

## THE SOCIO-CULTURAL AND LINGUISTIC IMPLICATIONS OF IGBO NAMES: A CASE STUDY OF EZEAGU NORTH LOCAL GOVERNMENT AREA OF ENUGU STATE, NIGERIA

By

Christian E. C. Ogwudile (PhD)

Department of Igbo, African and Asian Studies

Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka

[cec.ogwudile@unizik.edu.ng](mailto:cec.ogwudile@unizik.edu.ng)

Phone: 08037468693

### **Abstract**

*The study is a socio-cultural and linguistic implications of names as it concerns the people of Ezeagu North local government area of Enugu State, Nigeria. The purpose of the study is to investigate the meanings of names, categories of names and the socio-cultural implications of names in Ezeagu. The paper equally discusses the reasons for naming. This is because Igbo people in general and Ezeagu people in particular believe that the meaning of a name remains with the child and even leads him/her throughout his/her life. The study also examines the culture content of Igbo personal names which is vital in Igbo belief system. The study adopts survey method and the data are collected through oral interviews. Literature is reviewed to expose the study to other writer's views. Name and naming ceremony in Igbo land, especially in Ezeagu North, is a very important issue that cannot be toyed with. Names given to children are sacred because they were given before the presence of both the living and the dead. The paper therefore, attempts a study of naming forms and change in Igbo identity within the framework of social and cultural dynamics. It has been observed that the present Igbo people in general and Ezeagu in particular have lost sight of the sacredness and values of their names as well as the implications of the type of names they give their children. Hence the reason for this research. The study will be beneficial to the present Igbo people and Ezeagu in choosing the names they give their children, knowing fully well that names given to a child can affect him/her positively or negatively.*

### **1.0 Introduction**

The topic of the study is socio-cultural and linguistic implications of names in Ezeagu North L. G. A. of Enugu State. Name points to the bearer which could be humans, trees, places, concepts. It makes the thing named distinct from others of their kind. Name can be seen as the distinct appellation by which a person or thing is known or a name is a word or group of words used to refer to an individual entity (real or imaginary); the name singles out this entity by directly pointing to it.

There are many categories of name depending on what is named – waters, hills, animals, but this investigation is limited to personal names. A personal name is a name that belongs to an individual and which serves as a label for him or her. It is the distinct identity which every individual bears. It is the standard practice in all cultures for every individual to be named at birth. It is believed that every child should be registered

immediately after birth and shall have the right from birth to a name, and this has been going on for as long as human memory can recollect.

Different cultures maintain different naming practices. In some cultures people are given just one name as their personal names, while in others, personal name is made up of different kinds of names, the most outstanding being two given names and a surname. It is made up of a first name, middle name and a surname, all of which jointly address that person, and makes him distinct from even members of his or her own family. This practice is common among the Igbo. Their Given names consist of a first name which is usually a Christian name, and which could be western or Igbo in origin, and an Igbo name. Their surname is essentially patronymic as the Igbo have no inheritance in their mother's (maiden) home.

The names given to individuals within traditional African societies have an ontological influence on the lives of these individuals. Therefore, the names given to every Igbo child by his parents are considered to be carefully thought out and it makes meaning to the family members. This is why in Ezeagu, child naming is regarded as very important and it is always marked by a ceremony known as "Iba nwa n'ulo" ma obu "iba aha" (child naming ceremony).

The name given is not randomly selected or done through some research work carried out on names or through some guess work. So, before a name is given to a child, that name should be well thought out by his/her parents. Name is a word or words that a particular person is identified. Names are given so that ancestors will be aware of the entrance of the child into the family. These names help the ancestors know whom they are fighting for if something happens to the child. Igbo names have significance of expression and intensity of human emotions attached to them. The attachment does not only have personal living memory but also a record of persons and events that have been associated and connected with them.

In Igbo land, naming ceremony usually takes place on the twenty eight day of the month, after the birth of a child. In many African communities, a person's name is considered part of his or her personality. So by implication, names are not reflectors of one's professional ability. It is a mark of honour for one to be invited to a naming ceremony.

Igbo personal names are not mere tags of identity but very deep expressions of attitudes, sentiments, aspirations and commentaries of life experiences. The "name" of a person is the expression of his individuality and his peculiar possession". Sequel to this, it is by their names, one would be able to tell whether the child is male or female, tell the historical implication that the name refers or to tell the importance of family or clan or event that happened when the child was born.

