

A Socio-Onomastics Study of a Church Naming *Content* on legit.ng

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ABSTRACT

This paper is a Socio-onomastic analysis of a church-naming *content*, posted on www.Legit.ng, an online forum where young Africans share contents of all kinds. The content consists of the signboards and programme flyers of some hypothetical churches in Nigeria. The naming component of these signposts and flyers serves as the data for this article, which is aimed at expounding the underlying discourse significance of the socially-constituted genre of religious discourse. Using the principles of Socio-onomastics and insights from Eco's Textual Cooperation Theory and the notion of diegesis in Narratology, analysis of the data shows that the names in the signposts and flyers, though congruently fictional in form, are true narratives of the church naming practices amongst 'commercial church owners' in Nigeria. The paper concludes that although the church names fictionalized not directly reference specific real church names in Nigeria, they mirror certain societal values and ideologies of breakthrough in the country rather than merely serving as entertainment construction.

Keywords: *church names, socio-onomastics, hypothetical churches, diegesis, and religious discourse*

INTRODUCTION

Religion is a major reference in a typical definition of culture and society, considering, for instance, the significant ways in which it influences human behavior and perceptions of life. Christianity is one of the major religions in our contemporary world. It has many

strands, Catholics, Anglicans, Methodists, Pentecostals, etc. Pentecostalism, which is one of the strands of Christianity, adheres principally to the principles enshrined in the New Testament. This form of Christianity is becoming widespread in every nook and cranny of Nigeria. Its impacts cannot be ignored because its churches are reshaping the religious and socio-economic landscape of Nigeria. It has become a tool for a new orientation to life and for building a new community. Many Christians in Africa, especially Nigerians, have, therefore, embraced the 'work of redemption' offered by Pentecostal churches in order for them to be freed from the grip of evil spirits and repeated failures which are prevalent in Nigerian worldview/cultural beliefs (Ojo, 2010). Reflecting its power to resist rational or moral argument, Christianity, like other deeply held beliefs (such as politics and ideology, cultural identity, and personal values), continues to remain an inseparable part of individuals and societies. A large number of people in different parts of the world continue to use religion to mediate themselves and things that happen around them.

In spite of its important place in defining humans and their cultures, prominent thinkers and scholars have challenged the usefulness and morality of religious beliefs and practices. From the classical philosophers like Karl Max and Friedrich Nietzsche to some modern-day atheists like Richard Dawkins and Sam Harris who do not see any fruit in it, religion has been regarded as a source of harm, oppression, and division. While Karl Max argues generally that religion is a tool used by the ruling classes to maintain power and control the working class, Friedrich Nietzsche talks specifically about Christianity, describing it as "slave morality" that promotes weakness, obedience, and conformity. Similar to Karl Max are Richard Dawkins, who conceives of religion as a form of blind faith that is incompatible with scientific reason and evidence, and Sam Harris, who sees religion as a major obstacle to human progress and well-being. Hitchens' book *God is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything* (2007) is one of the several thought-provoking publications with negative representations of the roles of religion in society.

Despite this criticism, in Nigeria, for example, religion is still a key factor in marriage, politics, social opportunities, and relationships. It defines our politics, business,

and national and international relationships. Because the country operates on liberal democratic ideology, religion flourishes as, if not more than, other business ventures. Some religious leaders have made 'some places of worship' to largely become private establishments, described as "shops" by Wole Soyinka in *The Trials of Brother Jero* (1969), and this phenomenon generates competitiveness, similar to that in the business world.

In the competitive business world created by the religious actors, identity construction, through naming, is a stock-in-trade. Since church names are linguistic badges with which they can be identified (Alpatov, 2010), these actors invent captivating names and use them for branding their places of worship and as nicknames for their special programmes. These names are creatively (re) presentational of the traditional church naming practices in the country before the era of the commercialization of religion.

Contextualising Church Naming Practices in Nigeria

Church names and church programme naming are parts of the linguistic landscape in Nigeria. The practices reflect the country's linguistic diversity and cultural heritage. These names are created in indigenous languages such as Yoruba, Igbo, Hausa, and others, while others are created in Pidgin, which are usually found in the rural areas, and the English language is the most ubiquitous in rural and urban areas (Igboanusi, 2008, and Ofule, 2011). The names generally fall within the global parameters of church categorization as discussed shortly below.

