to the high rating of the English language in African Pentecostalism in general and Zimbabwean Pentecostalism in particular. English is associated with upward social mobility and participation in global Pentecostal discourses of salvation and prosperity. Some young Pentecostal couples have named their children, "Believe," "Divine", "Prayer", "Miracle", "Given", "Redeemed" and so on. These names reflect Pentecostal theology and place emphasis on progress and modernity. Ojo (2012, p.301) captures this well when writing as follows:

> Uniquely modern, shrewd, imbued with a can-do mentality, market-oriented, success-directed, and charismatic in style, with ever-growing multi-ethnic congregations principally using English as a medium of communication, Pentecostal and Charismatic movements propagate their doctrines to millions who live in urban areas.

Theoretical Framework
The study of personal names "anthroponomastics" is an interesting area of research that comes under onomastics or linguistic anthropology. "Lexemes found in anthroponomastics bear witness to the values and ideas of the society concerned..." (Abdul, 2009, p.16). Anthroponomastic studies "are informed by the theory that identifies an interface between a people's language use and their cultural practices. It reflects how people use language to act their culture and how they use their language as a powerful tool to view and understand their world view. Language can therefore be used as a lens to view and understand the social practices and daily activities of a society. Naming is a universal cultural practice but the social context from which the names are derived and the interpretations attached to the names vary from one society to another. The present study deals with the sociolinguistics of personal Christian names black Zimbabweans have given to their children since independence, the creative nature of the naming patterns, the morphological variations evident and the range of meanings communicated by the names.

Semantics of postcolonial names

The question of meaning is an important one when considering African names of any kind. Its importance derives from the fact that "Names are products and reflections of the intimate links between language and sociocultural organisation" (Herbert, 1996, p.187). For that reason, the assertion that most, if not all African names have meaning may not be far from the truth. The corpus of names studied for this article has shown that semantically Christian names have become like traditional African names in their richness in content; they are highly communicative in that they refer or are highly linked to the namer's beliefs, personal experiences and circumstances surrounding child birth. Besides serving as identity labels for their bearers, the names are loaded with meaning and are socio-historical and philosophical statements that are reflective of the name giver's socio-cultural, religious, political, etc values. Whilst the focus in this article is on Christian names, it is important to note that the Christian parents responsible for bestowing first names on their children are active participants both in their social, non-Christian lives as well as in their Christian environment. Thus in terms of meaningfulness the Christian names collected and analysed showed that they are not divorced from people's daily lives in the context of families and bigger communities. The names, Christian or non-Christian, are not haphazardly bestowed; they are given for specific reasons, to express specific meanings in relation to specific events and/or circumstances. Thus, like traditional African names, Christian names sometimes also serve the record or history-keeping function. The difference could be witnessed in the dominance of the positive nature of meaning visibly expressed in the messages contained in the names.

For a better understanding of the full meanings of African names, postcolonial Christian names included, a distinction should be made between the 'meaning' of the name and its significance. Meaning is taken here to refer to the sense of the word called a 'name' that is recoverable from simple rules of lexical and syntactic analysis. This kind of meaning is often referred to as surface meaning and can easily be deciphered from the word elements that constitute the name. At the surface level therefore, the general and obvious/transparent meanings of most names can be adequately decoded by those familiar with the language in which the name is expressed. The surface literal meanings of the following names can easily be understood from a linguistic analysis of the parts that make them up: *Zvaitwanashe*'it has been done by the Lord'*Mandipa*'you have given it to me', *Ndomuda* 'I love him'. However, an analysis of the names that constituted the corpus for this study showed that names are conceived in particular socio-cultural contexts to reflect their bestowers' perception of life in general or their specific life experiences.

The analysis showed that some names have the deeper meanings, which we refer to here as their significance that cannot easily be decoded from their linguistic composition. Such meanings are concealed in the name giver's personal experiences and to understand them one has to revisit the social circumstances in which the name was conceived and bestowed. In this case, the actual meaning of a name needs to be confirmed from the name giver. For example, whilst a simple linguistic analysis of the name Mandifadza yielded the literal meaning 'you made me happy', it could not capture the background that led to the father giving such a name to his daughter. It was upon asking

him that the researchers got to know that the couple had been blessed with baby boys only, and had been praying for a daughter in the family. The happiness that befell the family was expressed and concretized in the name … communicating their feeling to God. Conceived this way, African names are therefore not "… haphazardly chosen, the names are carefully crafted, essentially artistically well-finished products, designed to convey particular realities" (Okoh, 2009, p.129).

