



Signs and Portents? Theophoric Names in Zimbabwe

EZRA CHITANDO

*University of Zimbabwe
Harare, Zimbabwe*

IN MOST SOCIETIES ACROSS THE WORLD, CONSIDERABLE CARE IS TAKEN IN naming a newly born child. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights proclaims that every human being is entitled to a name. Religious and cultural concerns feature prominently in the selection of names; personal names serve, in fact, to preserve religious and social identity. Thus, “To be human is to name, to be named, and thereby to possess full being and the ability to relate to the world in meaningful ways.”¹ In primal religions, Hinduism, Judaism, Christianity, Islam, and Chinese religions, the ritual of name giving is significant and constitutes an important rite of passage.

Personal names may well identify the religious or cultural background of an individual. Often, conversion to traditions such as Christianity or Islam has been

¹Frederick Mathewson Denny, “Names and Naming,” in *The Encyclopedia of Religion*, ed. M. Eliade (New York: Macmillan, 1987) 300.

EZRA CHITANDO is a lecturer in the history and phenomenology of religion in the Department of Religious Studies, Classics and Philosophy.

Contemporary naming trends in Zimbabwe show a marked rise in vernacular names laden with Christian themes. The use of theophoric names by young African Christians demonstrates the vitality of Christianity as infinitely culturally translatable.

accompanied by a change of name. Although the world is collapsing into a global village, the symbolism connected with names remains a way to assert local identities. Names of gods, cultural heroes, saints, ancestors, founders of religions, and other key players on the religious front have all been used as first names in the diverse communities of faith.

In African societies, as in ancient Israelite society, names were laden with meaning. Among the Igbo of Nigeria, a name is not given in haste “for the name is supposed to represent the most cherished thought in the mind of the giver at the time the name is given.”² The Zimbabwean Old Testament scholar Temba Mafico also maintains that Africans believed that a name could shape a person’s character and have a bearing on future behavior. Thus, “it acted as a benediction, a wish, a motto and blessing to the bearer.”³

In the encounter between western missionaries as propagators of the Christian gospel and African converts, the cultural significance of indigenous names inevitably surfaced. To a very large extent, traditional and culture-bound names were rejected in favor of European, biblical, or “Christian” names. However, in the struggle for political independence, a number of prominent Africans renounced both the foreign names and the faith. Through a study of African Christian names in Zimbabwe, I seek to highlight creative solutions that are being offered in the search for identity.

I. SHONA NOMENCLATURE AND THE ENCOUNTER WITH MISSIONARIES

In the traditional Shona culture of Zimbabwe, parents gave their children names that reflected their socio-cultural context. Prior to 1890 when the Pioneer Column marked a European presence in Zimbabwe, names played a number of roles. First names provided an opportunity to thank the spiritual world, make requests, complain, look to the future, address opponents, and numerous other functions. The vicissitudes of polygamous life, hostile neighbors, and parental rebuke could all be encapsulated in a terse name. Alternatively, Shona names could be sentential, as in *Pakuramunhumashokoanowanda*, which means “When one grows up there are bound to be murmurs.” Nicknames, titles, and names of animals and places also played significant roles.

While the history of the implantation of Christianity in Zimbabwe lies outside the purview of this essay,⁴ it must be noted that the encounter between missionaries and local culture left an indelible impression on the latter. African theologians and politicians have had harsh words for the manner in which the gos-

²Emefie Ikenga Metuh, *God and Man in African Religion: A Case Study of the Igbo of Nigeria* (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1981)19.

³Temba Levi Jackson Mafico, “God’s Name Yahweh Elohim and the Unification of Israel: A Challenge to Africans and African Americans,” *Journal of the Interdenominational Theological Centre* 23 (1995) 62.

