Naming, Renaming, and Invention in Literatures of Faith and the Supernatural

THE FORGOTTEN DIALECT OF THE HEART

How astonishing it is that language can almost mean,
and frightening that it does not quite. *Love,* we say,
God, we say, *Rome* and *Michiko,* we write, and the words
get it wrong. We say *bread* and it means according
to which nation. French has no word for home,
and we have no word for strict pleasure. A people
in northern India is dying out because their ancient
tongue has no words for endearment. I dream of lost
vocabularies that might express some of what
we no longer can. Maybe the Etruscan texts would
finally explain why the couples on their tombs
are smiling. And maybe not. When the thousands
of mysterious Sumerian tablets were translated,
they seemed to be business records. But what if they
are poems or psalms? My joy is the same as twelve
Ethiopian goats standing silent in the morning light.
O Lord, thou art slabs of salt and ingots of copper,
as grand as ripe barley lithe under the wind's labor.
Her breasts are six white oxen loaded with bolts
of long-fibered Egyptian cotton. My love is a hundred
pitchers of honey. Shiploads of thuya are what
my body wants to say to your body. Giraffes are this
desire in the dark. Perhaps the spiral Minoan script
is not a language but a map. What we feel most has
no name but amber, archers, cinnamon, horses and birds.

I begin this essay by meditating on the Jack Gilbert poem quoted above, and drawing a straight line from it to the question of what we call things, how we arrive at the selection of words and sentences, how they manifest and the power and consequences of calling a thing, anything by a name.

Rikki Ducornet in her essay, The Deep Zoo says, to name a thing is to acknowledge and evoke its primary potencies–religious, medical, and magical. Stories abound steeped in myth and legend about potentially

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 worshiper 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 all other living creatures.

“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 אדם (’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 conversing with God about other names.

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, relationship of the work with the outside world, 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 faithful 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 also ponder 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, almost impossibly, succeed at carrying over from the unstable space of imagination into knowledge, into scholarship even. I believe that I think this way because I spent a lot of time reading the Bible as a child, not as a way of seeking God, but 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. 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 what I couldn't see in it.

When a piece of literature invokes language, that I find perfect in that moment, to talk about something even as mundane as a pair of shoes, I find myself lurking around 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 am present 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 thoughtfulness and respect, of proverbs that were thought-provoking and hilarious at the same time, of music and of constant invention. 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, of things that held weight. The same thing went for other tribes; the Igbos, the Hausas, Efiks, Nupe, Ijaws, etc. The 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. The holy book had finally put the fear of God into me.

Calvino, in his essay, Levels of Reality in Literature, 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.

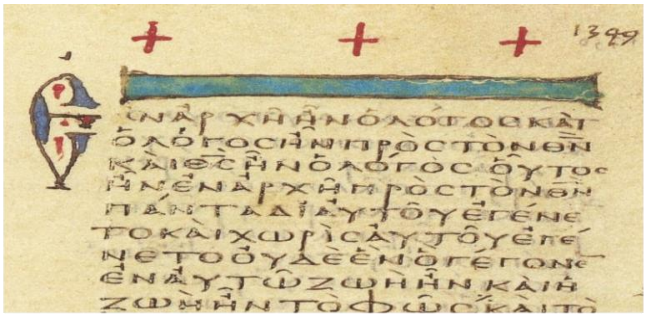
Translating from indigenous languages into the English language operates on a separate reality on its own. It is a story within the stories that are being rendered. The translator, whether a native speaker of the language being translated or not, decides on the rapport between the source material, the imaginative vehicle to convey the stories into the other language, and the tone which it is suggested to be received with. A translation of books of scriptures, legends, myths or other fantastic stories does not consist of simply re-saying a word in English, it also lends it the consequence that it lacks outside the literal and face value use of the language, the question of what to call or name things attains more urgency .

'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'. (Calvino, Levels of Reality in Literature).

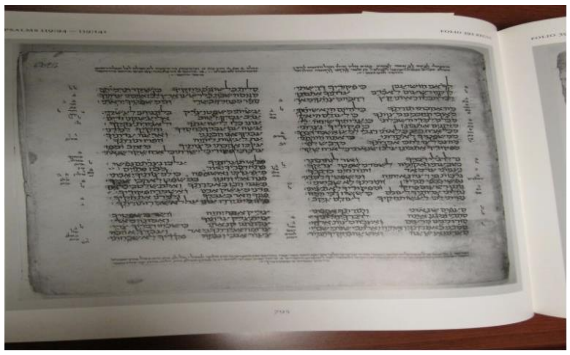
The Bible's physical manifestation is said to exist through the records of the prophets who heard from God. Some who directly heard his voice, some who had dreams, and others who had visions revealed to them. This is true for the Old Testament anyway. The New Testament consists majorly of the apostolic records and letters including the gospels and teachings of Jesus.