Igbo names are therefore meaningful. Therefore, from all the available literature in relation to the topic of study, little or nothing in socio-cultural and linguistic implications of personal names have been done in Ezeagu North of Enugu State. It is in recognition of this all-importance of names among the Igbo that a linguistic study of the names becomes necessary. Moreover, name and naming constitute a significant

aspect of the language and the culture. The study will be beneficial to the present Igbo people and Ezeagu in choosing the names they give their children, knowing fully well that names given to a child can affect him/her positively or negatively.

## 2.0 An Overview of Literature

The study is all about names and naming. As a matter of fact, it is very pertinent to critically examine the term 'names'. Chomsky (1975:45) has argued that the concept of name and naming, is among language universal. However, in view of the diverse nature of the speech communities of the world in their culture and circumstances, Strawson (1950:320) in Onuoha (1986:1) stresses that this presupposes and suggests why societies and people name things, taking into consideration the roles of speech context and speaker purpose. Ezeanya (1969:9) rightly observes that name (and the art of naming) among the Igbo is not just a personal label for the sake of identity but more importantly, an embodiment of some circumstances at the time of the birth of a child Chuks-Orji (1972:75) eloquently captured this in the following questions:

Was the child born in the morning, in the evening, or at night? On what week day or market day was he born? What special circumstances relating to the child himself, to his parents, to the extended family or to the national community attended his birth? Is this the parent's first child or first female child? Is the child one of twins...?

These factors are so influential in the choice of the name given to the child among the Igbo including the Ezeagu North of Igbo.

Anyachonkeya (2014:121), posits that we should love our language and live our language by giving our children Igbo names, for our culture is our essence as a people.

Emenanjo and Ndubigbo (1980:27) posit that... "everything on earth has its own name". That means that there is nothing without a name on earth. This expresses the importance of names. According to Obaji (1982:11), "a name stands for something, and to the Igbo, it stands for that by which he intends to be understood when he or those in his milieu use it". This shows that name is the representative of something and at times the name acts upon the things it represents. In that sense, name is observed to narrate things or circumstances as they are. Names tell the history of those who bear them.

According to Nwafam (2014:2), "the name given is not randomly selected or done through some research work carried out on names or through some guess work". What Nwafam is saying is that before a name is given to a child, that name should be well throughout by his/her parents.

Miller and Miller (1973:477), say that name reflects the Hebrew concern to establish inheritance right and to prolong the prestige of important individuals. Miti (1977), opines "...nearly all African names have meaning. Some names describe the personality of the individual or his character or some key events in his life". Though this explanation is not suffice, but it expresses the fact that "the name given to one, influences one".

Parrinder (1976:39) in his own view says ... “the name given to God indicates what men think about His character and attributes”. Ubahakwe (1981:99), asserts, “names are not simple labels used as baggage tags for mere identification purposes”. This observation shows that Igbo names are chosen for their meanings not for their sounds; and choosing a name needs a deep thought. As mentioned before, Igbo people believe that the meaning of a name remains with the child throughout his life.

This made Ugonna (1983:79) argue that “every name has its significance and often expresses the thoughts, reflection or philosophy of the parents. It may imply or verbalise attitude or petition to and praise or criticism of God, spirits, kith and kin, self or the society”. Personal names in Igbo language are regarded as sacred symbols, showing the whole essence of a person’s name as a vital part of him since a name given to a person can make auspicious predictions for the child’s future. Igbo names are therefore, meaningful

Nnokwe (2009:56) in Udeze and Onyekelu (2015:142) posits “By their names, one would be able to tell whether the child is male or female, tell the historical implication that the name refers or to tell the important of family or clan, or event that happened when the child was born”. To add to this, Udeze (2010:13) acknowledges that, there is more in a name- joy and sorrow, pathos and passion, tragedy and comedy, humanity and inhumanity- than it is possible for the civilized unit to realize,

## **2.1 The Cultural Content of Igbo Names**

Names and naming practices reflect the socio-cultural background of any particular society. Names are terms that can refer to any concept or object and naming practices concern the ‘how’ of naming. Socio-cultural implications are the large scale forces within cultures and societies that affect the thoughts and behaviours of individuals in naming practices. These factors are mainly influenced by ethnic values, identity, and family and kinship structures of that particular individual.

