

# **Sociolinguistic Significance of Names in Igbo Culture: The Umuchu Example**

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## **Abstract**

In Nigeria, the Igbo people of the South East have unique names. Umuchu is one of the towns in Igbo Land. The indigenous or people of Umuchu believe that a name has more than the attitude of 'What-Is-In-A-Name' that has destroyed that heritage through modernization and globalization. Names to Umuchu people are an embodiment of their mentality and life style which symbolically reveals their culture and sentiments, aspirations, beliefs, hopes, fortunes and values. This study examines Umuchu names from ancient to present to ascertain the extent the names have changed because of Western or European influence. This study also examines the naming conventions, values of life and love of life in comparison with the present trend of 'Modern' names. It reveals that names are not ordinary tags or labels in Umuchu but are tied to the bearer for life. The research method used in this study is the descriptive and survey approach using interviews. The findings of the research reveal that up until today, names in Umuchu still have their original ideas and meanings hence they are much more than mere tags or labels or means of identification. It is recommended that parents and guardians should continue to give children names that are of great values because they have powers to ward off negative spiritual forces. Finally, traditional names and naming in Umuchu is a priceless heritage which is done according to the thoughts, beliefs, experiences and philosophy which guard and guide the name- bearer to a successful life.

Key words: sociolinguistic significance of names; psychological effects of name on the bearer and spiritual effects of name on the bearer.

## **Introduction**

The history, philosophy and ideology of the Igbo people are encapsulated in the name they bear which Umuchu town is not exempted. A typical Igbo name is not just seen as emblems or compulsory badges every person is expected to bear for identification. A name is as important as people's history and Umuchu people take pride in their history, culture and ancestry. According to Umuchu people, names are used to examine the way Igbo people view life in its completeness as they concern personal, family and general life experiences which most of the times have cultural and philosophical undertones.

Child naming is one of the important rites in African societies and Umuchu in particular. Names have meanings and may well identify the social, cultural, political, professional and religious background of the person bearing it as well as the person giving the name. Names are not

arbitrarily given but are socio-cultural tags that function as communication tools which carry a variety of meanings. Personal names are not just empty labels but are interpretations that parents, the extended family as well as the society give to their people.

In support of this opinion, Banki (1987) observes that in many African languages, personal names have a strong opinion:

“In many African languages, personal names have a strong, socio-cultural and ethno-pragmatic bearing that go beyond mere identity or preferentiality... what is obvious is that African names have strikingly semantic and semeiotic load. In other words, they have communicative functions. Personal names in Nigeria are multifunctional despite their mono-referential status” (p. 46).

The branch of onomastics that deals with the study of personal names including their etymology, root meaning and forms is anthroponomy. Anthroponomy identifies, specifies and differentiates between names of members of a group of individuals. It defines a name as a word by which an entity is identified, designated and distinguished from another, Agyekum(2006pp.206-235). According to Ubahakwe (1981,p.27) ‘an indigenous African name of the whole personifies the individual, tells some story about the parents and or the family of the bearer, and in a more general sense points to the value of the society into which the individual is born.

### **Previous Studies on names**

Based on available literature, a number of studies have been conducted on Igbo anthroponyms. They include Ubahakwe (1981 and 1982), Ezenwa-Ohaeto (2021) and Onukawa(1982), which also form part of Igbo name. A close look at first names in Igbo and Umuchu in particular indicates that every personal name is motivated by one situation or another which point to the meaning of the names. Hence, names and naming has come to stay as far as there is birth.

Though so many have studied names in different shades as already seen but none covered the area under study, therefore, this study is novel because it has given attention on sociolinguistic significance of names in Igbo culture: An Umuchu example. This study hopes to cover a significant gap and contribute to knowledge as it will complement available studies on Igbo names in Nigeria and Umuchu in particular.

The sociolinguistic significance of names will be studied under the following subheadings: psychological effects of a name on the bearer, spiritual effects of a name on the bearer, relationship between name and language and socio-cultural analysis of names.

### **Is there any Relationship between Names and Languages?**

There is a relationship between Igbo names and Igbo language. This is because names are expressed through spoken and sign languages, which Igbo people use for the expression of their thoughts, beliefs and daily practices as well as experiences that have their philosophy and culture.

Names are the vehicle which carries the weight of their cultural linguistic burden. The meanings of Igbo names are reflected in the culture of the Igbo people which makes the names to be appreciated. According to Mcphenon (2009, p. 532)“...when names are not used properly, language will not be used effectively, when language is not used effectively matters will not be taken care of.... Thus, when the exemplary person puts a name to something it can certainly be spoken, and when spoken it can certainly be acted upon”.