Church Names with Saints Affinity

Many Catholic, Anglican, and some *Aladura* (prayer warrior) churches globally are named after Saints to honour their memories, seek their intervention, and reflect their spiritual heritage and values (Ferguson, 1966 & Uhl, 1997). Examples include St. Francis Roman Catholic Church, St. David Anglican Church, and St. Moses Orimolade C & S Church.

Church Names with Biblical References

Biblical names are commonly used in church naming practices. These biblical references are used to convey spiritual values and themes (Roger, 1988). Examples include Calvary Church, Bethel Church, and Baptist Church.

Church Names with Geographical Identifiers

Churches often include geographical references in their names, such as towns, cities, neighbourhood where they are located (Roger, 1988; Alpatov, 2010; Hanks, 2016; Awukuvi, 2019). Examples include Agbowo Baptist Church and Hillside Community Church.

Church Names with Descriptive/Aspirational Phrases

Some aspirational or descriptive phrases are sometimes added with church names to convey their values, missions, and aspirations (Mensah and Afful, 2022). These linguistic signifiers are usually chosen to depict their ideologies, transnational, international values, and doctrinal orientations in different contexts.

Some Relevant Early Studies

The different forms of church naming, as highlighted above, have attracted the attention of scholars from diverse academic fields. For instance, Alpatov (2010) explores the tie between naming and identity using the approach of Onomastics. According to the scholar, names are not just markers of personal identity, but they carry meaning that speaks to individual or group identity. Such names communicate to their clientele. The study emphasises the need to foreground the social and cultural contexts in which names are invented and deployed. Also, Einstein (2008) explores the intersection of religion and marketing by highlighting how faith-based organizations use branding to promote their faith and attract followers. The author warns about the commercialization of religion and the potential consequences of using marketing strategies to promote faith. This, to him, can lead to a commercial approach to spirituality. It can further be argued that names reflect and shape social identities, relationships, and power dynamics. These studies underscore

the relevance of considering the social and cultural contexts in which names are formed and used.

Bases for the Present Study

Although the earlier studies on church naming practices are impressive, much is yet to be done on invented/mocking church naming practices on social media, which represents a new form of church naming practices in third-world nations. With commercialization and competition in church establishment in Nigeria, Church naming has taken a new interesting form. The shift from the traditional naming of church programmes and church names has caught the attention of some social media content creators who reinvent (through the strategy of exaggeration) the new naming practices to create a new naming form that is congruently humorous but which requires extra creative reading and interpretation. Although it cannot be established, very clearly, what their true intents (whether to critique or to mock) are, especially because the church naming in the text-world is exaggerated, the creative products resonate with the practice in the social-world, where churches are branded creatively either as honest religious expressions or as expressions of consumerism. Thus, the church-naming contents are treated as a form of social commentary through which the content creators represent (not necessarily honestly) the perceived ridiculousness in the emerging trends.

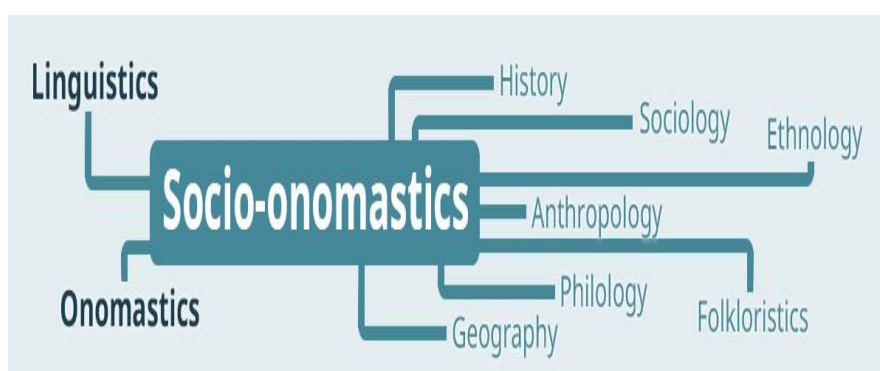
RESEARCH METHODS

The study employs a qualitative research design for this paper. The data were sourced from 20 samples of hilarious but fictional Nigerian posters data depicting church naming on *Legit* ([Funny names of churches in Nigeria - Legit.ng](https://www.legit.ng)). 10 church names, as well as 10 programme nicknames, were collected. These church names were categorised along the traditional features of church names as espoused earlier. The data were subjected to diegetic reading within the precinct of Socio-onomastics, which offers insights for accounting for the power dynamics, social norms, and group ideologies embedded in the new church naming innovation.

