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Contextual Deliefs and Pragmatic (De)construction of Selected Lexical Items in White Garment Christian Church Discursive Encounters in Yoruba

Temitope Michael Ajayi[*]

Abstract

The belief cum doctrinal system of the White Garment Christian Church (WGCC) in Nigeria informs the choice of some lexical items which manifest different conventional and contextual meanings. This study demonstrates how contextual beliefs aid meaning (de)construction in discursive encounters involving the use of the seven common lexical items in the vocabulary of the church. The shared contextual beliefs of the participants, as evident in their knowledge of the macro and micro contexts of the WGCC, demonstrated through shared knowledge of language, doctrine (church culture), situation and experience, aid the pragmatic (de)construction of the identified lexical items in discursive encounters.

Key words: *Contextual beliefs, White Garment Church, doctrinal pragmatics in Nigeria*

Introduction

For as long as language continues to be a tool deployed for purposeful and meaningful human and interpersonal communicative interactions all over the world, its dynamism, particularly in relation to specific situations and contexts would remain fascinating to language scholars, and especially sociolinguists, pragmaticians and discourse analysts. To scholars in the aforementioned fields of language study, the strong relationship between language and context cannot be overemphasized. In their opinion, it is one thing for a speaker of a language to demonstrate their linguistic knowledge of the language in their ability to form logical sentences that follow the rule(s) of grammar of the language; it is another for the speaker to demonstrate their pragmatic competence in the language as evident in their ability to decipher in what context or situation a particular lexical item, phrase, formulaic and proverbial expression is required or appropriate. While the former is referred to as linguistic competence, the latter is called communication competence (Hymes, 1974). Communicative competence involves the knowledge of what to say, to whom to say it, how to say it, and when to say it.

In this study, I shall be making a further case for the intrinsic link between the two, with particular reference to the White Garment

[*] Senior Lecturer, Department of Linguistics and African Languages, University of Ibadan, Ibadan, Nigeria, E-mail: michealtemitope@yahoo.com

Christian Church setting in the Nigerian context. In particular, I shall demonstrate how contextual beliefs become handy in the pragmatic (de)construction of some lexical items with peculiar meaning(s) within the context of the church. This becomes imperative because, apart from the fact that not much attention has been given to language use in the White Garment Christian setting in Nigeria, unlike its Pentecostal counterpart, the peculiar role context plays in the (de)construction of the meanings of some lexical items considered very common and central to the doctrinal practices of the church has been completely neglected. The knowledge of the contextual behaviour of these lexical items, particularly within the micro context of the White Garment church, is very important, given their ideological importance within the church. And given the important position the White Garment Church occupies in the Nigerian Christian group in general, and the Nigerian society in particular, the knowledge of its linguistic practices is very pertinent, especially for the teaching of religious and inter-faith practices.

The White Garment Christian Church: Origin and Practices

The White Garment Church is one of the very many churches that constitute the African Independent Churches (Falaye and Alokan, 2015) which sprang up in the second half of the 19th century (Alokan, 1991; Ayegboyin and Ishola, 1997). Turner (1967) cited in Falaye and Alokan (2015), defines the African initiated/independent churches as churches founded, funded and led by Africans and in most cases for Africans. These churches are seen as the symbol of Africa's independence/liberation from the control of the Western world (Babalola, 2008). Going by the doctrinal practices of these churches, they could be described as churches that are driven by African beliefs and ideologies. Hence, many of them practice syncretism (Falaye and Alokan, 2015). These churches have representation in different African countries such as Ivory Coast, Sierra Leone, Liberia, Nigeria and beyond (Akande, 2018). In the Nigerian context, some of the churches under the umbrella of the African Independent Churches include Church of the Lord, Aladura (COLA), the Cherubim and Seraphim (C & S), the Christ Apostolic Church, The Apostolic Church, the Celestial Church of Christ and the Zionist Church (Alokan, 1991). Akande (2018) extends the list to include the Christ Apostolic Church (CAC). It is no gainsaying the fact that the White Garment Christian Church, as represented by the COLA, C & S, and CCC, among others, constitutes one of the largest churches among the African Independent Churches in Nigeria.

The WGCC in Nigeria comprises several sects and denominations among which Cherubim & Seraphim (C&S) and Celestial Church of Christ (CCC) are prominent. In fact, it might not be out of place to submit that these two major groups constitute the source/origin of the several white garment Christian groups found in the country. As reported by Baiyewu (2014), the C & S started as a Christian group on September 9, 1925 as founded by Moses Orimolade who had reportedly begun his missionary assignment in Ikare Akoko (Ondo State) sometime around 1915. This assignment took him to such places as Ilorin, Osogbo, Lokoja, Zaria, Kano and finally Lagos. The church was said to have experienced some internal crises within the first five years of its existence and this led to the emergence of a splinter group led by Christiana Abiodun Akinsowon (Bayeiwu, 2014: 46), a development that marked the beginning of subsequent emergence of other various groups such as 'C&S Ayo Ni O', Order of the C&S (ESOCS), C&S Society (CSS), Sacred Order of C&S (SCSC), Praying Band of C&S (PBCS), C&S Movement Church (CSMC), among others as witnessed in the country today. In fact, according to Baiyewu (2014), as at 2011, about fifty churches and groups have emanated from the original C&S Church founded by Moses Orimolade.

The Celestial Church of God (CCC) on the other hand was founded by Samuel Bilehou Joseph Oshoffa on 29 September, 1947 in Porto Novo, Republic of Benin. Oshoffa was said to have claimed God gave him the mandate of preaching the Gospel to 'those who run after fetish priests and other powers of darkness that at death they cannot see God because they have the mark of Satan on them; to carry out divine miraculous works in the name of Jesus Christ' (Bayeiwu, 2014: 54). He was reported to have had a divine encounter with God in a thick forest. After the said encounter, he reportedly healed a hired canoe paddler named Kudiho, and raised one Emmanuel Mawuyon from the dead. Similarly, he raised a fellow, Tinavie, from the dead when his church was barely two months. He also later performed several other miracles which made him and his church attract multitudes.

