

THE DYNAMICS OF NAME-TAKING IN IGBO SOCIETY

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Abstract

This paper discusses the dynamics of taken names in Igbo land with particular reference to the Anambra State Igbo speaking people of Nigeria. Part of the naming culture practised amongst the Anambra Igbos involves the art of naming oneself. This paper explores names that emanate from the practice of name-taking. It examines a subset of personal names in form of taken honorific nicknames which have hitherto, been unstudied. Responsorial nicknames are names carefully and wilfully chosen by the bearers as a reflection of their world views anchored on individual life experiences, values and philosophy. Unlike given names, honorific nicknames are taken names borne by only adult members of the society. The data for this research are obtained via interview from four elderly individuals (two males and two females) from Anambra State. The data are analysed using a descriptive framework. From the analysis, it is observed that responsorial nicknames serve as a form of greeting. They are characterized by 'idiomaticity', that is, their meaning could be figurative. The set of responsorial nicknames studied in this paper mirror the overall Igbo world view on values or principles such as the sacredness of truth, unpredictability of life, gratitude, and hard work amongst others.

Keywords: name-taking, igbo, language

1. Introduction

A strong relationship exists between language and the worldview or culture of its native speakers. Names and naming process often mirror the interrelationship between language and culture. According to Olson (2002), naming is a means of structuring reality; as it imposes a pattern of the world that is meaningful to the namer. In other words, naming is not a random process, especially in Africa. It is premised upon the name giver's life experiences, religious inclination, ideology, and belief system. There is a plethora of literature on names and the naming system of different cultures in Africa. These studies consistently affirm the idea that naming in African cultures is more than giving of identification to

individuals. The naming process may be conditioned by factors such as physical appearance, circumstances surrounding the birth of a child, environmental and social factors.

Studies on naming within the Igbo culture are mostly focused on the linguistic and anthropological characterization of given personal names. Given names as used in this context refer to names given by parents or guardians to their children; they are part of a personal name used in conjunction with a family or surname. Little or no research is dedicated to the study of taken names; particularly the responsorial nicknames which is common amongst the Igbo speakers of Anambra origin. This work attempts to bridge the gap in research by investigating the subset of personal names termed 'responsorial nicknames'. A peculiar feature of this subset of personal names is that rather than being given by parents, friends or relatives as with typical personal names and nicknames, they are wilfully taken by the bearers to convey or project their personal life philosophy.

This work is therefore focused on the naming culture of the Igbo people as pertaining to honorific nicknames. Igbo is a Niger Congo language spoken in Nigeria by approximately 18 million people. The Igbo communities are found in five Eastern States: Anambra, Abia, Enugu, Imo, Ebonyi, and partly in Delta and Rivers states. The rest of the paper is structured as follows: section 2 gives a review of relevant literature. In section 3, the research methodology is presented. Section 4 gives a literal and contextual analysis of the language data. The summary and conclusion of the research findings is given in section 5.

2. Literature Review

The concept of naming has been explored in several fields such as Linguistics, Anthropology, Semiotics and Philosophy. This work studies personal names from the perspective of linguistic anthropology which is anchored on the semantics (meaning) and socio-cultural context of names and naming. Personal names are words that refer to individual entities. Beyond identifying an individual, Dehnart (2009) asserts that the continuous use of a name could communicate the whole personality of the individual, as well as the identity of his environment and society. Personal names subsume first names, family or

surnames, and nicknames. According to Lyons (1977), names have two characteristic functions: the referential and vocative functions. The referential function draws the hearer's attention to the presence of the person being named while the vocative function attracts the attention of the person being called or summoned. In addition, Lyons (1977) also distinguishes between the connotative and denotative meaning of names. He asserts that the connotations of a name can be drawn from history, politics or culture while the denotative meaning of a name encompasses reference to a gender as well as its etymology.

Names play varied roles in the society. Nithat (2011) identifies the roles of names to include social identity; that is, that names and naming aid the identification of an individual in the society. Names indicate ethnicity. In many cases, one's ethnicity is evident from the name that he/she bears. Names also indicate social relationships. The depth of one's relationship with another could be deciphered from the names that they are called.