The fictional data, although inspired by real-world data, were analysed not as a representation of ‘absolute accuracy’ but as the hypertext of the broader trends in Nigerian church naming practice. While the primary data comprises 20 purposively selected fictional church names, anonymised illustrative triangulation method is used, involving a secondary validation step to show the resonance of the fictional data with church naming from the real-world setting. This method is not for the purpose of making statistical claims but for the purpose of demonstrating that the fictional data have real-world instantiations beyond the creative corpus.

On Socio-onomastics, Textual Cooperation Theory and the Notion of Diegetic Analysis

As the figure below shows, Socio-onomastics is a subfield of Linguistics, which studies names in relation to such socially relevant disciplines as History, Sociology, Anthropology, Folklore, and Ethnology. It is a critical tool that studies social and cultural aspects of names and naming practices. It examines how names reflect and shape identity, power dynamics, and social relationships, using methods that demonstrate the social, cultural, and situational conditions in name usage. The figure below is a comprehensive illustration of the scope or concerns of socio-onomastics.



Source: <https://www.nordicsocioonomastics.org/about-socio-onomastics/>

The figure above shows, on the one hand, that Socio-onomastics is a broadening of Linguistics and Onomastics through insights from History, Sociology, Ethnology,

Anthropology, Philology, Folkloristics and Geography. It shows, on the other hand, that name materials from these other disciplines are objects of study in Socio-onomastics. As an interdisciplinary discipline, it is adequate in accounting for the societal/contextual circumstances of both fictional and non-fictional texts, for each is a significant name-giving ground. This sub-discipline of Onomastics requires the users of the theory to trace social circumstances, political, educational, historical, economical etc., which are responsible for the name-creating objects or phenomena. rid

Though the boundary between the two practices is narrow, the church naming content under study is a form of fictional naming that conveys judgments on the church naming practice in the larger social culture and implicitly issues warnings against the exploitative naming acts. The fictional church names stand for narratives of certain kinds that require diageitic reading. Diageis is a term used in narratology to designate the narrated events in a story as against the telling of the story. The diegetic (or intra-diegetic) level of a narrative is that of the story world, and the events that exist within it, while the extradiegetic or nondiegetic level stands outside these. There is a close relationship between the story world and the world outside the story- the latter is the hypo-text, which inspires the creation and interpretive processing of the former.

Therefore, in the analysis that follows shortly below, we explore both the story world in each of the church-naming objects and its contextuality in order to demonstrate how these objects reflect the real-world social structure. In doing this, we draw inspiration from Eco's Textual Cooperation Theory, which, among other things, conceives of the reader of a text as an active participant in the interpretation process. In this theory, a text is an incomplete product whose linear surface only serves as semantic cues for the model reader. The integration of the three provides a robust framework for analysing the creative data: textual cooperation theory inspires us to engage with the data and act as its target readers; the principle of diegesis allows us to concentrate much more on the narrative world of the texts, while socio-onomastics provides insights on the extra-textual or the social world (which is the inter-textual space) of the church naming fictional data.

RESULTS & DISCUSSION

Church Names/Appellations

A critical examination of the following church names, which represent a stylistic shift from the traditional (Latin saint names) to aspirational English phrases, discussed earlier, shows that they are largely motivational and transactional, for they are created around life, the problems that surround life, and how to get solutions to those problems. The content maker largely appropriates the normative church naming practices that target heaven, salvation, and spirituality.