The Igbo names (personal names) have high culture content. They are not simple labels or tags for mere identification purposes. Names and naming constitute a significant aspects of the language and culture, and so reflect the morpho-semantic structure of the language. Igbo personal names on the whole personify the individual, tell some stories about the parents or the family of the bearer and in a more general sense, points to the values of the society into which the individual is born. To illustrate this further, a good example would be the Igbo name “Onwugbufo” which depicts literally “the act of death or what death has done to the family”. Death has dealt with the family in such a way that they are appealing that they will not all die. There has to be a remnant. Names like this have perpetual landmarks in the history of the household of the Igbo people where they exist.

In traditional Igbo life, there is a lot in a name. A name is more than a tag or a convenient badge of identity. Igbo names always bear a message, a meaning, a history, a record or a prayer. They provide a window into the Igbo world of values as well as their peculiar conceptual apparatus for dealing with life. Their range of application spans the whole of life itself. Major Arthur Glyms’s “The lower Niger and its tribes” was one of the earliest written comments on the peculiarity and deep philosophical

import of Igbo names. He notes that in nothing, not even in their customs, can we grasp the natural and ancestral conception so plainly as in these names which involve promise, threaten, praise, virile, satire and sympathy that express and demonstrate all that is human.

In Igbo society, name giving is a significant ceremony performed on the occasion when the mother officially ends the postnatal period of enclosure (*omugwo*). The privilege of giving name is generally reserved to the parents and grand parents whom it gives the opportunity to express the importance of the child in their lives. It may also be a time to make significant statement on their life experiences and express deep felt wishes or their future hopes and expectations for the child.

## 2.2 Language and Culture

It is essential to explore the relationship between language and culture especially as naming in all societies deals with meaning and associations drawn from the culture of the people, or a foreign culture from which a foreign name originated. Language is a property of society by means of which all human interactions are conducted. No human society can exist without this powerful medium of communication. Language is the tool for the transmission of culture from one generation to another. Culture is a set of socially acquired knowledge, and since language is acquired and used in relation to other members of society, it is an aspect of people's culture. Hudson (2001) in Eruchalu (2018) comments as follows:

As I see it, a society's culture consists of whatever it is one has to know or believe in order to operate in a manner acceptable to its members... Culture, being what people have to learn as distinct from their biological heritage, must consist of the end-product of learning: knowledge, in a most general ...sense of the term.

Language is implicated in this kind of knowledge. Meanwhile, some anthropologists view culture as material culture, which includes artifacts, music, dance, cuisine, attire and others. From whichever way one views culture, it is that knowledge that people must possess in order to live normal daily life with other people. One's behavior must conform to the culture of the people one lives with. According to Akindele and Adegbite (2005:5-6), language and culture are connected in three major ways:

First, it is an aspect of culture – one of the very many objects and institutions of culture. Second, language is an instrument of thought. It helps to concretize thought and also to explore, extend and record the experiences in a culture. Third, language expresses culture. It is the only way by which the social experiences and values of a group of people are perceived and understood.

Edward Sapir studied the relationship between language, culture and personality, and argues that the physical world is unconsciously built up on the language habit of people. Language habit of people determines the choices of interpretations they make (Wardhaugh, 2010). Benjamin Lee Whorf, developed Sapir's ideas further, and observes that language conditions our worldview (Wardhaugh, 2010). We see things in the real world from the perspective of our individual languages. This is the theory

of Linguistic relativity. Linguistic relativity engenders cultural relativity. The idea behind this is that people live in different worlds due to their different languages. Linguistic relativity is an aspect of Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis. Since language and culture are intimately related, Igbo names represent Igbo cultural values and as such reflect Igbo ideologies and worldviews. Hence, the meanings and associations which Igbo names evoke are best preserved in Igbo language. Modernizing these names blurs their 'Igboness', and makes them meaningless both in the Igbo and English cultures.

