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INDIGENIZING RELIGIOUS NAMES

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A study
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INDIGENIZING RELIGIOUS NAMES.

1. General introduction.

a. Positive and African Traditional Religion.

This is the beginning of a study that the author hopes to pursue more in ~~the~~ the near future. It discusses one small but important and controversial aspect in the area of indigenization of the positive religions in the context of Africa.

By positive religions here, reference is made to those religions that trace their origins to the teachings of some great religious innovators who spoke as the organs of divine revelation and deliberately departed from the traditions of the past.¹ African Traditional Religions as we know them to-day do not claim anything like that. They claim no revelations, revealed books or scriptures or pronounced religious leaders. They grew up under the action of unconscious forces. They are based on religious beliefs and usages that cannot be traced to the influence of individual minds; and they have not been propagated on individual authority. African Traditional Religions form part of the inheritance from the past. In the main, they are based on the philosophical and theological belief that GOD CAN BE KNOWN not only through His revealed books and the only people He sent, but also through His works of creation. Under this aura of past inheritance, the African peoples have learnt to call themselves and their children names that we may rightly call religious.

b. Relationships between positive and African Traditional Religions.

African history in the last hundred years or so indicates a situation where the tribal African Societies came into contact with the foreign and alien cultures of the christian and the islamic worlds. In many instances, the contact caused a cultural shock on both sides. At that time, a number of reactions were possible along the line of total acceptance or rejection on the part of the Africans of the ~~new~~ foreign cultural forms.² There have been stages of bewilderment, shock, misunderstanding and the like. Along this line, it is reported that the majority of the outsiders who came to the African tribal societies maintained that the Africans were tabula rasa and just passive fields for outside religious and cultural experimentation.³

In these cases, the outsiders considered themselves as having everything to offer to the Africans in the political, economic, social and religious spheres, including the aspect of christian or islamic names. To them, the Africans had no religion and knew nothing about God. The Africans were consequently labelled pagans or wakafir, a word of Arabic origin meaning " infidel." Even other aspects of the African culture were so labelled, for instance, pagan funeral rites, pagan food, pagan marriage customs, pagan names etc. Such attitudes are clearly understood when taken in the sense that the agents of both Christianity and Islam came with certain religious goods to sell and therefore practised good salesmanship in trying to discourage whatever other religious goods were around. It goes without saying that such views , though still hanging around in certain minds, are not so widely maintained by scholars of African history to-day. The thousands of African tribal societies were far from being tabula rasa even at the time of white contact. They have always been rich, complex and continuously evolving.⁴

In religious as well as in other cultural matters, there is no need to maintain that African traditional religions and cultures should take a stand against other religions and cultures. There are areas of compatibility in religious beliefs, practices, religious objects and the aspect of religious personages that the author would have liked to discuss in detail along the line of adaptation or indigenization. Such discussions are valuable in dispelling the type of ignorance of which many foreign teachers have been accused in this that they are inadequately prepared to teach the Africans whose mentalities and cultures they do not know. They have insisted on teaching the African all about Christianity or Islam while completely ignorant of the African's religious sensibilities. In this way, they have been accused of violating one of the basic principles of education of starting from the known to the unknown! Obviously, they started from the unknown! After all, in the African context, positive religions like Christianity and Islam have had to establish themselves on ground already occupied by the African traditional religions.⁵ As new schemes of faith, they

could have found a better hearing by appealing to the religious instincts and susceptibilities that already existed in the audience. This would have meant seriously taking into account the traditional forms, thus talking a language which men accustomed to the old forms could understand. The aim of the author is herein to discuss one form- religious names.

c. Indigenization.