Among the fundamental doctrinal practices in the WGCC denomination include belief in spiritism and trance, and as noted by Abiaziem and Uma (2020), 'going to the river to bathe during deliverance, use of candles of diverse colours during services and drinking of waters laced with some concoctions in order to heal terminal diseases or chase out evil spirits. These practices,

considered diabolic, old-fashioned and non Bible-based, have attracted serious criticisms from other Christian groups such as the Pentecostals and Evangelicals in the country. The nomenclature 'white garment' came from the group's adoption of white garment as their means of identity, although clothing materials of different colours such as red, blue and yellow are often found among them. However, going by peculiar doctrinal practices (mixing African traditional beliefs with biblical principles), they have been seriously criticized by their Pentecostal counterparts and tagged demonic (Offiong and Offiong, 2012).

Review of Relevant Literature

The peculiar use of language in the church and Christianity context in Nigeria and beyond has attracted scholarly attention. Some of the scholarly works in this regard are Akhimien and Farotimi (2018), Ajayi (2017a), Anyanwu et al (2016), Ugot and Offiong (2013), Adedun and Mekiluwa (2010a and 2010b), Esimaje (2012), Bayeiwu (2014), Awonuga and Chimuanya (2016), and Ajayi (2019), among others. Adedun and Mekiluwa (2010a) examine the manifestation of cooperative principles in a Nigerian Christian sermon with particular interest in how meaning is constructed and deconstructed in sermonic discourse. They observe that background knowledge and assumptions by preachers and congregation members play an important role in meaning (de)construction during sermon delivery. However, the study's scope is limited to a sermon delivered in a Pentecostal context. Adedun and Mekiluwa (2010b) investigate the discourse features and patterns in a Nigerian Pentecostal Christian sermon. The study reports that sermonisation in Pentecostal Christian contexts is embellished with series of rhetorical and speech acts strategically employed by preachers in their sermons to achieve their discursive goal. This study too, like the earlier one, restricts its scope to the Pentecostal Christian sermonic discourse. Esimaje (2012) attempts a lexico-semantic exploration of Christian sermons delivered in English in Nigeria, in comparison with what is obtainable in other contexts. Esimaje notes that context is key in the semantic framing and deconstruction of the lexical items used in English sermonic discourse in Nigeria. Although Esimaje's claim on the role of context in the understanding of language use in Christian discursive encounters is valid, his study only focuses on the use of the English medium in such encounters, especially as it relates to sermons. Ugot and Offiong (2013) look at language of interaction in the Nigerian Pentecostal setting, with particular attention on the Calabar area of Nigeria These scholars note that Pentecostal

churches in this area employ the English language, Nigerian Pidgin and other local languages of the area in their services, although at varying degrees Characteristically, this study too does not include the White Garment Church in its scope. Bayeiwu (2014) is an 'encyclopedic' detailing of the transformation of the Aladura Christianity group in Nigeria, with particular focus on the origin, doctrinal practices and challenges facing the denomination. While Baiyewu details the cultural practices of the White Garment Church group, her approach is strictly from the religious studies perspective, hence her non consideration of language use in discursive interactions among members of the church.

Anyanwu et al. (2016) attempt a comparative investigation of the use of English in Orthodox and Pentecostal churches within Owerri metropolis in Imo State, Nigeria. They observe that the use of English is an effective manipulative tool deployed by preachers to achieve certain ideological goals in the two denominational groups Essentially, Anyanwu et al's study, more like the previous ones, leaves out the White Garment Church in its coverage. Awonuga and Chimuanya (2016) focus on the linguistic devices in selected Nigerian Christian preachers' sermons within the theoretical framework of systemic functional grammar. Linguistic devices such as repetition, syntactic parallelism, imperative sentences, and rhetorical questions, among others, are some of the rhetorical devices they note characterise the sermons of Nigerian Christian preachers. Although this study claims to have examined the language practice of 'selected Nigerian Christian preachers as demonstrated through their sermons, it conspicuously excludes preachers from the White Garment denomination, as those preachers focused in the study are mainly from the Pentecostal extraction.

Ajayi (2017)'s work investigates language use in Christian funeral services and sermons, especially among Christian preachers in southwestern Nigeria. Ajayi identifies discourse elements: 'reference to the deceased as *body* and not *corpse*, reference to the good deeds of the deceased, reference to shared religious (biblical) belief about death and resurrection, deployment of songs of relief, and offering of words of prayers' (Ajayi, 2017a) as pain-relieving devices pragmatically employed by Christian preachers at funeral services in southwestern Nigeria. Although Ajayi's study explores the contextual use of Yoruba in Christian sermonic discourse, especially in the context of burial and funeral ceremonies, no particular attention is paid to its (Yoruba) use in the White Garment Church,

especially with the aim of demonstrating how the macro and micro contexts of the church influence meaning (de)construction, drawing from shared contextual beliefs among the worshippers. Akhimien and Farotimi's (2018) study is a linguistic engagement of selected sermons of Pastor E. A. Adeboye, the General Overseer of the Redeemed Christian Church of God in Nigeria and one of the most popular Pentecostal preachers in the country. This is with a view to identifying and describing the discourse strategies and persuasive elements inherent in his sermons. Employing Schegloff's model of conversational analysis, they opine that Adeboye's sermons characteristically exhibit discourse features, namely feedback-call-response, adjacency pairs, openings and closings; repair mechanism, and selection of next speaker, complemented with non-verbal conversational features as pause, smile, laughter, and raising of the hands and head (Akhimien and Farotimi, 2018: 1). Ajayi (2019) attempts a generic structure potential analysis of Christian street evangelism in southwestern Nigeria. He notes that five obligatory elements: songs, greetings, sermon, prayer and finis; and three optional elements: declaration of purpose, call for confession, and welcome to the fold characterize Christian street sermonic discourse in southwestern Nigeria. The major weakness of Ajayi's work lies in its not distinguishing between/among sermons by the different groups: Pentecostal, Evangelical or White Garment Church groups/denominations involved. As obvious from the studies reviewed above, most linguistic studies on language use in Christian churches in Nigeria have largely focused on the Pentecostal group. This essentially points to the fact African Independent Churches in Nigeria have mostly drawn the attention of scholars in history, sociology, and particularly religious studies. Some of the notable studies in this regard include Nmah (2010), Falaye and Alokan (2015), Adedibu (2018), and Akande (2018), among others. These studies have essentially explored the history of the origin, modus operandi (doctrinal practices), inter-group relationships, and the ecumenical orientations of these churches in Nigeria.

