

# Maiden Name Retention Practice among Married Nigerian Women

JONES G.I. AYUWO

UNIVERSITY OF PORT HARCOURT, CHOBA,  
DEPARTMENT OF LINGUISTICS AND COMMUNICATION STUDIES

---

**Abstract:** Before the 1990s in Nigeria, it was conventional for a woman to drop her maiden name and take up her husband's surname as soon as her marital status changed. No woman was said to have been fully married if such woman still retained her maiden name after marriage. By then, the maiden name of an African woman was generally regarded as a temporary name which in due time would be dropped. Of recent the contrary has almost become the norm; some women who are married do not bother to drop their maiden names after marriage. In line with the above observation, this paper sought to propound a hypothesis that accounts for the change as well as show a few cases of maiden name retention even after marriage in Nigeria. To realise this, data was collected through observation of names women bore formally, after marriage as opposed to their maiden names. The findings of this paper showed that few Nigerians are beginning to retain their maiden surnames attached to their husbands' surnames. In some cases, the husbands' surnames are not used at all.

**Keywords:** name, naming, maiden name dropping and maiden name retention.

---

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The term onomastics comes from Greek 'onoma' and it means *name*. Onomastics is thus the study of proper names. As Bright (2003) points out, such study is carried out as part of some larger fields like linguistics, ethnography, philology, history, philosophy, etc. He, further on, discusses the term 'name' which, he says, people use when they refer to almost everything (e.g. "*Banana* is the name of the fruit."). Name is mentioned as soon as a person, thing, place, a state of being, an animal or idea is being referred to; and these are what characterize noun. In fact, noun is name and name is noun.

Most languages such as English, French, Spanish, African language, etc. words often appear in writing with initial capital letters but the same rule cannot be applied to spoken language. One thing which is also characteristic for proper names is that it is unusual for proper names to occur with articles (indefinite or definite).

People also use the term 'name' when they think of 'proper names' although there is a general category of names. Bright distinguishes two principal types of proper names: personal names or *anthroponyms* and place names or *toponyms* (other varieties also exist, such as *ethnonyms*- terms referring to nationalities or ethnic groups; and *glottonyms*- referring to languages). Of the ones mentioned, only *anthroponyms* will be discussed in this paper.

In America, there is an old naming convention that allows a female to retain her maiden name even after marriage. No woman is forced to take up the name of the husband and drop her maiden name owing to the fact that she is married to the man.

There is an observed trend in the naming practice among some female Nigerians. This trending naming practice obviously violates the conventional naming practice in Africa. Conventionally, in Africa, as soon as a female is married; she automatically drops her maiden name. This is what we refer to **MAIDEN NAME DROPPING**. This naming practice had

become a convention in African societies until 1990s. Specifically, in Nigeria, the only way a female who has just been married would be allowed to carry such status is when such female must have through newspaper publication changed her maiden name and introduced her husband's name. According to Osijek (2012), "in today's form, conventional family naming involves two independent practices: 1. The inheritance of a surname from generation to generation and 2. For a woman to receive her husband's surname (family-name) upon marriage" (p.17).

On the contrary, recently, the **MAIDEN NAME DROPPING** which became a quasi-traditional practice in Nigeria at large gradually is beginning to pave way for what we consider as maiden name retention. Women now choose to retain their maiden name while attempting to accommodate their husband's name. On very rare cases, they opt to retain their maiden name even without accommodating that of their husband. The new practice is spreading so fast especially in the media (both social and traditional media) and in the political arena.

## 2. PERSONAL NAMES OR ANTHROPOLOGY

The tradition of giving names to persons, Clark states, comes from West-Germanic people. Their custom required that each individual should have a single, distinctive name. She uses the term 'personal name' in her text when she wants to address an anthroponym but if the need for greater precision arises the term 'idionym' is a better option. In a case where a supplementary name of any kind is collocated with an idionym, Clark uses the term 'by-name'. The term 'nickname', on the other hand, is used to denote "any characterizing term whether used as by-name or as idionym" (Clark, 2005, p. 456).

In the view of Ayuwo (2014), anthroponyms encode world view experiences which are propositions or beliefs about the universe. Beliefs are formulations of what is thought about the universe, its objectives and relations. He further asserts that our choices of certain personal names derive from our world view. The names given by West-Germanic people were not ready made but, instead, were made of 'themes' (words were formed from a list of existing themes). A single theme was used to make a 'monothematic' name but mostly, these themes were linked in pairs to make 'dithematic' names. These two themes were combined freely with usually no semantic connection between them (e.g. *Thorsten* > *Thor* + *sten* 'stone' – not meaning 'the stone of the god Thor').