### **3.0 Analysis of the Study**

This is where we are set to analyze the facts of our findings

#### **3.1 The Naming Practices in Ezeagu North.**

The naming ceremony in Ezeagu takes place on the twelfth day of the month after the birth of the child, that is three Igbo native weeks (izuato). In traditional Igbo society, Ezeagu North in particular, a woman who puts to bed is expected to observe the postnatal period of enclosure or confinement (omugwo). This is to help her regain her strength after the labour and to be cleansed. Within those periods, the woman is considered to be defiled and unclean. This is because of the flow of blood as a result of child bearing. She is not expected to do anything such as cooking, going to market, fetching firewood etc or even appearing in the public gathering. Hers is only to rest and eat and drink pepper-like substance (uda) for cleansing of her inner bowels.

After three native weeks, a traditional rite will be performed. A boy of 5-7 seven years old is invited to ouench a live firewood which was supposed to have been in use by the nursing mother in her room of confinement. He would ouench the firewood with a cup of water at the entrance of her room. Then the woman would cross the ouenched firewood with her child and moved outside. That marks the end of her confinement (omugwo).

The woman is now free to cook and participate in public functions. Moreover, that day is the naming ceremony of her child. The things for the naming ceremony would be brought out by the parents which might include: goat, cock, cola nuts, yams, bitter yams (ighu) palm wine, odo and nzu. The parents and the grandparents of the child would move with their kinsmen to the clan's central shrine which was housed by ancestral house (obi/ebete) to give a name to the child. But however, before then the parents of the child must have discussed and thought out the name/s they would give their child. The eldest of the family who is also the chief priest of the shrine carries an 'ofo', a symbol of justice and authority of the clan.

The chief priest takes the kola nut and raises it up and offers libation to the gods of the land telling them the mission of their gathering before them. Then, he throws out a lobe of kola nut, pours out a cup of wine and kills the cock and splashes the blood on the 'ofo' and the shrine. Then he calls on the father to give his child name first, before any other person. After the father, the mother gives her own, then follows the grandparents and any other relation of the child. After the naming, then follows eating and drinking. A child can have more than two names in Ezeagu North depending on the persons to give him names according to tradition. It is the duty of the eldest man from the family to pronounce the names after consulting the parents. When he did that, all the people

present would shout in unison ‘ofọ’ (may it be so). This seals the names of the child. It is the belief of Ezeagu people that the words used in pronouncing the child’s names are not mere sound issue in the air. They are real instrument of power, a force which goes to kindle the real person in the child and make him an integral part of the family. From thence forth, the child becomes a person because he has gotten a name and his name expresses his personality.

### 3.2 Categories of Names

The role of names is very remarkable among the people of Ezeagu. The use of the names cover every aspect of ones life. With them, they express their religious beliefs which are principle of morality. It is found out that these names revolve around the Supreme Being. This is why Miller and Miller (1973:1477) say that “...many names are theophany”.

Igbo names in this study are classified in the following categories:

#### (a) Philosophical Names

Igbo society are very rich in philosophical ideas. In this system of naming, they illustrate or portray their sympathy, tolerance and even their morality, their charity or attitude towards their neighbours and people around in names like:

- Chinedum → God leads me
- Chikelu → God created
- Ibebuike → kindreds are strength
- Nwazuluoke → child has filled my house
- Ejikemeuwa → life is not by force
- Nwadiuru → child is profitable
- Nwakaibeya → child is greater than his mates

#### (b) Lamentation Names

In this kind of names, one laments over failures of some several years of prayers. Reasons for lamentations are many and they vary in degrees. It may be as a result of deaths, downfall of business or as a result of horrible sickness in the family. When in the midst of such problems, a child born in such situation may be given names such as:

- Emeremgini → what have I done?
- Mgbechijicho → when it is God’s will
- Somkwu → I am alone
- Ogechukwukamma → God’ time is the best
- Anene → let’s see what God can do for us
- Akwaeju → weeping does not suffice

#### (c) Poetic Names

Some parents may choose to celebrate in more poetic language the impact of their little girl’s beauty. This happens when such parents realise that people admire the beauty of their baby. In appreciation therefore, they give such a baby or babies pet names like:

- Nnenna → mother of the father
- Ojiugo → eagle’s cola nut
- Akwaugo → eagle’ egg
- Olujieigbo → the Igbo will strain their neck looking at you
- Mmaegbuna → beauty cannot kill you
- Akwaeke → python’s egg

