

## WHAT IS IN A NAME? AN IGBO-AFRICAN PERSPECTIVE

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### **Abstract**

The present paper undertakes an examination of the Igbo-African understanding of name. The aim is to highlight and strengthen the theoretical basis upon which the Igbo names in particular and African names are given. The approach is analytical. It is discovered that in the Igbo culture, names are not given arbitrarily. Rather a number of factors or certain cultural imperatives determine the name that a child is given such as: a family's or communal historical experiences or existential conditions, religious beliefs, circumstances of birth etc. These and several more others tend to shape or condition the names which individuals receive. Igbo names are not just tags for identification. They embody much symbols and meanings. This is against the arbitrary giving of names or outright choice of foreign names that have no significance for the African. On this note therefore the paper not only sounds a caveat on the growing trend of arbitrary naming and aversion towards Igbo-African names but also makes a clarion call for a rethink and for people to cherish once more their indigenous names.

**Keywords:** Name, Igbo, culture, beliefs and symbolic.

### **Introduction**

In the recent times, the Igbo language and culture have come under serious threat sequel to the increasingly eroding effects of the phenomenon of globalization and attendant inter-cultural encounters. The autochthonous Igbo cultural values are being challenged. For instance, it has not been long that the United Nations made a clarion that the Igbo language was at the verge of extinction. Invariably, the Igbo culture (as language is of the vehicles of culture) has been placed on the list of endangered species. But little do people know that Igbo personal names which serve as the primary factor in determining a person's origin and identity are at the verge of extinction too as a good number of Igbo people now resort to either adulterated Igbo names or entirely foreign names. It is now a growing trend in Nigeria for people to name their children arbitrarily. Even in the churches many priests and pastors abhor Igbo names at baptism and embrace foreign names. These ministers have done more harm than good to the Igbo culture. The above ugly trend calls for a rethink. The need to arrest the above situation serves as the

motivation for the present work.

According to P. O Bodunrin, “philosophical enquiry has a peculiarity.”<sup>1</sup> The above statement, according to him implies that, philosophy has got its peculiar approach and does not settle for the given. It rather goes on to probe the *raison d’être* of any given reality under its consideration. Based on the above feature of philosophy, the concept ‘name’ though at a glance seems common from ordinary point of view, has some cultural trappings that inform its meaning, origin, and usage in the Igbo culture. In a résumé, this is a philosophical probe of the concept of ‘name’ in Igbo culture.

The first section the work is an explication on name and its intersection with identity. The second section presents the Igbo perspective on names. It highlights the symbolic nature of names and the vital factors that inform the choice of names in Igbo culture. The third chapter is a detailed explanation of the ritual involved in naming ceremony in Igbo culture. The fourth section presents the western perspective on names. The fifth section does a comparative analysis of Igbo (African) and Western perspectives on name. Then comes a critical summation of the work, which also serves as the conclusion.

### **Name and Identity: A Conceptual Explication**

The Oxford Advanced Learners dictionary defines name as, “a word or words by which a person, an animal, a place or thing is known or spoken to or about”<sup>2</sup>. It went further and gave other meanings as, a reputation (especially a good one), a famous person, and identification tag of somebody or something and to state something exactly; to specify something among other interpretations. The Encyclopedia Britannica however succinctly concludes that a name is “a word or small group of words used to indicate an individual entity, real or imaginary, in its entirety.”<sup>3</sup> The above definitions are very clear as the two reference books stated clearly without equivocation, that ‘name’ or ‘names’ are not only mere word or words but as a mode of identification of a person, animal, place or thing. In a world where different entities exist both material and immaterial, it will be unimaginable that there is no method or form of classification. And since we cannot deny the existence or use of classification in our material universe, where different classes, species and categories of things exist in all its uniqueness, then we are somehow tied to this concept – Name. However, its interpretation and mode of usage may vary. It is fundamentally used as a mode of specification, but for the Igbo-African it means more than specificity and identity.

Identity refers to what makes an entity what it is. The word identity is derived from the Latin *idios* and *idem*, meaning *sameness*. Name serves as a tag of identity for a being. A reality, entity, phenomenon or event seems to wallow in the world of anonymity until a name is assigned or placed on it then its identity becomes partly concretized. A strange or unknown disease when named, gives a clue as to the nature of the disease and how to go

about its cure. Name makes it possible for one to be known and to connect with others socially. However, the Igbo-African names go beyond serving as a tag.