⁴See Chengetai J. M. Zvobgo, *A History of Christian Missions in Zimbabwe, 1890-1939* (Gweru, Zimbabwe: Mambo, 1996).

pel was first introduced to the Africans. Missionaries tended to view their own culture as normative. Clearly, there was a clash of cultures.⁵

Since missionaries were in a position of power, local cultures fared badly. Indigenous religious practices, social mores, and even the outward appearance of local people were all heavily censured by the missionaries. Polygamy, beer drinking, payment of the bride-price, the ancestor cult, and many other aspects were demonised.⁶ A leading African nationalist, Jomo Kenyatta, contended that the annihilation of local cultures was a major missionary preoccupation. Thus,

The missionaries endeavoured to rescue the depraved souls of the Africans from the “eternal fire,” they set out to uproot the African, body and soul, from his old customs and beliefs, put him in a class by himself, with all his tribal traditions shattered and his institutions trampled upon.⁷

Shona naming practices were deeply affected by the coming of Christianity, colonialism, and education. A sociolinguist in Zimbabwe, Pedzisai Mashiri, observes that from the 1930s to the 1970s it was obligatory for Africans to drop their traditional names and accept biblical names on baptism. He identifies two reasons: “The white missionaries and employers had difficulty in pronouncing Shona names and it was believed that an English or Christian name symbolised salvation.”⁸

Due to the centrality of the name to African identity, a number of African theologians have protested against the insistence that Africans had to assume European names. Mercy Amba Oduyoye, the foremost African womanist theologian, views this as an expression of cultural arrogance by the missionaries. “The missionaries,” she charges, “gave people names that only the Europeans could pronounce ‘correctly’ because they found African names too difficult to say, or too heathen to enter into their Book of Life, which their God kept in their heaven.”⁹

Although some missionaries acknowledged the profundity of some vernacular names, the growth of Christianity was marked by a steady rise in European names. Theologically, the change of name upon baptism represented the transition to a new life: “So, if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!” (2 Cor 5:17). Dropping the “heathen,” culture-bound name also signified a redirection of the will and was patterned on Jesus who gave his disciples new names to match new tasks (cf. Matt 16:18 and John 1:42). To this end, therefore, missionaries might have felt justified in asking the converts to take up new names.

⁵G. Z. Kapenzi, *The Clash of Cultures: Christian Missionaries and the Shona of Rhodesia* (Washington, DC: University Press of America, 1979).

⁶Chengetai J. M. Zvobgo, “Aspects of the Interaction between Christianity and African Culture in Colonial Zimbabwe,” *Zambezia* 13 (1986) 43-57.

⁷Jomo Kenyatta, *Facing Mount Kenya: The Traditional Life of the Gikuyu* (Nairobi: Heinemann Kenya, 1991) 269-270.

⁸Pedzisai Mashiri, “Terms of Address in Shona: A Sociolinguistic Approach,” *Zambezia* 16 (1999) 96.

⁹Mercy Amba Oduyoye, *Hearing and Knowing: Theological Reflections on Christianity in Africa* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1986) 33.

Alongside missionaries, colonial administrators had an impact on Shona nomenclature. To begin with, many were simply not willing to accommodate what they perceived to be childish insistence on vernacular names. After all, were names not mere labels to differentiate individuals? In addition, most administrators wanted short and convenient names for administrative purposes. They often gave European names to people who had to utilize their services in fulfilment of requirements of the colonial state. Considerations such as the simplicity of the name and its impact on conserving stationery featured in their choice of names for the “natives,” a derogatory term used to designate the colonial subjects.

The institution of the school also played an important role in Shona naming practices. In Zimbabwe, as in other “mission fields,” education was regarded as a weapon to wrestle Africans from the clutches of superstition and backwardness. Many people had to hide their culture-bound names, as these were the object of derision among their “more enlightened” peers. This was mainly a result of the missionary strategy to alienate the youth from their cultural context. Elizabeth Isichei’s observation applies to many African countries:

The missionaries succeeded in maintaining their virtual monopoly of education, and obtained adherents, not through dialogue with adults, but by cutting children off from their traditional culture and placing them in the artificially unanimous environment of the school.¹⁰

Due to the importance of formal education, many young people enrolled in schools and had to adopt European names. Taking up a new name symbolised entry into a new culture, with the express aim of superseding the old. The assault on traditional names was an ideological tool to foster an inferiority complex in the African. “Sometimes,” John Mbiti observes, “Africans have been pressured or hypnotised into being converted to a foreign culture, rather than to the Gospel.”¹¹ For how long would Zimbabweans allow others to name them?

