
The Sociolinguistics of Igbo Personal Names

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Abstract

Naming is a universal linguistic act. In Africa, naming is linked with traditions, values, beliefs, and events in people's lives. This study firstly presents sociocultural relevance of personal names in Igbo. Personal names in Igbo reveal important insights into the patterns of social and cultural organization of the Igbo society. The paper discusses the typology of Igbo names such as family names, occupational names, circumstantial names, market day names, kinship names, honorifics and title names, metaphoric names, etc. Igbo naming systems depict the Igbo culture and philosophy because an indigenous Igbo name identifies the bearer as a member of the Igbo society and carves a space for him/her in the society. In the traditional Igbo society, name givers chose personal names that reflect their culture. However, the changing modern and religious influences on the land and the people have left their impact on naming patterns. This results in changing naming practices. The paper, therefore, attempts a study of naming forms and change in Igbo identity within the framework of social and cultural dynamics. The paper reveals that names are no longer driven by the traditional Igbo philosophy rather by some external factors like new religions, urbanization and Western philosophy.

Introduction

Personal names are the foundation of one's identity. The topic of names has drawn the attention of philosophers of language, ethnographers, anthropologists and linguists, each with their own ideas and theories about names. Mutunda (2011) observes one widely held view, that of nonsense theorists (Searle 1967) which posits that a personal name has no meaning (Mill 1961); it is merely a tag, a pointer-outer which in itself has next to no meaning (Adamic 1942). Markey (1982:138) also claims that "while names have references, they lack sense." This theory claims that personal names are arbitrary. This theory was, however, refuted by Bing (1993) who stated that it reflects Westerners' worldview and does not apply to all cultures. In Africa, a name is viewed as a message that the name-giver conveys to society through the bearer of that name (Mutunda 2011). A personal name in Africa paves ways into understanding the culture of the people. On this note, Zawawi (1993:xii) comments, "personal names provide an important component of African cultural identities."

African personal names have high cultural significance. The power of African personal names reflects cultural variables such as kinship, gender relations, class, cosmology, personal tastes and preferences, and indexes relationships that define socio-cultural functions and meaning. African personal names, therefore, are creative cultural symbols that represent experiences, conflicts or situations with deep historical resonances. These names are a body of knowledge that reflect a wide gamut of African culture; language, history, philosophy, spirituality and worldview. African names mirror the patterns of the society's cultural and social organization and are pointers to individuals' identities and collective belonging.

Personal names in most African settings do not simply identify an individual; they are lexical items that designate in addition: circumstances of birth, sex, family hierarchy, physical features of the baby at the time of birth, day of delivery etc. A closer look at personal names in Lamso just as in any other African language reveals that these names are not just viewed as the personal property of the bearer, the lexical choices in preference for the composition of these names are good pointers to the socio-cultural leanings of the native speakers (Yuka, 2008:3).

The study of personal names is subsumed under the term ‘anthroponomastics’. It is an aspect of linguistic anthropology, and lexemes found in anthroponomastics reveal the values and ideas of the society concerned, details about the people's origins, tradition, professions, fashion, social rank, etc. Based on this, many African and Africanist scholars have looked at studied personal names in Africa. In his study on African naming practices, Stewart (1996:3) observes that “while Western names are generally chosen for their aesthetic values, African names are selected taking additional factors into consideration.” These may include beliefs and world view, ethical and social values, events or circumstances at the birth of the child, place of birth, period of birth, and manners of birth.

Iwundu (1994) attempts a classification of the semantic categories of Igbo names and finds the followings: (i) theophoric (ii) ideational (iii) monumental (iv) testimonial (v) relational (vi) solicitor (vii) admonitory (viii) temporal. Ogunwale (2012) subsumes Yoruba proverbial names into Iwundu’s classification. Ubahakwe (1981:108) gives a typology of African names as: given, ascribed and pet. Given and ascribed names are apparently more valued by families and studied by linguists and anthropologists. Given names are names which are given to a child at birth while ascribed names are based on certain unique

circumstances. Igbo market-day names are instances of ascribed names.