Mountain of Swallowing Problems International Ministry

Like the story of the Sugar Candy Mountain in George Orwell's *Animal Farm*, which captures the human tendency to seek easy escape from the inevitable hardships of life, in



this church name, a problem-free world is invented through the symbolism of a mountain, which is capable of 'swallowing all problems' of life. In many Nigerian socio-cultural contexts, the mountain is a symbol of strength and resistance. In many traditional African cultures, all manners of mountains are regarded as sacred places believed to be populated by powerful spirits and deities. That is why in these cultures, the base of mountains or the mountain top was usually a worship site where traditional religious rites were performed. It is this traditional belief

in the power of the mountain that the new birth churches are currently appropriating and infusing into their church-naming practice. The mountain has now regained its traditional recognition as a haven for the oppressed, as further illustrated in another church name discussed below



Mountain of Solution Fire Ministry

This is another church name, which suggests some affiliation with some churches because of the presence of the nominal group reference “Fire Ministry”. The head word “mountain” evokes a sense of magnificence; the word “solution” implies a sense of problem-solving, healing, and deliverance from the problems of life; and the word “fire” denotes the presence of the Holy Spirit. All these suggest immediate divine connections

and spiritual empowerment. These diegetic elements narrate the story of a church that is sacred, where people can find solutions to their problems because the transformative power of the Holy Spirit is ever-present in that church. The name relates to such themes as problem-solving and guidance, healing, and empowerment. These themes are effective in targeting the needs of the people for a problem-free life, which is a fantasy. It should be stressed that there are some spirit-filled churches where the congregants are not exploited and enslaved. While not delimiting the transformative impacts of some churches in the life of their members and the communities, the analysis of this data is limited to satirizing those churches and their leaders where mercantilism reigns.

City Light Bible Church

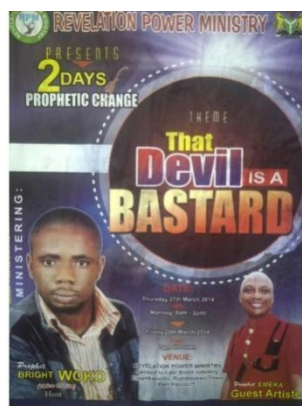
The church name above is also reflective of the aspiration of many people in third-world nations like Nigeria, for a life of opulence. Through the metaphor of light, the name creates an impression that life in the city is a special kind of life and that the church advertised is one that is attuned to the needs and the challenges of city dwellers. The

church name implicitly creates a parallel between rural and urban lives, one of the reasons for the widespread practice of rural-urban migration in the country.

The word “light” is a metaphor of all aspects of human experience because without the latter, there cannot be the former. It also creates the illusion that city life is a life of special opportunities, which will be accessible as a result of attending that church. This naming strategy targets and leverages the aspiration of many people for city life.

Revelation Power Ministry

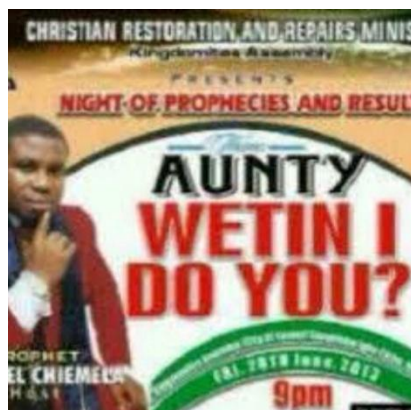
The quest for spiritual power to tackle problems of life is one of the reasons for people's involvement in church activities. It is consequently a kind of bait for luring



some people to attend certain churches in Nigeria. In this country, like in many African nations, most people believe that no bad thing happens without a human or satanic force behind it. Capitalizing on this belief, the church in the poster below is presented or named as one that is guided by truth and as one that knows the values of spiritual power and spiritual empowerment. The nominal word “revelation,” which is a direct reference to The Book of Revelation in the Bible, is suggestive of authentic vision and the power of prophecy. That is capable of restoring all lost glories, as the church's name suggests.

Christ Restoration and Repairs Ministry

This church name, by strategy of association, constructs a narrative of a church that is committed to total support and care, with its explicit reference to the positive affective lexemes “repair” and “restoration”.



