



A priest baptises a child. Most Africans believe only names of European origin can be given to children at baptism. NET PHOTO

What is in a name?

Rebirth. Did you know you don't need to have a European name to be baptised? Then what is all the fuss about?

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Long before the Whites came, Africans "baptised" with traditional names. But at the dawn of Christianity in Uganda in 1877 and 1879 for the Protestants and Catholics, respectively, the influence of the two faiths seemed to have eroded our culture, especially in naming. Before the arrival of Christianity, Africans had birth rites and initiation ceremonies for naming (baptising) the new born babies. The giving of names was a responsibility of an elder or a family leader. In other words, the "baptism" ceremony was conducted by an elder or a family head. But as people converted to Christianity, that responsibility became an exclusive ritual of the clergies. And that came with other costs such as baptising Africans with European names. Therefore, Africans adopted the culture of acquiring a European name at baptism even when such names had no meaning whatsoever where to be adopted as the first name for every baptised African.

In the pre-colonial Africa, every African had a name with a meaning and a purpose. Africans named their children after their ancestors. Because every African name had a story to tell, it was easy to tell why they named an individual so or so and you would ask, for instance, why one was given a particular name. For example, in western Uganda, if one had a name such as Rushambuzi Rwa Rutatinangabo Rwa

Rushamba-Ngabo. You would definitely understand that Rushambuzi is the son of Rutatinangabo the son of Rushamba-Ngabo. In other words, Rushambuzi is the grandson of Rushamba-Ngabo. However, such names were usually a reserve for the brave, rich and famous. Africans also named children according to the prevailing circumstances one was born in. In western Uganda dialects, those born during a war were usually named Rutaro, Rwentaro, Rwebyeita, among others, if the child was a male and if a female, she would be named Kentaro, Korutaro or Kebyeita, among others.

However, there were also names symbolising good times such as Kebirungyi. If a girl was born around harvest time, she would be named Komweru. If one was born during famine, floods or similar a misfortune would be called Weizahi meaning (You arrived at a bad time/situation).

Colonialism

Before the first Ugandan Christian and Catholic Nalubandwa was baptised Paul on March 27, 1880, ahead of four others, many Ugandans had one name. But that ended on that day. Since then, every baptised Ugandan carries two names - a European one branded as the Christian name and the family name. But do you need a European name to be a true Christian? Does the church in Uganda allow the baptism of two African names? The *Sunday Monitor* sought answers from Ugandan religious leaders.

Pastor Brian Migadde of the Double Portion Revival Centre, Mabombe Wakiso District says: "I think the problem was when the Whites brought Christianity to

Africa or Uganda, our surnames were clan names like in Buganda, these missionaries thought that some of the clan names [Bemba, Musota Mukasa] were related to evil spirits. And so gave local people new names that they called Christian names. I also think Africans or Ugandans felt good at baptism to be given a European name". But hastened to add: "now to some of us who have known the secret behind names we no longer baptise our children European names; but names from the Bible with a biblical connotation or meaning". "I have three children. I chose the name Elianah for my daughter which means God answered my prayer. My second born is a boy called Eliadad, which means God's will. And the third born is called Elisheba which means God is my oath. And they have Migadde as the surname," he shares.

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PASTOR BRIAN MIGADDE, DOUBLE PORTION REVIVAL CENTRE, MABOMBE WAKISO DISTRICT

On why Ugandans have not dropped the baptism of European names and rather adopt two African names, Pastor Migadde said: "Colonial culture is still a big influence on us. Until we learn to appreciate our own, we will not drop the European names which are not necessarily Christian". He adds: "People should get saved from using European names". Pastor Migadde also said that he would have no problem baptising anyone with two African names so long as they have good meaning and connotation to God.

Rev Fr Andrew Kasirye Kato, the Judicial Vicar (head of legal), Kampala Archdiocese, told the *Sunday Monitor* that according to the Code of Canon Law, which governs the Catholic Church, "a person can be baptised any name but the name

must be sensible and must not be offensive". Thus, the Catholic Church prohibits names such as Baryejusa, Bampalana. For that matter, Canon Law 8:55 says: "parents, sponsors and the pastor are to see that a name foreign to a Christian mentality is not given." It goes to elaborate: "the prior norm of Canon 761 of the 1917 Code obliged the pastor to require that a Christian name [that is, ordinarily the name of a saint or sometime or sometimes of a virtue or the like] be given or at least added to the name chosen by the parents. In the revision, the responsibility in this matter belongs to the parents (of an infant) and the sponsors as well as the pastor, and the substance of the norm is different: a Christian name in the sense of a saint's name is not required but only one that not alien or offensive to Christian sensibilities..."

Priests rejecting African names

Asked why some priests refuse to baptise children with two African names such as "Ruhanga Owembabazi" which means God of mercy insisting that they must add a "Christian" name like Fabian, Francis, the Judicial Vicar Kampala Archdiocese says it is because such pastors do not know what Canon Law 8:55 says.

Rev Canon, Diana Nkesiga, Vicar of All Saints Cathedral Nakasero in Kampala, does not believe that one needs to be baptised a European name to be a good Christian. "Some African names are more Christian than European ones. In western Uganda, they have beautiful names such as Karugaba, Karuhanga, Kamukama, Twino-mujuni, which connect to God," she said.

"I think it was a fashion when the Europeans came to us, our parents admired the European names because they sounded beautiful, although some did not even know the meaning of such name". She mentions her first name Diana which is a name of a European Goddess of warriors and compares it with her middle name Mirembe which means peace and says in that case, she would prefer her Mirembe name because of the morals it upholds. When asked whether Africans were not always forced by the clergies to baptise their children with European first names, the cleric said no. "I think it was a matter of choice" she answered. During the telephone interview with the *Sunday Monitor* last week, Rev Nkesiga expounded on the subject.

European names not Biblical requirement

"For your information, my second son has three African names. And he was baptised in church. He was baptised Tehemba Lukiza Iraguza. Tehemba means hope in Khosa language of South Africa. Lukiza is a Kiganda name and Iraguza is a Kinyarwanda name. When he was born, we were in South Africa and Nelson Mandela had just been released from jail and every one was hoping for the better after so many years of oppression under the apartheid regime".

Now, since it is not a law or a biblical requirement for African Christians and Ugandans in particular to be baptised European names, the Ugandan clergies will understand and accept the baptism of African traditional and historic names such as "Ruhanga Owa'haiguru Atukwatse Abenaitwe Tube Abatsinguzi Ebirobyona". This name if translated in many of western Uganda dialects means: "The Almighty in the Heaven be with us Guide us so that we are Winners Always". Hopefully, the priests at the Holy Altar will henceforth stop suggesting to the parents and guides for their children to be baptised. Names such as Joel, Warren, Patrick, Abed, Venansius, Maureen, Benon or Elton among others, whose meaning, unfortunately, many do not know or admire.