Ogie (2002) investigates Edo personal names and argues that they are used to affirm certain aspects of Edo culture. The linguistic aspect of the study breaks names into its constituent morphological parts to reveal their meanings. Agyekum's (2006) study deals with naming as an important aspect of the Akan society and looks at Akan names within the pure linguistic anthropology. According to Agyekum, names are not arbitrary labels but socio-cultural tags that have socio-cultural functions and meanings. The study also discusses the typology of Akan names.

The social and cultural orientation of a people is reflected in the names they bear. On this note, Yuka's (2007) study on Lamnso names claims that names that eulogize antisocial behaviour and activities are rejected as personal names. According to him, words like *Shó* (thief) [**mdzeshó*] 'I am a thief'; *kibaa* (madness) [**bò kibaa*] 'madness is better'; *rím* (witch) [**rìmdzewo*] 'you are a witch', etc., are not considered worthy candidates for personal names."

The philosophy of a people can be unearthed through the study of their personal names. In this vein, Onukawa (2011) argues that the semantic scope of *Uwa* covers three types of reality – abstract, spiritual and physical – in the Igbo metaphysics. The study draws examples from Igbo personal names and expressions. In the same vein, Mmadike (2014) studied *Ala* names as an aspect of the Igbo worldview because of the overwhelming influence of *Ala* over the various aspects of Igbo life. *Ala* anthroponyms, according to Mmadike, are personal names given to children at birth in honour of the earth goddess, *Ala*. The study observed that the use of *Àlà* names as forenames has become obsolete as a result of the influence of Christianity.

Emeka-Nwobia (2016) studied the dynamics of onomastics in Afikpo Igbo society. Most importantly, the paper looked at the typology of Afikpo-Igbo personal names. An interesting aspect of the study is the class of names which appear under the category, 'physical appearance'. This class of name, according to her, reflects complexion, size and values. For instance, *Okorochoa* - fair boy (male); *Ojii* - dark complexioned (female); *Ucha* - fair complexioned (female); *Ugo* - eagle (a beautiful bird); *Ọla edo* - gold (a valuable jewel); *Mma* – beauty. Personal names occur in any language and they basically change, develop, and die out, and they have a life cycle similar to that of the other lexical items of the language (Rosenhouse, 2002).

The view of this paper is that there is an ongoing change in the naming practices of the Igbo people. This change could be construed as one examines the traditional and contemporary Igbo naming patterns. Traditional Igbo society is used in this paper to refer to precolonial Igbo while contemporary Igbo society refers to the postcolonial period, which is the period from late 20th Century to present. The rest of the paper is organized as follows: Section two discusses the methodology adopted by the paper. Section three gives an overview of the theory of social and cultural dynamics. Section four presents a typology of names in the traditional Igbo society. Section five is on innovations in the Igbo naming system while section six forms the summary and conclusion.

Methodology

Some of the names in this paper were collected from entries in primary and secondary school registers, churches (for records of Christians who were baptized into the new faith) while others belong to friends, family members and individuals from various

villages in Igbo land. A good number of the names were obtained from the class list of 2016/2017 first year students of the department of Linguistics, Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka, Nigeria.

Oral interviews were conducted for some older members of the Igbo speech community to find out the meanings of names and reasons for giving such names. Three different groups were investigated: elders above 70 years, who are the actual custodian of the Igbo tradition and culture; those between the ages of 40 and 60 years, who have imbibed mixed culture owing to language contact and western education; and parents of children below 20 years to ascertain the level of intergenerational transmission of Igbo personal names.

Theoretical orientation

The study of personal names is referred to as anthroponomy. Anthroponomy is related to genealogy, sociology and anthropology. It falls under the umbrella of onomastics that deals with the study of proper names including their forms and use (see Algeo 1992: 727). Under the umbrella of Onomastics there come two branches of research, anthroponomastics which deals with personal names and toponomastics devoted to the study of the names of places. This paper routes through anthroponomastics, and it is an aspect of linguistic anthropology. The focus of this branch of study is that there is a strong interface between a people's language and their cultural practices. There are two basic principles of the branch of study: (a) how language is used as cultural resources and practices, and (b) how language is viewed as a powerful tool used to view and understand the worldview and philosophy of a particular society. With this understanding

language can be used as a microscopic lens to view and understand the social practices and day-to-day activities of a society.

