

Surname Change Among Some Yorùbá Christians

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Abstract

In this paper, we examine the argument advanced against the claim that some Yorùbá Christians deride reject and change the cultural events, values and beliefs present in their tradition-based surnames and the reasons advanced include a violation of God's law, a recent development among the Yorùbá people and encouragement of semantic ambiguity in language use or word formation. The data collected include data drawn from previous studies on Yorùbá personal names, The Holy Bible, the lists of staff of three Nigerian universities, copies of sworn affidavits from some Courts and change of name columns in some Nigerian National News Papers or Dailies. We argue that surname modification or change is not a violation of God's law because several examples of name change abound in the Bible and that for some social reasons name change has been a common practice among the Yorùbá people from time immemorial. We also argue that, in some cases, name modification or name change does not promote or lead to semantic ambiguity and that some Yorùbá Christians delete the NPs of their surnames which show reference to Yorùbá deities and retain the VPs. Therefore, we are of the opinion that surname change or surname modification should be a personal opinion which can be or not be especially when some of such names were mere appellations or alliances before the introduction of formal education in the Yorùbá-speaking areas of Nigeria.

Keywords: surnames, christianity, deities, language use, change.

INTRODUCTION

Yorùbá personal names, before the advent of Christianity, were drawn or formed from Yorùbá beliefs that had to do with the way they saw the world around them, their family professions and their forms of religion (See Sówándé and Àjànàkú 1969, Òkédìjì and Òkédìjì 1971, Adéoyè 1972, 1979, Odúyoyè 1972, Èkúndayò 1977, Akínnásò 1980, Àlàbá 2003, Babalòlò and Àlàbá 2003). While the family professions were 'isè ọdẹ'(hunting), 'àgbè ẹ' (goldsmith), 'ilù-lílù' (drumming) and 'gbìgbè nà' (designing), the family forms of religion included 'Ifá' (God of divination), 'Sàngó' (God of thunder), 'Òrìṣà oko' (The god of land), 'Egúngún' (Masquerade), 'Ògún' (God of iron), 'Ọṣun' (Goddess of ọ ṣun river), 'Ọya' (Goddess of the river Niger), and 'Orò' (Custom or Habit).

The researchers also claim that some examples of Yorùbá personal names that were formed or generated from the family professions or religion are 'Ọdẹtúndé' (A hunter came again), 'Mosádògún' (I ran to the god of iron for salvation), 'Áyàndélé' (A drummer reached home), 'Ọnàniyí' (Design has honour), 'Fáwólé' (The god of divination entered the house), 'Sàngódiran' (The god of thunder is now an issue of generation), 'Sóyínká' (The Seer surrounds me), 'Ọjé wùmí' (I cherish masquerading), 'Ọṣunyeṣí' (The god of ọ ṣun river fits me) and 'Qyarínú' (The god of river Niger sees my heart) among others.

It has also been argued that the use of alliances or nicknames, war names and chieftaincy titles as names is common among the Yorùbá people (see Adeoye 1972, Ikòtún (forthcoming)). Some examples of such names that are now used as real names include the following:

Òkùnrinmẹta (literarily, three men but culturally a strong man)
Ọlómọlà (Whoever that has children is rich)
Dágundúró (A war stopper)
Atoyè (A person who arranges chieftaincy titles)
Erinlẹ (The god of land)
Kúkúrí (A short person)
Eyínafé (The teeth we want)

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Before the advent of Christianity, Yorùbá personal names were only used as first names. A first name is defined as a name that is given to a newly born child (see Turnbull, 2010:560). But, when Europeans brought Christianity with formal education in schools the use of first names and the parent's or father's name was introduced (see Ikòtún (forthcoming)). The father's name is called a surname because the use of the name is also shared by other children of the same father (see Turnbull, 2010: 1503). According to Ikòtún (forthcoming), names that were drawn from Yorùbá beliefs, family professions, religion, titles and alliances became surnames when children of the

users of such names registered in schools established by the Missionaries. In this paper, we are interested in the use of surnames among Yorùbá Christians. The question that is of interest in the present study is: do some Yorùbá Christians modify or change their tradition- based surnames in view of the Christian teachings or doctrine? In response to this question, Ajíbóyè (2009) observes that some Yorùbá surnames are now being modified or restructured as a result of some Christians’ belief in God through Jesus Christ and that the practice of name modifications is a recent development. Some of the examples he gives include the following:

