# 'PENTECOSTAL' LANGUAGE AND CONFLICT RESOLUTION IN AFRICA

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**ABSTRACT**

The paper observes the use of pentecostal language as a positive trend in the resolution of conflicts within the African family setting. It specifically notes the element of negativity embedded in verbal violence and its attendant psychological effects that is contained in interpersonal relationships within the family setting. It further notes the increasing disappearance of such negativity in the light of Pentecostal influence on the lifestyle of the people. A major point of concentration in the paper is located within the pervasive tendency for Pentecostalism within the Nigerian society to touch virtually all aspects of life within and even outside the Yoruba (of south-western Nigeria) setting. Paramount among these is name-changing and a re-enactment of positive confessions in countering seemingly negative situations or pronouncements. Overall, the paper makes suggestions on how this could be further enhanced in the prevalent linguistic conditions within the African society, thus paving the way for sustainable national development.

**Introduction**
**The Family in the African Society**
Within the African society, the family is the social institution in which individuals largely belong and remain attached to, throughout the course of their lives. The provision of security for the young by the adults whose prerequisite it is to meet the needs of the former as well as to take them through the process of socialization remain the major functions of the family (Obidi, 2005). One major aspect of such socialization process is reflected in the manner of language that young people are admonished to imbibe as far as their respective lives and destinies are concerned. They are thus brought up to make positive declarations that are expected to shape the course of their lives towards the position of excellence and commendable achievement. The relatively recent upsurge in Pentecostal movements within and outside Nigeria can therefore be said to have met on ground within the Yoruba society, for example, an already existing positive language communication pattern which has come to be rooted within the cultural repertoire of the people.

**Language and Culture**
Words are widely believed to carry with them power, both from the earthly and spiritual realms. Among human beings, words are believed to communicate intentions and so constitute a major component of language, which is a unique attribute of the human race. The socio-cultural African setting makes enough provisions for a strong symbiotic relationship between language and culture. Indeed, the Yoruba believe that "eyin loro to ba bo ko se e ko" (words/speech can be likened to an egg, when it drops, it shatters). The same is true of the Akan of Ghana (Yankah, 1994). It is probably in line with this view that Stross (1981:22) quotes his nine year-old nephew's definition of language as "Words are the ways that we string them together and pronounce them to communicate ideas". The complexity of language is indicative of the different definitions scholars have postulated, depending on individual standpoints ranging from views of language as speech to language as part of the social structure. Two definitions here capture our perception of language: "Languages are not purely linguistic entities. They serve social functions. In order to define a language, it is important to look to its social and political functions…" (Holmes 1992:141).

Bernstein, a theoretical sociologist, incorporates language into his theory, not as an opinion, but as an essential component of the social system. He argues that language has evolved in a certain way because of its function in a particular social system. Thus, he sees language either as belonging to the cultural sphere, or as a way of expressing meanings, or even as a means of coding experiences (Bernstein, 1976). Since Labov (1972) argues that every language provides its speakers with unique, intricate and constantly changing medium of expression, it follows that African languages and by implication their cultures, are in a constant state of change. Fadipe, (1970:301) for example, argues that "The Yoruba is gregarious and sociable…, there is an elaborate code of manners and etiquette, the observance of which serves to reduce the strains and frustrations of interpersonal relationships". Yankah (1994: 3568) identifies proverbs, honorific terms of address and politeness expressions as part of the Ghanaian repertoire.

Thus, for the Yoruba, there is a salutation (greeting) for every conceivable occasion or situation. For instance, "eku oko" (for people on board a vehicle); "e ku iroju" (for people in distress); "e ku ijoko" or "e ku ikale" (for people seated). There is even a form of greeting for people lazing about (e ku aise o). It follows, therefore, that the Yoruba would be courteous, friendly, sociable and hospitable on one hand, and caustic, sarcastic and even satirical on the other hand. Thus, a positive disposition as well as the constant use of affirmation is part of their culture. A people's culture is exemplified by its food, language, history, dance, myths, songs, proverbs, etc. This implies that language helps in perpetuating particular social, cultural and historical experiences in Africa.

Thus, among the Yoruba, the importance of the belief in the supernatural power of words is highlighted in the cautionary discipline that is often meted

out by older members of the society to upcoming ones concerning the need to utter good words at all times. This is depicted in this proverb "Ape mo'ra la npe temidire" (A positive change of fortune is achieved or possible through verbal affirmation). Consequently, the use of positive affirmation is encouraged at all times. Psychologically, it gives a sense of assurance that all is well. For instance, "Owo po lowo mi" (I have plenty of money). This is usually said by people in need of money. It is believed that a positive affirmation will attract a positive change in the finances of the person concerned.