II. NAMING THEMSELVES: THE NATIONALIST PERIOD

Zimbabwe waged a bitter armed struggle between 1972 and 1979 for the right to self-determination. Christian bodies, such as the World Council of Churches through its Program to Combat Racism, actively contributed to the struggle.¹² In addition, many of the leading nationalists such as Ndabaningi Sithole, Abel Muzorewa, Joshua Nkomo, and Robert Mugabe had strong Christian backgrounds. Given the impact of Christianity on African culture, Ali Mazrui is right to note “the remarkable irony that Christianity has been both an ally of colonization and a part-

¹⁰Elizabeth Isichei, “Seven Varieties of Ambiguity: Some Patterns of Igbo Response to Christian Missions,” *Journal of Religion in Africa* 3 (1970) 212.

¹¹John S. Mbiti, “Christianity and African Culture,” *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* 20 (1977) 30.

¹²Canaan Sodindo Banana, *The Church and the Struggle for Zimbabwe: From the Programme to Combat Racism to Combat Theology* (Gweru, Zimbabwe: Mambo, 1996) 206-233.

ner in liberation.”¹³ For the armed combatants on the battlefield however, Christianity was the oppressor’s religion and had to be undermined.

As Charles Pfukwa argues, during the armed struggle individuals had a say in renaming themselves, for safety and ideological reasons:

Their names were a statement against Christian tradition and beliefs. A few called themselves Jesus, an act of sacrilege in the eyes of any Christian, to question the ethics and values of a faith that had been in existence for over two thousand years. Some names were outrageously blasphemous or turned the whole religion of Christianity upside down: thus a few called themselves Judas Iscariot. Some names were infernal or apocalyptic, such as Satan, Devil or Diabhorosi, a Shona version of “Devil” possibly derived from the word diabolic.¹⁴

I have cited Pfukwa at length because he vividly illustrates how the guerrillas used noms de guerre to subvert Christianity. Indeed, the liberation struggle was sometimes portrayed as a holy war against all external influences (except of course Maoism, which was the guiding ideology). By taking up names that were jarring to Christian sensibilities, the combatants were demonstrating their defiance. Since the settler government justified its grip on power on the pretext of protecting “a Christian civilization,”¹⁵ many fighters underlined their protest by taking on martial names that celebrated the shedding of blood. Names such as *Teurai Ropa* (Spill Blood), *Urayai* (Kill), and others were clearly at odds with the Christian teachings on passivity and turning the other cheek.

African Traditional Religions (ATRs) also experienced a revival during the armed struggle in Zimbabwe. Guerrillas emphasized the centrality of ancestors to the success of the war. To begin with, they described themselves as “the resurrected bones of the ancestors” and to be the fulfilment of Mbuya Nehanda’s prophecy.¹⁶ They also invited village heads to offer prayers to ancestral spirits and sought the guidance of spirit mediums to try to ensure their safety. In line with the traditional guidelines pertaining to the conduct of warriors, they were supposed to protect wild animals, avoid defilement from sexual relations, and observe dietary restrictions.¹⁷

Ancestral names and culture-bound names started to reappear during the quest for freedom in Zimbabwe. Unlike those adopted by the combatants, these were real names given to children born during the struggle. As the parents experienced the demands of the war, as well as anticipated the sweetness of victory, they gave their children names that were steeped in Shona traditions. *Hondo* (War), *Ti-chatonga* (We shall rule), *Simba* (Power), and others illustrate this trend. The liberation struggle thus had a marked influence on Shona naming trends.

¹³Ali A. Mazrui, “Religion and Political Culture in Africa,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 53 (1985) 832.

¹⁴Charles Pfukwa, “Their Own Godparents,” *The Zimbabwean Review* 4 (1998) 30.

¹⁵Ambrose Moyo, *Zimbabwe: The Risk of Incarnation* (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1996) vii.

¹⁶Isabel Mukonyora, “Women and Ecology in Shona Religion,” *World & World* 19/3 (1999) 277.

¹⁷Norma J. Kriger, *Zimbabwe’s Guerrilla War: Peasant Voices* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992) 99.