However, the focus of this paper is the change in the identity and naming practices of the Igbo. For a work on changing patterns of naming, this study explores the theory of social and cultural dynamics. This theory claims that all sociocultural phenomena change incessantly owing to some external forces. Sorokin (1970) presents three sub-theories within the theory of social and cultural dynamics that take care of the various phenomenal changes. These sub-theories are the externalistic theory of change, environmentalism and mechanistic theory of change.

The externalistic theory of change, according to Sorokin (1970:631), “looks for the reasons (causes, factors or forces) of change of any sociocultural system in some “variables” that lie outside of the sociocultural system itself.” He goes on to ascertain that when the investigators set forth the problem of what are the factors, reasons, variables responsible for the change, they almost invariably take variables or factors external to the phenomenon studied, and through the change of this external factor(s) explain the change of the phenomenon under investigation. The phenomenon itself is assumed to be something purely passive, devoid of any capacity of change by itself, and pushed by this or that external force along the line of change.

Environmentalism, as Sorokin puts it, is a theory and method of externalistic explanations of any change through “environmental forces” that lie outside but not within, the unit studied. Mechanistic theory, in the words of Sorokin, usually assumes that any sociocultural phenomenon is in a state of rest or static equilibrium, and remains in the state of rest until some

“external force” thrusts it out of its place and keeps it moving and changing.

From the foregoing, therefore, it is obvious that a sociocultural phenomenon is destined to remain changeless without external forces or factors of change. It is these external forces or factors that set the phenomenon in motion. Concerning the change in Igbo naming practices, societal factors play vital roles. As the society is changing people’s behaviour is changing. This paper tries to show how this behavioural change is reflected among the Igbo.

Typology of names in the traditional Igbo society

The classification of types of Igbo personal names is discussed in this section. Here, emphasis is laid on the description of names that existed in the traditional community.

Family names

Children were given names based on their clans. Clans in Igbo land have peculiar names which most of them were derived from certain deities the ancestors worshipped. Examples of such names are: *Agwu, Agbara, Onyejemeni, Ubanjiogo, Ofodile, Ofokansi*

Occupational names

These are names given according to people’s job. Instances are:

Diji	Yam cultivator
Diochi	Palm wine tapper
Dinta	Hunter
Okamgba	Wrestler

Circumstantial names

Many a time there could be circumstances surrounding the birth of a child. In the traditional Igbo society, these circumstances

suggested the names given to a child. Instances of circumstances that surround a child's birth are: manner of birth, period of birth, place of birth, festivals or sacred days, etc. Blum (1997: 364) states that these names are viewed as governing the child's fate in some ways, they should harmonise with the time and often place of the child's birth...'. Here, I will discuss manner of birth and death prevention and survival names as instances of circumstantial names.

Manner of birth

Sometimes there may be certain events that herald the birth of a given child. When the child is born, s/he is given a name that depicts those events. For instance, a woman who stayed for a long time in marriage before conception may give the child names like *Ositadimma* 'If it starts today to be good', *Taabugboo* 'Today is early', etc.

Death prevention and survival names

In the traditional Igbo culture, there was a belief that if a mother suffered constant child mortality, then the reason was that the child was an *ogbanje*¹. To combat such an unfortunate situation, the parents would give the child a weird name. They believed that if the name is unattractive the spirit of death would not like to accept the child anymore and this would make the child stay. Examples are *Onwudinjo* 'death is evil', *Onwubiko* 'death, please', *Onwudiwe* 'death is wicked', *Onwuasanya* 'death is no respecter of person', etc.

Market day names

There is a system of four-day names that correspond to the Igbo days of the week². There are two forms; one for males and another

for females. A child automatically gets a name based on the day s/he was born even before s/he is officially named. Igbo market day names show a regular pattern: name of a market-day deity + *nwa* (or *oko*)/*mgba* ‘male/female child’ e.g.