**(d) Adoration Names**

Often times, the prayers are answered favourably and the parties concerned jubilate. It pays due homage to the gods in names like:

Amarachukwu → God's favour  
Chukwudalụ → God thank you  
Chimemerie → my God has won  
Chikamso → it is God I follow  
Chidimma → the Lord is good

**(e) Boasting Names**

In other instances, the arrival of the child is used as an occasion to boast and make statements of triumph over misfortune or of vindication over gossiping neighbours. Such names given in regard to such condition are:

Egejuruuka → I have heard enough  
Akụabata → wealth has entered  
Chinagorom → God has exulted me  
Onyejekwe → who would have believed  
Akụbuilo → wealth is enmity  
Ọbianuju → a child born in abundance of wealth  
Adaeze → princess  
Adaobi → honourable daughter

**(f) Names as Family History**

Most Igbo names constitute a complete expression. They have symbolic meaning and are grammatically constructed. They usually reflect the immediate circumstances when a child is born to a family. As a reflection of the family's history, Udeze and Onyekelu (2015: 144) report that:

The names are but the pages, experiences and the chapters in the life history of every household; more than this, they are the diary or daily record, either of a person's progress and development or of deterioration and downfall. These names are not saccharine but, like an aircraft's black box, that record the content or totality of the individual Igbo.

This is an expressive reminder and powerful emotive thoughts of the family before and after a child is born. These have religious undertone most times. For instance, "Uchechukwumee" (may the will of God be done). This name is a good expression of somebody patiently expecting something or a child. When the thing or the child eventually comes, he is given such a name to serve as lasting memory to the family on the circumstances prior to his/her birth. Others include:

Onwumelụ → death has dealt with us  
Onwudiwe → death hurts  
Onwubiko → death please  
Onwudinjo → death is bad  
Ozemena → may it never happen again.



Many names have to do with the character of death and helplessness of one whose relative passed on. The names may have been as a result of unexpected deaths in the family prior to the birth of a child. Due to the pains associated with the deaths experienced by that family, the child will be given such names having to do with that death as a lasting memory. Consider the following:

“Maduagwuna” which is for short “Maduagwu” meaning, may people never finish. This is a wish from God for the growth of the family. This name can also mean ‘may there be no shortage of human being’. “Ahamefune” which is for short “Afam” → my name should not be lost. “Nnaghoyo” which is for short “Nnanna” → I have arrived in the family.

### 3.3 Structural Description of Igbo Names

This section attempts a structural analysis of selected Igbo names. By convention, there are separate names for male and separate names for female children. There are however cases of shared/unisex names where male and female children are given the same name. But whether they are male or female names, it is observed that each Igbo name can be structurally analyzed. All Igbo names are lexicalized sentences and so they are written as one word.

#### 3.3.1 Procedure for the Structural Description

We draw some male, female and unisex names and group them as observed in the Igbo name structure as in the following order:

- Lexical names
- Noun-noun phrase
- Noun-verb phrase
- Noun-verb-complement/sentential

By lexical names, we mean one word names which though were sentences but were clipped for so long that people tend to forget their components. The following are examples of lexical names:

- Oji, Ugwu, Ani, Ibe, Uba, Agu, Ugbọ, Egwu, Ilo, Enyi etc

- (A) The following is a group of noun-noun Igbo names designed for male children:

#### Name Components For Male Children

Dike- di ‘husband’ + ike ‘power’ (courageous/powerful person)

Ezeugo- eze ‘king’ + ugo ‘eagle’ (king of the eagle)

Igwedibia- igwe ‘multitude’+dibia ‘doctor/diviner’ (a renowned doctor/native doctor)

Ikechukwu- ike ‘power’ + ‘chukwu’ ‘God’ (God’s power)

Nwachukwu- nwa ‘child’ + ‘chukwu’ ‘God’ (child of God)

Obinna- obi ‘heart’ + nna ‘father/God’ (‘father’s heart)

(B) The following is a group of noun-noun Igbo names for female children:

#### Name Components for Female Children

Nnenna- nne ‘mother’ +nna ‘father’ (mother’s father)

Adaeze - ada ‘daughter’ + eze ‘king’ (king’s daughter)

Adaobi - ada ‘daughter’ + obi ‘palace’ (Daughter of the palace)

Adaora - ada 'daughter' + ora 'people' (The people's daughter)

Ebelechukwu - ebele 'mercy' + Chukwu 'God' (God's mercy)

(C) The following is a group of noun-verb Igbo names designed for male children.

