

Carrying-Over: Naming, Renaming, and Invention in Literatures of Faith and the Supernatural

'Watch your mouth' and 'Think before you speak' are some of the phrases that many hear as admonitions growing up, and even as adults. However, beyond the avoidance of saying a thing considered incorrect, inappropriate, rude, or generally making a kind of faux pas, does the need to lend thought to words before they are said out loud carry more weight than the usual? Yoruba and many other West African traditional beliefs teach us that there is power in the tongue; words intended to be said are to be chosen carefully and in a way that is befitting of the relevant discourse. This is not a notion that is distinct to Africans alone. Many cultures, theories, and faith-based beliefs, hold words as delicate things to be measured before they are said aloud.

A straight line can be drawn from this to the power and consequences of calling a thing, anything by a name.

Stories abound steeped in myth and legend about formerly tragic characters finding release from their predicament upon discovering the names of the personas tormenting them. Of these, the tale of Rumpelstiltskin who tears himself into two after the miller's daughter guesses his name (Grimm Tales version) is perhaps the most famous. There is also the tale of Saint Olaf and the Troll where the King saves his soul by calling the troll his true name 'Sigge' and causing him to turn to stone.

A character in Ursula Le. Guin's 'The Rule of Names' says, "The name is the thing, and the true name is the true thing. To speak the name is to control the thing."



The bridge between naming and power holds firm even outside tales and Ms. Le. Guin's fantastic worldbuilding, taking form in multiple spaces and with different reach and exceptions, many of them rooted in different faiths and mysticism.

While it is now debatable if Greek and Roman religions originally believed that knowing a god's true name lent power over them, some theorists seem to believe so. R.M Oglive (The Romans

and their Gods, Chatto & Windus, 1969, p244) argues, that Gods, like dogs, will answer only to their names... The invocation of a god by name has always been a central feature of prayer and magic. If you know the name of a god, you can make him listen. In the Old Testament, the name of Jehovah was for long a secret name, not to be named or written, because it was too powerful. In the New Testament, the superstition is eliminated but believers 'who call upon the name of the Lord' will be saved. In Roman and Greek religion, the first task was to discover the name of the god whom the worshipper wished to influence and invoke that name.

Christianity and Judaism hold parallels in the story of the first naming ceremony, while also having notable distinctions.

In Christianity, the first naming ceremony and handover of authority between the supreme being and man can be found in the book of Genesis where God grants to Adam, the power to name.

'And out of the ground, the LORD God formed every beast of the field, and every fowl of the air, and brought them unto Adam to see what he would call them: and whatsoever Adam called every living creature, that was the name thereof'. (Gen. 2: 19).

While the Bible records Adam naming Eve "because she was the mother of all living" (Gen. 3:20), there is no record of the naming of God's first human creation which in Psalms 8:5, is said to be crowned with glory and majesty. The name of the first man is rooted more in etymology than symbol or meaning and stems from the Hebrew word אָדָם ('adam), which means "man" or "humankind" (Hello, My Name Is: Adam. Robert R. Cargill, PhD Bible & Archaeology (University of Iowa). Why does God not name Adam but yet give him the power to name his other creations? A power and authority that seems divine.

Judaism presumes to offer more answers. In a Torah commentary, The Power of a Name: The Power of Naming (B'reishit, Genesis 1:1–6:8) by Rabbi Andrew Davids, the naming ceremony, according to the Jewish scriptures has more details and also includes Adam.

It says:

"When, however, God created man and, making them pass before him, asked him what the names of these were, he replied, "This should fittingly be called an ox; that, a lion; that, a horse; that, an ass; that, a camel; and that an eagle," as may be inferred from the text, "And the man gave names to all the cattle." Then God asked him, "And you, what shall be your name?" He answered, "Adam." God persisted, "Why?" And he explained, "Because I have been created from the ground."