To indigenize means to make local, inborn, innate, inherent or to make native.⁶ Indigenous is the adjective. Thus, one can talk of indigenous food, drink, language, style, and so on, in the sense of things that make sense to a particular group of people living in a particular locality at a particular time. When one talks of indigenizing Christianity or Islam, there is no idea to have distinctly African, native or local beliefs, doctrines or lessons. The majority of the christian or islamic tenets are universal and unchanging. Indigenization in such cases would be along the line of explaining these tenets in the language the local people understand. For instance, when talking about God, whereas the muslims have ninety-names for Him, people in Buganda have at least fourteen, and in Western Uganda they have over eight names for Him. Talking about God to the Baganda people and using the 14 names the people know, makes a big difference, and there is no conflict whatsoever.⁷ The same method of localizing instructions could be applied in the case of issues about man, life, hereafter, heaven, hell, spirits, and even in the area of naming and other stages of human existence.

On the contrary, there are several behavioural patterns and merely cultural forms that have been imported from Western Christian and Islamic traditions that make no or little sense in the local African context. One could write volumes about non-essential christian or islamic aspects that have been imported in the areas of building, way of praying, language, art, dress, religious music, names etc. Concerning this aspect Agbebi voices the following opinion: "The hymns of one nation may not necessarily be those of another nation, and they may not be put in a book. The christians of England may sing hymns different from the christians of Armenia, of France or of Africa; one tribe may sing different from another tribe.....Tastes differ, English tunes and metres, English songs and hymns, some of them most unsuited to African

aspirations and intelligence, have proved effective in weakening the talent for hymnology among African christians... No one race or nation can fix the particular kind of tunes which will be universally conducive to worship. (8)

The difficulty of having universally accepted explanations and instructions seems to be best stated in the English saying: "One man's meat is another man's poison, or the Latin, *de gustibus nihil disputatur*." ⁹ But in the circumstances of Africa, we have had "prayer-books, hymn-books, harmoniums, pew constructions, surpliced choir, the white man's style, the white man's dress, the white man's names..... so many non-essentials affecting the African christian religiosity. " ¹⁰

In the African traditional context, names are so replete with meaning that when one is called Calisisi Bradilafu (Charles Bradlaugh), Maliya (Mary) Jejefu (Joseph) etc, one asks the question: "What is the meaning of these names?" One may be told, these are christian names; they are good! This is a value judgment based on the historical situation whereby everything of high standard and excellence was European. ¹¹

Someone well dressed would be dressed European style, kijungu. A good shirt or cloth must be European; a good house was European. A good name must be European! Having a European name through baptism mostly, or even without being baptized, gave prestige and caused one to be associated with the high class. Initially, many people came to send their children to the missionary schools, among other things, so they could learn European ways and how to live like the Europeans.

Once the people joined the European establishments, by being lured into them, or due to their desire to share in the European Education and material benefits, or even by being literally bribed into them, they accepted the status quo and settled down to adjust themselves. They accepted Christianity and Islam and their new ways of initiation, their marriage rituals, and their ways of praying, including their names.

The issue is, is it essential for one to have a christian name in order to become a christian which happens to be either European, Latin Greek or Jewish? What of those Africans who decide to be called names like Anderea (Andrew=manliness) or Thomas (twin) etc without being baptized?

And what of those Africans who want to be baptized christians and choose names like Muga, Mafuta, Twale, Rwakaikara, Mugisa, Kizito, Mukasa etc. but dislike the so-called christian names of foreign origin? Now, let us examine the issue of the christian names proper in Africa.

2. Christian names.

With the coming of Christianity, there were introduced a whole lot of names classified as christian. The converts to christianity were lured or persuaded, and at times forced to take these at their baptisms. Some of them were names of people who died and are known as saints, in the sense of being in heaven with God and the angels. It is to be noted that not everyone who died and is in heaven is acknowledged publicly as a saint. The argument has however been that when the convert takes the name of one of the saints, the convert comes under the patronship of that saint, or is expected to know the life history of that saint and try to emulate that saint. Christian teaching is also that the saints pray for anyone, so that if one had no publicly acknowledged saint as patron in heaven, there was no fear that no one in heaven cared about such a person.