In the same vein, a headache will elicit such a remark as this "ori n'fo 'gi loko" (the tree in the forest/farm has headache). The implication is that the person is well and that in so far as he is concerned, the headache does not exist. Another common positive aspect of the use of language concerns the use of "oriki" (encomium in the form of praise names). For instance, "Adunni" (someone nice to have around) and "Aduke" (someone everybody struggles to pamper). Such names are common and they are used to motivate, encourage and dignify the bearer of such names.
However, an ambivalent angle has been observed among some groups within the Yoruba society. Take for instance, the Ijesha (both male and female) who are noted for negative pronouncements or declarations particularly within the family setting where parents, especially mothers, rain curses on their children. For example, "Ofo la se laye yi" (May you be a loser!); Lukuluku gbe e! (May you die of bird flu). To them, it is a way of life. A possible explanation of this contradiction is that such pronouncements are meant to scare and also deter these children from the act that called forth such vituperations. There is also the general belief among this group of people that no amount of negative pronouncements can change their destinies, thus implying that they are immune to such curses.

## Negative Language within the Family Setting
Apart from the above, the everyday frustrations, strain and stress of life as exemplified through anger and impatience, have brought about the use of negative words between spouses, relations, by parents on their children and by children to parents (albeit surreptitiously). In such conflict-related situations, commonly used words include: "Oloriburuku" (one with impaired destiny); "Arungun Omo" (one who destroys the family legacies); "Oniranu" (layabout, vagrant); "Dongisola" (tall and sluggish); "Agunmaniye" (tall for nothing); "Anumadaro" (irresponsible child who feels unconcerned about serious issues such that even when he is lost, would not bother to find his way back home). Other negative comments include "Olosi" (never-do-well); "O ti s'osi lo bi eran asewo" (has gone roaming aimlessly about like a ram with broken horns). Everyone knows that a ram with broken horns will run away when challenged to a fight. But rather than stay at home where it is safe, it prefers to roam.

The summary is that the culprit is a vagrant. Sometimes, borrowed expressions come into this negative aspect of language used within the family setting. For instance, the Portuguese expression that seems popular

among the Yoruba of Lagos Island is exemplified in the saying "O ti t*askarada* lo" (taskarada implies roaming about); "Obo" (monkey); "eranko" (wild animal) etc. For one who is really struggling without success, he is scornfully told: "ijo mbe nnu aro, ese ni osi" (the cripple can dance, if only he had legs). For a couple, they are regarded as "oko bi omo ise, iyawo bi omo odo" (the husband is like a houseboy and the wife like a housegirl i.e. both are not better than house helps).

Abusive songs and proverbs also abound. For instance "a f' ai ba won ja, won nbinu" (without a reason, they have picked a quarrel with me). The hunchback is called "saanu idi, feyin joko" (pity your flat backside and sit on your protruding hunch). A petty husband will tell his wife in a song; "iyawo to l' oun ose mo, bi ose mo ko maa lo, elomiran a si ma wole de e" (the wife who is no longer interested in the marriage should just opt out, for sure someone else will be willing to play your part). A parent to an erring child: (i). "Omo to ni k' iya un ma sun, Oun naa ko ni f' oju kan orun"(the child that does not allow his mother to sleep, should also be prepared to stay awake). (ii). "Omo yi ma pa mi, to ba ya, a di omo yi ma pa ra e" (my child, have pity on me, will soon become have pity on yourself).

The psychological effect of this verbal violence on the child, relation or spouse can best be imagined. The user believes the recipient is irresponsible and can never achieve anything in life. However, as earlier pointed out, it is possible that it was meant to jolt the child out of a state of complacency or stupor. It could also be seen as a psychological wake-up call to the person involved in order for him to avoid the seeming inevitable path to destruction that he is bent on taking. While this element of negativity appears to have survived the advent and spread of Christianity among the Yoruba, the recent upsurge in Pentecostal churches in Nigeria has introduced a new, noticeable and positive dimension to the use of language.

**Background to Pentecostalism**
When a child is born, the culture and beliefs of the Yoruba is reflected in the names given to such a child. For instance, it was the custom in those days for parents of the new baby to consult diviners in order to ascertain the child's mission on earth. Incidentally, this is not only common among the Yoruba as a case in point is *King Oedipus* which was given an African flavour/interpretation by Ola Rotimi in *The gods are not to blame.* In this process, parents are asked to do all manner of things. For instance, if the birth produced a set of twins, many of these parents are usually asked to go begging for alms to forestall the death of the twins. Thus, able-bodied mothers and their young innocent sets of twins throng the streets begging. It is, however, possible that having noted the additional responsibility a new child would place on parents, not to talk of two children at the same time; the diviners reasoned that the only way these twins and their families could survive was to rely on the goodwill of the public. In any case, the mother would be unable to contribute positively to either farm work or household chores in addition to taking care of a set of twins. As a matter of fact, she would need a lot of assistance. Because of the Yoruba belief that twins are

special children and that the younger (Taiyewo, Taiye or Taiwo) usually precedes the elder (Kehinde), twins have fixed names regardless of sex. Another category of special birth is what the Yoruba call "abiku" (in Igboland, they are called "Ogbanje"). These are spirit-children who enjoy the prank of dying after they are born only to come back to torment their mothers by dying again. Soyinka aptly captures this phenomenon in his poem entitled *Abiku*. Such children often have their corpses mutilated before burial (as a punishment) and they are given such names as:

Kuti    could no longer die
Durotimi  (plea) please stay with us
Durojaiye  (plea) please, stay and enjoy this world
Malomo  (plea) please, do not go back (to the spirit world)
Bamidele   (plea) please, come home with us
Tijuiku   Be ashamed of dying
Kokumo   Has decided not to die once again

## Characteristics of Pentecostalism

Pentecostalism is a renewed religious movement within Christianity, that places special emphasis on a direct personal relationship with God through water baptism, the baptism of the Holy Spirit i.e speaking in tongues, the use of the annointing oil, mantle, communion, feet washing,etc. The term *Pentecostal* is derived from Pentecost, a Greek term describing the Jewish Feast of Weeks. For Christians, this event commemorates the descent of the Holy Spirit upon the followers of Jesus Christ, as described in the Book of Acts, Chapter 2 and Pentecostals tend to see their movement as reflecting the same kind of spiritual power, worship styles and teachings that were found in the early church. For this reason, some Pentecostals also use the term *Apostolic* and/or *Full Gospel* to describe their movement.

Though Americans tend to focus on the gift of tongues, overall Pentecostals emphasize that God has given several gifts - not just speaking in tongues but also healing and the so-called rational gifts like organization or building a school. Diverse gifts to diverse people. It's not a strictly theological definition but a phenomenological one.

Pentecostalism is an umbrella term that includes a wide range of different theological and organizational perspectives. As a result, there is no single central organization or church that directs the movement. Most Pentecostals consider themselves to be part of broader Christian groups; for example, most Pentecostals identify as Protestants.

The most important reason is that it is an oral religion. It is not defined by the abstract language that characterizes, for instance, Presbyterians or Catholics. Pentecostalism is communicated in stories, testimonies, and songs. Oral language is a much more global language than that of the universities or church declarations. Oral tradition is flexible and can adapt itself to a variety of circumstances.

Generally referred to as "new generation" churches in Nigeria, Pentecostal movements include Evangelical and Pentecostal churches, fellowships and ministries. They achieved remarkable growth from around the 1980s and

have become the fastest growing and most visible form of Christianity in Nigeria (CASSA, 2005).

This is connected to the fact that their sermons, mode of dressing, etc are a departure from what used to obtain in orthodox churches. Instead of the formal, predictable and old fashioned worship style of the latter, Pentecostals delight in inspirational songs rendered during "Praise and worship" where people "dance their hearts out". There is also more awareness about the benefits of being a child of God. Thus, people are gravitating more towards the Pentecostal churches where the language in particular is a standout. subcultures often develop a specialized language understood only by the members of the group, a language that must be learned as a new member becomes assimilated into the group and that, when artfully and correctly employed, will signify membership to others in the group. Specialized language serves further to mark the group to outsiders, to delineate boundaries hat keep groups distinct, and to intensify group cohesion and solidarity. A special language must be close enough to the mother language to make sense to the members of the group and simple enough for the novice to pick up fairly quickly. No tome is set aside for the teaching of this specialized language, but its constant and repetitive use in the verbal messages of the group members serves to teach the newcomer what the words mean and where and how it is appropriate to employ them. Positivism is a crucial aspect of Pentecostalism. When one believes and one says it, things can only get better. Hence, they believe strongly in Biblical sayings like:

*…let the weak say I am strong*
*let the poor say I am rich…*

Phil. 4:7; And the peace of God, which passeth all understanding, shall keep your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus.

Fundamental to this are three main signposts:

**Power in the Word:** At the beginning of creation, God had to make pronouncements. "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God" (John 1:1). Gen. 1:3 tells us: "And God said, let there be light; and there was light." It means these words brought forth light.

An example is found on the day of Pentecost and it is linked to the supernatural ability to bring to reality that which was hitherto deemed impossible (Acts 2). The Apostles received the power of the Holy Spirit which enabled them to speak in languages they had never heard of i.e. (speaking in tongues, also known as glossolalia). This has its equivalent in the Yoruba tradition (earlier mentioned) which emphasizes the use of positive words. It also explains the reason why the Yoruba have a strong belief in the power of words.

**Power of Faith:** This is the motivating factor behind the adopted positive dimension in the power of words which can only be positive and not ambivalent as observed in Yoruba culture. Such instances are found in names, expressions, way of life, etc. that is the norm in Pentecostalism.