Since the bible was not written as a work of fiction within the context in which Calvino postulates, God stands as the actual first character and author of the work, if not the actual writer. This minimal

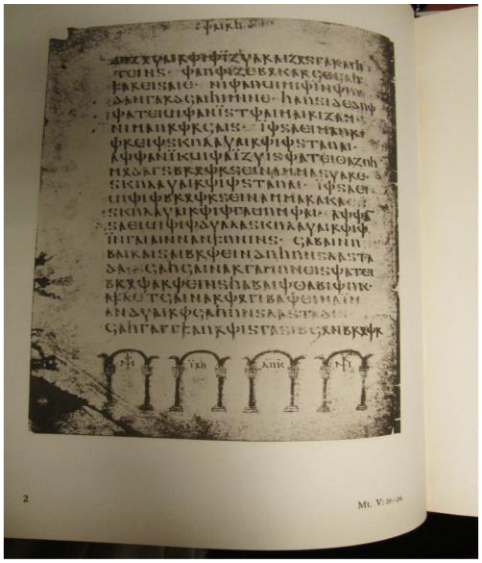
complication however only works for the first biblical manuscripts written in Hebrew and Greek. The voice of the first character/author of the work inevitably, in spite of the best intentions of the translator(s), if any at all, undergoes a modification and reinvention suitable for the new language it takes up space in.



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

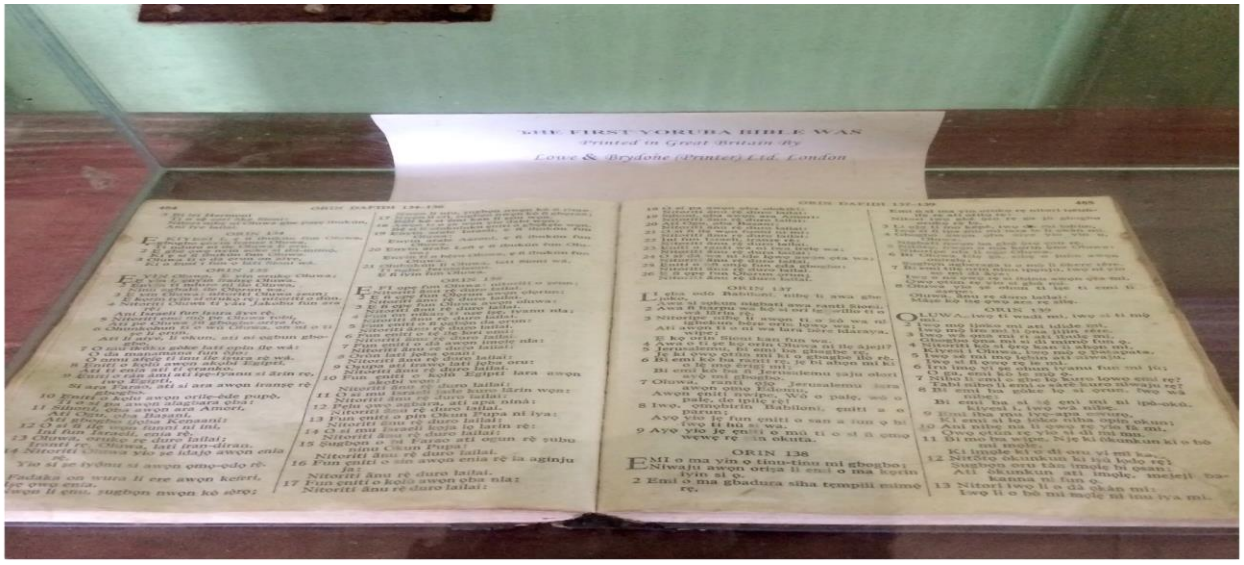


Codex Leningradensis, A.D. 1008, facsimile, the oldest Hebrew manuscript of the entire Old Testament



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

To understand the literatures of faith in Yoruba Christianity, it is important to know that pre-colonialism and before the presence of Christian missionaries, Yoruba traditional faith and religion operated as a system that consisted of spiritual hierarchies; ancestors, the orishas, and God who was not as accessible as the lower gods. God had no shrines, and faithfuls who sought his favor or mercies went through the orishas to reach him.

There isn't a singular Yoruba word for God. The most common include Olorun, a word made up of two other words, 'Olu' and 'orun' which translates into the ruler of the heavens, 'olu' meaning ruler or king and 'orun' meaning heaven. This is also the most straightforward.