Beyond the Nigerian context and the scope of linguistics, some works on Christian activities and linguistic resources are also notable. A few of these are Tönsing et al. (2015), Adams (2016), Bryan (2016), and der Merwe (2018), among others. For instance, Tönsing et al. (2015) examine the place of songs in Christian activities. They conclude singing songs constitutes a core part of the various activities in Christian gatherings and practices. Similarly, Adams (2016) and der Merwe (2018: 8) note the importance of prayer in the

belief system of Christians globally. Bryan (2016: 49) notes that calling for confession is also an essential part of Christian practices in the global space. These studies, like the ones carried out by the Nigerian scholars as discussed above, essentially did not give thoughts to the peculiarity of language use in the WGCC context. In particular, while scholarly attention has been largely paid to language and language-related phenomena in Pentecostal settings, especially in the Nigerian space, very little attention has been paid to language use in the WGCC setting, hence the pertinence of this study. This study is a novel contribution to language and church discourse scholarship, especially as it relates to the deployment of contextual beliefs in meaning (de)construction in discursive encounters in the WGCC setting in Nigeria.

Theoretical Framework: Odebunmi's Contextual Beliefs

As opined by Odebunmi (2006: 25), context incorporates the linguistic, socio-cultural and psychological "background from which the meaning of a word springs". In fact, he argues that context is the spine of meaning in interactions. Odebunmi (2006) further posits that context is of two types: linguistic context and social context. According to him, the coverage of linguistic context includes phrases, clauses and sentences surrounding a particular word, otherwise called the co-text. Social context, on the other hand, has to do with the socio-cultural, religious, political and historical aspects of an interaction. In the opinion of Mey (2001: 39), context is dynamic and as such should be conceived as "the continually changing surroundings…that enable participants in the communication process to interact, and in which the linguistic expressions of their interaction become intelligible." He submits that context provides utterances their comprehensive pragmatic meaning. Accordingly, context makes utterances achieve their illocutionary and perlocutionary goals.

In the words of Allott (2010), context is defined as "source of clues that aid the hearer in working out what the speaker intended to convey." He notes that in the absence of context, it is difficult to understand the illocutionary force or the implicature of an utterance. Therefore, context is key in teasing out the meaning of utterances. In fact, context is what distinguishes semantics from pragmatics (Unuabonah, 2016: 621). In the opinion of Allott (2010), context covers the knowledge of previous discourse, the physical environment, and subsequent discourse. This position informs his categorization of context into: physical context and co-text. Co-text,

according to Allott, contrary to Odebunmi's concept of the term (linguistic environment, including phrases, clauses and sentences surrounding a particular word), refers to a combination of the linguistic, historical, and socio-political environment of the utterance. Some of the contextual models, none of which is considered for adoption in this study, include Hymes' (1974) ethnography of communication and Levinson's (1979) activity type. Hymes' model which revolves round the concept of SPEAKING, has been heavily criticized for being too ritualistic in its approach to discourse, given its applicability to ritualized speech events including funerals, weddings and its non applicability in non ritualized events such as interviews and hospital consultative interactions (Unuabonah, 2016). Levinson's (1979) activity type, a pragmatic framework, emphasises the impact of Gricean maxims, interpersonal maxims, turn taking, topic control and other sociopragmatic parameters in the analysis of verbal interactions. Unfortunately, this model does not recognize the role of participants' knowledge, beliefs and opinions which interlocutors bring in to meaning (de)construction in discursive interactions (Unuabonah, 2016). Thus, we find Odebunmi's model of context with its emphasis on shared knowledge and beliefs interactants deploy in negotiating meaning in interaction relevant to this study, hence its adoption.

Odebunmi's (2006) contextual beliefs model is situated within common ground scholarship. According to Odebunmi (2006), participants in interactions rely on (assumed) shared linguistic resources, experiences, situations, cultures, and sociopolitical realities, among others to (de)construct meaning in discursive interactions. Thus, no utterance operates in isolation; meanings of utterances are context-bound and essentially as jointly constructed by the participants. As mentioned earlier, Odebunmi (2006) identifies two types of context: linguistic and social contexts. While the former has to do with the linguistic structure or environment of an utterance (which explains why the meaning of a word in an utterance is essentially dependent or constrained by the preceding or the succeeding item(s)), the latter, social context, refers to the role of sociocultural, situational, religious and historical factors in meaning (de)construction in communicative interactions. According to Odebunmi (2006: 26), contextual beliefs comprise two levels of beliefs: language level and situation level beliefs. Language level beliefs are demonstrated by participants' understanding of the language of communication. For example, communicative interaction between an Igbo father and his children could only be meaningfully

achieved in Igbo if they share the Igbo language, including the knowledge of the gestures that accompany the use of linguistic resources in the language. At the situation level, we deal with the assumptions which "are held on the basis of participants' shared code (linguistic and nonlinguistic) and experience" (Odebunmi, 2006: 28). According to Odebunmi, it is at the situation level that the variety of the "language selected and other situational variables are used to process meaning" (Unuabonah, 2016). For example, a Christian faithful who visits their pastor's office for counseling is acting under the assumption that the time of visitation is appropriate for visitation according to the schedule for visitation; that the pastor, being a mouthpiece of God, is spiritually enabled to perform the task of a spiritual counselor, and that the pastor is aware of these.