Z!KOKO

The church name invokes some symbolic association with the image of a skilled craftsman. After discovering the sources of their problems through revelations from the so-called people of God, many churchgoers seek repair to their tortured lives to re-establish their problem-free life. Churches impress it on their clients to undergo the process of glory rebirth. Human life is conceived as the engine of a vehicle that can be repaired if and when damaged. The repair metaphor reinforces the idea of restoration by showing that the church is committed to fixing or mending all things in life that are damaged. These may relate to physical, spiritual, and emotional damage caused by a problem in life or some enemies of life. These enemies of life, as the name of the church considered below suggests, have the power to rob people of their God-given glories.

New Glory Revival Ministry

This church name, which has some symbolic association with the notion of God's glory as depicted in several verses of the Bible, is a product of the belief in the Nigerian context that certain humans have the knowledge of the glories of others and that they can cover or even confiscate these glories.



When this happens, the victims are left to live an empty life if they are unfortunate to meet their destiny helpers, whose power supersedes the power of destiny killers. This name gives the picture of a church whose mission is to recover lost glories. The diegetic element “new” implies a sense of novelty, renewal, and restoration. It suggests that the church offers new dimensions or a new era in the spiritual mission, and this may compel prospective ‘clients’ from disregarding the old methods of spiritual revival. Through the epithet “new”, the church name depicts the theme of innovation and growth and evokes the image of a bright, shining light, which suggests purity. It is capable of compelling the victims who believe that their glories have been confiscated to embark on the mission to a saviour church in pursuit of their divine glories. Such a mission, as the action verb “run” in the church discussed below suggests, requires haste.

Run for Your Life International Chapel

Also, with the theme of life and the need to consciously struggle to make it worth living in, is the church name above.



This is a facsimile of the common culture amongst commercial church leaders whose marketing trick is to paint life as difficult to make people run to them for outlets. The predicative diegetic element “run” implies a sense of danger and the need to urgently flee from it. This is probably an indirect reference to the biblical idea of ‘fleeing from sin, danger or destruction as recorded in such verses of the Bible as (1 Corinthians 10:14) and (James 4:7).

Church Programme Names

As the church names analysed above show, the *content* under analysis contains church programme names that draw upon the widespread problems of individual and social poverty in Nigeria. The church programme names that we analyse shortly below give some narratives of how proprietors of some new-birth churches capitalize on the poverty of individuals and society in commodifying their religious activities. The names are hypertexts, inspired by people’s desire for financial success, healing, or spiritual breakthrough, that create unrealistic expectations that the church can provide magical solutions to complex personal and societal challenges. Instances of poverty perpetuating church programme names found in the *content* are discussed below under perceived different social circumstances drawn upon to create them. The analysis of these circumstances is guided by the need, in socio-onomastics research, to explore the social

dimension of texts and the significance of implicit and explicit contextual reference in linguistic research generally.

The *Japa* Syndrome

The word *Japa*, in Nigeria, is the youth phraseology denoting “flee: The *Japa* syndrome describes the situation in Nigeria wherein people, especially young ones, emigrate from the country seemingly in fright and without critical appraisal (Yusuf, 2025). This phenomenon is the in-thing among citizens from developing nations who emigrate to developed economies like Japan, the USA, Canada, and the UK to better their fortunes. Due to this unfavourable climate of unemployment and the desires of the young ones to *japa* (flee), many leaders of private churches in the country organize programmes and special prayers towards meeting the aspirations of the youth to flee the country. Church-naming programmes like ‘*anointing to get visa*’, and ‘*I smell America*’ are presented below.



These types of programme labels are satirical or very humorous and present the idea of fleeing Nigeria as the solution to the problems of the citizens. They depict the church as a centre that can offer a spiritual solution to obtain a visa, which is a complex and often frustrating process. This scenario can be seen as preying on people’s desperation and vulnerability to what is called the *japa* syndrome. While it is legitimate for churches to offer spiritual support to the needs of their members, such programme names often create unrealistic expectations and potentially exploit people’s emotions. Instead, the satirical import here is in admonishing the church leaders to go beyond spiritual interventions and

call out the governments to empower the youth by creating a good environment that will allow them to unleash their creative potentials towards developing their communities. By so doing, the urge to migrate to other climes will reduce. The inherent message is beyond the mockery, but a call for urgent intervention to stem the tide of *japa* syndrome that is endangering the lives of the citizens, given the recent xenophobic tendencies of some Africans towards other Africans.