In the observation of Batoma (2009) has observed that the meaning of African names is summed up in a cluster of three layers of meaning. These are; the lexical meaning, the onomastic meaning which is based on each tradition of naming practices and the socio-pragmatic meaning center on the cultural knowledge of the onomastic code of conduct, the interpersonal relationships of the partners of the onomastic communication, and the situational contexts that engender that communication. Proper names are not just mere lexical labels but of utmost importance is the use of their meaning in day to day discursive practices. He further noted African names can be divided into two morpho-syntactical categories: (they are either nominal, that is, they are constituted of single words), or syntagmatic (they are made up of sentences or parts thereof).

Naming culture and practices (Onomastics) in African societies specifically articulate the preceding aspects of language functions as they reflect not only the particular information on the people's culture but they also encode factors relating to the parent's (name-giver's) social, economic, political and spiritual circumstances. The components of discourse in naming also involve utilizing the morpho-semantics of the language structures to lexicalize the bearer's past, present and the future (Ogunwale, 2015).

## 3. CATEGORIES OF NAMES

### *Surnames:*

Hereditary surnames were most intensely created during the period of high Middle Ages. This process was finished by the beginning of our period. English surnames have undergone only a slight change since 1776 and little has been added to English surname stock since then. "The adoption of a different surname to one's inherited one involved taking a pre-existing one, usually at the behest of a relative bearing it, in order to come into an inheritance..." (Coates, 2007, p. 348).

All surnames are in their origin by-names. They can be divided into four main classes:

1. Derived from true by-names - *Reid/Read* > 'red (-haired)'; *Gildersleeve* > 'golden sleeve'

2. Derived from locations (local surnames) – (strictly metonymic) *Marsh, Green, Street*, etc.; (true place names) *Crawley, Sutton, Darbyshire, Ireland* etc.
3. Derived from family relationships (surnames of relationship)– *Anderson, Wilkinson*
4. Derived from occupational terms (surnames of occupation or office) – *Smith, Baker, Hayward, Coward, Reeve*

#### **Women's names:**

In medieval English records women's names are less adequately represented than men's. They rarely amount to even tenth of the total in estate surveys and are even lower in numbers in tax-rolls ratios.

Continental name fashions, as already mentioned, became popular on the island in this period. However, they were never static and the new widespread trend involved a rising popularity of 'Christian' forms. When women's names are concerned, "two related generalizations are often made: (a) that they tended to be less stereotyped ... and (b) that they reflect the 'Christian' fashion both earlier and more extensively." (Clark, 2006, p. 584)

Views such as these seem to have influenced the development of family naming. In today's form, conventional family naming involves two independent practices: 1. the inheritance of a surname from generation to generation and 2. for a woman to receive her husband's surname (family-name) upon marriage. A woman in the 12th century, if she was of a noble origin and an heiress, could have kept her family name and pass it to her sons. This custom ceased to be performed after the 13th century when husband's family name was extended to his wife.

Among people of lower social status, the usage of family-name was slower to settle. Documents from the 13th century mention women as often as they do men "but perhaps proportionately more frequently by complex periphrases detailing family relationships..." (Clark, 2006, p. 586) Women (married or widowed) were identified in reference to their husbands.

Some women had independent styles of by-naming which were not connected with their husbands or their fathers. There is only a small number of them because women were rarely publicly defined by occupations of their own. Examples of these by-names are: *Juliana Selkwomman, Margeria le Goldescherste*, etc.

#### **4. METHOD OF DATA COLLECTION/ INSTRUMENTATION**

Data for this study were gathered basically through personal interview and based on the researcher's observations with respect to the topic under study. The major instrument used for this study was interview. This interview was strictly structured in its nature; since all the subjects involved were literate. On the other hand, observations were made which also gave the interview responses a strong backing. These observations were made during formal gatherings, press briefings, certificate verification as well as during castings; most of which involved celebrities and public figures in Nigeria. Following the freshness of the topic just a few data were gathered.

Wikipedia and Facebook served as secondary sources of data for this paper.

#### **Big-Name Retention Hypothesis:**

Before 1990s in Africa and specifically Nigeria, it was conventional for a woman to drop her maiden name and take up her husband's name as soon as her marital status changes. It had been a thing to be boastful of. No woman was said to be fully married if such woman still retained her maiden name. By then, the maiden name of an African woman was generally regarded as a temporary name which in due time would be dropped. Women who are married border not to drop their maiden name even after their status change. This also extends to official documents where it remains compulsory that a married woman shall publicly drop her maiden name on a state newspaper publication and document a copy of such publication for official purposes.