Odebunmi (2006) concludes that beliefs at the situation level covers participants' shared knowledge of subject/topic, shared knowledge of word choices, referents and references; and shared knowledge of previous and immediate socio-cultural experiences. Odebunmi's conception of beliefs at the level of situation points to the fact that participants have their own independent knowledge and experiences about the world, which could be personal or shared with a group such as faithful, audiences, students, teachers, doctors, nurses, etc.

At best, one can then describe Odebunmi's contextual beliefs model as a nomenclatural expansion of common ground. Some notable works that have applied Odebunmi's contextual beliefs in accounting for meaning (de)construction in language use in the Nigerian context include Odebunmi and Alo (2010), and Unuabonah (2016), among others. None of these studies too have considered language use and meaning construction in the context of white garment Christian denomination in Nigeria.

Methodology

This study relies on the ethnographic method of data collection. First, I was born and raised in a white garment family. Second, in my over thirty years of interacting with adherents and faithful of the doctrinal practices of the church, I have had cause to visit several white garment churches and parishes, as well as participate in their Sunday and mid-week services, including their special programmes and crusades. From participant observation, the particular set of lexical items considered for analysis in this study constitute the core of the vocabulary of the group, as used across the different sub-groups within the sect, including the core C&S group and the CCC.

My personal experience as an individual that has had over thirty years of exposure to the doctrinal practices of the church, my linguistic and cultural competence in the Yoruba language, which can be described as the 'official language' of the church, are handy and relevant in data generation and analysis. I should add that the Yoruba language emerges as the official language of the church, perhaps because that was the language spoken by Moses Orimolade and Bilewu Oshoffa, two major individuals involved in the establishment and founding of the two major groups (the C&S and CCC) captured in this study. Similarly, most of the present-day leaders in the church are from the Yoruba extraction in Nigeria. Thus, even beyond the shores of Nigeria, it is not surprising to observe that this sect conducts their services largely in Yoruba (although there are cases where interpretation is done in English). This explains why the excerpts captured in our data were in Yoruba for which appropriate translations were done. As a Pentecostal Christian who has participated in Pentecostal gatherings and activities for close to two decades, my observation has revealed the selected lexical items in this study are not found in the Pentecostal denomination's vocabulary. Data, comprising twelve discursive interactions, covering the conventional (macro) and the White Garment Church-specific (micro) use of the observed lexical items, ethnographically gathered in six C & S and four CCC randomly sampled White Garment churches across different parts of Nigeria, subjected to pragmatic analysis with reference to Odebunmi's (2006) contextual beliefs. The practices observed in the sampled churches validated my observation with respect to the peculiar use of language in the church.

Data Presentation and Discussion

The shared contextual beliefs in the discursive encounters (among worshippers and leaders) in the white garment context as evident in their use of the selected lexical items: *ètò, iṣẹ́, wọlé, ìmọ́lẹ̀, idà iṣẹ́gun, imọ̀ ọ́pẹ,* and *ìpèsè* manifest through their shared knowledge of language (code), doctrinal practices (which can be described as the culture of the church), experience and situation. A critical appraisal of the two contextual uses of these items informs my identification of two micro contexts within the general religious macro context of the white garment church. These are the *generalized* and the *particularized* contexts. The former refers to the usual or generic situational activities that the church shares with other churches within the Christian folk generally in Nigeria, while the latter refers to the specific situations that pertain to the core and doctrinal

practices among the white garment churches. As shall be demonstrated in my discussion, the attestation of the former in the macro religious context of the church explains why some senses of the sampled lexical items, as found in conventional Yoruba, manifest in the linguistic practice of the church. These are demonstrated in the discussion done in this section of the study.

Ètò, ìṣẹ́

I have decided to treat these two lexical items together, given their synonymous nature in the white garment church context. In conventional Yoruba usage, the word *ètò* literally means 'order', or 'pattern'. It is derived through the process of prefixation where the dependent derivational morpheme *è* is attached to '*tò*' which means to set in order, arrange or organise. The meaning is obvious in the excerpts below:

Excerpt 1 (as observed in a father-daughter interaction in a family setting)

Father (to his daughter): Ṣé o mọ̀pé ọ̀la ni o ń lọ school?
I hope you know you are returning to school tomorrow?

Daughter: Yesa (Yes sir)

Father: So, k'òo tètè lọ *to* àwọn ẹrù ẹ o
So start arranging your belongings

Daughter: Mo tí gbọ́ sir.
I have heard (you) sir

In the excerpt above, the lexical item '*to'* is jointly constructed as arrange, park and put in order by the particpants (father and daughter) given their shared knowledge of the situation at hand. In the same vein, the word *ètò* in the excerpt below is contextually interpreted as 'programme' or 'order' in its context of use.

Excerpt 2 (as observed in a radio programme)

Presenter (a radio): A kíi yín káàbọ̀ s'órí *ètò* wa. Ṣé àlááfíà ni gbogbo ilé?
We welcome you on this programme. Hope your home is good.

Interviewee: Ẹ ṣeun tí ẹ p'èwá s'órí *ètò*...A sì kí gbogbo ará ilé tí wọ̀n ń gbọ́ wa lórí ètò. Àjíńde
ara yóò ma jẹ́ o.

Thank you for inviting (me) us to the programme. We also greet out listeners at home. May we continually enjoy good health.

In the excerpt above, I capture a Yoruba programme where the word *ètò* is jointly constructed and deconstructed as meaning 'programme' by the particpants. However, the situation is different in the white garment church context, even though a sense of the meanings of the word as found in conventional Yoruba could also be found within the church's context. Consider the following excerpts:

Excerpt 3A
Church sectretary (announcing to the congregation): Bí *ètò* ìsìn wa yóó ṣe lọ lónìí níyìí...Kí

Olúwa kí ó wà pẹ̀lu wa
*Here is our **order** of service for today…may the Lord be with us*

Church: Ààmín.
Amen

Excerpt 3B
A woman (in trance delivering a 'message' to the church): ...A ó nìí ìṣọ́ òrú nínú èyìí tí a ó tí ṣe

ètò láti dáàbò bo àwọn ọmọ wẹ́wẹ́ àti àwọn aláboyún

We shall observe as vigil during which we will have a special spiritual exercise to protect the children and pregnant women

Congregation (listening and writing down the message).