**Generally, names are classified under various forms such as:**

**A. Common Names: this names or describes any entity, person, a concept, place or thing. They are not usually capitalized.** The term “Common name” is sometimes used roughly as the equivalent of ‘noun’. It is usually contrasted with proper names or nouns.

**B. Personal Name: Proper names are the names of specific persons, places or things.** This can also be called a given name. In western nations, most people have three names - two given names and a family name. The given name consists of a first name and middle name. It is often called a Christian name. The family name is also called the surname or last name. All three names together make up the legal name. Notably, most of the common given name comes from Hebrew, Greek, Latin or Teutonic Languages. The present research focuses more on personal names.

**Other types of names include: quasi-personal names, non-personal names, place names, brand names: names of historical events or epochs etc.**

**The Igbo-African Perspective on Names**

The continent of Africa is blessed with multiplicity of cultures but despite the above fact, a conscious observer can always notice the basic similarities that exist among these cultures. It is based on this underlying similarity that a culture could be termed African in origin. The present work focuses on one of these cultures, the Igbo culture in the investigation of the meaning of names. The Igbo-African concept of names goes beyond a tag of identification. Ehusani acknowledging the above view quoted Charles Nyamiti thus: “To an African, however, a name means much more than an identification mark, and serves more purposes than a baggage tag”<sup>4</sup>. He was also quick to assert: ‘The African name is an important vehicle of cultural identity by virtue of their rich religious, anthropological and social content’<sup>5</sup>. In the African worldview then, a child cannot be named “Bush” for instance just for the fun of it or just because a tick forest exist beside his father’s abode or more still for the sake of convenience. An African name essentially should have a religious, social or cultural root. That is to say that African names despite their literal translation connotes a deeper meaning which could be metaphysical or existential with respect to a particular family’s world (wholistic experience). Names are also determined by historical circumstances and experiences: eg Anataogu (done/born soon after the war), Oguadimma (war is evil), Onwegbusi, (may frequent deaths subside), Obianama (born at the moment of joy and abundance). There are also religious considerations for instance the belief in reincarnation: Nnaya, Nnamdi, Nnedi and Nnenna are all names implying a return or coming back of either mother or father. The Igbo of Eastern Nigeria for instance attach so much importance to name that some names are derived from the market day on which a child was born. G.T. Basden anchoring on the above view writes:

It is a mark of honour and respect to be invited to give a name and the privilege is usually reserved for one of the elder relatives. Two or more names are given, the first almost invariably taking the form “Nwa” (child, in combination with the name of the day on which the child was born, e.g Nwa-eke—the child of the eke day).<sup>6</sup>

Good examples of such names are; Nwafor, Okafor (Males) or Mgbafor (females), for those born on afor market days. Others include Okoye, Mgbe-eke and Nwankwo for those born on Oye, eke and Nkwo market days respectively.

Apart from naming a child based on the market days, some market play the dual role a deity and a market site, thus the Igbos names a child after a deity especially a market-deity and by implication dedicates the child to the said deity for protection. Benedict Okoli corroborating the above view has this to say: “Names are given in order to protect the individual from harm.”<sup>7</sup> Example Ekeawgbu, Oyeudo, and Aforudo.

In Igbo-African culture also names are given based on the family’s existential realities. Fabian Ukaegbu noted equally that:

Once a child is born, a name arises from the parents’ belief, faith, vision or experience. The child must be given a name within four days (Izu Nta). It is through the calling of this name that the Igbos know that babies hear earlier than seeing<sup>8</sup>.

Such existential circumstances result in naming a child names like Aghamere (war has done it (for a child born during the war), Ahamefuna (let my name not be lost, (for parent who has waited for years to have a child), Ogwanwa (completion of childbirth, for parents who has waited for a female child for years), Umunnadikwe (if my in-laws agree, for a wife who has faced many maltreatment before her in-laws) and Ogoamaka (Charity is good, for one who has reaped the fruit of Charity).

As a result of the Igbo-African man’s belief in God, names like, Ikcchukwu, Chukwujekwu and Chibunze, meaning ‘God’s power’, ‘God will say’ and ‘God is my crown’ respectively are equally given. However the Igbos are also ardent believers of reincarnation, and so he names his offspring anchoring on the above religious believe as G.T. Basden observes:

The second name is suggested by the display of some characteristic trait, or some resemblance, fancied or otherwise, to a deceased member of the family. The Igbos believes that all children are reincarnations of beings who have already passed through a lifetime in this world, hence a man will point to a little girl and gravely inform you that she is his mother reborn into the world! The child will

consequently be given the name of the relative it is supposed to resemble and as such will receive a joyful welcome back to earth<sup>9</sup>.