From the foregoing, the fact that Christian names often reflect the name giver's personal and/or religious experiences needs not be over-emphasised. With the meaning of names deriving from specific personal, family or community experiences comes what Okoh (2009, p.130) refers to as occasionality of names, that is, that names are often linked to life occurrences – hence they incorporate specific history or comment on particular events in a person or people's lives. This makes names historical-cum-narrative … for one to understand them, s/he should be acquainted with the historical event that preceded or precipitated name bestowal. As will be shown later in this section, whilst some names are meant to celebrate God in general, some express the name-giver's personal experience with God. The philosophy revolves around what the Christian parents think about themselves and others, how they live and how God influences their lives. Whilst some names express philosophical truths regarding God's position in our lives, some are short stories surrounding child birth or other specific family experiences. For the sake of understanding the meanings of post-independence Christian names in Zimbabwe, the names are put in the following categories:

1. Names celebrating Christian values
The names analysed showed that there are quite a few that show God's centrality in people's lives; those that are a form of worship, a reminder of what God represents in the Christian person/ the name giver's life. Such names are often bestowed to show that God is the Almighty and that we should rely on Him for support, that we owe our existence to Him. They are meant to draw strength from the fact that God is with us every time, even when times are hard, hence the name Sheunoziva 'God knows'; that we are always under His cover even when things get difficult as articulated in the name Sheunesu 'God is with us'.

2. Names expressing thankfulness to God
Child birth is an important but difficult step in people's lives. Its importance lies in the fact that for new parents, it is a process of transformation from childhood into fatherhood and motherhood, a status cherished by many in the Zimbabwean society. For those already blessed with children, it is a process of further extending oneself into posterity. However, the process is often characterised by many challenges, especially involving the would-be mothers. Whilst some mothers struggle to conceive, others meet all kinds of problems and complications during the pregnancy period and at child birth. When faced with such problems traditionally, people used to rely on traditional healers in trying to solve problems relating to child bearing. However, because more people have become Christians in post-independence Zimbabwe there seems to be a visible shift in trend from relying on traditional healers to greater dependence on God. For example, there seems to be an increase in the number of people who consult prophets compared to those that consult traditional healers. It is often the case that even those that visit clinics and hospitals also

take time to commit both the unborn child and the mother to God. The success that is witnessed through the successful delivery of the child calls for parents and relatives to communicate their happiness to the Lord. Whilst gratitude to God can be expressed in different ways, including having Christian baby welcome parties, prayers, etc, it is also shown through the names bestowed on children. Some such names given to children include Tinotenda 'we thank you', Tavonga 'we thank you', Tafara 'we are happy', Mandifadza 'you made me happy', Mazvitashe 'thank you Lord', Sibongile 'we thank you' and Siyabonga 'thank you'. Despite the obvious differences in the way the names are built morphologically in Shona and Ndebele, they all mean the same; they are an expression of gratitude.

3. Names expressing religious conviction

Unlike the names that have been given as examples in the previous section that are intended to capture some historically significant experiences of the name-giver, some Christian names are not meant to do that. Instead, they are solely meant to communicate important religious messages, values and teachings. The names are a form of teaching or expression of Christian beliefs and values. The following are some examples: Rutendo 'faith', Ruvimbo 'trust', Rukudzo 'reverence', Tendaishe 'be grateful to the Lord', Kudzaishe 'praise the Lord', Nyengeterai 'worship', Vongai 'be thankful', Holiness, Emmanuel 'God is with us', Wadzanai 'live in harmony', Tinashe 'God is with us', Bimbanashe 'trust in the Lord', Bongani 'be grateful', Bhekinkosi 'look forward to the Lord', Sibusiso 'blessing', Bonginkosi 'be grateful to the Lord', Nyasha 'grace', Panashe 'abide in God', Tinovimba 'We trust in God', Anotida 'He loves us', Ariko 'He lives', Munesushe 'Lord, you are with us', Anesu 'He (Lord) is with us', etc.

A semantic analysis of these names shows that whilst some of them teach the kinds of qualities that Christians should possess or strive for, some instruct Christians to praise and worship the Lord. Yet others are also a form of teaching on the critical presence of God in our lives.