Comparatively, the use of *ètò* in the two excerpts above is pragmatically different, given their contextual situations even though they both took place within the same white garment church context. In 3A, given their shared situational belief, the word *ètò* is deconstructed as programme or order of service. It means the particular order the series of events or activities lined up for the day would follow. This reveals the *generalized* (macro) context of the church. However, in 3B, the understanding of *ètò,* as used in a *particularized* (micro) context, is not so. Given the doctrinal practices

among white garment Christians to engage in some spiritual exercise such as the burning of candles, burning of incense, a combinatory use of perfume and oil, among others to ward off evil and ensure their general well-being, the lexeme *ètò* is shared as meaning spiritual processes of preparing an effectual spiritual item, which outside the Christian religious context, particularly within the Yoruba traditional practices, could be referred to as *òògùn* (charm). In 3A, since it is customary for the secretary to reel out the order of services in each service situation, just as it could be found in other churches and denominations, the congregation members easily related to his use of *ètò* in that situation (generalized context) to mean the order of service. But in 3B, the participants rely on their shared knowledge of the situational use of *ètò* in that (particularized) context to mean a special spiritual exercise/product aimed at achieving a particular goal. In both situational (macro and micro) contexts, the co-participants (audiences) do not need to be explained to as to what the meanings of *ètò* is because, over time, both the speakers and the hearers have been exposed to the same experiential cum doctrinal practices of the church, which distinguish the situation in which *ètò* would be deconstructed as 'order of service' as apposed to the situation in which it is deciphered as a potent spiritual emblem or activity.

Iṣẹ́

The word *Iṣẹ́* behaves very much like *ètò* in the white garment church micro context. In conventional Yoruba, *Iṣẹ́* could mean what earns one a living, a job or a career. That is why the Yoruba will proverbially say '*Iṣẹ́ l'òògùn ìṣẹ́, ẹni ò siṣẹ́ á j'alè'* which translates as (hard) work is the antidote to poverty; one who fails to work would steal. Let us consider the following excerpt between siblings in reference to a fellow known to the two of them on the concept of *Iṣẹ́* among the Yoruba.

Excerpt 4A (as observed in an interaction between siblings in a family setting)

A: ...Ijọ́ wo lo gbúróo Tayo last?
When last did you hear from/about Tayo?

B: Ah, ó mà ti pẹ́ẹ̀
It has been a while

A: Ó ga o.. *iṣẹ́* wo l'ó ń ṣe báyìí?
That is serious, what (job/work) is he doing now?

B: Mi ò ti ẹ̀ mọ̀, mo ṣáà rí pé ó ń advertise àwọn pedagogical materials nígbà kan
I don't even know but I am aware he was advertising some pedagogical materials sometime ago

A: Oh, ok....

In the conversation above, the word *iṣẹ́* is understood to be a job or piece of work one does to earn a decent living. The participants rely on their beliefs of the shared situational and cultural knowledge of the word *iṣẹ́* (as Yoruba) to place its meaning in this context. Note that *iṣẹ́* attracts the meaning of 'message' also in the Yoruba conventional use of the language (part of which is witnessed in the white garment church (macro) context, particularly when an individual in trance is believed to be relaying a message to the church and some individuals in the church). Let us compare the situation in 4A above with the one presented 4B below:

Excerpt 4B
Prophet: Kí gbogbo àwọn ọmọ iléèwé wa bọ́ s'íta fún àdúrà
Let every child in the church come out for prayer

Congregation (some school going youngsters and teenagers marched out)

Prophet: (Prays for them as they were preparing for school resumption). Kí ẹ tó wọlée school, a ó ṣe àkànṣe iṣẹ́ kan fún un yin...
Before you resumption in school, we shall prepare/conduct a special spiritual exercise for you…

The youths and youngsters on their knees (noting the ***message***).

Prophet: A máa nílòo oyin, àti ẹyin ìbílẹ̀, pẹ̀lu àwọn Sáàmù kan...
We will need honey, local egg, and some special Psalms (for the special spiritual activity…)

In the situation captured in 4B above, the participants, that is the prophet and the congregation rely on their shared assumptions that they both understand *iṣẹ́* not to refer to either 'work, job' nor 'message' in this situation. Rather, using their shared knowledge of the situation (micro context), doctrinal practices and subject of discourse, they deconstruct the word as meaning a potent spiritual 'concoction' believed would boost their retentive memory and

ultimately assist them in achieving excellence in their academic pursuit. No extra efforts are required on the part of either the prophet nor the addressees as to the meaning of the word *Iṣẹ́* here.

Wọlé

The Yoruba lexical item *wọlé* is an imperative sentence comprising the verb '*wọ'* enter, come inside or come in, and the nominal object *ilé* 'house'. It is a lexical item that has gone through the morphological process of contraction, hence the realisation of *wọlé* (a verb) from '*wọ'* come *ilé* house (come/go inside the house). This has been adopted as Yoruba personal names among the people, hence such names as *Olúwọlé, Wọlẹ́ọlá, Adéwọlé,* among others. Consider the meaning of *wọlé* in the excerpt below as used in conventional Yoruba.

Excerpt 5A

A: (knocks the door) ko ko ko
B: Tanì yẹn o?
Who is that?
A: Èmi Sẹ́gun ni ò
It is me Segun
B: Ah, Segzy, ìwọ l'o ń ṣebí àlejò
Ah, Segzy, you are the one acting like a stranger/visitor
(both laugh)
B: *Wọlé* jọ̀ọ́
Please come in
A: Goes in

In the excerpt above, *Wọlé* is undestood by the interactants to mean come inside, given their shared knowledge of what the lexical item could mean in this particular situation. In the white garment church context, the verb *Wọlé* shares some meanings with those found outside the church context as found in conventional Yoruba. However, one of such meanings, which is peculiarly restricted to the white garment church context, would be addressed here. That would be demonstrated in the excerpts below.

