



SOCIO-RELIGIOUS IMPERATIVES IN A NAME: TRADITIONAL RELIGIOUS PERSPECTIVE OF THE IGBO OF NIGERIA, WEST AFRICA

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ABSTRACT: *A name is not just a label but an instrument for identification, communication and expression. Beyond these, it is a religious instrument, among the Igbo people of South East Nigeria, meant for the enhancement, prediction and control of man's life not just in the physical world but also in the world of the ancestors. In recent times, some people give their children foreign names that their meanings do not reflect the world views of the Igbo, but rather portend ills. World systems theory which posit that nations relate with each other in a hegemonic order according to the quantum of technology they have developed, thereby wielding controlling and dominating influence over others that are not equally endowed for their own benefit. The paper used the method of discourse analysis to review names among the Igbo people of Nigeria, aimed at unraveling the categories of names, sources of names among the Igbo, symbolic nature of names and characteristics of symbols, expressed in Igbo names. The paper revealed that Igbo names are not just tags or convenient identification badges but rather repositories of historical archives, semantically condensed with meanings expressive of the peoples hopes, aspirations, promise, threat, praise, reviles, satires, sympathies and prayers, imbued with their world view that is religious. It recommended that foreign names that may sound sweet to the ear but means little or nothing to the people should be discarded for the rich meaning laden Igbo names.*

KEYWORDS: Names, Traditional, Religious, Socio, Igbo Names, Nigeria.

INTRODUCTION

In recent times, some Igbo parents have been giving their children foreign names mostly found in the western parts of the world, sometimes ignorant of the meanings of those alien names. These names come as effect of globalization, which is the diminution of distance and approximation of cultures through the aid of information, communication technology and colonialism that subjugated the colonies with a presumably superior versus inferior psyche. Globalization as the notion of "one world and villagization" which refers to the spread of cultures, politics, economics and societies through the use of technology to bring about homogeneity, account for the incipience of western names into Igbo society (Bamgbose, 2008: 111). Names constitute a significant aspect of Igbo culture. It is also an important source of information on African traditional religion. Therefore, a shift in the value of names to the Igbo is a shift in their culture that results in identity crises and cultural alienation. The influence of western culture on African values has produced "a marginal population whose adults, teenagers and children are groping desperately to reconcile within" (Nnedum & Ezeokana, 2008; 127). The chaotic situation caused by this cultural dilemma is evident in names borne by the people "such as David Mark, Philip Trim ell, Patrick Doyle, Evelyn Russell, Ben Bruce, Seine Alwell-Brown, Julie Coker... (Knor, 2008:86)".



THEORETICAL CONCEPTION

The paper used the world system theory which states that a world system is a multicultural system in which nation states are classified into the core, semi-periphery and periphery. They relate with each other in a hegemonic order, according to the quantum of technology they have developed, thereby wielding controlling or dominating influence over others that are not equally endowed, for their own benefit. The core represents the West, the periphery represents the “the third world countries” or cultures and the semi-periphery represent the class of countries and cultures in between. The technology of the core evident in firearms was instrumental in the colonization of the periphery and semi-periphery cultures. The result was the subjugation of the colony’s cultural values that presented the cultures of the west as superior, rational, and alluring even to the natives who resorted to emulating the western cultural traits like dressing, food, language and names. The Igbo were not exonerated from this experience. The attack on the culture of the Igbo was made with names that tagged the religion and culture of the people barbaric, fetish, pagan and so on (Idowu; 1979). This was meant to possibly eliminate the culture and religion of the natives, which was their identity, as their religion is not isolated from their social life. Cultural identity is the feeling of self-perception that is innate in every being, and continually yearns for association with one’s own culture, ethnicity, religion, social class, generation and locality (Ejiofor, 1981). As a cultural identity, the names of the Igbo have not been completely exterminated, although western names have been much adopted under the auspices of Christian baptism thereby leading to such names as Josephine Okeke, Humphrey Chukwuma, Allwell Ogbonna and so on, typical of a hybrid of western and Igbo names. The mixture of western and Igbo names in vogue can therefore be regarded as a blend of two varied cultures or cultural mullato.

Names as Words

A word is regarded as a meaningful unit of sound from a language. Each word carries with it, an understanding of information, to the owners of that language. Hence, words represent not only actions but also identity. Man makes use of words to identify and communicate. Man being an animal that lives in constant interaction with other beings, communicate with words. “We can say without contradiction, that communication is the wheel on which all interaction rotates” (Madu, 2003:66).