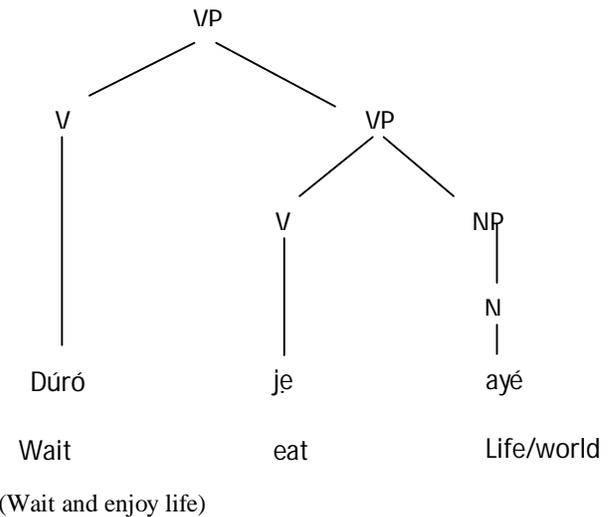
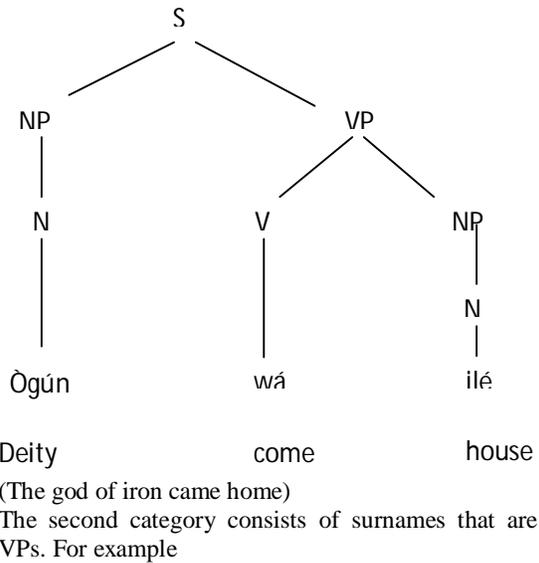
- | | | |
|---|---|------------------------------------|
| Ọláèéǵún | → | Ọláólúwa |
| (The reflected glory of our ancestors) | | (The reflected glory of our Lord) |
| Ọǵúndáre | → | Olúwadáre |
| (The god of iron adjudged me to be right) | | (The Lord adjudged me to be right) |
| Ọǵúnrìn | → | Olúrìn |
| (The god of iron walked) | | (The Lord walked) |

Ajíbóyè (ibid) also observes that the restructuring of Yorùbá surnames leads to semantic ambiguity and that the restructuring or changing is a violation of God’s fifth commandment that is recorded in the book of Exodus 20:12. The verse reads and he quotes “Honour your father and your mother in order that your days may prove long upon the earth that your God is giving you”. In this paper, we want to continue the discussion on surname change and we will show that:

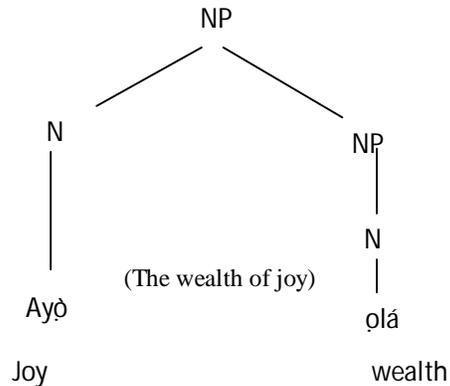
1. it is not true that Yorùbá Christians who engage in surname change violate the law of God
2. it is also not true that the practice of name change is a recent development.
3. some Yorùbá Christians delete the noun phrases (NPs) of their tradition-based surnames and retain the verb phrases (VPs) as surnames because the NPs show reference to Yorùbá deities.
4. some Yorùbá Christians replace the tradition-based surnames with new derivations that have Christian connotations.
5. some surnames that are restructured do not have semantic ambiguity.

The Structures of Yorùbá Surnames

There are three categories of Yorùbá surnames. The first category comprises surnames that are sentences and the sentences are combinations of noun phrases (NPs henceforth) and verb phrases (VPs henceforth). An example of a Yorùbá sentential surname is shown in the diagram below.



The third category includes the use of NPs only. For example



As we continue with this discussion, we will show that the NPs of some Yorùbá sentential names that are surnames are either changed or the names reduced to VPs. We will also show that because some surnames show reference to Yorùbá deities, such names are completely replaced by some Yorùbá Christians with new names that have Christian connotations

Data Collection

This research is descriptive. The data that will be considered in this study were drawn from a study carried out by Ajíbóyè (2009), the lists of staff of three Nigerian Universities that show names of Academic and Non-academic staff members and the names were compared with the names that are written on the doors of the offices of the staff members. We also interviewed some Yorùbá Christians who modified or changed their surnames. Similarly, we interviewed some Court Registrars in two Yorùbá major cities. In the Courts, copies of sworn affidavits were presented in support of change of surnames. The ages of the people who changed or modified their surnames ranged between thirty and fifty years (30-50 years). Some of them also paid for the advertisement of the former and the new names in some Nigerian National News Papers or Dailies like The Tribune and The Guardian under the change of name columns. The essence of the affidavits and the paid advertisements is to allow the applicants to continue to use their certificates where their former surnames appeared.

FINDINGS

We discovered that surname change is very common among the literate Yorùbá Christians. The data collected are in three groups. The NP of each of the surnames in the first group was any of the Yorùbá deities before the advent of Christianity and the NP is now changed to the Biblical 'Olúwa' (Lord). Some examples are shown below:

- Olúdíímú (The Lord or a special child holds me)
- Olúwádíímú (The Lord holds me)
- Olúrántí (The Lord or a special child remembers)
- Olúwọ́lẹ̀ (The Lord or a special child entered the house)
- Olúbodún (The Lord or a special child met the festive period)
- Olúlẹ̀yẹ̀ (The Lord or a special child has honour)
- Olúwálẹ̀yẹ̀ (The Lord has honour)
- Olúgbẹ̀san (The Lord or a special child revenged)
- Olúwámọ̀dẹ̀de (The Lord brought the/a hunter)
- Olúyẹ̀mí (The Lord or a special child fits me)
- Olúwáyẹ̀mí (The Lord fits me)
- Olúmúyíwá (The Lord brought this one)
- Olúwáṣọ́lá (The Lord performed exceedingly well)
- Olúwádáre (The Lord adjudged me right)
- Olúdáre (The Lord or a special child adjudged me right)
- Olúwábíyí (The Lord gave birth to this one)

- Olúgbénró (The Lord or a special child upholds me)
- Olúrín (The Lord or a special child walked)
- Olúwátúsín (The Lord is enough to be worshiped)

The NPs of the surnames in the second group were deleted completely because they showed reference to Yoruba deities. The VPs are therefore retained. Some examples are as follows:

- Jẹ́ 'mílóhù (Let me have a voice)
- Báyò dẹ̀ (Came with joy)
- Díran (Become a generational issue)
- Bíyí (Gave birth to this one)
- Gbénró (Uphold me)