Excerpt 5B (as observed in interaction between two siblings in a family setting)

A: Tope, bóoni?
Tope, how are you?
B: Aunty, ẹ káarọ̀ ma
Aunty, good morning ma
A: Pẹ̀lẹ́. Sé kò sí táà rí ẹ ní ṣọsh l'ọ́jọ́ọ Sunday

You were not in church last Sunday. Hope no problem?
B: Rárá aunty, mi ò *wọlé* ni
No ma, I was in my period

A: Oh, pẹ̀lẹ̀. Ṣé o ṣáà fine ṣá?
Oh, sorry about that. Hope you are fine now
B: Bẹ́ẹ̀ni ma
Yes, ma
A: Alright. Take care oo.
B: Alright ma.

Excerpt 5C
Prophet: Ẹ jẹ́ kí gbogbo wa gbìyànjú l'áti wá fún ìsìn ní ọjọ́ méjọ. Ẹyin obìnrin, yálà ẹ *wọlé,* ẹ ò *wọlé,* ẹ wá. A ti ṣ'àyè ibi tí ẹ máa jókòó sí fún ẹyin tí ẹ ò *wọlé...*

Everyone should endeavour to be in church next Sunday. For the women, whether you are in your period or not, make sure you come. We have arranged a place to those in the period to stay.
Congregation (listening and taking note).

The use of *wọlé* in these exerpts (5B and 5C) is pragmatically instructive. In 5B, the first speaker (a fairly old young woman) is asking the second speaker (also a young lady) why she was not in church the previous Sunday. She immediately responds it was due to her observation of her monthly menstrual period during which she was not expected to be in church as is the practice in white garment churches. In particular, the second speaker (speaker B) responds *mi* ò *wọlé...* 'I did not enter' with the assumption that speaker A shared certain contextual beliefs (linguistic, experiential and topical/subject knowledge) with her which would help her connect to the situational interpretation of the expression in this particular instance. Speaker A in turn demonstrates her shared knowledge of this situational deconstruction of *mi* ò *wọlé* as meaning 'I could not come to church because I was observing my monthly menstrual period' in her response. This mutual understanding of *mi* ò *wọlé* in this situation as meaning 'I could not come because I was in my period' by both participants thrives on their contextual beliefs in the doctrinal practices within the white garment church's micro context. Looking at this encounter further, one could argue that the Yoruba cultural practice of avoiding taboo words and expressions, especially in public discourse is what has extended to the white garment church's micro context. As observed by Oyetade (1994) and Ajayi (2017b), the

Yoruba, as a culturally decent people, frown on the obscene use of language which they consider taboo. Hence, in place of such taboo expressions, more pleasant and euphemized ones are used. For instance, *nńkan ọmọkùnrin* is preferred to *okó* in reference to penis, and *ojú ara* to *òbò* in reference to vagina, etc. In the particular interaction presented above (5B), the expression '*mo ń ṣe mǹkan oṣù'* 'I am doing my monthly thing' could have as well been used by speaker B to veil a direct reference to her monthly vaginal bloody discharge. But this would mean that other passive participants (passers-by and others around) could easily decode what she is saying, which could be embarrassing, given the fact that the Yoruba consider anything that has to do with the private parts of the body such as the one discussed here as sensitive, and as such should be treated private. This cultural, situational and topical knowledge is shared by both speakers in this particular context, hence their understanding of *wọlé* as not meaning 'come in or enter'.

The situation is not different in Excerpt 5C where the prophet and his congregational members could easily relate to the contextual use of the word *wọlé* in his utterance. He rides on the assumption that the congregational members share the same doctrinal (cultural), linguistic, topical and situational knowledge of the expression in this micro context. He neither needs to make extra efforts to explain his utterance to the members nor seeks to know if they clearly understand his message in this particular encounter. They all, making recourse to their shared knowledge of the language of the discourse, the Yoruba culture that frowns on the use of taboo expression in public discourse, and ultimately their knowledge of the situation of the interaction, are able to construe *wọlé* as having to do with whether one can come to church or not considering one's observance of one's menstrual period or not.

Idà ìṣẹ́gun and *imọ̀ ọ́pẹ*

Idà ìṣẹ́gun and *imọ̀ ọ́pẹ,* like I did for *ètò* and *iṣẹ́*, will be treated together in this section of my discussion. This is owing to the fact that they are structurally and referentially synonymous although they are pragmatically used in different contexts. *Idà ìṣẹ́gun* and *imọ̀ ọ́pẹ* are palm fronds which constitute part of the symbolic items Christians in general and white garment churches in particular could easily relate to (as *imọ̀ ọ́pẹ* among the Yoruba Christians as a symbol of the triumphant entry of Jesus Christ into Bethlehem), given its use particularly during the Easter season when the death and resurrection of Jesus is being celebrated. However, in the white

garment church's micro context in particular, the palm frond, in addition to its being used as (*imọ̀ ọ́pẹ,* a symbol of Christ's celebration at Easter*)* assumes another pragmatic conceptualization, hence its conception as *idà ìṣẹ́gun* (a sword of victory or a sword for engaging in a battle). These two dimensions to the conceptualization of palm fronds in the white garment church context are demonstrated in the excerpts below.

Excerpt 6A
Church secretary: Kí a má gbàgbé pé Sunday t'ó ń bọ̀ ni ìsinmi ọ̀pẹ. Ẹ jẹ́ kí á rántí láti mú *imọ̀ ọ́pẹ* wa dání. Kí a má sì ṣe gbàgbé gbogbo àwọn ohun tí a fẹ́ ṣe nínú ìjọ wa...

