

Naming in Igbo Land: A Linguistic and Cultural Study

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Abstract

This paper examines naming in Igbo land to ascertain a range of implications it entails. The study assumes a position that the Igbo do not give names to their children anyhow, that the names they give their children have social, linguistic, historical, religious and philosophic colouring. It argues that names of children of the Igbo born are a projection of not only the whims of the parents but also a window through which we mirror their lives and concatenations. At times, such names constitute an aphorism unto themselves as well as an exemplum of their world view, what we may in Igbo refer to as Uwa Ndi Igbo. Naming reveals the people's sociological and ideological culture, vis-à-vis, their folkways, fears and aspirations, joys and hates, ideals and values as well as their cultural and spiritual values in which they hold so dear. The paper observes that every generation sets its own value. That is why the philosophic meanings of naming of the previous generation of our forebears sharply contrast with those of the succeeding generations. The Omuma Igbo in Oru East Local Government Area of Imo State will furnish the case study of the inquiry that is so fascinating, so intriguing, but, also, at the same time, so interesting.

1. Introduction

In Africa, and probably Asia, naming is unique and meaningful, even among people of different subcultures within a speech community. By subcultures we mean dialectal areas. The linguistic features manifest themselves among the Igbo stock of Nigeria and Igbo in the Diaspora. This assertion will be justified in the course of this essay.

The Omuma people in Oru East L.G. A. of Imo State share cognate cosmology with their Igbo kith and kin in the naming enterprise. The process of naming within themselves follows the same prescriptive rituals as well as modus operandi. It hinges on the demands of traditional religion of their forebears, irrespective of alien religious faith. Thus, naming is a delicate issue that is not trampled upon or treated with levity.

While explicating this crucial cultural and linguistic matter, we will bring to the limelight the religious, linguistic, social, philosophical, historical, etc., ramifications of naming.

2. Clearing the Ground

We do not mean forest clearing in readiness for yam farming. We mean to explain some assertions and claims or generalizations in the synopsis of this essay. These assertions are: The meaningfulness of names among Africans or uniqueness of names within subcultures (or regional) dialectal areas and cognate linguistic features is evident among the Igbo. For example, Rolihlahla literally means "trouble maker" or "pulling the branch of a tree" (Maharaj and Kathrada n.d: 13).

Again, Chinualumogu means "May (my) Chi or God fight my war or battle," a name Achebe "simply cut...in two, making it more businesslike without...losing the general drift of its meaning" (Achebe 1982: 67).

Adam, the Asian, no doubt, was a linguist. The first assignment God gave Adam was to name "all the beasts of the field and the birds of the air" (Genesis 2: 19, 20). Adam, according to Watch Tower Bible and

Tract Society of Pennsylvania (1988:44), means "earthly man, mankind; humankind; from a root meaning "red." The Hebrew word "mankind" or "earthly man" occurs as "man" over 560 times in the Scriptures and is applied to individuals and mankind in general. It is also used as a proper name. Essien (2004: 104) observes that Eve took a cue from her husband, and so named her first son Cain; that means "with the help of the Lord, I brought forth a man."

From this earliest linguistic function Essien infers:

We can therefore see that even from the very beginning, naming had been an important duty man had to perform not only to distinguish animals from birds but man from man to facilitate linguistic communication. Brothers had to be distinguished from brothers, sisters from sisters and siblings from siblings especially in the ancient days when polygamy and concubines were normal and pro-creation in large numbers was a virtue.

The random survey of naming among the African (Rohlah, Chinua) and Asian (Adam, Cain) shows that names are meaningful and that naming is a serious business among these peoples.

Another assertion we want to clear is linguistic uniqueness of names within dialectal areas. In other words, names suggest and reveal the regional dialects of Igbo land where the owners come from. Consider the following survey.

3. Names Common among Enugu People of Igbo Land: Udi, Achi, Nkanu, Nsukka Regional Dialects

Udi:	Nebo, Onyia, Chime, Ene, etc
Achi:	Ukelegharanya, Onyekaonwu, Mmamkanwanyi, Onyekeleze, etc
Nkanu:	Nnaji, Ede, etc
Ngwo:	Ono, Ozoalo, etc
Nsukka:	Ugwuanyi, Odo, Okwoli, Alumona, Attah, etc

3.1 Afikpo Regional Dialect

Ukpai, Idam, Uduma, Otu, Ukeni, Ibiama, Osuu, Nnachi, Oko, Obiahu, Iduma, Aluu, etc
Ohaozara: Aja, Agwu, Okoronkwo, Okorie.