### Name Components for Male Children

Aniamalu – ani 'land' + amalu 'knows' (the land knows)

Chukwucheta - Chukwu 'God' + cheta 'remember' (let God remember)

Ibekwe - ibe 'kinsmen' + kwe 'agree' (if kinsmen agree)

Ifeedi - ife 'something' + di 'is/remain' (something is/remains)

Isiguzoro - isi 'head' +guzoro 'stay/remain' (let the head remain upwards)

Nnamdi – nna m 'my father' + di 'lives' (my father lives/exists).

(D) The following is a group of noun-verb Igbo designed for female children

### Name Components for Female Children

Chimalu - Chi 'God' + malu 'knows' (God knows)

Chinenye - Chi 'God' + nyene 'gives' (God gives)

Chinyelu - Chi 'God' + nyelu 'has given' (God has given/God's gift)

Chidimma - Chi 'God'+ di 'is' + mma 'good' (God is good)

Chizoba - Chi 'God'+ zoba 'begin to save' (let God save)

The noun-verb Igbo names of male and female are exactly the same with sentential names. The difference is that the complement is not overtly expressed in the noun-verb as it is in the sentential. We separated them here for structural analysis but will combine them in the semantic analysis. The noun-verb constructions are the more lexicalized form of the sentential constructions.

Morphologically speaking, Igbo personal names are resistant to determiners or relative markers in their structures. Personal names have the tendency of appearing in the singular forms, as a universal diagnostic principle. These are some of the formal considerations that are certainly part of a grammar or morphology of Igbo personal names. We can in the light of the above, the features peculiar to Igbo personal names thus:

NP =N + N or Adj; for the noun phrase form and S =NP + VP = V+(NP) for the sentential forms. Let us consider the following:

NP → N + N =	Nwa + Ogbuu =	Nwoogbuu →	Nwogbuu
	Aka + Eze =	Akeeze →	Akeze
Ama+ Okwe =	Amooke →	Amokwe	
Ishi + Agu =	Ishaagu →	Ishagu	
Onu + Eke =	Oneeke →	Oneke	
	Eke + Agu =	Ekaagu →	Ekagu
Nwaanya + Ocha =	Nwaanyoocha →	Nwaanyocha	
Azu + Onye =	Azoonye →	Azonye	

In the above example, we observe that column one shows the constituents of the names as N + N, column two shows the assimilated form, while the third column shows the conventional spelling. It is the assimilated form that the native speaker actually

pronounces, which is not reflected by the spelling of these names. Assimilation is a very common feature of spoken Igbo in general and Igbo personal names in particular.

#### 4.0 Summary of Findings and Conclusion

This study has attempted to explore the socio-cultural and linguistic implications of naming among the Igbo, with Ezeagu North of Enugu Igbo as case study. Igbo personal names have a very high socio-cultural content. They form an integral part of the language and the day- to-day speech act of the people and so require a linguistic or grammatical description. They are found to exist, not only as noun phrase (NP) structure but also as sentences. Sources consulted accede the fact that naming has social, cultural, linguistic, philosophic colouring. Findings show that names children bear are a reflection of their parents' thoughts and life's travails. Put differently, the names given to children are the whims of their parents. This study unveils the world view of our people as regards our ideological culture. Naming among our people showcases our fears and aspirations, joys and hates, ideals and values as well as cultural and spiritual values in child rearing practice in Africa. All associated with naming is a linguistic matter, language being culture-carrier, the deoxyribonucleic acid (DNA) of culture. In effect, we should love our language and live our language by giving our children Igbo names, for our culture is our essence as a people.

Igbo parents should consider first of all the meaning and implications of names before giving it to their children. Many Igbo people give foreign names to their children without knowing the meanings of such names. Igbo people should get back to their roots and have personal and collective reflection on their cultural heritage. That is to say that the people go back to their naming ceremonies where significant names are used in naming their children. Christianity no doubt, had changed a lot of traditions that stabilized the Igbo society. Igbo people should learn that in the process of modernization of their cultures, the guiding principles should be identified and not allowed to be lost at the end.

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