This shows a shift connection between names, language and the people’s culture. Names perform the role of vehicle which carries the weight of their culture- linguistic burden of the people. It carries meaningful language of the people which its meaning is mainly derived from linguistic rules governing the use of words. Owing to the fact that Igbo names are inherently meaningful, most of them turn to be complete sentences in themselves, thus:

1. Ihedikachukwuadighi – There is none like God.
2. Kwenyerechukwu – Believe God / Agree with God
3. Marachukwu – Know God.
4. Febechukwu – Worship God.
5. So Chukwu k’anyi ma – Only God we know
6. Chim-bu-odogwu – My God is a warrior.
7. Chimzuruke – My God is complete.
8. Chimemezugo – My God has completed it.

### **Religious and Cultural Identity of Umuchu**

The people of Umuchu believe in the existence of a supernatural force controlled by good and bad spirits. Like in most religions, their belief system is equally hinged on superstition which is often seen in good and bad omens. There was also the existence of ancestral worship which was a traditional religious practice that involved the worship of the dead relatives.

In social science, identity is seen as the way that individuals label themselves as members of a particular group. Therefore identity simply mean who, you are, a condition of being a certain person from a certain area. It is who you are, if a person asked you who are you, definitely, what comes to mind is that the person wants to know the name and other variables that will identify you.

Culture reflects the identity of a people, the people, values and beliefs. It influences the nature, values and beliefs. It is the foundation of each specific ethnic group which the specific value and beliefs from previous generation will pass to the subsequent ones like in the area under study. It is not only encompasses the external aspects of a person’s life but also influences beliefs as well as the shared value of (Umuchu people) that shapes the way a person thinks, behaves and views the world. It is people’s way of life that incorporates the totality of what they are. Naming is a vital aspect of people’s cultureUmuchu inclusive. Naming is what identifies an individual from Umuchu and makes him outstanding among others. In other words, it is a person’s identity.

## **Socio-Political Significance of Ancestor Worship in Umuchu**

The people of Umuchu believe that death does not separate the dead from the living. The dead are believed to live in communities in a sub-terrain region which is the counterpart of their earthly abode. From there, they communicate with their earthly relations and interceded on their behalf against the wrath of the gods. The living reciprocates by making sacrifices of food and drinks to those ancestral spirits. Umuchu people believe that ancestors oversee the conduct of the living and it made them abstain from some negative behaviour for fear of incurring their wraths. This link between the living and the dead further explains the people's belief in reincarnation.

## **Socio-linguistic Significance of Names**

The school of thought that believes that a name is just a name which William Shakespeare belongs, maintain that there is nothing special in a name, but the first piece of information we have about a person is his name. It's often the first thing you learn about someone with which we form judgments about people very rapidly. This first information is very important in such a way that it can lead one in a positive or negative direction, which can also set the stage for future interactions.

Also, there is this expression that says: your name is you. Your name speaks for you. This expression means that a name an important part of a person. Umuchu people express their experiences: fear, anticipation, joy, terror, belief and unbelief of frustration, disaster, and anguish about life through names. Through names, Igbo people expose the state of their inner selves, Igbo names are characteristically contextual, ideological and historical. They represent significant element of a person and or family and serves as a perpetual mark in the history of the house, (Ezenwa- Ohaeto, 2021,p.14).

Igbo names are used as pointers, labels, that designate the bearers and there are also some relationship between some Igbo names and reputation. Above all, the fact remains that names have meanings amongst the Umuchu people and names are used as storehouse of experiences and belief. In Umuchu, parent or name giver gives names to his child to reply his or her neighbour's mockery. Such naming has allusive connotation. For example; 'Chinasaramokwu'- God replies my mockers. This may be from a motherwho has a delay in child birthfor a long period after her marriage, which her follow women kept mocking her until the baby girl arrived to her mother's relief. Others are: 'Emeremgini'- what have I done?; 'Emereuwaonu'- do not boast over good fate of the world; 'Obumnaeke'- Am I the creator?; 'Obumneme'- Am I the doer?

Parents or name givers also give names that are ego boosting in recognition of the incomparable gains of kinship hence, 'Izukammananneji'- No relationship/bond is stronger than that of siblings; 'Somadina'- may I not live alone or I am not alone.