God is also said to take on an additional name for himself:

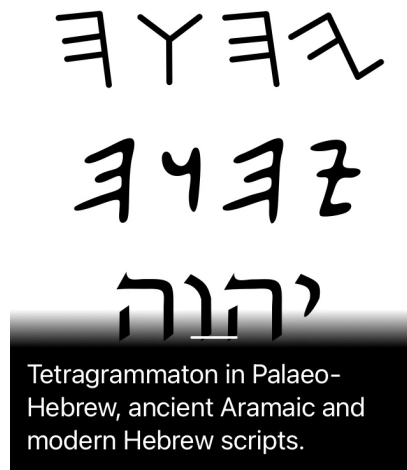
"The Holy One, blessed be God, asked him, "And I, what is My name?" Adam replied, "Adonai." "Why?" "Because you are master over all created beings." Hence it is written, "I am Adonai, that is My name." (Isaiah 47:8) It means, "That is the name by which Adam called Me; it is the name that I have accepted for Myself; and it is the name on which I have agreed with My creatures."

Here, not only is Adam allowed to name himself, but he is also allowed to 'name' God as he sees him.

This notion of a name of God suggested by Adam leans into the Jewish belief of not calling or pronouncing the four Hebrew letters usually transliterated as YHWH or JHVH that form a biblical proper name of God because to do that is to suggest that they can control or conjure God in some way. Many Jewish scholars and believers postulate that the present-day pronunciations of Yahweh and Jehovah are made up and do not in any way reflect the true pronunciation of God's name.

These two stories call to mind Calvino's ideas on how different levels of reality can meet even while they remain distinct and separate, or they may mingle and knit together, achieve harmony among their contradictions, or even form an explosive mixture. Even if Calvino wasn't

particularly thinking of scriptures when he spoke of complications of plot, reality, linguistic barriers, etcetera, are all great works at the end of the day not literatures of faith?



The Jews' restraint from calling out God's 'true' name to not fall into the sin of presuming power over his entity assumes a considerable distance from the practice of Hesychasm, an Eastern Christian tradition rooted in monasticism, where its adherents sought enlightenment and religious euphoria by contemplating and calling upon God without breaking their concentration (George A. Maloney, *Russian Hesychasm* (The Hague: Mouton, 1973)). This practice was also referred to and known as the Jesus prayer technique. The idea behind this meditation, so to speak, was the belief in the power of the names of God and Jesus, and that calling upon these names without interruption and with full focus and measured breathing could also grant the faithfulness access, if limited, to the power of the names being called upon. This is a manifestation of how calling upon a sacred and revered name does not necessarily offer control over it but allows proximity to the source of its power.



I am curious about language and the way it works mostly in spaces of what is unclear and not immediately visible to the unfocused eye. I ponder also on the mystical and mysterious, the intangibles that fill up the world, and how we are somehow able to find the language to accommodate them. How we somehow succeed at carrying over from the unstable space of imagination into knowledge, into scholarship even. I think this is because I spent a lot of time reading the Bible as a child. When I attempt to have conversations about this, I find that the questions that I get revolve around my relationship with God and if I have any.

I didn't read the Bible as much as I did because I was seeking God, I read it because the stories of the Old Testament made me insatiable. It was the Bible that first taught me about plot, setting, characterization, dialogue, and other craft elements that I would later be introduced to in a high school literature class. It was the language of the books of Psalms, Songs of Solomon, and Ecclesiastes that showed me how poetry could comfort and soothe me. The Holy Bible, KJV written in English was my first collection of short stories, and on every reread, I found something new and exciting. The stories of God manifesting as a burning bush, as a man wrestling Jacob and losing, and of donkeys speaking and scolding their riders made me curious about the world and I couldn't see in it.

When a piece of literature invokes what I think is the perfect language to talk about something even as mundane as a pair of shoes, I find myself curious about the contours of the sentences, the spaces between thought and articulation. I wonder about what the words and sentences looked like when they first arrived on the page before they were made over into their final, more elegant, nuanced, and evocative selves. I find myself thinking 'What happened here? What was the journey from point A to Z?' " I stay more in that space of searching for what makes words and sentences make sense.

When I learned to read in Yoruba, my mother tongue, and I read the Yoruba bible for the first time, something significant shifted for me. While I was fluent first in English before Yoruba, I had grown up in a home and environment where everyone who could speak Yoruba did so. It was for me, a language of familiarity and intimacy, of gossip, of proverbs that were thought-provoking and hilarious at the same time, of music and of constant reinvention. It was not unusual for a person to be addressed in English and they would respond in Yoruba without any form of disconnect, I saw and felt the language move with ease and rhythm. But Yoruba was also a language of consequence. The same thing went for other tribes; the Igbos, the Hausas, Efiks, Nupe, Ijaws, etc. Their native language was how people conversed when something truly heavy was in the air.