Words constitute one of the major instruments of communication. The biblical account of the origin of words credits the first spoken word to God but for man to interact with his fellows, he gave identity to other beings by giving those names. From the foregoing, names were given as a mark of identity. Hence, names are indispensable tools for effective communication and identification. The sense of personal identity and uniqueness that a name gives, is at the crux of the essence of names to an individual and the society. According to a local axiom, for the child, a thing is not known until it is named. Put differently, names are instruments for the social existence of man. To Ifesieh (1989:176) “Names in Igbo religion have socio-religious significance”. According to Durkheim in Ritzer (2008: 96), “society through individuals creates religion by defining certain phenomena as sacred and others as profane”. To Ugwu & Ugwueye (2004:25), among Africans “nothing is said to exist until that thing is named”. Therefore, for anything whether physical, tangible, empirical, profane or spiritual, psychic, intangible, sacred to be said to exist, it must have a name. Words can therefore be seen as a creation of the society for expression of views, which include religious experiences which Idowu (1979) identified as the inception of religion. Arinze (1970) holds that beliefs, rites and



laws are universal components of religion that demand expressions. To the Igbo, the essence of religion is for prediction, enhancement and control of human life that is cyclic (Madu, 2004) Words or more definitely put; names are used for the prediction, enhancement and control of human life. Theocentric; God centered and theomorphic names which refer to the attributes of God are all expressions of religious experiences.

Imperatives in Names

Among the Igbo of Southern Nigeria names are given by parents and grandparents, according to local custom (Arinze, 1970). The Igbo name their children after *Izu-asaa* (twenty-eight) days after the birth of the child. Ezekwugo (1971) adduced that the reason why the naming of a child takes this long before it is performed is to find out if the child wishes to stay by surviving, indicative of the dread of *Ogbanje* (Born to die). The choice of names originates firstly, from the divine. The *Chi* (The Supreme God) creates a child but *Eke* (the patron spirit) determines the destiny of the child after having it ratified by *Chi* and engraving it in the child's palm as lines. This is known as *Akala Aka* or *Akala Chi* as obtainable in various parts of Igboland, indicative of destiny. In some communities, the diviner is consulted to ascertain the child's destiny and named according to the dictated destiny of the child. The Igbo believe that life exist before natural birth implicating the preexistence of souls, after natural birth in the physical world and after death as ancestor. The philosophy of the preexistence of the soul is anchored on dual spheres of existence namely, *Ani mmuo* (the spirit world) and *Ani mmadu* (humans world).

Names are sometimes given as an expression of a people's view about the world. These views are expressed in the form of words but are associated with persons or objects that they wish to identify as names. Literally, names like *Nwabuaku*-a child is wealth, or a child that predictively will be wealthy, *Uwa di ogbu*-the world is unfathomable; *ifeka nandu*-things are appreciable with life and so on. World views try to answer philosophic questions that the individual or people may have (Ifesieh, 1989). Madu (1997) outlined such questions that bothered on the origin and nature of the cosmos, the creator and sustainer of it, the beings in it and their interaction in the cosmos. Answers to these questions amount to the world view of the people and are condensed in names. Names like *Odinaka olisa* - it is in Gods hand? *Ajuluchukwu* - Was Gods view sought? *Afulu enu* - was the height seen? as the height refers metaphorically to the abode of the Divine, *Ejinkeonye*-Whose own am I withholding? Such names are rhetoric questions that have their meanings in their answers. Human names therefore address man's questions about life and the cosmos. World view to Nwala (1985) is the complex of beliefs, habits, laws, customs and traditions of a people. It includes the overall picture they have about reality, the universe, life and existence; their attitude to life and things in general.

According to Madu's (1997)' definition of world view, some names also intone the origin, structure, nature, organization and interaction of beings in the universe with particular reference to man. *Chukwueke*-God of creation, *Ajaegbo*-sacrifice has appeased, *Anyanwu ma*-the sun deity knows, *Ani egboka*- the earth deity intervened, *Nnameme*-my (late) father has performed, *Udo 'gu*-the spirit *udo*'s fight, among others, are names that refer to God, the deities, spirits, ancestors, and their interactions with man. To the traditional African, the beings in Man's world include God, gods, spirits, deities, ancestors or saints, legends, sacred and profane places. World views are religious in nature (Madu, 1997) and names that express world views are inter alia religious.