There are instances where the tradition-based Yoruba surnames are replaced with new derivations that show Christian connotations. Such names belong to the third group and some examples are indicated below:

- Ooreolúwa (The Lord's gift)
- Aríjésùdádé (A person who wears a crown because he/she sees Jesus)
- Tolúwani (It is the Lord's own)
- Olúbùnmi (The Lord/ a special child gave me)
- Olúwáfẹ̀ mí (The Lord loves/likes me)
- Olúwọ́lẹ̀ (The Lord/ a special child entered the house)
- Olúwágbéngá (The Lord uplifted me)
- Oore-ò fẹ̀ (Grace)

DISCUSSION

It has been shown in the introductory section of this paper that Ajíbóyè (2009) claims that some Yorùbá Christians modify or change their surnames because the names show reference to Yorùbá deities. Ajiboye (ibid) also argues that the practice of name change or modification is a violation of God's Fifth Comandment that is recorded in the book of Exodus 20:12. He further claims that name change is a recent development and that it leads to semantic ambiguity. However, Ajíbóyè's (ibid) claim that the Yorùbá people who engage in surname change violate the law of God as recorded in the books of Exodus 20:12 and Matthew 15:4 cannot be accurate. Parents that are supposed to be honoured, as far as religious issues are concerned, are parents who are in the Lord and the Lord in this case may either be God or Jesus Christ as shown in Micah 4:5, and Ephesians 6:1-3. The two references read:

For all people will walk everyone in the name of his god, and we will walk in the name of the LORD our God forever and ever.

Micah 4:5

CHILDREN, obey your parents in the Lord for this is right. Honour thy father and mother; (which is the first commandment with promise:). That it may be well with thee and thou mayest live long on the earth

Ephesians 6:1-3.

In fact, in the Bible, there were several examples of name modifications or name change. For example, in Genesis 17:5, God changed Abraham's name from Abram to Abraham. In Genesis 17:15 also, God changed Sarah's name from Sarai to Sarah. Similarly, God changed Jacob's name from Jacob to Israel in Genesis 35:10. The four Hebrews that were taken captive to Babylon in 617 B.C.E also serve as evidence of name change in the past (see Daniel 1:6-7). Their Hebrew names were 'Daniel' (My Judge is God), 'Hananiah' (Jehovah has shown favour), 'Mishael' (Who is like God?) and 'Azariah' (Jehovah has helped). But, the Babylonians renamed them according to Babylonian gods and the names became: Daniel → Belteshazzar (Protect the life of the King)
Hananiah → Shadrach (Command of Aku)
Mishael → Meshach (Who is what Aku is)
Azariah → Abednego (Servant of Nego)

In fact, anywhere in the world today where biblical discussions are held, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah are known by their Babylonian names. In John 1:42 also, Jesus changed the name 'Simon' to 'Peter'. Apostle Paul too was formerly known as Saul before he became Paul (see Acts 13:9). Therefore, since name change is endorsed by God, name change among some Yorùbá Christians could not have been a violation of God's law.

But, one question which we feel Ajíbóyè's (ibid) paper raises is: should children rename their parents without considering the circumstances that surrounded such names? Although, our answer is no, the problem of name change is caused by the Europeans who brought Christianity with European address forms. In the Bible, the address form that was emphasized was the use of first names and not first names and surnames or generational names. For example, we read and still read about Adam, Abraham, Joseph and Jesus to mention a few and not Adam God, Abraham Terah, Joseph Jacob and Jesus Joseph. Although, there were very few occasions when parents' names were mentioned especially for genealogical purposes, it used to be Adam the son of God, Abraham the son of Terah, Jesus the son of Joseph, etc. What was the case among the Jewish people and the Christians was also the case among the Yorùbá, Hausa and Igbo people, to mention a few before the advent of Christianity. But, when the Europeans came, they did not only bring Christianity, they also brought the European form of education or learning and address forms. Therefore, registration in schools required first names as well as surnames or generational names. In fact, there would have been a swift transition from what is traditional to what is biblical or Christian if the Missionaries had not introduced the European culture of address forms.