## **Psychological effect of a name on the bearer:**

There is a deep psychological effect of names on the bearer which could either be positive or negative. A person's name according to Deluzain (1996) has an impact in building his or her self

image or concept. According to psychologists, names determine the messages name givers send to the child. They go further to explain that these messages are very subtle, but sometimes they take the form of jokes, teasing and even ridicule especially within the peer group. At best, the joking and teasing can make the child's self conscious about their names and reluctant to have any contact with other children out of fear of being cajoled. At worst, especially when insensitive adults think the joke and nicknames are funny and actually use them too, it can undermine healthy personalities.

If a child had a name that encourages his peers to jeer at him or her, makes his peers jeer or like him or her, it will make the child build a negative or positive self concept. In support of the above, Seeman(1980,p.129 asserts that“Ethnic tradition, religion and ancestry, gender, social class, birth other; physical appearance, time and place of birth, rearing all contribute to a sense of identity. Although identity is a complex concept... many of its attributes can be telescoped into a single morpheme-the name given to a child at birth”.

### **Spiritual Effect of a Name on the Bearer**

The spirit behind a name follows the bearer. Names do not only possess unseen powers; they also behave like words of power used to influence the mind, body and spirit according to school of thought. Another school of thought believes that ‘a good name can bring a harmonies flow of sound current or word of power to our professional and personal life and simultaneously inviting the inflow and outflow of God's bounty/blessing. With a full understanding of the power of the spoken words, name givers can choose names that will bring or attract blessings to the bearer.

Furthermore, because the spirit behind a name follows the bearer, therefore name givers should always give names that should be beneficial to them, The syllables of a person's name do not only hold a reinforcement of sound that is sweet to the ear only but also has a meaning that defines one also. As surname remarks heredity, proper name is a stamp of identity. Name contains treasure and that treasure is in its meaning as Umuchu people believe.

### **Theoretical Framework**

The theoretical framework of this study is anchored on John Staurt Mill's (1964) distinction between denotation and connotation, which was endorsed by mostly Western onomasticians that have approved Mill's terminology by shifting from the connotation and denotation distinction to an opposition between two categories of meaning thus; the lexical meaning and the onomastic meaning- meaning of names. In turn, this opposition is dependent upon the division between the two dimensions of language: the body of proper names and the body of words that constitutes the rest of the language. This classification is of the opinion that proper names are typically devoid of any lexical meaning. Even when a lexical meaning of a name is acknowledged, it is done as the onomastician's construct rather than the actual property of the name.

According to Botman (2006) ‘the meaning of African names is summarized in a cluster of three categories of meaning, the lexical meaning, the onomastic meaning which is anchored on each tradition of naming practices and the socio-pragmatic that is centred on the cultural

knowledge of the onomastic code of conduct. The interpersonal relationship partners of the onomastic communication, and the situational contexts that generate communication. Names are not just ordinary lexical label rather of more importance is the use of their meaning in day to day practices.

## **Methodology**

Data for the study were randomly selected from different families in Umuchu through interviews and observations.

## **Sociocultural Analysis of the Umuchu Names:**

Umuchu names are unique and different in their sound, structure, forms and meaning. This section is on the breakdown of the nature of Umuchu names. The names discussed in this section are traditional and contemporary Umuchu names and will be discussed under the following sub-headings:

- Circumstantial names
- Theophoric names
- Fate- tied name
- Social circumstance
- Temporonym

### **Circumstantial Names**

These are names based on circumstances surrounding the birth of a child. Examples are:

- i. Ahamefunu: May I not lose my name:

**Interpretation:** Prayer from parents that have suffered or experienced delayed child birth.

- ii. Chukwudumogu: God leads me in battles or fight.

**Interpretation:** Parents naming their child after a long fight against lack of conception was finally won with God's help.

- iii. Ekpereka: Prayer is greater

- iv. **Interpretation:** Parents who suffered severe difficulties before conception/ delivery which was won through prayers.

v. Chikaodiri: It is left for God :

**Interpretation:** The circumstance that surrounds the conception of the child is only left in God's hand.

vi. Ogechukwu: God's time:

**Interpretation:** God's time is the best, after all struggles it finally happened at God's own time.

vii. Obioha: The heart of the people/ people's need

**Interpretation:** Many people willed and desired that the child should come and eventually it happened.

viii. Maduonaenye: If it were up to man to give kids...

**Interpretation:** Childlessness makes parents give this name that if humans give children, no one would have.

ix. Chimaobim: God knows my mind:

**Interpretation:** Family saying out of circumstances that surround the child's birth that it is only God that knows the heart not man.

x. Chinazaekpere: God answers prayers:

**Interpretation:** A child conceived/born as a result of answered prayer.

xi. Okwudirichukwu: Leave every dispute for God.

**Interpretation:** After experiencing mockery from friends and family members.

xii. Chimzurum: My God is sufficient for me.