Big-name retention hypothesis holds that a woman retains her maiden name even after married because of the following possible reasons:

1. A woman is likely to retain her maiden surname name even after marriage if she comes from a wealthy home. For some, they are of the view that by retaining the name, they are still part of the family. Hence, can still have a share of the family's property should the need arise.

2. The possibility of a woman to retain her maiden surname name even after her marital status changes is high if her parent(s) is highly influential in the society. She believes that the retention of such name keeps her fame.
3. A woman likely retains her maiden name if she believes she has become very popular with such name; hence, cannot drop it. This perception is commoner with female celebrities and political office holders who are female.
4. A woman is also likely to retain her maiden surname even after marriage if she thinks that marriages are temporary arrangements that may not stand the test of time. Where that happens such a woman would not be bordered about the rigors of changing her name again.
5. Influence of Western culture cannot be completely ruled out. A lot of educated Nigerian women are quick to copy Western culture as the norm. Hence, the practice is to copy their American and European counterparts.
6. Fallout of feminism: women over the years have been in a battle for gender equality especially in the political arena, this accounts for why they now retain their maiden surname so that they would not be seen as playing second fiddle or still being under the control of their husbands.

### **5. CASES OF MAIDEN NAME RETENTION AFTER MARRIAGE**

***Ngozi Okonjo Iweala:***

She is a renowned economist working with the World Bank. She also served twice as Minister of Finance in the Federal Republic of Nigeria. In fact, under the Goodluck Jonathan's administration, Dr Okonjo Iweala was not just a minister but also held the position of Coordinating Minister for the economy. She is happily married to Ikemba Iweala. She even after getting married retains her maiden surname, Okonjo while accommodating her husband's surname, Iweala.

***Ngozi U. Emeka-Nwobia:***

Ngozi U. Emeka-Nwobia is a university teacher who holds a doctorate degree in Linguistics. She is currently in the Department of Linguistics and Literary Studies, Ebonyi State University Abakaliki – Nigeria. other than drop her maiden surname, Emeka; she hyphenates it to her husband's, Nwobia.

***Mifikne Igoya Akinwale:***

She is post-graduate student of the Department of Linguistics and Communication Studies, University of Port Harcourt. She retains her maiden surname, Mifikne while accommodating her husband's, Akinwale.

***Hope Okereke Isiani:***

Hope Okereke Isiani is a Division Police Officer (DPO), Imo State Police Command. She is married to Chidiebere Isiani, her university classmate from the same department. Hope retains her maiden surname, Okereke even after getting married and also accommodates her husband's, Isiani. She belongs to the group who believes that their maiden surnames have taken them quite far therefore, as a way of showing gratitude to their parents they attach their husbands' surnames instead of having their maiden surnames dropped.

***Prof Chinyere Madumere – Obike:***

Prof Chinyere Madumere – Obike is a professor of Health Education in the Department of Human Kinetics and Health Education, University of Port Harcourt. She was a classroom teacher in the University Demonstration Secondary School before joining the staff of the University where she rose through the ranks. Her maiden surname is Madumere and even after getting married to her husband retains her Madumere and accommodates Obike, her husband's surname.

***Dr Adetokunbo Awolowo Dosunmu:***

Dr Adetokunbo Awolowo Dosunmu is the daughter of the late sage Chief Obafemi Awolowo, former Premier of Western Nigeria. She was also a Nigerian ambassador to the Netherlands as well as a trustee of HIDA (Hannah Idowu Dipeola Awolowo) Annual Lecture Series. Dr Adetokunbo was the one who presented flower to Queen Elizabeth when she came to Nigeria in 1956. She is married to Ayodeji Dosunmu. She maintains her maiden surname Awolowo while accommodating her husband's surname, Dosunmu

**International Journal of Novel Research in Humanity and Social Sciences**

 Vol. 5, Issue 1, pp: (72-77), Month: January - February 2018, Available at: [www.noveltyjournals.com](http://www.noveltyjournals.com)
***Prof S. Donwa-Ifode (Yul-Ifode):***

Prof Shirley O. Yul-Ifode (Donwa-Ifode) is a Professor of Linguistics at the University of Port Harcourt. For some decades she was known and addressed as Donwa-Ifode which includes her maiden surname. But in recent years, this erudite scholar had a change of heart and dropped her maiden surname. She is now known as Prof S. O. Yul-Ifode – where Yul is taken from her husband’s first name Yuletide. One would be tempted to ask, why the change? Could it be because of her position as a pastor in a Pentecostal church?