Apart from giving names of saints to their converts, the christian preachersmen also at times gave names of their own culture, e.g. Smith, Brown, Tucker, Livingstone etc, and the Africans were persuaded that such names of European, Greek, Latin or Hebrew origin, although meaningless to them in the majority of cases, were better than the African local names, originally categorized as pagan names! There are still Registration forms where one is asked to indicate his: " Christian and Pagan" names.

The author's chief interest is the cross-cultural comparison of names, where possible, of religious significance. The contention is that, the desire to have a European name has caused some people to duplicate their names unnecessarily. This is what is meant. You may get one called,

Benedictus...Latin name

Benedict ..adapted in English

Benedikito..adapted in Rutoro(Uganda)

and Mugisa..Runyoro/Rutoro for Blessing , and all four

derivatives mean the same thing, essentially, one blessed by God.

It is true that many of the so-called christian names have some religious meaning in this that they indicate reference 'to God or God's attributes. Examples of such names are the following with the local variations of Western Uganda.

1. Baruch-Baruku, Hebrew Baruk, meaning " Blessed" by God.¹² It also means a man of strong character.
2. Daniel - Daneri, Daneli, means " My judge is God." 13
3. Emmanuel - Manueri, Manuaeli, means, "God with us."¹⁴
4. John, Joannes (Greek)-Yohanan (Hebrew)- Yohana, means, "God has been gracious." 15
5. Jonathan, Yonasani (abbreviated to Nathan- Nasani) means "God has given."¹⁶
6. Joran, Jehoran-Yolamu, Yoramu, means " God is high." 17
7. Josephus, Joseph-Yozefu, Yusifu=God takes away, or may He add.¹⁸
8. Jesus, imitation of the Greek form Jeshua, which in turn is a late form of Jehoshua or Joshua - Yōswa =God is salvation.¹⁹
9. Jerenias, Yereniya = God does establish.²⁰
10. Benedictus, Benedict-Benedikito= Blessed by God.
11. Tobiah-Tobi = God is good.²¹
12. Raphael, Rafairi = God has healed.²²
13. Michael, Mikairi = Who is like God(?)²³
14. Gabriel-Gaburieli = man of God.²⁴
15. Deogratias, Thanks be to God, often shortened to " Deo".
16. Nehemiah - Nekemiya (Neko) = God has consoled.²⁵
17. Mathias, Matthew -Greek Matthaïos, or Maththaios, probably a variant form of Mattathias (Hebrew) -Matayo = Gift of God. 26
18. Godfrey = friend of God, or in favour with God.
19. Osee-Hebrew Hosea = God's slavation or deliverance.
20. David-Daudi = Beloved by God. ²⁷

In names listed above, it is easy to see the relationship with God. There are other christian names of Greek, Jewish or European origin whose relationship is not all that clear. They are called christian names because at some time in history, some individual by such a name became a christian, and therefore everything about him including his names became christian. Such would include such names as Moses, the Egyptian Mes or Mesu, meaning extraction, a son,²⁸ Peter, is the Greek form of an Aramaic surname

Cephas, latinized to Petrus, meaning a rock- Mark, Marcus, means large hammer(29)- Marta means lady or mistress,³⁰ - Abraham means exalted father,³¹ Phillip means fond of horses³² - Thomas(Greek) means twin- Sarah(Hebrew) means princess³³, whereas Andrew, Andrea or Andereya means " Manliness.

Under the desire to copy some European customs, one at times comes to an absurdity as in the following. A man is called Mr. Walker. His wife, male and female children are called by that name. This may not apply exactly in the local circumstances. If one is called Kato or Isingoma or Wasswa, these are names for " twins"-like Thomas. Since this person's wife and children may not be twins, it is nonsensical to follow a European custom and insist that they must be called after their father's name.