**Interpretation:** After several horrible experiences such as confusion of hidden pregnancy, missing items/ utensils.

xiii. Uzoma: Good way:

**Interpretation:** From parents that have experienced difficulties in their journey of life and now have a better life.

xiv. Rapuruchukwu: Leave everything to God

**Interpretation:** From parents that have been mocked, cajoled and accused of many ills.

xv. Nzubechukwu: God's will

**Interpretation:** Parents accepting the gift of a child as the total will of God for them against their own wish or choice.

xvi. Ngozichukwuka: God's blessings are greater

**Interpretation:** Blessings from God are the greatest, and, the child should also be a blessing to them and the world.

### **Theophoric Names**

These are those names given to children to reflect the religious belief of the parents or the name giver, faith of a people is enshrined in the name they give their children in Umuchu. It may either be faith in God or deity they ran to during their period of agony.

a. Anaelechukwu: Looking unto God:

**Interpretation:** Looking unto God for solution to life's problem.

b. Onyedikachukwu: Who is like God?

**Interpretation:** Parents showing their faith in God and expressing that nobody is like him.

c. Echezonachukwu: Never forget God:

Parents showing their total commitment to God and promising not to forget Him

d. Ikemdinachukwu: My strength is in God:

**Interpretation:** Parents showing their source of strength in God alone.



e. Chinedum: God leads me

**Interpretation:** Through the name a family shows that God leads them.

f. Chidinma: God is good

**Interpretation:** An expression of the goodness of God

g. Mmesomachukwu: God's kind/ good gesture:

**Interpretation:** Family expressing the goodness of God to them in all odds.

h. Ekenedirichukwu: Thanks be to God

**Interpretation:** Name giving to appreciate God for His benevolence to the parents of the child.

i. Oluomachukwu: God's good work

**Interpretation:** It is only God who does good work.

j. Jesunaachi: Jesus is the king/ Ruler

**Interpretation:** Parents stressing on the kingship of God as the supreme God.

k. Chukwudalu: God, thank you/ Thank you, Lord

**Interpretation:** Family expressing their gratitude to God for the gift of a child.

l. Eberechukwu: God's mercy

**Interpretation:** Parents showing that this gift shows God's mercy towards them not that they merited it.

m. Ochezechukwu: God's throne

**Interpretation:** This child should endeavour to be righteous because she is God's seat/ dwelling place.

n. Oluebubechukwu: Wonderful work of God

**Interpretation:** Parents showing that this gift is God's miracle.

o. Sochukwuma: Only God knows/ Only God understands how the child was born:

**Interpretation:** Parents saying that their faith is in God alone and only He knows about them.

p. Chukwunenye: God gives

**Interpretation:** Children are gift from God.

#### **Fate-tied names:**

These are names that were given according to the fate of the parent for the child:

a. Ifeoma-Iheoma: Good/Beautiful things

**Interpretation:** Usually a female name showing that the child is a good thing.

b. Nkiruka: The future will be better/best

**Interpretation:** Family saying, no matter the present circumstances, tomorrow or the future will be better.

c. Ogoamaka: Generosity is good

**Interpretation:** Encouraging to continue being generous..

d. Akuabata: Wealth has come

**Interpretation:** From a father who welcomes his first daughter.

Adaeze: Princess: Often to a first daughter of a king.

e. Chibuuzo: God first/God is the head

**Interpretation:** Parents pointing that it is God who leads.

f. Onyemaechi: Who knows tomorrow, it is fate-tied.

g. Obioma: Kindheart

**Interpretation:** Parents showing that it is God's kindness that pays and as such telling the bearer to be always kind.

h. Chekwubechukwu: Hope in God

**Interpretation:** Parents saying that their only hope is in God.

i. Okwuchukwu: God's word/ Prophecy

**Interpretation:** Parents showing their dependence on God's word and telling the bearer of the name to live by the word of God.

j. Febechi: Continue to worship God

**Interpretation:** Parents telling the child to continue to worship God that he /she came through the worship of God.

k. Daberechi: Depend on God

**Interpretation:** Parents disclosing their total dependence on God who gave them victory.

### **Social Circumstances**

These are names given to a child to mark social circumstances of one's personality or achievements. These are some of the social circumstances of naming in Umuchu:

Ego booster, supremacy of child over other things, supremacy of kinship, supremacy of gender and others

1. In Umuchu parents give some names as ego bolster to assert their intellectual higher social class which they enjoy over their rivals examples:

Ugooji: An iroko tree that stands out.

Agunaechemba: A lion that guides a town.