Deity	Male	Female
Eke	Nweke /Okeke	Mgbeke
Orie	Nwaorie/Okorie	Mgborie
Afo	Nwafọ/Okafo	Mgbafọ
Nkwo	Nwankwo/Okonkwo	Mgbankwo

¹ *Ogbanje* in the traditional Igbo culture is a child that is born, torments the parents through rigorous sequence of sicknesses, dies and comes back to be borne by the same woman. However, societal and cultural dynamism has impacted on this belief. Such children are now seen as sufferers of sickle cell anaemia.

² There are four days in the Igbo week. These are also the four market days. These days are named after the market deities which are *Eke*, *Orie*, *Afo* and *Nkwo*. Surprisingly, Akan, a West African language, has a system of seven-day names that correspond to the days of the week just like almost all the Indo-European languages. Akan names of the days of the week show a regular pattern: name of a deity + *-(a)da* ‘day’ e.g. *Kwasi-ada*, *Dwo-ada*, *Memene-da...* The same patterns are found in English (*Mon-day*, *Tues-day*, *Wednes-day...*), in Italian (*Lune-dì*, *Marte-dì*, *Mercole-dì*) and in many other Indo-European languages: French (*Lun-di*, *Mar-di*, *Mercre-di*), German (*Mon-tag*, *Diens-tag*, *Donners-tag*), Norway (*Man-dag*, *Tirs -day*, *Ons-*

Kinship names

These are names associated with kinsmen. It is otherwise referred to as name saking. Naming a child after its kinsmen serves as a link between two alternate generations – grandparents and grandchildren. This naming practice stems from the belief that the child so-named will automatically inherit the virtues of its grandparents. For examples, when a first child is born, the parents feel that their own parents or friends have reincarnated. The child may be given names such as:

Nnenna	Father's mother
Nnenne	Mother's mother
Ogbonnija	Father's friend
Enyinnija	Father's friend

There are other cases where the parents give their children the same names as their parents.

Honorifics and title names

Some other names are taken outside people's given names. Such names may be achieved from occupations, wars, zeal, and stool names when a person is enthroned. Such names are normally appellations and titles. Examples, *Ogbuagu*, *Ogbuehi*, *Ikenga*, *Ezegedegwum*, *Ezeamii*, *Igwe*, *Ahūbaraezeama*

Metaphoric names

These names are symbolic names used to represent certain objects. Instances are *Oji* (Iroko), *Agū* (Tiger), *etc.*

Names denoting Igbo philosophy and worldview

Igbo personal names are significant entry points into Igbo philosophy and worldview. An Igbo name can stand for its bearer and synecdochally epitomizes the essence of his or her being.

Names connected with *Uwa*, *Chi*, *Eke* and *Ndu* depict Igbo traditional philosophy. *Uwa*, *Chi* and *Eke* are essences of life in the Igbo metaphysical belief. The concept of *uwa* becomes glaring in *Ilo uwa* ‘Reincarnation’ which literally interprets as “to return to life”. *Ilo uwa* is basic in Igbo metaphysics. The traditional Igbo belief is that it (*Ilo uwa*) is the only process by which all humans come into existence. Onukawa (2011) notes that *uwa* is a polysemous nominal in Igbo. Its core meaning is “life/existence” and its other referents are “nature/fortune” and “the world and its occupants” (the people). *Uwa* as “nature” is related to *Chi* (individualized providence, destiny) and *Eke* (agency of destiny). In his discussions on the relationship between *Uwa*, *Chi* and *Eke*, Nwala (1985:116) cited in Onukawa (2011) points out that:

The concrete conception of this nature and destiny are “Uwa” and the personal “Chi” which every man has. Thus if man does something characteristic of him the Igbo say: “*O bu otu uwa ya di*” (i.e it is how his nature is). If a man meets misfortune he is “*Onye chi ojoo*” (i.e. one that has a bad chi i.e. bad destiny). In Owerri there are cults of *Uwa* and *Chi*. The cults of chi is very common in Nri clan in Awka area. The cult of *Eke* embodies the conception of nature and destiny found in *uwa* and *chi*.