3.2 Ikwere/Etche Axis of Rivers State

Amadi, Nwonodi, Nwuche, Chibudom, Ndimele, Ozo-mekuri, Chinwo, Wobidike, Wali, etc

3.3 Owerri Subculture (Owerri-Nchi-Ise, Urrata, Ngor-Okpalla, Mbaise)

Njoku, Osuji, Ejiogu, Ibezimako, Njiribeako, Ononiwu, Njemanze, Emenyonu, Amajirionwu, Azuwuine, etc

3.4 Mbanjo Regional Dialect

Wadigo, Ajuonuma, Diala, etc

3.5 Old Aguata Regional Dialect

Udike, Umeugokwe, Ihediwa (Ifediba), Nnolim, Umeakuka, Onwukaike, etc

3.6 *Oguta Regional Dialect*

Nwakuche, Oputa, Nzeribe, Gogo, Nwabiani, Iyasara, Ezediario, Nzimiro, Ossai, etc

Nnewi: Nsoedo, Nchedo, Aralu, Moghalu, Ikejaku, Obiefuna, Atuegwu, Muoneme, etc

3.7 *Onitsha/Anioma/Obosi*

Oranyelu, Onwughalu, Iweka, Kaodilinye, Anyaoku, Ossai, Ofuani, Onowu, Okwudishu, Nnanyelugo, Emeagwali, Azikiwe, etc

3.8 *Orlu (Orsu, Oru, Nkalu, Isu) Regional Dialect*

Okonkwo, Izunobi, Odinkemelu, Ukachukwu, Anyachonkeya, Akubueze, Umnnakwe, Odingbe, Onyemesim, Amasiatu, Igboayaka, Ugaliiebulem, Amamkanjaha, Ajafumughere, etc

Ngwa: Irondi, Erondu, Ukachi, Alilionwu, Mgbodichimma, Azuonwu, Onwumgbelu, etc

Having cleared the ground, we now continue our inquiry. Essien's hunch (2004: 104) will form our working definition. He states that:

namings in Nigeria – in particular – can have serious linguistic, cultural, historical, religious and even philosophical implications and therefore become a serious academic and intellectual matter. The landscape for naming has become so wide-spread and so serious that it is now a subject for not only B. A. and PhD research as well as learned conference papers at both international levels, including such fora as World Congress of African Linguistics.

Yes, naming is a serious issue for academic research.

Even though a lot of research and essays have been carried out and written on this subject matter, nevertheless, this inquiry is novel because this paper is unaware of any research findings that have focused attention on naming among Omuma Igbo of Oru East L. G. A. of Imo State and to ascertain the relationship that exists in their naming with the rest of Ndi Igbo of Nigeria and Ndi Igbo in the Diaspora, and above all, in the unique and fresh approach this study addresses this subject. In effect, the inquiry is hoped to represent a significant contribution to knowledge, since it will complement available literature on naming in Nigeria with particular reference to Omuma in Oru East L. G. A. of Imo State. We now address the task proper.

The implications of naming in this essay will be examined under the following subheadings: religious, social, historical, linguistic, and philosophical. We speculate that every generation sets its own value. This speculation cuts across human societies and social strata. For instance, the names unique to our ancestors are no longer attractive to the present generation of Omuma people. Indeed, naming among our ancestors was sentential, syntactically speaking. However, sentential naming is customary of the Igbo people in general, as Achebe (1982: 67) aptly puts it; Igbo name "is a full-length philosophical statement." As Essien (2004: 115) observes that some of the sentential names are "positive, and negative...names," and "declarative sentential names." For example, some sentential names among Omuma ancestors are the following:

Odibemje: There is no place I am going (sort of "I wait and see.").

Omeremsorom: He that hurt me should avoid me.

Olembadimma: Which town (or people) is or are good?

Ejirimezeba: Did I become rich or wealthy on account of Ezeship (i.e. kingship).

Emereonyeokwe: Who is hurt or offended and he agrees?

Ngogbaehiagwaigbowuunwa: The dire need or lack of Agwaigbo is child.

Ughabugweeziokwuajetikpoya: However big (in height or enormity) a lie may become or assume,

truth will douse or demolish it.

Igbojmkpo: The Igbo arm themselves with boasts.

Elesionyeiroanya: Do not look at or mind the enemy.

Agbosolannadi: You do not run a flight of life through vampire or wicked kinsman.

Nnadiaborusilam: May vampire or wicked kinsman not vilify me.

Onyesimfee: Who really asks or wants me to pass or survive.

Nnadiawuke: Wicked or vampire kinsman is not a haven of kinship.