3. Islamic names.

What has been said about the introduction of christia names and the arguments behind, apply to the Islamic ones too. These are mostly names of Arabic/cultural origin. When a traditionalist hears names like Hadija, Abdulalin, Anilani, Abdunurr etc, he asks: " What do these names mean?" The impression has been that if you meet an Abdullah, or a Suwedi, you have met a muslin. The contention is that one may have an Arabic name, and not be a muslin by religious affiliation. It is to be noted as in the case of Christianity, quite a good number of Arabic/Islamic names have reference to Allah, God. They are usually reflective of some attribute of God, and the prefix " Abdu", servant of is often employed in conjunction with some sort of "liason." Thus we have names like:-

1. Abdurahin, the servant of God the compassionate.
2. Abdurahman, the servant of God the benefactor.
3. Abdubarr, the servant of God who causes pity.
4. Abdughani, the servant of God the rich.
5. Abdunafi, the servant of God who favours.
6. Abdunurr - Nuuru, the servant of God who is the light.
7. Abduhadi, the servant of God who guides.
8. Abdubaqi, the servant of God who is eternal.
9. Abdurashid, the servant of God the leader.
10. Abdukabir, the servant of God who is great.
11. Abdumuqit, the servant of God the nourisher.
12. Abduwasi, the servant of God who is omnipresent.
13. Abduqawi, the servant of God the strong one.
14. Abdunuyi, the servant of God creator of life.
15. Abduqadir, the servant of God the powerful.
16. Abdumalik, the servant of God the king.
17. Abdukhabir, the servant of God the sagacious.

18. Abdubasir, the servant of God who is the seer.

19. Abdusami, the servant of God the hearer.

20. Abdalin, the servant of God who knows.

4. African traditional names.

That the Africans have been concerned about God, needs no argumentation.³⁵ According to African cultures, man is a creature that belongs to a community of persons. Human relations are understood in terms of relationships and kinships to others who are the living or the dead. Relationships with the spirits of the dead, whether these be saints, ancestors, or even God Himself, are much recognized in concrete form. It is in view of such acknowledgements that people among other things, give names in commemoration of the dead or in relation to God or His attributes. Drawing from the examples of such names from Western Uganda, some names are herein given and paraphrased to indicate that point. Thus we have the following.

1. Byaruhanga (Bya-Ruhanga) of God; a person of God.
2. Karuhanga, a child of God.
3. Byarugaba (Bya-Rugaba) a person of God the giver or provider.
4. Karugaba, a child of God the provider.
5. Byenkya (Bya-Enkya) a person of God source of good fortune.
6. Birungi, someone of God source of goodness.
7. Mbabazi; a person of God who is kindness.
8. Bunihizi, has reference to people's hope in God.
9. Tuhaise or Tumuhaise, let us praise Him (God).
10. Byenyonzi, one of God source of love.
11. Ahimbisibwe, let Him be praised.
12. Asiinwe, let us give thanks to Him.
13. Arinaitwe, He is with us.
14. Turwiine, we are with Him all the time.
15. Nuwagaba, He is the one who gives talents, riches, etc.
16. Twesiye, let us trust Him.
17. Mugisa, child given as a result of God's blessing, Blessing.
18. Tumukuratire, let us follow Him in all His ways.
19. Twinomujuni, we have the Saviour.
20. Musinguzi, He (God) is the conqueror.

5. Towards a synthesis of religious names.

It is the author's contention that any name given to anybody, anywhere in Africa in reference to God or God's attributes, is as religious as any other names found in other religious traditions.

If one is called Lwanga, Jaramogi, Omwony, Jono, Androa, Ekeru, Kiiiza, Kato etc, before he becomes a christian or is baptized, the author maintains that at his baptism, everything about such a person is baptized including all his names. In such cases, and without denying the value of having names of saints, or beautiful foreign names, there is no need for additional so-called christian names of a foreign

origin, which may be meaningless in the local context, and especially when the persons concerned insist on being baptized and recognized by their local names. It is not essential to maintain that Mugisa is a pagan name good for pagans only, Abdulbarr is a muslim name good for muslims only and Benedict is a christian name good for christians only, whereas in essence, all three mean practically the same thing, namely, one who is blessed by God one way or the other. A christian combination of Benedict Mugisa or Grace Mbabazi, when both names mean the same thing, is an unnecessary duplication. Besides, it has been pointed out that, one can be called Andrew, Peter, Joseph etc, without having ever been baptized. One may inherit such names from one's cultural heritage. In such cases, such names are more cultural than christian. In themselves, they have nothing christian about them unless they are born by people who are christian by religious affiliation. In the same vein, one may choose to be called Ramanzani, Abdullah etc, and one is not ipso facto a muslim.