The same trend could be observed in other African cultures, as could be seen in this Yoruba saying as acknowledged by Ehusani “lie lanuwo Kato Somo loruko”<sup>10</sup> (the state of the house is what is considered before giving a child a name). However this unique trend does not imply absolute uniformity, as, Ehusani quickly acknowledges Erikson thus:

From his or her name one can determine not only which country an African is from, but also which ethnic or language group. Thus an ‘Adeiza’ is from the Epira speaking part of Nigeria, a Chukwudike is from the Igbo speaking part of Nigeria, a kwame is from Akan speaking part of Ghana, Zinyoyo is from Shona speaking part of Zimbabwe, and so on”.<sup>11</sup>

There seems then to be no better quote to conclude the Igbo perception of the “name’ concept other than that of Sofola as acknowledged by Ehusani:

To us names are cultural. They tell us who we are, what our thought and aspirations are. They express our relation with our maker. Above all they represent our attempt to understand the universe and ourselves, our place in the universe and our attempt to achieve order in our human midst<sup>12</sup>.

Examples of prevalent African names, their origins and meanings include:

	<b>NAME</b>	<b>ORIGIN</b>	<b>MEANINGS</b>
1.	Ikechukwu	Igbo (Nigeria)	God’s power
2.	Ngozi	Igbo (Nigeria)	Blessing
3.	Abimbola	Yoruba (Nigeria)	Born rich
4.	Abioye	Yoruba (Nigeria)	Born during Coronation
5.	Adamu	Swahili (Kenya-Tanzania)	Adam
6.	Abdalla	Swahili (Kenya -Tanzania)	Servant of God
7.	Addae	Akan (Ghana)	Morning sun

### **Naming Ceremony in Igbo-African Setting**

Naming ceremony is a very important ritual in most African societies. G.T. Basden aptly describes naming ceremony in Africa as “a time of great rejoicing and feasting and large quantities of palm wine are consumed in celebrating the occasion”<sup>13</sup>. For John S. Mbiti “The naming of children is therefore an important occasion which is often marked by ceremonies in many societies”<sup>14</sup>. The Igbo people for instance were bound by tradition to set out a day when name or names were conferred on a newborn baby<sup>15</sup>. This day was generally the twenty-eight day of the baby’s birth. Prior to the naming ceremony, the

child is not allowed to live without a name and so he/she is given a name depicting the market day on which he/she was born. Such names as 'Nweke', 'Nwankwo', 'Okoli' and 'Nwafor' stand as examples.

On completion of the seven native weeks (28 days) the elders in the 'Umunna' (kindred) were summoned to come and give the baby a name or names as the case might be. This was the duty of the father of the child. His in-laws were also summoned, as they were equally free to come with friends and well-wishers. The mother of the child was called to bring the baby as all the important guests arrive.

The Igbo symbol of authority and representative of the god's popularly called *ofo* must be brought before the commencement of naming ceremony. Kolanut and alligator pepper were also brought. The eldest man in the community then carried the baby on his laps looking at the baby's face and said the usual proverb; *E lee nwa anya n'ihu aguo ya afa*, meaning one must first look at a child in the face and then give him/her a name. He could say, 'call this child, 'Chibuzo' for me'. The people around would repeat the name 'Chibuzo'. The name was then glorified and the elderly man was then praised for his wisdom in giving the child a benefiting name. The father of the child and the in-laws also gives the child a name following the same tradition.

In conclusion the elderly man uses the *Ofo* and hits it on the ground and prays to the gods and the ancestors to guide and protect the child and help him/her to grow up a useful citizen. The man then takes the kolanut and prays at length for the good health, long life and prosperity of the child and everybody around. In some cases, the at family or kindred calls a diviner who engages in consultation to determine the name that can be given to the child. The diviner consults with the forces that are operative in the given cosmology and extracts this vital information.