III. HEARING GOD IN THEIR LANGUAGE: SHONA CHRISTIAN NAMES AFTER INDEPENDENCE

Zimbabwe attained political independence on April 18, 1980. While embracing a constitution that guarantees freedom of worship to all faiths, Christianity has clearly asserted itself on the spiritual market. Critically for this essay, many of the children born after the war have Shona Christian names. The names reflect Christian themes but are couched in vernacular idiom.¹⁸ By giving their children names that are charged with Christian theological overtones, Zimbabwean Christians are basically claiming Christianity for themselves. They have made Christianity “a vernacular religion lived through hearing the Word of God ‘in our own language’.”¹⁹

A lot of creativity has gone into the emergence of Shona Christian names in postcolonial Zimbabwe. The preponderance of names such as *Tadiwa* (We have been loved), *Tatenda* (We are grateful), *Tinevimbo* (We have hope), *Rutendo* (Faith), and others shows a willingness to have Christianity drink from African wells. Such names have become quite common among young families, illustrating the extent to which indigenous people now believe because “they have heard for themselves” (John 4:42).

Other Shona Christian names reflect deep spiritual values. *Ishewanatsa* (The Lord has done well), *Mupindishe* (Only God gives), *Chaitamwari* (What God has done), and *Haatsari* (He does not discriminate) are some examples of oral theology. These names are professions of faith and demonstrate theological sensitivity. While Zimbabwean theologians have produced lofty theological treatises, ordinary Christians have had their faith encapsulated in the names bestowed on their children. As Mbiti reminds us concerning this oral theology, “It is theology in the open air, often unrecorded, often heard only by small groups of audience and generally lost as far as libraries and seminaries are concerned.”²⁰

The ascendancy of vernacular names that are imbued with theological concepts in Zimbabwe is a direct result of the translation of Scriptures and the arousing of “deep loyalties towards the indigenous cause.”²¹ The availability of the Scriptures in the vernacular had a profound effect on naming patterns in many African communities. While we have highlighted the influence of the missionaries, colonial officers, and the education system, it must be conceded that many biblical figures fired the Shona creative mind independently.

In many African Independent Churches, Old Testament names feature prominently. Alongside the vernacular name, one encounters individuals named

¹⁸Ezra Chitando, “Theology from the Underside: The Case of African Christian Names in Zimbabwe,” *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* 101 (1998) 27.

¹⁹Kwame Bediako, *Christianity in Africa: The Renewal of a Non-Western Religion* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1995) 185.

²⁰John Mbiti, “The Biblical Basis in Present Trends of African Theology,” *Bulletin of African Theology* 1 (1979) 12.

²¹Lamin Sanneh, “The Gospel, Language and Culture: The Theological Method in Cultural Analysis,” *International Review of Mission* 84 (1995) 54.

Joseph, Josphat, Samuel, Rebecca, Nathaniel, and so on. In the evangelical/pentecostal churches, with their appeal towards the educated, young, and upwardly-mobile,²² original Hebrew names are on the rise. Names such as Jedaiah, Shemaiah, and Shaddai illustrate this trend towards the exotic. The cultural context, however, is not ignored, since the parents continue to seek meaning in whatever name they give to their children.

The dominance of vernacular Christian names in postcolonial Zimbabwe also vindicates the assertion by Andrew Walls that the Christian faith is “culturally infinitely translatable.”²³ Whereas in the early phase Christianization and Europeanization had been seen as coterminous, indigenous believers have challenged this assumption. Since names are valued in Shona culture, converts have carried this conviction with them into the new faith. The use of African Christian names is thus an attempt to respond to the question, “Traditional Religion or Christianity?”²⁴ by providing a synthesis. Christianity has therefore taken on an African flavor.

In adopting Shona Christian names, Zimbabwean Christianity is demonstrating its maturity and self-confidence. The declaration of the fictitious missionary Rev. Evan, “I cannot compromise with you on that. All Shona or African names are heathen,”²⁵ is being questioned. However, while academic African theologians have spent time criticizing the missionaries, lay believers have moved on to engage in vernacular theology. Through their naming practices, they illustrate the extent to which Christianity in Africa has in fact become African Christianity, although more remains to be accomplished.