Not only are some Nigerians hungry after trans-border migration for greener pastures, but some also crave to migrate from their villages or state to Lagos, the economic capital of Nigeria. Lagos is ‘the London’ of Nigeria is a common phrase that underscores the city’s reputation as the epicenter of opportunities and entrepreneurial breakthroughs. In line with the dire need to make it in Lagos, Lagosians do hustle in various economic activities. Churches, therefore, organize programmes such as ‘I will not leave Lagos empty-handed’ (see the poster below) in response to the aspirations of the people.



The assertive statement ‘I will not leave Lagos empty-handed’, which represents Lagos as a land of dreams and possibilities, is an expression of determination and resilience. It speaks to their readiness to seize opportunities, face challenges head-on, and become successful in the city. The urge to achieve prosperity in the city where opportunities abound also motivates the prayer point in the poster below.



Marital issues

In Nigeria, marriage is a very important socio-cultural obligation. Nigerians attach great importance to marriage so much that being married is considered a significant achievement, and being single at a marriageable age is considered as a misfortune. Drawing on this cultural context, churches organize programmes with the theme of marriage. The content under study invents the following programme names to reflect this phenomenon.

- (i) Who stole my wedding gown? (ii) Will you marry me? (iii) Give me a spouse or I die! (iv) Single bonanza-I must marry (v) This beautiful sister must marry.



These programme labels are very interesting, metaphorical and dramatic in expressing the frustration and anxiety of marriageable men and women that are overdue or under pressure for marriage. The church programme naming adheres to the cultural beliefs of the

The program is set on the frustration of the congregants and their desire for freedom from the chain of stagnation. The 'leave me and let me enjoy my life and own a car' is a legitimate request in Nigeria context, where mass transportation infrastructures to ease the movement of people are missing or inadequate. Hence, the craving for the ownership of cars, which pastors are raising prayers on. Additionally, the place of money in meeting the essential things of life cannot be overemphasized. 'Lord Where is my money?' is an important prayer point that will attract the attention of the congregants.



The label suggests that the church can provide a spiritual solution to financial problems. This has the tendency of creating unrealistic hopes and encourages people to focus on quick fixes like 'miracle money' rather than sustainable financial planning and literacy. This type of programme has seen many Nigerians on prayer mountains praying for money, thereby making them dependent on the efficacious power of their pastors for spiritual guidance, neglecting valid economic activities.

The excruciating /existential state of life

This is another fertile ground on which churches usually organise programmes. '*I don taya for this nonsense*' (I'm tired of this nonsense, or I have heard enough of this). Putting

this expression in proper context, they suggest that the programme will focus on overcoming life challenges, frustrations, and setbacks. People who are the targets of such carefully designed church programmes can identify easily with the expression of exhaustion and exasperation. Such programmes offer hope on how to overcome adversity, build resilience, and find purpose and meaning in life.



Ditto, 'oh God, na like this we go dey?' is a classic pidgin English expression which means 'oh God, is this how we'll continue to be? This expression portrays frustration, exasperation, or resignation in the face of difficult circumstances. This is a heartfelt cry to God, seeking intervention, guidance or relief from difficulties. The expression captures the scatological features of people who struggle perpetually, lack progress, and are uncertain about their future. This statement is a poignant expression of human emotion seeking divine intervention and solace in times of trouble.

CONCLUSION

This study of 20 church names on *Legit* has shown that religious naming generally is not ornamental but rather serves as a theological-commercial brand that solves real existential problems through their promises of healing and economic prosperity. As a discursive site, religion, as illustrated by the analysed naming practice, has many positive utilities, especially in converting doctrines into hopes and in alleviating the fears of people. However, the widespread issue of the commodification of religion, which is the social

context or the implicit ideology responsible for the creation of the online content under study, can prevent ordinary people from changing the social structure through innovation and self-help projects. The church-naming culture can keep the ordinary people perpetually poor spiritually, economically, and mentally as they wait for divine solutions to problems they could solve physically. In view of the adverse effects of this naming act on individuals and societies, the government should regulate the activities of church proprietors in the country. Rather than leaving these proprietors to achieve self-opulence, churches can serve as significant contributors to the national economy. Privately owned churches can be tapped into by governments through taxation to contribute to the national economy.

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