***Power of the Supernatural:*** It is the believe that not everything can be physically/naturally explained and that there must be a Supernatural Being that is guiding people's actions, thoughts, etc. Thus, the power to counter the negative aspects of life can only come from the positive supernatural realm i.e. The Power of God. This testifies to the concept of divine essence as reflecting the innate recognition of God as the Creator of the universe (heaven and earth). It follows, therefore, that since God is the Creator, He alone can effectively and successfully allow or subdue certain things that happen to human beings.

The fact that Pentecostalism calls the individual away from idolatry and encourages alignment with the creator, makes it necessary to review/modify previous notions about the culture, names, expressions, etc totally with the new way of life. Names that reflect the cultural practices and beliefs particularly concerning the various gods worshipped in different families were the norm; such names include:

Fabunmi - Ifa (god of divination) gave this to me
Ogunwole - Ogun (god of iron) has come into this house
Osundiya - Osun (river goddess reputed with giving children to barren women) has compensated me for my suffering
Sangowanwa - Sango (god of thunder and lightening) has visited me.
While some of the names are not on their own negative, the fact that Pentecostalism calls the individual away from idolatry and encourages alignment with the Creator, makes it necessary to review/modify previous notions about the culture, names, expressions etc. to tally with the new way of life. Areas in which these changes are highly noticeable include names, positive expressions and conflict resolution within the family. For names, for instance,

i.      Faseun (we are grateful to Ifa) increasingly changed to Oluwaseun (we are grateful to the Lord).
ii.     Ogunwole becomes Oluwole (The Lord has come into this house).
iii.    Fashanu (Ifa has shown me mercy) is replaced by Anuoluwapo (God's mercies are plenteous).

Thus, people now bear such names as: Favour, Excellence, Success, Peace, Hosanna, Divine, Testimony, Faith, Praise, Lifted, Goodness, King David, Apostle Paul, Angel, Covenant, Marvelous, Amen, Dominion, Jesus Righteousness, The Lord's , Perfect, Anointing, Wisdom, Miracle, etc. These names are not restricted to Yoruba language.

In the area of use of words particularly in family conflict resolution, there is strong positive affirmation especially in times of serious trouble. For instance, "problems" are not addressed as problems but are seen as "challenges" which means they must be overcome. The under-listed expressions are also common especially when resolving family issues:

The devil is a liar! It is well!  The Blood of Jesus!  You are blessed.  It is not my portion!  Holy Ghost fire!  I reject it.  I claim it. I receive it.  I am a child of God. The family that prays together stays together.

And for whoever is misbehaving, pronouncements like "God will touch your heart". "Thank you, Jesus, for (name mentioned)… "God will make a way…". "God will arrest him" This is in addition to hundreds of inspirational songs

that are meant to comfort, support, and guide and soothe the spirit in times of distress. For example:

i.   I have seen the Lord's goodness, His mercies and compassion, I have seen the Lord's goodness, Halleluya, praise the Lord. *Refrain*: O Lord you have been so good, you are so good to me, O Lord you are excellent in my life everyday, O Lord you have been so good, you are so good to me, O Lord you are excellent in my life.

God will make a way where there seems to be no way; He walks in ways we cannot see, He will make a way for me; He will be my guide, Hold me closely to His side, with love and strength for each new day, He will make a way, He will make a way.

(iii) The Spirit of God is upon me: Even the devil knows that I am a winner. I am a winner, I am a winner, Even the devil knows that I am a winner.

## Conclusion and Recommendations

From all indications, language and culture are inextricably intertwined. It is observed that the Yoruba culture exhibits traits of divergence concerning the use of negative and positive affirmations in resolving conflicts within the family. On one hand, they cherish the use of positive pronouncements; on the other hand, some use curses, insults and negative pronouncements. For the latter, abusive words and songs, proverb, sayings and even physical violence are used. Rather than this antagonistic approach, what obtains now include positive affirmation, prayers, inspirational songs, counseling, exhortation and a strong belief that no matter how difficult the situation may be, God will definitely intervene as long as they steadfastly hold on to their faith ( Gal. 6:9). "And let us not be weary in well doing: for in due season we shall reap if we faint not."

Imbibing positive affirmation and a sense of spiritual well-being should be upheld specifically, from within the family and generally in the society so that conflict situations will be considerably reduced. Knowing that one does not gain anything from negative pronouncements, parents, spouses, relations and children should encourage one another, especially in times of trouble/distress by using positively-inclined words, songs, etc. After all, the harsh negative and hurtful words do not provide solutions to these challenges. Thus, the role of Pentecostalism as a mechanism for attitudinal change in conflict resolution has been quite noticeable. As Pentecostalism continues to grow, the erstwhile condition continues to decline, thereby becoming an index of re-orientation and reformation of family values.

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