Ihegwuruike: The thing that defies strength.

Nkemjereomara: What I would do for Omara (people).

Onwummereobojiripeempe: It is death that makes (or diminishes the number of) a family to be small.

Ukabiaralam: May trouble not come to me.

Nnadikachi: Vampire or wicked kinsman is greater than one's personal god.

Onyekwurufe: Who is courageous enough to speak up (near to the brave person).

Ubueruleanwa: (Scramble for a man's possession [by the enemy] does not reach in or extend to [a] child).

Names, like those above, are no longer given to the present-day Omuma born. Rather names that reflect their value system are those that appeal to the adherents of the twenty-first century post-religious modernism, as well as those that reflect the spirit of the time. Consider the following examples:

Oluebube: Miracle.

Odera/Chidera: (If) God predestines or ordains.

Kaosisochukwu (Abbreviated **Kosi**): As it pleases God.

Kamsiyoochukwu (abbreviated **Kamsi**): As I requested God.

Chisimdi(iri) (abbreviated **Simdi**, to make it sound foreign): My God said I shall live.

Iyikimo: (Water does not lack in Imo (River).

Let us now appraise the implications under which an Omuma parent could name his child.

4. Religious Implications

Since Omuma parents do not name their children anyhow, naming has (traditional) religious implications. Therefore, acting on the dictates of religious influence, Anyachonkeya (2006: 118) reports:

When a baby is born, the parents will enquire from a diviner (dibia afa), among other things, who reincarnated the baby and who will perform the traditional iriiga oga l'onu as well as the person to shave the baby's hair. These inquiries are con-sidered germane because it is feared that the baby might come to some harm if the inquiries were not made. (The) in-quiries are pursued ever before the baby is given a name.

In the excerpt we read that the enquiries are made before the baby is given a name. According to Anyachonkeya, cited above, additional adult male and female accompany the parents along with the dibia afa (medicine man). These people perform the ritual ceremony of sipping oil into the baby's mouth. Of course, those who perform this ritual ceremony must be revealed by the oracle as enquired by the medicine man. Strictly speaking, the oil, so called, is not oil, per se. It is called oriwu-oriwu (concoctions of all sorts) in Omuma dialect.

The adult male and female who take turns to sip the oil in the baby's mouth would say something like this: "May whatever you may eat not harm you," after which the baby is given a name by its parents "(118). After this important instrument of act, the baby's hair is cut and this, of course, is done by the person revealed by the diviner. We will recall, among other things, that in the excerpt we stated that the inquiry included ascertaining who reincarnated the baby. The knowledge of this is important as well, that is, essential in the eschatological process; that is, in birth, childhood, adulthood, old age and death. For instance,

Anyachonkeya reveals that in Omuma when one of the persons reincarnated by the same person dies (however long dead), the surviving person(s), must not participate in his or her funeral. According to the cosmology of Omuma people:

a dead relation may reincarnate one or more persons.... And so soon the death of one of them is announced, the other surviving person(s) must flee the town and sojourn, briefly, to such a town where he (or they) will not hear the burial cannon shots. He (or they) must not participate in any of the burial activities or see the corpse. If he (or they) did participate in or see the corpse or hear the cannon shots, the implication would be that he (or they) has (have) taken part in his (their) own burial rituals and so will die(!)... This means that those reincarnated by the same deceased relation are "one," metaphysically, although they may not have been born the same generation or die at the same time (119).

Anyachonkeya adds that the fellow incarnated peers must remain in the town of "refuge" until all the burial ceremonies and associated rituals were over. He maintains that the same attitude is taken even during memorial ceremony of the deceased -- reincarnate – no matter how long in years his or her death is being memorialized.

These eschatological and ethnographic implications associated with naming are knitted in the naming of an Omuma born and in Igbo land by extension. Okwa mba na achi n'olu (The bush fowl of a people shouts in voice). Indeed, the religious implication of naming is the arrowhead under which all other implications lie and so we now proceed to enquire into the other implications associated with naming in Omuma, nay, Igbo land. We will revisit this criterion later in this essay with ample naming examples.

5. Social Implications of Naming

The social implications of naming are legion. We will examine a few examples of them under certain criteria. One of the social criteria revolves around marriage. From the discipline of sociology, we learn that functions of marriage, among others, include security, sexual gratification, companionship and procreation. Of these functions, procreation occupies a position of primus enter pares. The premium attached to procreation in marriage is reflected in the following names Omuma parents give their children.

Uzoejinwa(adighiechiechi): (The path or route where a child is begotten (does not close).

Nkwutesilanwa: (Mention is possible where a child is begotten).