Ndu is “the life-giving force”, not “life” itself. *Ndu* is “the activating principle sustaining all existence and also regulating all actions. It operates in all modes of existence. If an Igbo says *Onye/ihe a di ndu*, s/he means that “the person/thing is alive” (not that he/it has life) i.e. the force regulating his/its activity is active (Onukawa, 2011).

Examples of names connected with *Uwa*, *Chi*, *Eke* and *Ndu* include:

Uwa names

Uwadięgwu	The world is amazing
Uwazuruike	People should have some rest
Uwaezuoke	Life is not all-satisfactory.
Ejikemeuwa	Issues of life are not handled with force

Chi names

Onyebuęhiibeya	Who is the other's destiny
Ukaachi	The concern of destiny
Mmaduabuchi	Nobody is destiny
Chijindu	Destiny controls life sustenance

Eke names

Ekeoma	Good agency of destiny
Ekenedu	Agency of destiny leads
Ekekwe	If agency of destiny permits
Ekejekwu	Agency of destiny will decide

Ndu names

Nduębuisi	Life sustenance is basic
Ndukwe	If life sustenance permits
Ukandu	The concern of life sustenance
Onyejindu	Who controls life sustenance

Changing patterns of Igbo names

The innovations in the Igbo naming system is the focus of this section. It is worthy of mention that the innovations observed in the structure and system of Igbo names have been brought about

by such factors as religion, westernization, education, and urbanization.

These changes include:

Change of family names

Agyekum (2006) aptly observes that among the Akan, by default people who bear the same family name are supposed to be related genetically. That is to say that people who are related genetically bear the same family name. This practice was religiously followed in the traditional Igbo society, but is currently affected due to societal change. Presently, two brothers will bear different surnames and will not be recognized as brothers from the same parents. For instance, brother A bears Chinedu as surname and brother B answers Chukwuemeka as surname. Their children will bear different surnames. There is nothing in their names that will suggest genetic relationship. This is a clear instance of change in identity practices.

Christian or Western names

Presently, elites and Christians take up names after the foreign religion and western culture. People take these names as their first names. Examples are Linda, Mary, John, Stephanie, Vanessa, Philip, Peter, Favour, Miracle, Cherish, Amblessed, Itiswell, etc. Again, baptismal names are being used in place of Igbo family names. These names are the father's baptismal names. There is nothing in these names that shows they are Igbo people. Instances are: Rita Dominic, Christiana Christian, Favour David, Martha John, Splendor Stephen, Frank Edwards, Alfred Daniel, etc. Agyekum (2006:228) rightly observes that in Akan, "this phenomenon is so predominant among females than among males." However, this is not the case with Igbo. In Igbo land, the

adoption of Christian or Western names is equally evident across genders.

Adoption of Hausa/Muslim names

Another intriguing observation in the changing patterns of Igbo names is the adoption of Hausa/Muslim names. I observed that contemporary Igbo people now bear Hausa/Muslim names. This is quite intriguing because a typical Igbo man is a Christian. But then, conversion of a few Igbo people to Islam has left its impact on Igbo naming practice. Therefore, some Igbo people currently take up Hausa/Muslim names. So, one finds Igbo people bearing such names as Ibrahim Katu, Ahmed Idris, Muhammed Abdulkadir, Amina Karatu, etc.

Matrimonial names

In the traditional Igbo society, married Igbo females took the names of their husbands and dropped their maiden names. In the contemporary Igbo society, females still take the names of their husbands and drop their maiden names but there is a changing trend where females combine their maiden names with their matrimonial names. Instances are: Okafor-Anowai, Obiora-Anokwuru, Ede-Nwagbara, Udeji-Obika, etc. It is noteworthy that the last name is usually the husband's name.

Anglicized names

The names discussed under this section are the names derived from the use of English orthography and translation from Igbo into English. Here, there are two categories – category A and category B. Names under category A are spelt using the English alphabet and sounds while category B contains names translated from Igbo into English.