The practice of naming is a universal process that could differ across cultures. In the African culture, names do not only serve as labels, but reflect our conception of the world. Olson (2002) observes that individuals create their own structure of reality through naming. The naming process may be influenced by cultural, social, environment and religious factors. Several works by European philosophers and linguists on names and the naming system mostly focus on the referential and denotative characterisation of names. In Africa however, studies have shown that there are belief systems, circumstances, and other factors underlying the naming process. Layne (2006) observe that in some cultures, children are given 'ugly' and 'silly' names with the belief that those names will protect the children from the attack of witchcraft. In Datooga, a Nilotic language spoken in Tanzania, Charwi (2019) notes that naming is determined by factors such as the seasons of the year, personal characteristics, events, physical appearance, time of the day, normal things, respect, habits of parents and circumstances. According to Charwi (2019), names such as '*Getabak*', is given to children from a family that is not well off. It is particularly given to a male child born of a woman who is poor and comes from a poor family that has numerous problems.

In the Igbo society, the practice of naming is influenced by a number of factors such as the personal experiences of the name givers (usually the parents of a child), the circumstances surrounding the birth a child, and religious leanings amongst others. Mbarachi & Igwenyi (2018) identify given personal names such as *Ikemefuna* 'Let my strength or effort not be in vain', *Kambili* 'Let me live' and *Onwumbiko* 'Death I implore you' as names that stem from negative experiences that the parents or name givers have had in their lives. Mbarachi & Igwenyi (2018) also observe that the need to express love for one's parents is evident in some personal names given such as *Ezinne* 'good mother', *Nneka* 'Mother is supreme' and *Nnaemeka* 'Father has done well'. Anyachonkeya (2014) identify personal names that depict the Igbo metaphysical belief in one supreme God 'Chi'. Such names include *Chioma* 'good God', *Munachimso* 'My God is with me', *Chukwuma* 'God knows'. Nkamigbo (2019) however, notes that the use of *Chi* in modern Igbo naming system differs from its use in the traditional naming system. In the former, *Chi* represents the Christian God while in the latter; *Chi* is an essence of life in the Igbo metaphysical belief. Nkamigbo (2019) also identifies a subset of personal names that denote the Igbo philosophy and worldview; names connected *ndu* life and *Chi* 'God'. Nkamigbo also identifies other types of personal names which include honorifics and title names such as *Ikenga*, metaphoric names such as *Agu* 'tiger'. The honorific names are a type of personal names that are taken outside people's given names. Nkamigbo (2019) asserts that such names may be achieved from occupations, wars, and position. For instance, the name *Ikenga* connotes the right hand man of the king. The honorific and title names identified by Nkamigbo are somewhat similar to responsorial nicknames in that both are taken rather than given.

3. Methodology

Within the field of Onomastics, two branches of research are dedicated to the study of of names. They include anthroponomastics and toponomastics. Anthroponomastics deals with the study of personal names while toponomastics deals with place names. Anthroponomastics is situated within the larger domain of Linguistic Anthropology. The study of Igbo personal names points to the interrelationship that exists between language and culture. This current research

is focused on responsorial Igbo nicknames as a subtype of personal names and is therefore situated within the domain of Linguistic anthropology.

This work adopts a qualitative approach which involves a primary collection of data from Igbo native speakers of Anambra state via interviews. The correspondents or consultants are 3 in number; comprising two elderly males and two females, all between the ages of 50-70. The collected data are descriptively analysed.

4. Data Presentation and Analysis

This section discusses a subtype of Igbo personal names labelled 'responsorial nicknames' (subsequently RNs). RNs are name wilfully chosen by the bearers to reflect their personal ideologies or philosophies. Unlike given names, RNs are taken names, specifically coined by the bearers. Amongst the Anambra Igbos, RNs are particularly taken by adult males and females and are usually motivated by the bearer's exposure and life experiences. As the name suggests, this subset of personal names are responsorial, that is, they require a call and response. The name bearer provides a response that specifically matches his chosen nickname. It should be noted that RNs do not always require a response. In other words, the bearer is not obliged to chant a response at every instance of a name call. The use of RNs only elicits a response from the bearer when it serves as a form of greeting. Each RN comprises two parts: the call and the response. Both parts are coined by the bearer alone. In the following subsection, we provide a literal and contextual analysis of select RNs.