2. Another social circumstance that manifest in Umuchu names is supremacy of Child over any other thing, in which children enjoy wealth as in the following:

Onweremadu: He that has people is more than riches.

Madukaejiaka: It is in people that one is greater.

Madukaku: people are more than riches/wealth.

3. Another is recognizing the incomparable benefits of kinship through children, thus:

Somadina: May I not live alone.

Ikwuka: Kinship is supreme.

Other names given according to social circumstances in Umuchu are:

- a. Nneka: Motherhood is supreme

**Interpretation:** Pointing to the greatness of a mother and showing her importance in a family.

- b. Omumuamaka: Children are good

**Interpretation:** Parent showing their pride in their children as important/ integral part of their well-being.

- c. Omekannaya: One who behaves like the father

**Interpretation:** A father showing his strength in his child and sees himself in the child.

- d. Ikemefuna: May my strength not get lost

**Interpretation:** From parent praying that their effort should not get lost.

- e. Ihunanya: Love

**Interpretation:** It is true love of God that one survives not by strength or struggle.

- f. Ikenna: Father's strength/wealth

**Interpretation:** Parents telling the child that he is a son of their youthfulness.

g. Nkemdirim: Let mine remain for me

**Interpretation:** Parents telling fate to leave theirs for them usually after experiencing great losses/ setbacks.

### **Temporonym:**

These are names given in reference to the period of birth, or an event of the community or family.

a. Obiageriaku: Whoever comes/is born will enjoy wealth

**Interpretation:** Parents insinuating that the child that came during the time of affluence.

b. Obiarananma: One who arrived at the right time

**Interpretation:** The child came at the appropriate time when everything is right.

c. Obianuju: A child that came in the midst of plenty /came in the midst of plenty

**Interpretation:** That one who came in the midst of plenty at the pick of their high social status.

d. Aghaegbunam: May the battle of life not kill me

**Interpretation:** Telling the child that he was born in the midst of war but he survived.

In Umuchu, some names reflect social, political and religious circumstances that surround one's birth. Some of the names are:

Ndukwe or Ndudi: If life permits. These names demonstrate that life determines whatever a man does.

Ndukaku: Life is worth more than wealth: precious of all riches to be possessed by man. This does not mean that the Igbo (Umuchu) people do not search or struggle for wealth, but the point is

any pursuit of wealth that puts life in danger is totally discouraged because Nduadighiabuo – life has no duplicate.

Onwubiko/ Onwuhara: Death, please: it is a kind of prayer and request for death to spare someone's life. For a family that has sadly witnessed the death of a number of her children such a name is for any subsequent surviving child. It demonstrates also a kind of disgust over the painful effect of death.

Ozoemena: May it not happen again:

It has almost the same meaning/ implication as Onwubiko; a prayer that death may not strike again because life is preferred to death.

Onwudiwe: Death is wicked, merciless/wrathful

If death is so, then life is therefore seen as kind, good, lovable and to be desired above all.

For the people of Umuchu, good life must be loved and death dreaded. However, in as much as they manifest value for life through their names, the sight of the fact that life is absolutely a gift from God is never lost. That is why they have such names as:

Chinenyendu: God gives life

God is seen as the source and giver of life and no other.

Chinwendu: God owns life and not man. He gives at will to whom He wills.

Chikwendu: God permits life. If God permits we shall live and achieve our goal.

Ndudinakachukwu: Life is in the hands of God and never in men or riches. It is often shortened as "Nakachi"

Chibundu: God is life; an identification and personification of God with and as life, hence, the need for complete respect for life.

Tochi, Kelechi: Praise God/ thank God for the gift of life, praise Him for same.

### **Conclusion:**

From the above, the researcher concludes that Igbo names in Umuchu are not merely nominal. They contain and convey values. Therefore, to the people of Umuchu names are the epitome of the bearer or family's genealogy which mirrors the values of the society as well as the attachment to the bearer.

It serves the purpose of preserving and maintaining the historical event, a link between the past in relation to the present and possibly helping in the future action of the bearer. The researcher finds that names children bear are as a reflection of their parents' thought and life's pains.

A good name is of great value to Umuchu people, they are not collected from a book. They are from imagination of the heart and are created from events and situations. Hence, they are innumerable. A good name has great powers to fight all negative forces that surround the bearer every day because name follows the bearer, therefore, the force of a good Umuchu name is more powerful and prevailing than negative force, Umuchu people should continue to make good use of them and refuse to allow the changing world around steal their priceless heritage in naming (their) children according to belief, experience and philosophy, which have powers to ward off negative force.

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