Category A

English	Igbo name represented
Iyke	Ikenna/Ikechukwu
Ify	Ifeoma/Ifeyinwa/Ifeanyichukwu
Dukor	Mmadudịkọ
Okey	Okechukwu
Nekky	Nwanneka
Chizzy	Chimzimụzọ
Zubix	Azụbuike
Chybyke	Chukwubuike
Edeh	Ede
Okafor	Okafo
KC	Kanayochukwu/Kenechukwu

Category B

Igbo	English
Ngozi	Blessing
Ogechi	Godstime
Kenechi	Thankgod
Amara	Favour
Adaeze	Princess
Toochukwu	Praisegod
Oluebube	Miracle

Chi names

With the advent of Christianity, Igbo people have changed the ‘*Chi*’, a key factor in the Igbo traditional philosophy to denote their belief in God. This results in the multiplicity of *Chi* names such as:

Chidimma	God is good
Chiemerie	God has won
Chimgozirim	My God blessed me

Chinedu	God leads
Chisom	God is with me
Chioma	Good God
Chinenye	God gives
Chinonso	God is close

Name dropping

People add names to their original names and drop some of the original; this is a system of elimination by substitution. This is most evident in people with circumstantial names who normally change them when they grow up. Again, this is a clear case of the influence of Christianity. For example, names such as *Ohuabunwa*, *Nweke*, *Nwaagwu*, *Nwosu* are fast disappearing. People who answered *Nweke* or *Nwaagwu* will drop the *eke* or *agwu* and add *chukwu* hence, *Nwachukwu*.

Names for twins

Twins were not a part of traditional Igbo culture. They were forbidden in Igbo land. However, cultural change has led to the acceptance of twins in contemporary Igbo land. Hence, one finds names given to identical twins like *Ogechi* and *Mgbechi* for females, *Ikenna* and *Tobenna* for males. There is uniformity in these names.

Names given after successful people

Parents often give names to their children after 'successful' individuals in the society. A very good example is the period between 2010-2015 when President Goodluck Jonathan was the president of Nigeria; the circumstances surrounding his enthronement led to parents naming their children after him. Many

Igbo boys born within that period were named *Goodluck*. Members of the Living Faith Church (a.k.a. Winners Chapel) name their male children *David* and their female children *Faith* as a result of success recorded by the founder of the church and his wife – Bishop David Oyedepo and Pastor Faith Oyedepo. Some others are named after people who are successful in their various areas of endeavours such as medicine, law, etc.

Summary and Conclusion

This paper brings to consciousness the changing trend in Igbo naming practices/patterns in terms of the identity they want to bear in the contemporary society. It examined the mechanisms involved in the new/changing practices in Igbo naming system. The paper discovered that a good number of issues such as absolute hope and trust in the gods and ancestors, caution, the essence of man, the unforeseen nature of future, kinship, etc., which were unwritten regulations stipulated for individual members of the Igbo society and the society at large were represented in the names given in the traditional era.

Regrettably, Igbo people no longer take on these kinds of names despite the fact that this class of names is educative. The changing phenomenon is motivated by religion, westernization, education, and urbanization. There is actually nothing wrong with the old names such as *Irugo*, *Oji*, *Mgbeke*, *Mgbafo*, etc. but no one wants the child to bear such names anymore. Presently *Mgbeke*, *Mgbafo*, etc. gives impression of people who are still backward. They are now used ridiculously to refer to people who are uncivilized.

Cultural and societal changes have left their impacts on the contemporary Igbo naming system. ‘Chi’ appears so much in the contemporary Igbo naming system. It is pertinent to note that the ‘Chi’ in contemporary Igbo naming system is not the same as that in the traditional Igbo naming system. The ‘Chi’ in the former represents the Christian God while the ‘Chi’ in the latter is an essence of life in the Igbo metaphysical belief. It is also noted that people change their names when there is something in the family history they want to dissociate themselves from, and in order to put an end to such historical event, they cease to answer the family name.

With the ongoing trend in matrimonial names, Igbo families will soon be like some western families where a wife bears a surname different from that of the husband. Nonetheless, the paper has no doubt provided useful insight into the changing perspectives in Igbo naming system.

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