We should not forget next Sunday is Palm Sunday. We should come with our palm fronds. And we should not also forget other activities of the church

Congregation (noting the announcements as reeled out by the church secretary)

Excerpt 6B
Prophet: ...L'ára àwọn ohun tí a máa nílò fún iṣẹ́ iṣẹ́gun tí a fẹ́ ṣe ni ọṣẹ, kàn àn kàn àti *Idà ìṣẹ́gun* méjé. A ó ka Sáàmú (mentions the Psalms) . Ṣé o ń kọ ọ́ sílẹ̀
Part of what we are going to need for the deliverance activity we want to do is soap, sponge (the local one and the sword of battle/victory).
A church member on counsellig visitation: Bẹ́ẹ̀ni, mo ń kọ ọ́ sir.
Prophet: Okay

A comparative appraisal of the excerpts (6A & 6B) above reveals the contextual deconstruction of palm fronds in different macro and micro contexts within the church. The palm frond as used in excerpt 6A (a depiction of the macro context of the church) is referred to as *imọ̀ ọ́pẹ*, a symbolic item used to celebrate the victory of Jesus over death even prior to his death as recorded in the Bible. The church secretary here is guided by the assumption that the church members to whom he is passing the information/announcement (in the situational context of a Sunday service) share the situational beliefs required to decode the meaning of the use of palm fronds in this particular situation. The situation is different in 6B (a micro context) where palm frond takes a new meaning *idà ìṣẹ́gun.* In the white garment church context in particular, and in Nigerian Christianity

system in general, there are shared beliefs in the existence of some supernatural forces that contend with humanity (Ajayi, 2015). Such forces for instance are responsible for the many misfortune and unfortunate experiences of mankind in the world. Against this backdrop, it is believed that Christians are in the world to fight wars and battles. One of the many ways of fighting such battles, in the belief system of white garment church Christians, is to take some spiritual steps, including the use of palm fronds, 'holy' water, and Psalms, among others to fortify oneself. It is in this micro context of the church that palm fronds become *idà ìṣẹ́gun* 'the sword for winning a battle/the sword of vctory'. The prophet in particular makes his utterance with the assumption that the hearer is aware of the contextual meaning of *idà ìṣẹ́gun* in this situation; the fellow being counseled similarly demonstrates his awareness of this assumption by responding accordingly. Both of them, going by their shared linguistic, situational and doctrinal knowledge of activities within the church's micro context, are able to understand palm fronds in this situation as referring to an instrument of battle/war and not as used in the context of Jesus' triumphant entry. This explains why no further clarification was requested by the fellow being counseled as to what *idà ìṣẹ́gun* meant as used by the prophet.

Ìpèsè

Ìpèsè is another lexical item in the vocabulary of the white garment church that is core to their shared doctrinal practices. Going by the compositional meaning of the word, it is difficult for non members to relate to it. The word is a composition of two morphemes, '*ì*' (a derivational bound morpheme) and *pèsè* (a free morpheme) 'provide or make provision for'. *Pèsè* is often used in the context of supplication among Yoruba Christians, particularly when asking God to provide for their needs. Hence it is common to come across an expression such as *pèsè fún ún mi Olúwa* 'provide for me oh Lord'. However, *Ìpèsè* (noun) which could translate as 'spiritual sacrifice', among others, (which could be in form of sharing of fruits or cooked food items among a particular group of people), is characteristically peculiar to the white garment church's micro context. It is often done as a response to a divine instruction to individuals or families in order to secure one favour or the other from God. The use of the word *Ìpèsè* is demonstrated in the excerpt below:

Excerpts 7

Prophet: Iya XXX, Olúwa rán mi sí ẹ.
XXX's mother, the Lord has sent me to you

Iya XXX: Má a wí o, ìránṣẹ́ rẹ ń gbọ́ Olúwa...
Speak on, your servant is listening

Prophet: Wàá gba àwẹ́ funfun ọlọ́jọ́ méta. Lẹ́yìn èyí, wàá ṣe *Ìpèsè* fún àwọn ọmọ wẹ́wẹ́, ó lè jẹ́ ẹ̀wá àti àgbàdo, tàbí èso... Olúwa ò ní fi wá sílẹ̀

You will go on three-day 'white' fast. After this, you will prepare a 'special spiritual sacrifice', it could be with beans and corn, or fruits… May the Lord never leave us

Iya XXX: Aàmín. Olúwa o ṣé o.
Amen. Thank you, Lord.

In the excerpt above, *Ìpèsè* is jointly (de)constructed as meaning a 'spiritual sacrifice', a spiritual menu/provision specially prepared for a particular set of group of people, by both participants. This interpretation is aided by the participants' shared knowledge of the doctrinal practices in/of the white garment church. The prophet uses the word *Ìpèsè* with the assumption that, given their shared knowledge of the topic, situation and 'cultural' practices of the church, the addressee, Iya XXX, would relate to the meaning of the lexical item as used. The addressee on the other hand demonstrates her awareness and understanding of this assumption, given her shared experiential and 'cultural' knowledge with the prophet, by responding and participating meaningfully and actively in the encounter. It is my belief that the choice of *Ìpèsè* as used in the white garment church context is a deliberate attempt to distinguish their 'spiritual sacrifice' from the conventional sacrifice *ẹbọ* as found in the Yoruba traditional religion. *Ìpèsè* readily comes as a euphemistic term in place of *ẹbọ* whose use in the church's micro context is believed would not be a good projection of their denomination as a church that is following the principles of Christ, especially given the global conceptual understanding of the mission of Christ in the world as coming to eradicate such practices among which *ẹbọ* is. Although it could be argued that, *ẹbọ* as used in the Yoruba traditional religion, is to appease some spiritual beings considered supernatural, while *Ìpèsè* is specially made for mortal beings. However, a critical

appraisal of the spiritual significance and goals of the two reveals they could are conceptually synonymous.

Ìmọ́lẹ̀

In the white garment church context, the use of the lexical item *ìmọ́lẹ̀* is very common. Given what it symbolically represents in the shared belief system of the church, *ìmọ́lẹ̀* is one of the items used for spiritual exercises, including *ètò*. Its perceived spiritual significance as a symbol of 'brightness of glory or star' explains why there is hardly any spiritual activity that can be embarked upon in the church without its use.