5.1 Social Implication of Naming: Allusion or Innuendo

Another social perspective under which an Omuma parent gives names to his or her child is a reply to his or her neighbour's taunting. Such naming has allusive connotation. This paper reminds us of a colleague whose mother named **Mgbemgasha (Shasha, for short)**, meaning, "When I will respond or reply (to taunting at me)." That was a mother who did not beget a child for a very long time after her marriage. Her opponents and neighbours (fellow women) kept tormenting her, until the baby girl – today an academic colleague of ours – arrived, much to her mother's relief, and to the frustration of those neighbours of her mother!

We will cite five similar examples of such names in Omuma.

Anochirimonyeanya: (Who is it have I blocked?).

Omeremsorom: (He/She who hurt me should avoid me).

Emereonyeokwe: Who is it that is hurt or offended and he/she yields?.

Emereleluwaonu: (Do not boast over good fortunes of the world).

Adikaechere: (Things do not turn out as thought).

5.2 Social Implication of Naming: Supremacy of Child Over All Else

Another social implication of naming is in respect of supremacy in which children enjoy over wealth. Consider the following examples.

Ahiazunwa: (No market sells [a] child).

Ezekalammadu: (Human being is supreme over kingship).

Maduamaka: (Human is incomparable or is uniquely beautiful).

Madukaejiekwu: (It is in human being we can boast).

5.3 Social Implication of Naming: Ego Bolster

Some Igbo names are ego bolster. Parents give such names to assert either their intellectual prowess or higher social standing in which they enjoy over their neighbours or rivals. The following names attest to this hierarchy needs.

Ohianechienyi: (The bush or woods that harbours or shields the elephant).

Igbojmkpo: (The Igbo arm themselves with boasting).

Akamigbo: Let me be greater than or superior to the Igbo), etc.

5.4 Social Implication of Naming: On the Supremacy of Kinship or Siblings Over Other Considerations

Naming under this heading recognizes the incomparable gains of kinship in begetting siblings. Consider these names.

Ikwuka: (Kinship is supreme).

Izikalanwanne: (Whispering for decision-making is supreme among siblings).

Ikwubirilotunne: (Kinship is supreme only among siblings).

Otunneka: (Kinship within kinship is supreme).

Mmeremikwu: (May I have kinship).

Somadina: (May I not live alone [as lone sibling]), etc

5.5 Social Implication of Naming: Gender Superiority

Because of the patriarchal nature of Omuma people, and probably the Igbo, certain names given to male children allude to gender superiority. That is why the people concede preeminence to procreation in marriage. So they are overtly conscious and desperate to beget male children. An Omuma parent is happy when he or she begets male and female children. But even at that, he looks forward to seeing the child of his or hers who he or she would call a child (nwa) to come from his or her (first) son. In view of this, an Omuma parent believes there are children and also child. (Enwere umu [children], nwekwara **nwa** [child]). Thus, an Omuma person incontrovertibly endorses gender superiority because he or she is most unwilling for his homestead or family to obliterate, simply because he has no male successor to perpetuate the family lineage.

This aspiration of our ideological culture is commonplace among the Igbo, the rest of Africa and Asia as well. That is why in Owerri regional dialect, especially in Mbaise and Ngor- Okpalla, parents give their male children the name **Azuwuine**, which means. "I am proud I have got a successor and inheritor!"

An Omuma born shows his penchant in gender superiority in the following names he may give his sons.

Nwokediegwu: (A man is awesome).

Amutaobielo (After begetting a child, a son, the mind is at rest, (This name has the same contextual meaning with **Obiajulu**).

Obidimaru (May my mind be heavy with satisfaction).

Amaeruchi (Homestead or family would not obliterate).
Obiefulé (May my family not obliterate).
Onyekeleihem (May no one share my inheritance).
Amefule (May [my] family not get lost, or go into oblivion).

5.6 Social Implication of Naming, Revealing Maternal Descent

In the polygynous families of our ancestors, some children were named attaching their mothers' names to their names. Thus, it was easier to ascertain the mother of the child in the polygynous family. Examples:

Okerekembogorie: (**Okereke** means a son born on Eke day; **Mgbogorie** is an attachment, revealing his mother in his polygynous family).

Nwankwobijalu: (**Nwankwo**, a person – male or female – born on Nkwo market day;
Obijalu is the mother's name in her polygynous family).

Okorinwaejinga: (**Okori** is a name given to a male child born on Orié market day;
Nwaejinga is the mother's name in the polygynous family), etc.