4.1 Igbo Responsorial Nicknames

The following RNs are taken by adult male and females of Anambra state origin:

1)	Name (call)	Response
	Ùbákāńdù	yá gbañuó
Literal:	'Wealth that is greater than life,	should stay away'

This name conveys the belief that life is invaluable and should never be traded for wealth or affluence. The name bearer asserts that any form of wealth that is obtained at the expense of one's life and wellbeing is not worth it. This RN is also partly motivated by the Igbo traditional belief in ritual killing for money. It is

presumed that desperate individuals could trade their lives and souls or that of their loved ones in exchange for wealth.

2)	Name (call) Ékwúbé	Response áchọhọ́ ézíókwú sị ákpōnyēnā m
	Literal: 'In any discussion, the truth'	don't involve me if you don't want

This name paints the picture of the bearer as an upright person who abhors lies, deception and injustice. It embodies the value of truthfulness; the truth should never be compromised in deliberations, irrespective of the circumstances or individuals involved.

3)	Name (call) Ónyémálúríé	Response á fú ọ̀zọ́ ènyékwá yā
	Literal: 'If one eats well,	he/she is given another portion'

This name connotes the idea that gratitude attracts more blessings. If one is grateful for what he has received, the giver is spurred to give more. The events of eating (food) and receiving another portion are used figuratively to emphasize the importance and the reward of gratitude.

4)	Name (call) Ónyékwémégbú	Response ọ́ búrú ézígbó m̀mádu
	Literal: 'Anyone that accepts mistreatment,	is considered a good person'

This name reinforces the idea that some people are only pleased with you when you are seen as someone who could be taken advantage of without consequences. You are judged as good or humble when you accept maltreatment or injustice without fighting back. You cease to be considered good or humble when you learn or choose to stand up for yourself.

5)	Name (call) Íjènwáòkúkò	Response ọ́ náhā àdí égbē m̀mā
	Literal: 'The roaming of a hen,	brings displeasure to the hawk'

This name upholds the belief that one's enemies or detractors are never happy with one's progress. They are presumed to work behind the scenes, orchestrating or hoping for your downfall. The animals *ọkukọ* 'hen' and *egbe* 'hawk' are symbols metaphorically used to denote the predatory relationship between an individual and his or her enemies.

6)	Name (call) Nkèónyérìrì	Response kà ó bù àná
	Literal: 'Whatever one eats,	he goes home with'

This name is used to figuratively portray the view that life should be lived to the fullest. It is rooted in the belief that everyone leaves the world empty handed. It is presumed that the only satisfaction gained in one's short sojourn on earth comes from living a fulfilling life by indulging in things that make one truly happy. Simple put, it means, 'enjoy life as much as you can and as well as you can, while you still can'.

7)	Name (call) Íkpémaluèziókṹ	Response áká āzū ò yá
	Literal: 'When judgement is against the truth, corruption is involved or evident'	

This name is premised on the belief that truth is sacred and should never be compromised. The bearer believes that whenever truth is compromised, there is always an evidence of foul play if one looks carefully.

8)	Name (call) Ázòtándù	Response èdóbélú ọnwṹ
	Literal: 'Life is preserved/saved,	to be kept for death'

This name is anchored on the ephemerality of life. Death is seen as an inevitable, a debt that all must pay. The bearer sees the preservation of human life as a momentary struggle that will ultimately give way to death no matter how long it takes.

9)	Name (call) Ónyépùò	Response èkwúó màkà yá
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Literal: 'If a person leaves, he/she becomes the topic for discussion'

This name suggests that gossip is human nature. People will talk about you as such as you talk about others. It reinforces the notion that what goes around, comes around. It is believed that no matter how perfect or good a person is, some people will always have something negative to say about you.

10) Name (call) Íhénáèkùúmè	Response èjíhì yà ànyà ísì
Literal: 'a living thing/being,	should not be bragged with'

This name is centred on the idea that life is unpredictable. It buttresses the belief that life is fleeting that death can come knocking at any time irrespective of your achievements or success or responsibilities. There is an implicit caution for one to live humbly because life is vain.