I read a passage in the Yoruba bible that I had read multiple times in its English counterpart and for the first time, felt a kind of trepidation. For the first time, the holy book put the fear of God into me.

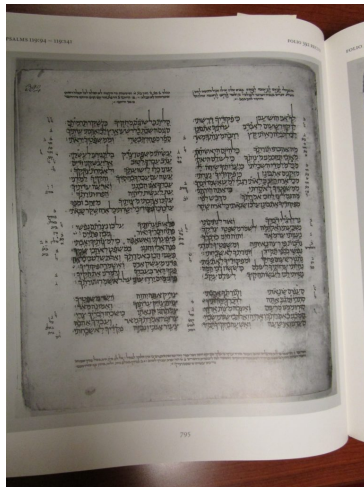
Calvino says writing always presupposes the selection of a psychological attitude, a rapport with the world, a tone of voice, a homogenous set of linguistic tools, the data of experience, and the phantoms of the imagination—in a word, a style. The author-cum-character is both something less and something more than the 'I' of the individual as an empirical subject (Levels of Reality in Literature).

Story within a story, the translation itself operates as a reality on its own. With the author deciding on the rapport between the source material, the vehicle to convey the stories from one language to the other and not only the story but choosing the tone which it is to be received with. A scriptural translation does not consist of saying a word in English in its other native equivalent but also making it have the consequence that it lacks outside the language.

'The preliminary condition of any work of literature is that the person who is writing has to invent that first character, who is the author of the work'.

The Bible is said to exist through the records of the prophets who heard from God. Some who directly heard his voice, some who had dreams, and others who had visions revealed to them.

This is true for the Old Testament anyway. The New Testament consists majorly of the apostolic records and letters including the gospels and teachings of Jesus. The Bible has come a significant distance from Greek, Hebrew, Biblical Aramaic and English before it touched the hands of Samuel Ajayi Crowther, a Yoruba man taken in and educated by the missionaries before he would grow to be a Bishop himself and translate the holy book to not Yoruba, but a language that his parishioners could understand, could listen to and feel its weight. Yi o parun lojiji lai si atunse is not the same perish without repair. The latter could have been literally translated but it would have just been words, the place of adding emphasis and literary creativity is the place of invention.



Codex Leningradensis, A.D. 1008, facsimile, the oldest Hebrew manuscript of the entire Old Testament



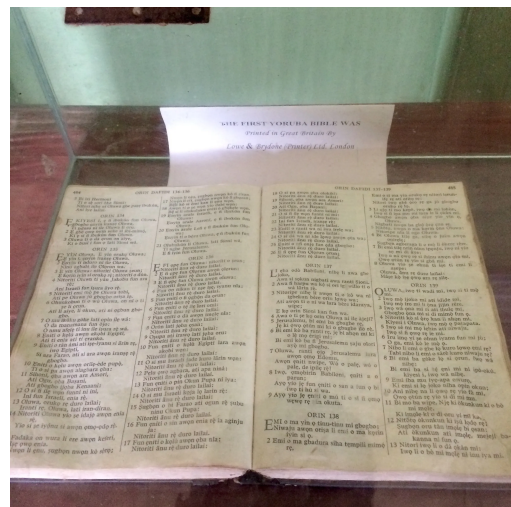
Codex Vaticanus. Fourth Century, facsimile. One of the earliest complete manuscripts of the Bible, includes the Greek translation of the Hebrew Scriptures



Codex Argenteus Upsaliensis. 6th Century, facsimile, 1927, Uppsala, Sweden. The Arian beliefs of Ulfilas, the translator, allegedly influenced his translation of Philippians 2:6.



1526 Edition William Tynsdale New Testament, first Anglophone biblical translation.



First Yoruba Bible

There isn't a singular Yoruba word for God. The most common include Olorun, an **enjambment** of Olu-orun which translates into the ruler of the heavens, 'olu' meaning God and 'orun' meaning heaven. This is also the most straightforward. Another word is Olodumare, whose etymology is a tad more complicated. Different theories of the true meaning of the word have been put forward by Yoruba scholars.