***Ebele Stella Onwuka – Ire:***

She is a lecturer in the Department of Linguistics and Communication Studies, University of Port Harcourt. Ebele Stella retains her maiden surname, Onwuka as she accommodates her husband’s

***Ipalibo Gogo Harry Banigo (Rivers State Deputy Governor):***

She is currently the Deputy Governor of Rivers State as well as a medical doctor turned politician. She is the first female Deputy Governor of Rivers State. Her Excellency is from Harry’s Town, Kalabari ethnic group in Rivers State with the maiden surname Harry. Even after being married to Gogo Banigo who is from Bonny, Rivers State, she accommodates her husband’s surname as a part of her full name.

***Omotola Jalade-Ekeinde:***

She is a renowned Nollywood actress, singer, philanthropist and former model who has appeared in over 300 films selling millions of video copies. She sings her debut in 1995. Omotola is an MFR national award winner. She claims to be happily married to Capt. Matthew Ekeinde with grown up children, but still keeps her maiden surname, Jalade while accommodating her husband’s surname, Ekeinde.

***Kate Henshaw Nuttall:***

Kate Henshaw Nuttall is a Nollywood actress. She won the African Movie Academy Award (AMAA) in 2008 for best actress in Leading Role. This Calabar born soft-spoken Nigerian actress is married to Rod Nuttall in 2000. She hyphenates her maiden surname Henshaw to her husband’s, Nuttall. Kate is one of those who believe that they have become very popular with their maiden surname and so, cannot throw it away.

***Joke Silva:***

Joke Silva is a popular Nollywood actress who has featured in a lot movies. Her case happens to be a very rare one. Joke’s husband is *Olu Jacobs*, a well-known actor in the Nollywood industry as well as his wife. But as shown above, the woman retains her maiden surname even after getting married to her husband and still living happily with him.

Some other female individuals among others not mentioned who have been observed to be involved in maiden surname retention practice in Nigeria are:

Veronica Opuwari Wenendah – whose maiden surname is Opuwari and her husband’s is Wenendah.

Ngozi Chikwe Adigun – whose maiden surname is Chikwe and her husband’s is Adigun.

Jane Ayuwo George – whose maiden surname is Ayuwo and her husband’s is George.

## 6. CONCLUSION

Anthroponym is, as previously stated, the study of proper names of individuals. This work has attempted to appraise succinctly the recent practice as observed in naming among women as opposed to the old conventional practice; especially in Africa. Previously, maiden surname was usually dropped by the reason of marriage. On the contrary, some Nigerian women now retain their maiden surnames after marriage. Also, there is a case (but very rare) of total absence of husband’s surname as observed in the current naming practice among Nigerian women. It is therefore worthy of note that this work does not condemn maiden surname retention as is gradually becoming the order of the day neither does it encourage maiden surname dropping as was conventionally practiced in Nigeria. Rather, it observes the current practice as it negates the old convention. Maiden surname retention is hardly the case with unpopular ladies/women and those with little or no

**International Journal of Novel Research in Humanity and Social Sciences**

Vol. 5, Issue 1, pp: (72-77), Month: January - February 2018, Available at: [www.noveltyjournals.com](http://www.noveltyjournals.com)

financial/academic/political relevance within their social environment. From the findings of this paper, there are three main groups who have been observed to be involved in this practice maiden surname retention. They include: the academic group, the economic and the political group.

This paper in conclusion therefore proposes a theory which it calls '**The Big Name Theory**'. This theory accounts for the possible reasons why a woman who is legally married can still retain her maiden surname while in the marriage. The theory is prequel to the hypothesis that has been proved in the paper as to the reasons that can actually make possible maiden surname retention after marriage by women.

**REFERENCES**

- [1] Ayuwo, J.G.I. (2014). The communication import of Obolo anthroponyms. An unpublished PhD thesis submitted to the University of Port Harcourt.
- [2] Clark, C. (2005). Onomastics, in: *The Cambridge History of the English Language Vol 1*. Cambridge University Press. United Kingdom.
- [3] Batoma, A. (2009). Onomastics and Indirect Communication Among The Kabre of Northern Togo. *Nordic Journal of African Studies* 18(3): 215–234
- [4] Bright, W. (2003). What is a name? Reflections on Onomastics. *Language and Linguistics* 4 (4):669-681
- [5] Coates, R. (2007). Onomastics, in: *The Cambridge History of the English Language Vol IV*. Cambridge University Press: United Kingdom.
- [6] Ogunwale, J. A. (2015). Paradigm shifts in the Yoruba anthroponyms: A critical discourse analysis on Yoruba reincanated-child`s names. *International Journal of African Society, Cultures and Traditions* 3 (4), pp.32-48.