11) Name (call) Ághádìnáúnò	Response Ágwahā gī, Ì máhà
Literal: 'There is war at home,	you can't know except you are told'

This name conveys the belief that individuals face numerous challenges and fight personal battles that you are oblivious of except you are confided in. The bearer believes that no person or family is devoid of troubles. Behind the smiles lurks anxiety and worry.

12) Name (call) Ojénànwáyò	Response Ánāhā èmèrú āhū
Literal: 'A slow walker,	never gets hurt'

This name implies that life is a journey of consistency, gradual and continuous improvement. It enforces the idea that one should be wary of being in a haste to speak, to take major decisions, or to achieve success. Life is best lived one step at a time. The bearer believes that being cautious in the overall affairs of life saves one a lot of stress, mistakes and hurt.

- 13) **Name (call)** **Response**
 Akùzuòòkè fóonù àná-àdà girírím
 Literal: ‘When wealth is complete, the phone keeps ringing’

This name is centred on the belief that humans are keen to associate with individuals who are successful, wealthy, influential, and in a position of power or authority. The bearer believes that one is only valued when he/she has attained a good measure of success. This expectation has its pros and cons. On the positive side, people are encouraged to work hard to attain success and on the negative side, people who are yet to attain success are less regarded. It leaves the ripple effect of unhealthy pressure and desperation to attain success which could spiral out of control.

A summary of the RN characterisation is further given in the following table:

Table 1: Igbo responsorial nicknames

S/N	Name (Call)	Response	Meaning
1.	Ụ̀bákā̀ndù	yá gbáfuó	Supremacy of life over wealth
2.	Ékwúbé	áchòhò éziókwu sí ákpònyēnā m	Uprightness, standing on the truth at all times
3.	Ónyémáluríé	á fú òzọ̀ ènyékwá yā	Gratitude begets blessings
4.	Ónyékwémégbú	ò búrú ézigbó mmádu	You are considered good until your refuse to be mistreated.
5.	Íjènwáòkúkò	ò náhā àdí égbē mma	Your foes are unhappy at your progress
6.	Nkèonyeriri	kà ó bú àná	Live life to the fullest
7.	Íkpémaluéziókwu	áká āzū dī yá	Truth is sacred
8.	Ázótándù	èdóbelú ònwù	Death is inevitable
9.	Ónyépùò	èkwúó makà yá	Gossip is human nature
10.	Íhènaékuúmē	èjìhì yá anyà isī	Life is fleeting and unpredictable

11.	Ágháðìnáúnò	Ágwahā́ gī, Ì máhà̀	Behind the smiles are worries
12.	Òjénànwáyò̀	Ánāhā́ èméréjù́ ahū̀	Slow and steady, being cautious in life
13.	Àkùzuóòkè̀	foónù́ ànà-àdà́ gírírím	Success draws people to you like moth to a flame

4.1 The Structural and Idiomatic Characterisation of Responsorial Nicknames

Responsorial nicknames have a sentential structure. They are mostly realised as complex sentences that are divided into two parts. The first part could be a noun phrase as in (1, 5, 6 and 10) or a dependent clause as in (.3, 4, 7, 8, 9, 13). The first part is what the bearer is called by while the second part is the response that the bearer gives to that call. Because of their responsorial nature (call and response), these nicknames function as a form of greeting that can be used at any time of the day.

Some of the RNs studied have metaphorical underpinnings. In (5) for instance, the nature of the animals, *okukọ* 'hen' and *egbe* 'hawk' are used figuratively to express the hostility that exists between a victim and a predator or between an individual and his foe. Also in (13), the constant ringing of a phone is used figuratively to express keenness of humans to associate with successful people.

5. Conclusion

This paper has discussed a subtype of Igbo personal names labelled responsorial nicknames. It is observed that these names embody the personal philosophies of the bearers. From a structural view point, RNs are described as sentential constructs consisting of two parts. They are characterised by idiomaticity. In other words, their meaning is not always deducible from the individual words. Besides the denotative function of RNs, they also function as a valid form of greeting. They collectively mirror the Igbo worldview and values such as the sacredness of truth, the supremacy of life over wealth, the virtue of hard work and consistency, and the unpredictability of life amongst others.

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