Furthermore, the claim by some Yorùbá Christians that "Ta ló tún wá maa jẹ orúkọ mọ́ orísá" (Who will

want his or her name to reflect deities) may not be valid especially when such names are not first names. In fact, the four Hebrews that have been mentioned above are good examples of the difference between name or address form and salvation. Although, the four Hebrews were renamed after the Babylonian gods the true God did not forsake them because their deeds were in agreement with the Jewish laws which God endorsed then. We can therefore say that it is not the address forms in Jewish culture or any other culture that guarantee salvation but obedience to God's laws. Therefore, the Yorùbá people who modified or changed their generational names did it in error or because of religious ignorance.

However, some Yorùbá Christians who changed or modified their surnames may be justified. This is because some Yorùbá surnames were appellations, alliances or nicknames that were not real names. Some examples of such names that are now used as surnames are 'Erinlẹ̀' (The god of land or a kind of god) and 'Ajọ́ ngọ́' (Ajọ́ ngọ́ lo is part of the title of Èṣù). Ìkọ́ tún (forthcoming) reports that, appellations, alliances or nicknames became surnames when the need to register in schools with surnames arose. Therefore, it will not amount to aberration if some Christians decide to change such surnames today especially for social reasons.

Similarly, the practice of name change or adding names to the existing ones was not peculiar to the people in the Bible alone. It has been a common thing among the Yorùbá people from time immemorial. For example, a Yorùbá person may change his or her name because of some social reasons. One may change one's name if one's name is identical with a notorious person's name in Yorùbá society. This is because, when the addressee's name is mentioned, the speaker may ask in Yorùbá if the speaker is older than the addressee:

'Sé ará ilé lágbájá ni é?'

Q relative x are you (sg)

(Are you (sg) x's relative?)

Or if the addressee is older than the speaker:

'Sé ará ilé lágbájá ni yín?'

Q relative x are you (pl)

(Are you (pl) x's relative?)

Some Yorùbá speakers of English may also ask in English: Are you related to x? There are instances where some applicants have lost job opportunities because their names are identical with notorious people's names and attempts by the applicants to deny any relationship with such notorious people are always turned down by employers.

Another reason for name change among the Yorùbá people is when a name has multiple types or meanings and some of the types or meanings are derogatory when used. For example, the

pronunciation of 'Timothy Babájidé' when reduced to initials e.g 'T.B.>'; 'T' for 'Timothy', 'B' for 'Babájidé' may be extended to include 'Tuberculosis' by some literate speakers of Yorùbá, especially students, in social interactions. This is because the acronym of 'Tuberculosis' is 'TB'. As some Yorùbá people would say 'Àwọ̀n ọ̀mọ̀ sùkùrù lẹ̀ yọ̀ ilé ayé lẹ̀ mí ẹ̀niyàn' (The school children can make life difficult for one). What some addressees do, therefore, is either to drop one of the initials or restructure the two so as to guard against being addressed as 'Tuberculosis'.

There are also instances of some Yorùbá people who have abandoned their great-grand- parents' names as surnames and adopted their parents' first names as their surnames. Such first names that have become surnames may either have 'Oló run' (God), 'Olúwa' (Lord) as NPs or new derivations such as the following:

Ooreolúwa (The Lord's gift)
 Aríjésùdádé (A person who wears a crown because he/she sees Jesus)
 Tolúwani (It is the Lord's own)
 Olúbùnmi (The Lord/ a special child gave me)
 Olúwáfẹ̀ mǐ (The Lord loves/likes me)
 Olúwọ̀lé (The Lord/ a special child entered the house)
 Olúwágbéngá (The Lord uplifted me)
 Oore-ò fẹ̀ (Grace)

One of the reasons for rejecting such generational names as surnames may be because the names sound archaic and do not have any serious meaning. Some Yorùbá names that belong to this category of archaic names are 'Ajo' ñgọ' lọ' 'Èbirẹ̀' (a kind of vegetable) and 'Erinlẹ̀' (a kind of god) to mention a few. While rejecting the archaic names for new ones, an addressee may ask "Èwo tún ni Ajo' ñgọ' lọ' " or 'Èbirẹ̀' or 'Erinlẹ̀ ? (Which one is 'Ajo' ñgọ' lọ' ' or 'Èbirẹ̀' 'Erinlẹ̀ ? i.e what do they mean?).