5.7 Historical Implication of Naming

Certain historical landmarks predicate names in which Omuma parents give their children. Let us cite a few examples here.

Agumbanonu: (Do we count people?)

Comment

The Colonial Government introduced population census. Our ancestors, owing to their preliterate society and world view, resisted this exercise and so queried its rationale and attributed evil omen to it, hence the naming.

Ejirimezeba: (Did I become rich or wealthy through kingship or Ezeship?).

Comment

The Colonial Government evolved or rather introduced Warrant Chief system of governance in Igbo land. Our people jettisoned Igbo republicanism and resorted to ezeship or chieftaincy tussle or struggles. One of our ancestors lost out in such struggles to his rival and opponent. In consolation, he begot a son and named him **Ejirimezeba** (Did I become rich or wealthy via ezeship or warrant chief institution).

Urumkwebere: (The theft I admitted culpability).

Comment

In the dim past, one of our ancestors, a notorious rogue, stole a human being, a boy, in his theft "business", and came back successful. In this euphoria, he named this boy **Urumkwebere:** (The theft I admitted culpability)! This child and boy and son grew to become the progenitor of his kindred, now a village, in Omuma. This kindred and village has for long changed this strange and historically revealing name to **Ihite**.

6. Eschatological Implication of Naming

This criterion of naming should come under religious implication. However, we chose to give it a special highlight owing to its confounding semanticity. Naming under this criterion reveals human emptiness and

helplessness to the unknown, death and vagaries beyond man's compass. We explore the following names Omuma parent may give his son.

Onyemaelu: (Who knows the cosmos above?).

Amaiheuwalamba: (Who knows the (finale of the) world from the beginning).

Onwuamaeze: (Death knows no king).

Onwuanaibe: (Death accepts no kinsman in exchange)

Onwuharonye: (Who does death spare?).

Onwuegbuchulem: (Death, I implore you; don't kill me untimely).

Onwumereobijiripaempe: (Death made a family to be very small), etc

7. Religious Implications of Naming

We opened our discourse with the religious angle, the discussion of which we want to conclude now. In the first segment of this criterion of naming, we stated that an Omuma person does not name his child anyhow; that he must follow the religious prescriptions of his forebears.

As with the rest of the Igbo stock, **chi** is supreme in Omuma belief system. That is why we agree with Achebe (1982:93, 94), who admits that **chi** is a concept that is "central in Igbo psychology." What does an Omuma born do without placing God in the front banner? Absolutely nothing! In effect, he gives his children these names:

Chukwumaeze: (God knows the king).

Maduawuchukwu: (Man is not God).

Chukwuma: (God Knows).

Chukwudi: (God lives).

Chioma: (God is pleasant).

Alisichukwu: (Do not underrate God).

Ngozichukwuka: (God's blessing is supreme).

Chimsi(ri)mdi: (My God said I will live).

Munachimso: (My God is with me).

Chinwendu: (God is the owner of life).

Chinyere/lhechinyere: (God's gift [is supreme]).

Chiamaka: (God is good), etc.

This subtle random survey evinces the implications of naming among Omuma people, the scenario of which is similar in Igbo land. Arua (2009: 65) concurs to this assertion. He says:

"(T)he meaning of names resides in the message they convey, the wishes they express, the histories they record and the gratitude (to God) they express." Indeed, the semantic content of "names in the African world view is significant enough" (Anyachonkeya 2011: 131).

8. Concluding Thoughts

This brief study has attempted to explore the implications of naming among the Igbo, with Omuma Igbo as case study. Sources consulted accede the fact that naming has social, 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. Why not? Yes, as Achebe (1982:67, 96) aptly puts it, an Igbo name "is a full-length philosophical statement" and goes ahead to lay bare his discursive agenda:

If you want to know how life has treated an Igbo man, a good place to look is the names his children bear. His fears, his joys, his sorrow, grievances against his fellows, or complaints about the way he has been used by fortune, even straight historical records are all there.

Yes, even how he has been used by fortune, etc, is there, hence, such names as **Mgbemgasha, Enyekwaramlezi** (Were I actually or truthfully given [this child?]). The second name just cited summarizes the point for an Omuma parent, who has lost many of his children to death; he got one at last at his old age and queries his chi: Were I truthfully given this child?

Okafor (2004: 174) recaptures this truth of fiction of Achebe in another captivating way and in the process restates the corpus of this essay. Let us read him. On the occasion of naming a child on the eighth (market) day:

a father gives his child a name that is usually a statement about the family's circumstances. Again, in Igboland as in most traditional patrilineal societies, families are anxious to have male offspring who will perpetuate their names.

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.

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