It is important to comment on its derivation process for better understanding. The word is derived through a combinatory process of prefixation and contraction. The derivational bound morpheme '*ì*' combines with *mọ́* (brighten or lighten) *ilẹ̀* (the ground or a flat surface) to derive *Ìmọ́lẹ̀* (that which lightens or brightens up a dark place). In conventional parlance, candle or *àbẹ́là* is the preferred lexical choice in reference to what is conceived or called *ìmọ́lẹ̀* in the white garment church. While the use of the lexeme *candle* is occasionally found in the church's macro context, *àbẹ́là* (candle) is rarely used, perhaps due to the derogatory connotations its use generates in the Nigerian Christian religious context dominated by Pentecostalism and Pentecostal Christians who would often describe white garment churches as being fetish. Besides, *àbẹ́là* has been identified with mysticism or esotericism associated with some groups whose acts and practices are considered magic by the Christian body in the country. Thus, *ìmọ́lẹ̀,* which sounds more pleasant (perhaps considering its derivation and function as a spiritual item in connection to glory and star) is institutionally and doctrinally adopted in the white garment church's micro context. To a non member who is not privy to the shared doctrinal belief system of the church, the lexeme *ìmọ́lẹ̀* could be (mis)understood to mean any object that could provide lighting, such as the electricity bulb or lantern. Even though *ìmọ́lẹ̀,* by its primary or conventional function, provides illumination or lighting like the bulb and lantern, its spiritual significance in the scheme of things in the white garment setting transcends just the provision of illumination. The contextual use of *ìmọ́lẹ̀* in the church is illustrated in the excerpt below.

Excerpt 8
Prophet: Gégẹ́ bí ó ṣe ku ìṣẹ́jú bíi mẹ́ẹdógún kí a wọ inú ọdún tuntun, ẹ jẹ́ kí a mú *ìmọ́lẹ̀* wa jáde..

As we are barely fifteen minutes into entering the new year, let us bring out our candle
Congregation: Brought out their candles
Prophet: (Lit his candle and asked the church members to light theirs too) Àdúrà àkọ́kọ́ tí a ó gbà ni wípe, Olúwa jẹ́ kí ògo mi búyọ nínú ọdún tuntun tí a fẹ́ wọ̀ yìí
Our first prayer point goes thus: Oh Lord, let my glory manifest in the new year we are going into
Congregation: (Started praying fervently)...

The scenario painted above is often found during cross over services (usually held between the night of December 31 through January 1 of the new year) in which churches pray and spiritually 'prepare' for a new year. In many parts of Nigeria, as it is in many countries of the world, the New Year eve is considered a significant day, particularly the peak period of the 'expiring' day (between 11 and 11:59 pm). This period is believed to be sensitive and as such should not be toyed with spiritually. In the white garment church, *ìmọ́lẹ̀* is one of the items used to launch into the new year, hence its use as seen in the excerpt above. The prophet, operating within the ambit of the assumption that the church members are exposed to the shared linguistic, experiential and doctrinal beliefs of the church, directs them to bring out their *ìmọ́lẹ̀*; the church (members) on the other hand display their awareness and understanding of this assumption as well as their understanding of the word *ìmọ́lẹ̀* in that situation by responding appropriately to the directive of the prophet (bringing out their candles). The use of *àbẹ́là* in this instance could still have been understood as referring to candle by the church members, using their shared linguistic knowledge of Yoruba and the referent. However, making recourse to their shared doctrinal and experiential knowledge which considers *àbẹ́là* a 'taboo' in the church's micro and macro contexts, participants in this encounter would rather opt for the use of *ìmọ́lẹ̀* in this situation, particularly demonstrating their knowledge of the non appropriateness of *àbẹ́là* in their doctrinal context.

Conclusion

The aim of this study is to demonstrate how contextual beliefs aid the proper understanding of some lexical items whose use is peculiarly restricted to the white garment church context, particularly as it relates to encounters held in the Yoruba language. In this regard, based on observation that has lasted over thirty years, I have identified lexical items such as *ètò, ìṣẹ́, wọlé, ìmọ́lẹ̀, ìdà ìṣẹ́gun, ìmọ̀ ọ́pẹ,* and *ìpèsè* as those that are peculiarly core to the doctrinal practices of the white garment church (in Nigeria). Drawing inputs from Odebunmi's (2006) model of contextual beliefs, it has been argued in this paper that shared knowledge of language (code), doctrinal practices (which can be described as the culture of the church), experience and situation aid participants in white garment church discursive encounters and related ones in their proper (de)construction of the meanings of these lexical items. Two major contexts are identified with respect to the use of the sampled lexical items within the white garment context: the *generalised* (macro) and *particularised* (micro) contexts. The former refers to the general practice among the various Christian churches/denominations, including the white garment church in Nigeria where Yoruba is the medium of interaction, which explains why some conventional senses of the lexical items sampled feature in the church. The latter has to do with the particular context in the white garment church where the lexical items attract special meanings based on their shared doctrinal practices.

This further lends credence to the argument of 'contextualists' such as Mey (2001), Odebunmi (2006, 2008), Ajayi (2016), and Unuabonah (2016) in general that context is the spine of meaning, and the notion that there is the need to understand the beliefs that both the speakers and the hearers know and share in order to understand the context of an interaction (Odebunmi, 2006; Allott, 2010) in particular. Essentially, it has further been clearly demonstrated in this study how contextual beliefs ensure that there is economy of language use in the White Garment Church encounters. Participants make use of few words, relying on the assumption that their co-participants have or share background knowledge of what is said. Largely, the paper has shown the role of contextual variables in the production and interpretation of utterances, particularly in the Nigerian white church context. This study is an addition to the various reference and pedagogical materials on religion and religious practices, especially in the African and Nigerian contexts.

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