In addition, when name change or name modification occurs it does not mean that it will lead to semantic ambiguity. The following names, after the NPs have been changed to 'Olúwa', do not have semantic ambiguity.

Olúwádiímú (The Lord holds me)
 Olúwálẹ̀ yẹ (The Lord has honour)
 Olúwamọ̀ dẹdẹ (The Lord brought the/a hunter)
 Olúwáyẹmí (The Lord fits me)
 Olúwáşolá (The Lord performed exceedingly well)
 Olúwádáre (The Lord adjudged me right)
 Olúwábíyí (The Lord gave birth to this one)
 Olúwátúsin (The Lord is enough to be worshiped).

There are also instances where the NPs that show reference to Yoruba deities are deleted and the

VPs are used as surnames. Some examples are listed below:

Fáje' milóhùn → Je' milóhùn
 (The god of wisdom made me to have a voice)
 (Let me have a voice)
 Ògúnbáyò dé → Báyò dé
 (The god of iron came with joy)
 (Came with joy)
 Ògúndìran → Dìran
 (The god of iron became a generational issue)
 (Become a generational issue)
 Fábíyí → Bíyí
 (The god of wisdom gave birth to this one) (Gave birth to this one)
 Fágbénró → Gbénró
 (The god of wisdom upheld me) (Uphold me)

But, the semantic ambiguity which Ajíbóyè (ibid) observes with name change can also be observed with the names listed below when the following questions are asked.

Kí ló gbé ẹ̀ ró? (What uplifts you?)
 Kí ló bá oyè? (What meets a chieftaincy title?)
 Kí ló bíyí? (What gave birth to this?)
 Kí ló òran? (What became a generational issue?)

Certainly, responses to these questions will show deceit and religious bigotry. This is because the addressees will say the Lord and the Lord in this respect refers to Jesus when they are supposed to refer to some Yorùbá gods or deities. However, although the present study claims that name change is a common issue among Yorùbá people from time immemorial, the practice whereby the NPs of some surnames are changed or re-worked or deleted completely is a recent development and it is peculiar to some Yorùbá Christians. Similarly, the findings of the present study and that of Ajíbóyè (2009) show a departure from the findings of the previous works or studies on Yorùbá personal names and the difference is caused by the contact between the Yorùbá culture and the Christian culture. Therefore, there are some modified Yorùbá tradition-based names that do not contain cultural events, values and beliefs as against the generally accepted claim by scholars and readers of Yorùbá onomastics.

CONCLUSION

In this paper, we react to the claim that surname modification or change by some Yorùbá Christians is a violation of God's law, a recent development among the Yorùbá people and that it encourages semantic ambiguity in language use or word formation. We argue that surname modification or change is not a violation of God's law because several examples of name change abound in the Bible and that for some social reasons name change has been a common practice among the Yorùbá people from time immemorial. We also argue that, in some cases, name modification or name change does not

¹ Ajo' ñgọ' lọ' is part of the title of: Ajo' ñgọ' lọ' okùnrin ogun (Ajo' ñgọ' lọ' the man of war)

promote or lead to semantic ambiguity and that some Yorùbá Christians delete the NPs of their surnames which show reference to Yorùbá deities and retain the VPs. Therefore, we are of the opinion that surname change or surname modification should be a personal opinion which can be or not be especially if such surnames are appellations or alliances.

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