The Wolof name their children one week after birth. Friends and relatives of the family concerned are informed before and if it is the first child a large gathering takes place. The ceremony is performed where the birth occurred and starts just before noon. The Shona has no special ceremony for naming their children, this being done by the father a few days after birth. Among the Luo, the child's name is sought when the child is crying. During this period, different names of the living-dead are mentioned and if the child stops crying when a particular name is called out, then the child receives that name. The names have meaning according to the occasion or other significance at the time of birth. The Akamba give names to their children on the third day, the occasion being marked by feasting and rejoicing. On the fourth day the father hangs an iron necklace on the child's neck, after which it is regarded as a full human being and as having lost contact with the spirit world. Before that, the child is regarded as an object belonging to the spirit (Kiimu), and if he should die before the naming ceremony, the mother becomes ritually unclean

and must be cleansed. When the naming has been performed, the parents perform a ritual sexual intercourse that night. This ritual is the seal of the child's separation into the company of human beings. Names are chosen by women who have had children and most of them have meanings.

### **Names: Western Perspective on Names**

To the western world, name is merely a tag of identification nay specification with little or no deeper philosophical connotation. George Ehusani acknowledges this fact while quoting Sofola: "What has been a source of wonderment and sometimes frustration to the Africans, since the cultural contact with west is the kind of names the newcomers to their territories bore and are bearing."<sup>16</sup>He went further to add:

Besides the fact most of the traditional European and American names hardly had any philosophical motifs, there is a new development in the contemporary American society, whereby parents pick names for their children merely on the consideration of how "sweet" they sound."<sup>17</sup> The two quotations above clearly capture the conception of the western world as regards "name" and what it stands for. The Western world, unlike the African, views 'name' as an abstract concept that represents a person, a place or an object. Even in these days of much philosophical muscle flexing, the West perhaps because of their renewed interest and alignment with secularism and materialism has degenerated to the level of naming for convenience sake. Ehusani concludes then that:

Even the traditional Judeo-Christain names that perhaps had some meaning in the past are today being reduced to monosyllabic words, which in themselves mean nothing beyond their sound, and serve little purpose beyond identification. We refer to such mimes as "Pete" for Peter, "Sam," for Samson or Samuel, and "Jim" for James<sup>18</sup>.

To sufficiently highlight the difference between African and Western perspectives about name, we need to do a little comparative analysis.

### **African and Western perspectives on Names: A Comparative Analysis**

When a writer or commentator on culture makes reference to cultural plurality, he is simply informing or reminding his readers that man is not only a product of culture but that humanity manifolds cultural orientations. Based on the common understanding of culture as 'a way of life', it is arguably possible to conclude that each individual possesses a culture that is unique to him/her, not to talk of a community of individuals, a state or a continent. Having seen the need to accept cultural diversity as an existential fact, we cannot equally avoid attempting a comparative analysis of the concept 'name' as could be interpreted from the perspective of different cultures.

The notions of name in both the western worldview and African worldview have their points of convergence and divergence. In both cultures, name serves as a means of

identification. This is fundamental and is the major similarity shared both cultures. In western culture, names are regarded as an identification mark or serve the purpose of baggage tag, in other words, here names tend to be labels or tags which the individual carries along with him for identity.<sup>19</sup> But African names transcend mere identification tag. They tend to be highly symbolic.

African names are pregnant with deep meanings that have social significance and their collective study in a particular society expresses a worldview of the people.<sup>20</sup>

Thus for the African, 'name' has a deeper signification that is anchored on the religious, socio-cultural and collective lived experience and aspirations of the African peoples within a particular community. Ehusani underscores the above view when he says: "Names teach, instruct, motivate and inspire generation after generation of Africans in the religious and philosophical truths, which have been tested over time."<sup>21</sup> African names mostly spring from the cultural and existential experience of the people.

The above contrast between Western concept of name and African concept does not suggest that Western names (be it personal names or place-names) are devoid of deeper meanings and cultural trappings rather where such meanings do exist, they do not often go beyond mere literal interpretations. Examples are such names like, Andrew (manly), Barbara (stranger), Deborah (bee) and Richard (rule, hard). With reference to names of places in western culture, there are those that are descriptive like incident names such as Battle Creek, Avalanche Pass. There are those that are possessive such as Cooperstown; and euphemistic: Greenland, among others. In a nutshell then, western names could be said to be simplistic labels or tags of identity while African names could be deified, historical and even philosophical.

### **Evaluation and Conclusion**

The present work has done an exposition on Igbo-African understanding about names. It discussed the ritual involved in naming ceremony. The paper highlighted the core features of Igbo-African names. It also gave a brief description of Western perception about names. This was followed by a comparative analysis of the African and Western perspectives on names. Their areas of convergence and divergence were discussed. Names remain a fundamental instrument of identity in both cultures.