The Igbo as Africans' are religious in everything, including choosing and giving names to their children. This is evident in the preponderance of theomorphic and theophoric names among the Igbo. Temple (1958), corroborating the innate tendency for religious experience in man, asserts that no man is entirely without such intercourse with God, "Whether it comes in the form of visions or intuitions, or in the form of a gradually crystallized conviction or habit of mind towards life, it is something recognized as overmastering" (61). The "overmastering" experiences of the Igbo is often preserved or recorded as names. In awe of the divine, the Igbo worship, pray, sacrifice and conduct himself in such manner as required for him to enhance, control and predict his life through the beings around his world. These acts are recorded and executed sometimes with the instrument of the names he bears. Some of such names that present as worship or praise include, *Tochukwu* – praise God, *Chilotalum*- God has remembered me, *Chidiebube* – God is glorious, as prayer, *Chidozie* God amend, *Chizoba*- God save, *Ekpereamaka*- prayer is good, and *Ekperedike* – prayer is potent, among other names. Such names that depict sacrificial nature of the Igbo include *Aja - egbo* – Sacrifice has appeased, *Ajakor*- sacrifice is never lacking and so on.

Behavioral pattern that makes for the enhancement, control and prediction of life of man and the being around him is condensed in the moral requirement of the society. However, the Igbo believe that the patron deity that controls morals is the Earth deity, *Ani*. A breach of the moral code of the people is referred to as *ilu Ani*, meaning *ilu* the desecration of *Ani* – Earth. The Igbo therefore extol moral behaviors and virtues by giving names such as *Udoka mma* often shortened as *Udoka*, literally meaning peace is better, *Ozoemena* – Literarily meaning another should not happen, is the Igbo way of wishing or praying that another undesirable occurrence should not repeat itself. *Ndidi amaka* – literally meaning patience is beautiful is a popular name that hallows the virtue of patience. The name *Ilo kansi* – *ilo* meaning enmity *ka-* is worse than *nsi* poison decry enmity as precursor to poisoning. The deuteronomic tradition that underscores the principle of 'cause and effect' is obvious in the Igbo maxim of *nkpuru onye kuru ka o g' aghoro* - meaning whatever a man sows is what he will reap (Madu, 2004). A pernicious influence from man towards any other being in his world portends a disruption of cosmic harmony that spells disaster for him and his immediate world. A good seed begets good reward while evil begets chaos to man's life, hence the value the Igbo place on virtues of good conduct.

Categories of Names

1. Natural names – *Aha omumu*: These are names given by the parents of the child at birth which includes names given by uncles, aunties, grandparents with the father taking the lead. Such names that could be called circumstance names could be chosen to mark days of the week or events that took place at the face of the child's birth. It could also be chosen to state the parents most cherished thought or state of mind at the birth, philosophy or achievements.
2. Given names – *Aha okpesi*: These names underpin the interconnectedness of the Igbo with other cosmic beings in the cycle of reincarnation. At the naming ceremony of a child in some Igbo communities, the diviner is employed to tell which ancestor is believed to have reincarnated in the child and after whom the child is named (Ifesieh, 1989). Such names are given in front of the ancestral shrine, sometimes describing the nature of relationship that had existed between the parents and the reincarnating family member



(Metuh, 1992). *Enyinnaya* – Friend of the father, *Nneoma* – good mother, *Nnameme* – father has done it, *Ifenna* – fathers light and so on are examples of such names.

3. Praise names – *Aha otutu*: According to Arinze (1970) & Metuh (1992), this is a name chosen by an individual at adult age reflecting his philosophy of life or aspirations and by which he is addressed. Sometimes a better appreciation of such names requires an insight from the bearer of such names. *Aku ezu mkpa* – meaning wealth never suffices for wants, *aka ezu isi mma* – the palm never covers the head of a knife and *ijiji ana esolu nma* – the fly that require a sharpened knife to ward off, are examples of *aha otutu* among others. Such name may also be metaphorical.
4. Title name – *Aha echichi* – These are names given to titled men by traditional political institution on conferment of titles, often depicting the basis for which such title is conferred (Arinze, 1970). A titled man is intrinsically an elder among the Igbo. To Okadigbo (1976), an elder is a leader, an instrument for the execution of religious, moral, philosophical and political will of the people; the first and final source of political power. They are the transmitters of the wishes of the ancestors, thus assuming social, political and religious roles. An old man who is not conferred with a title is assumed not to have achieved much and thus regarded as *ofeke*, meaning a worthless person. Title taking is a set goal for advancement in social status, necessary for attaining the status of an ancestor at death. A title name must go along with the title and replace the elder's natural name as a mark of respect, when addressed by subordinates (Arinze, 1970). Such names include *Ogbuefi* meaning a killer of cow, *onwa* – the moon that illuminates the night, *ochili ozuo* he who gathers and trains the indigent.
5. Baptismal name – *Aha mmiri chukwu*. These are names adopted by the Igbo as a result of their embrace with the Christian faith as a requirement for partaking from some sacramentals of the church. Such names depict that an individual has embraced the Christian faith. Such names are borne after some renowned Christian characters from the bible and the annals of the church as saints. The popularity gained by this type of names after the arrival of Christianity into *Igboland*, saw the emergence of the next category of names.
6. English name – *Aha Oyibo*, The latter category of names came as a result of the effect of colonialism and Christian incursion into Africa. Idowu (1973) among other scholars have reported how the colonialists and the early missionaries into Africa denigrated all that was found in Africa including the religion, culture and traditional valued ethos of the natives. Names as an aspect of culture was not spared the ridicule of the colonialists. Hence local Igbo names like *mgbeke* – a daughter born on *Eke* market day came to represent a name for the novice, ignorant, crude, and barbaric and in recent times, the illiterate. The people began to adopt western names of the colonizers without proper knowledge of the meaning of such names. The Igbo consequently began to bear names like Humphrey, Brown, Clayton, Branch and so on.