Another word is Olodumare, whose etymology is more complicated. Different notions of the true meaning of the word have been put forward by Yoruba scholars. There are theories that believe the word is Olo-odu-mare and describes the source of balance within the universe, the invincible nucleus from which creation emerges. 'Olo', meaning owner or source, 'Odu', meaning womb or portal, and 'Mare', a word that can be translated literally in 2 ways; first, as the short form of 'Osumare', the rainbow or the spirit of the rainbow, which represents the portal between heaven and earth, mobility and renewal, creation, balance, continuity and balance; second as 'ma re', which describes a thing that 'is present', 'is here'. This complication and the different levels at which this word and the words within it can be translated makes the question of what Olodumare is, hard to answer. However, the general consensus is that Olodumare is the universal spirit and source of the creation of the world and its mysteries, its connotation full of light with no space for evil.

The other most commonly used Yoruba word to call on God is Oluwa, a word that translates better to 'Lord' and not 'God'. Oluwa is also the only Yoruba word for God that can as well be used to refer to a

human being who is lord over a thing or a people. What is uncanny about this word, which does not possess the essence of divinity or of a supreme being is how it is mostly relied on by Yoruba Christians in their prayers, instead of Olodumare or Olorun which are the most accurate and appropriate Yoruba words for God. A fact that becomes more interesting upon realizing how this is a leftover of colonialism and the Christian missionaries who relied on the natives' language to separate the God that traditional faith practitioners called on and prayed to, Olodumare, from the gospel of God, his son, Jesus Christ and the holy spirit, Oluwa Olugbala (Lord & Saviour) that they intended to introduce to their colonies. Oluwa v. Olodumare; our God versus their God. These early missionaries used the natives' language to open the Christian faith and allowed the converts move from the roles of onlookers in a new terrain to full participants.

In oral traditions across Latin America, Spain and Europe, the duende is a mythological creature that can either be good or evil, depending on its color. But it has also been described to have the function of showing an artist his limitations and extent of his capacity, and bring him face to face with death so he can create something that makes his audience feel the presence of what is called the *duende.*

In the Play and Theory of the Duende, Federico Garcia Lorca describes the *duende* as 'all that has dark sounds', 'a mysterious force that everyone feels and no philosopher has explained', 'the most ancient culture of immediate creation', and a thing that 'has to be roused from the furthest habitations of the blood'. Lorca sees the *duende* as a heightened ecstasy that is only brought on by circling the edge of death, depending on what death signifies to you.

Lorca distinguishes the artist's search for the *duende* from the faithful's search for God, he believes that seeking the duende has neither map nor discipline but its presence is recognized like blood in powdered glass. He states that 'the roads where one searches for God are known, whether by the barbaric way of the hermit or the subtle one if the mystic: with a tower, like St. Teresa, or by the three paths of St. John of the Cross. And though we may have to cry out, in Isiah's voice: Truly you are a hidden God, finally, in the end, God sends his primal thorns of fire to those who seek him'.

However, is there really much difference in the form that faithfuls like the Hesychasm monks seek euphoria by focusing on nothing but repeating and meditating on God's name, and an artist choosing to wrestle with the duende on the edge of the pit of death before being brought to a state that reinvents their art? Do both instances not involve a crossing over to a space of neither being alive nor dead?

Does the submission of the body and spirit outside the realm of the world where return to it is not certain, and praying to see God's face or hear his voice not constitute an attempt to come face to face with death? Both require a state of absolute faith and surrender. Lorca himself answers this when he says that, in all the songs of Southern Spain, the appearance of the *duende* is followed by sincere cries of 'Viva Dios!', deep, human, tender cries of communication with God through the five senses.

Similar to the idea of the presence of the duende and the religious euphoria arrived at through the practice of the Hesychasm is the energy of the Christian 'speaking in tongues', a phenomena meant to mark the manifestation of the holy spirit being poured out of the person speaking it. 'For anyone who speaks in a tongue does not speak to men but to God' (1 Corinthians 14: 2).

However, speaking in a manner that is divine but incoherent to persons outside a faith or even some within it isn't exclusive to Christianity alone. Entering an elevated plane and speaking in a strange tongue is also one of the many signs of spirit possession in other cultures and traditional faiths including being caught up by the Lwa in Haitian Vodoun rituals, or the Santeria faithful speaking their ritual language. The Yorubas of West-Africa believe strongly in the power of the tongue, of words, of names and that the knowledge of their proper manipulation can bend the world to a person's favor. These powers that are called upon mostly through incantations known as 'ofo' and 'ayajo', have been described by some African scholars as Yoruba command language, and are tapped into when recited in a particular order. When many former Yoruba traditional faith practitioners converted to Christianity, they continued to use this command language in their prayers to the Christian God and taught them to new converts, and

it is now fully infused in the prayer language of many African Christians through repetition and invocation. A prayer rite not dissimilar from the Hesychasts' Jesus prayer.

Language and all the things that we do with words, in the space of the imagination, the supernatural and even the mundane have never existed in isolation; words, phrases and their multiple variants of combinations have always also been hieroglyphs.

To quote Ducornet, 'Within a writer's life, words, just as things, acquire powers'.