Your name is your identify and a window on your culture and self. Your name links you with your past, your ancestors and is a part of your spirituality.<sup>22</sup> Igbo-African names, apart from being a means of identification, is imbued with some cultural trappings. For instance, Laurenti Magesa in noting the rationale behind naming tradition in Africa using the Maasai as a point of reference states thus:

What justifies the desire for children among the Maasai as everywhere else in the continent is the need to preserve the life- force so that the life of the family, community or clan may continue without end. This purpose supersedes all



others (such as parents personal economic or social standing through offspring) and is made clear in the naming practices of African religions.<sup>23</sup>

The above quotation as we can see links the African concept of name with the preservation of life-force and perpetuation of the family lineage. The desire for the continual existence of man on earth is a noble one based on man's intent for self-preservation. The problem only lies on how Africans set to realize this noble objective. African must realize that in practical terms, the intent for self-preservation is only an inbuilt desire in man and inasmuch as we can argue that an individual could take his/her life or strive to preserve it, based on his/her actions or inactions, the continuation of human race is not dependent on a person or group of persons not to talk of giving a name to preserve the life-force. If there is actually a life-force according to the Maasai, what nature is this life-force? And how does naming influence the life-force? Is the life-force spiritual or material?

Ensuing from the above notion of 'life-force' or vital force is the belief in 'reincarnation' and "the way in which names are given indicates a specific understanding of "reincarnation" throughout the continent" Laurenti Magesa states further thus:

More than merely symbolic or for purpose of identification real-representation (making present again) takes place in the act of naming. Naming involves the incarnation or actualization of a person (an ancestor) a certain desired moral quality or value a physical trait or power or an occasion or event.<sup>24</sup>

This is to say that in Igbo-African context, "to confer a name is therefore to confer personality, status, destiny or express a wish or circumstances in which the bearer of the name was born,"<sup>25</sup> as C. Nyamiti was quoted by Laurenti Magesa. One may ask, how real is reincarnation? If reincarnation is possible, how do we account for parents who gave birth to say, fifteen children; whose incarnates are they? How many descendants can an ancestor confer his/her vital force? How can a child who is not well groomed according to the traditional family values exhibit the supposed good character of the ancestor he/she incarnated from? The above concern about reincarnation notwithstanding, the phenomenon remains one of the articles of belief in African culture. Reincarnation therefore is one of the key factors that determine the name a child can be given in Igbo-African culture. For we are made to believe, according to the Agni people thus: "Reincarnation here is real, but in the sense that the life force of the deceased comes to inhabit, protect and shape the character of the child."<sup>26</sup> It is on this basis that the name of ancestor is automatically given to the new born baby.

Another serious issue arising from African conception of name is the fact of the belief that a name decreed by the ancestors or deities serving as a sort of protection over the child. If they are sources of protection, how do we reconcile this with the fact that child mortality rate was high in the past when there were few hospitals, fewer health professionals and less health consciousness despite the predominance of the above naming traditions? Can a child with an untreated case of malaria survive the ailment solely on the mere bearing a name after a shrine?

J.S. Mbiti recounted a common practice among the Luo, thus:

Among the Luo, the child's name is sought when the child is crying. During this period, different names of the living-dead are mentioned, and if the child stops crying when a particular name is called out, then the child receives that name. The names have meaning according to the occasion or other significance at the time of birth.<sup>27</sup>

Evaluating the above belief boils down to a very loose assumption. There are many reasons why a child cries at such a tender age and to ascribe the crying of a child to the need to name him/her after an ancestor is unwarranted.

Conclusively, the above critique of African perception of 'name' should not becloud its many positive attributes, such as its social, religious and philosophical anchorage. The fact that Africans tie naming to existential realities is a strong positive point. Thus, "names are conferred according to the circumstances of birth, link with ancestors or elders or by choice of an ancestor or divinity through some sort of oracle or revelation."<sup>28</sup> Undeniably, the phenomenon of globalization and culture contact have had serious effects on the African culture and much changes have been recorded. Today many parents tend to abhor indigenous Igbo-African names and prefer foreign names. Some go to the extent of giving their children names of their favourite football clubs such as Liverpool, Aston, Chelsea etc. It is the firm belief of the present researchers that this paper will once more draw attention to this ugly trend and possibly make a clarion call for a rethink.

### Endnotes

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