The morpho-syntactic structure of names

A detailed account of the morphology of Christian personal names has been given in Mashiri (2003). The most important thing to note is that morphologically Christian names in the Zimbabwean languages investigated take the form of all the other kinds of names. They can be simple verbs, nouns and adjectives or complex constructions derived from some simple primary source. They can be derived verbs, verb phrases or compound nouns. A brief analysis is provided below.

1. Simple structures

From the names analysed, it was concluded that the names in this category are verbs. The names appear in imperative mood, either in singular or plural form. In singular form, the names end with the final vowel -a. In plural form, they are expressed with the finite -i vowel. Examples of such names include Bvuma 'agree/admit', Farai 'be happy', Kumbirai 'ask', Kudzai 'praise', Gamuchirai 'receive' and Vongai 'be thankful'.

2. Derived names

Generally speaking, names in African languages are created derivationally (Koopman, 1979, p.153). As already insinuated above, they are derived from

nouns, verbs, adjectives, etc. The majority of names in the corpus that was analysed for this article are those that are derived from verbs. Some of them appear as verbal phrases, for example, Atisvitsa 'The Lord sustained us', Taremekedzwa 'We have been blessed', Kudiwanashe 'The Lord loves us', Tadanwanashe 'The Lord has called us', Zvaitashe 'God's gift', Zvaitwanashe 'Child given by God', etc.

However, some of the names are derived from nouns and are realised as compound nouns with the constructional pattern: Noun + Possessive. Examples include names such as Inzwirashe 'God's voice', Simbarashe 'God's power', Chipochedenga 'Gift of heaven', and Ruvarashe 'God's flower'.

3. Truncated names
Formally, African names are long sentences that are shortened into single words. One interesting thing regarding African names in general and postcolonial Christian names in particular is the fact that most of the derived and compound names are expressed in their truncated forms. It is the first part of the full form that is often expressed with the second part implied. Examples of such names include Tadiwa(nashe), Tawana(nyasha), Simba(rashe), Chipo(chedenga), Kumbirai(munopiwa), Taremeredzwa(nashe), Akudziwe(ishe), Tatenda(nyasha), Mazvita(ishe), Munesu(ishe), Ndomuda (ishe), etc. In their truncated form, the names become compact to represent their philosophical nature. The compression reinforces the pithy character of names.

4. Plural form
Whilst there are quite a few names that are expressed in the singular form (for example, Wandifadza, Ndomuda, etc), the majority are expressed in the plural form. The plural form expresses the communal spirit abundant both amongst the Christians and in Zimbabwean African families. Generally speaking, Africans do not live and act individually but collectively as families or communities. They believe in the strength of numbers both in the physical and spiritual worlds. This attribute of communality is also exhibited in names such as the following; Tinomuda, Tatenda, Tadanwanashe, Taremeredzwa, etc. The subject prefix /ti-, ta-/ in the names cited above refer to the child's parents of (extended) family. Some of the names discussed above such as Mazvita and Munesu use the second person plural subject prefix /ma- or mu-/ that refer to God. These pronouns index respect and reverence extended to God as the almighty father. The same honorific form is used for addressing or referring to one's parent or any adult of the same age. The use of such grammatical particles is also reflected in Zimbabwean sermonic discourse where the Shona generally refer to God as "baba vedu" in prayers.

Conclusion
The analysis of postcolonial Christian names done in this article has shown that Christianity, as a popular religious movement in postcolonial Zimbabwe, provides another exciting social context within which personal names are created. The article has shown that the change from the way Zimbabwean citizens perceived Christianity in the pre-independence era to the way they view it now has also changed the nature of names bestowed on children born to Christian parents. The corpus of names analysed provide evidence for the fact that unlike in pre-independence Zimbabwe where African names were discouraged as baptismal forms of identity, they have become a significant

part of Christian nomenclature in post-independence Zimbabwe.

In terms of semantics and significance, the names bear resemblance to traditional African names in that a lot of them are meaningful. In addition to being forms of identity, they are a reflection of the name-giver's Christian beliefs. They are also forms of expression of the joy and happiness that usually greet newly born babies. The names carry socio-Christian messages from name-givers to other members of the family as well as to the greater society. In terms of form or structure, the names are also comparable to all other kinds of Zimbabwean African names.

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