One has to realize that in the present social structures of Uganda, for instance,, to be called Yusifu, Yozefu or Suwedi places one at an advantage or a disadvantage depending on some circumstances, because one becomes labelled either as a protestant, a catholic or a muslim. A name like Moses, like many of the local names, throw people off balance in the sense that they are not directly associated with a particular religion. A Byarugaba could be a christian or a muslim, and yet the name refers to a child of God who gives things.

In the subconscious minds of many people, many traditional names of the Africans are still called " pagan!" and as it were, not good. There is a core of nationalists who have been dismissing Christianity and Islam as enemies of Africa because of the actions or inactions, statements or speechlessness, of the church leaders on specific issues in colonial Africa.³⁶ Such people reject alien cultural forms en masse, at times without distinguishing between the good from the bad—they don't distinguish between the essentials and the non-essentials. Along such a line of thinking, it is not surprising that some reject even their so-called christian names. When it is argued that these are names of

saints, the answer is, "Yes, saints are ancestors of white men; we want names of our own ancestors!" These and related matters need much study and understanding. This type of study is what the author is proposing to carry out, so that what is said in here is far from being conclusive.

FOOT-NOTES.

1. Smith R.(1894) pp.1-3
2. Barrett D.B.(1971)pp.3-5
3. Tabula rasa is a Latin phrase meaning an empty slate.
- 4.Barrett D.B.(1971) p.3
- 5.Byaruhanga-Akiiki,A.(1971) Thesis p.425.
6. Webster Dictionary p.510
7. Some of the names for God in Buganda include:Ddunda(shepherd) Mukama(Lord) Katonda(creator) Diisoddene(big eyed One. In Western Uganda, He is known under names like:Nyanuhanga, Nkya, Kagaba, Kazoba etc.
8. African Church,reports of proceedings of the African Church for Lagos and Yorubaland,1901-1908(Liverpool) p.91.
9. De gustibus nihil disputatur, is a latin phrase which expresses the fact that when it comes to matters of tastes, there are values of choice which are appreciated only by the individuals involved, and arguing does not pay.
10. Ayandele E.A(1971) p.16
11. Byaruhanga-Akiiki op.cit .pp.399 ff.
12. Catholic Bible Commentary section 472.
13. Ibid. section 494.
14. Bible Math.1:21
15. Davis J.(1929) p.399
16. Davis J.(1929) p.407
17. Ibid. p.409.
18. Ibid. p.413
19. Ibid. p.379
20. Ibid. p.364
21. Ibid. p.785
22. Ibid. p.650
23. Ibid. p.500
24. Ibid. p.240
- 25.Ibid. p. 534
26. Ibid. p.484
27. Ibid. p.167
28. Ibid.p.515
- 29.Ibid. p.474
30. Ibid.p.478
31. Ibid.p.7
- 32.Ibid. p.604
- 33.Ibid. 681
34. In Arabic, Abdu al-Sami, there is a liaison to get Abdulsami. But in local languages, the "l" disappears, so that one has Abdu.... Other islamic common names include,Aburahin, Aburahamani, Abdu, Nuuru, Abdurashidi, or Rashidi, Juna, Ausi, Amisi, Amilani, Onesmo, Budala, Twaha, Musa, Onari, Muhamudu, Zulia, Osinani, Hadija, Hafisa, etc.
35. Mbiti J.(1970) discusses concepts of God in Africa in some great details.
36. Ayandele E.A op.cit. p.9.

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