The encounter between Christianity and Shona nomenclature over a long period of time indicates the potential for a mutual exchange between the two. The vernacular names are being used to announce Christian values—in thanksgiving, theodicy, ethics, and other areas of Christian life. As couples draw on the richness of the Shona language, they also contribute to the prominence of Christianity in Zimbabwe. Thus, “The encounter of African culture with Christianity brings a newness, a freshness, an originality, a difference like a spice that brings a new taste to food.”²⁶

By creatively holding together Christianity and African culture, “ordinary” believers are demonstrating that the notion of a split personality belongs more to the scholarly imagination than to the reality on the ground. “Overzealous intellectualization,” opines Jehu Hanciles, “has become a fatal flaw in the African theological initiative,”²⁷ and this has tended to magnify the perceived chasm. Things have

²²Ezra Chitando, “Following Christ, Making Money: Black Christians and Economic Empowerment in Zimbabwe,” *Journal of Black Theology in South Africa* 12 (1998) 5.

²³Andrew F. Walls, “The Gospel as the Prisoner and Liberator of Culture,” *Faith and Thought* 108 (1981) 39.

²⁴Mbongeni Z. Malaba, “Traditional Religion or Christianity? Spiritual Tension in the African Stories of Charles Mungoshi,” *Word & World* 17/3 (1997) 301-307.

²⁵Bisset C. Chitsike, *Confrontation in the Church* (Harare: The Literature Bureau, 1995) 71.

²⁶Joseph Healey and Donald Sybertz, *Towards an African Narrative Theology* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1996) 20.

²⁷Jehu J. Hanciles, “African Christianity: An Appraisal of the Search for a Critical Hermeneutical Model,” *Studia Historiae Ecclesiasticae* 14 (1998) 83.

really not “fallen apart,”²⁸ and Zimbabwean Christians have largely succeeded in making Christianity an indelible part of African identity.

The theophoric names that are dominant in Zimbabwe show the extent to which reflection on God has gone within grassroots communities. What God has done, the promises, power, and deliverance are recurrent motifs. *Anotida* (He loves us), *Munashe* (In the Lord), *Ngaakudzwe* (He must be praised), *Inzwirashwe* (The Lord’s voice), and *Nyevereyoyashe* (The Lord’s warning) are names that highlight the centrality of God in the mundane lives of the believers. The names have a component of the divine name and demonstrate total surrender in faith.

Theophoric names allow religious continuity between African Traditional Religions and Christianity. Although God was not thought of as being active in the daily lives of traditionalists, the theophoric names in contemporary Shona society highlight the increased participation of the sacred. When the missionaries adopted *Mwari* as the name for the Christian God of the Scriptures and *Ishe* (Lord) as a divine title, a radical theological statement had been made. Thus, “if the African names of God were the equivalent of the Christian God, then the Africans had known His name before the arrival of the missionaries.”²⁹

Shona Christian names have dominated postcolonial Zimbabwean culture. By emphasizing the believer’s point of view,³⁰ this article has drawn attention to how indigenous Zimbabweans value the personal name. Following the traditional practice of giving meaningful names, contemporary believers are applying theophoric names to pronounce their distinctive Christian identity. While some early missionaries and colonialists had undermined culture-bound names, in the post-independence period vernacular Christian names have been embraced. This, I have argued, demonstrates the maturity and self-confidence of Zimbabwean Christianity as well as the fact that Christianity is an infinitely culturally translatable faith. Individuals bearing theophoric names are therefore “signs and portents” (Isa 8:18) in Zimbabwe. ⊕

²⁸See Chinua Achebe’s now famous novel, *Things Fall Apart* (London: Heinemann, 1958).

²⁹Lamin Sanneh, “They Stooped to Conquer?: Vernacular Translation and the Socio-Cultural Factor,” *Research in African Literatures* 23 (1992) 101.

³⁰Ezra Chitando, “Phenomenological Approach to Study of Religion in Africa: A Critical Appraisal,” *Journal of Black Theology in South Africa* 11 (1997) 6.