Dimensions of Names

Nearly every name among the people of Igbo of Nigeria has a meaning; with social, religious and philosophical referents (Mbiti, 1997). Hence the naming of a child is preceded with socio-religious ceremonies and rites which boil down on the philosophical perceptions of the people involved. Names therefore point towards definite dimensions of human interest. They are:

Commemorative: Names commemorate historical events that took place during or within the period of the child's birth, family or country (Metuh, 1987). Such names are regarded as "records, living personal memories of persons and event (24)". Such names may mark traditional market date of birth as obtained in most Igbo communities like *nkwo*, *eke*, *orie*, *afor* for *nwanyi nkwo* or *mgba nkwo*, *nwanyi eke* or *mgbеke*, *nwanyi orie* or *mgborie* and *nwanyi afor* or *mgbafor*, respectively for female names and *nwankwo*, *nweke*, *nworie* or *nwafor* for male names.

Expressive: Names express a parent's state of mind before, during or after the birth of a child. Such names may depict passion, tragedy, comedy, inhumanity and emotions expressed in form of joys, fears, anxieties or hopes towards the circumstance of birth, the spiritual beings or events that are critical.

Affirmative or re-affirmative: Some names affirm new or known religio-philosophic beliefs and aspirations in a re-affirmative manner. Such names have latent transcendental reference that are given as prayers or re-enactment of religious principles like faith, sacrifice, offerings and so on. They may also reflect the attributes of God, deities, spirits, legends or names of religious functionaries in association with the qualities for which they are known.

Names as Symbols

Madu (2003:63) describes man as a "meaning seeking animal who must necessarily use symbols to proffer answers to the problems or mysteries of his existence" which he does with words or more succinctly put names. Names are symbolic because they stand for other things and make other symbols possible (Ritzer, 2008). A name as symbol is anything that represents recalls or typifies something of great practical importance by possessing analogous quality or by association in fact or thought. Man, in trying to give meaning to his world, conceptualizes ideas and associates same to words or rather names, thus standing as meanings to these words. Simply put, words are made to represent something else. Symbols are social objects like names used to represent or stand in for, or take the place of whatever people agree they shall represent. Names as symbols allow people to deal with their universe by identification, category and recollection. They also enable man to think and interact with himself while sorting out the identity of one symbolic name from another. Error of identity is eliminated and efficiency in problem solving is increased as man travels through space, time and his immediate environment. For instance, the mention of Charles Robert Darwin will quickly transport the individual to the 19th century. Likewise, the mention of *Amadioha* brings the dread of the god of thunder to the mind of the Igbo, though it is not visible.

Mysteries in Names

Worship in religion makes use of form and matter. Form refers to the linguistic gesticulation implored during worship while matter is the material object engaged in the act. Man is homo-religiosus and an intelligent being that looks up to his ontological source in the encounter of



dialogue that can be either mental or vocal which is the form (Ifesieh, 1989). Among other reasons, man engages in prayers for the purpose of controlling, predicting and enhancing his life or existence with the aid of the divine. He therefore makes use of words or more definitively, name of the object of prayer to address his desires. As man gives names to his progeny, he is engaging in a vocal dialogue that calls for the intervention of the divine. Prayers therefore yield practical results when they are borne as names that are repeated over times thereby playing out in the lives of the bearers positively or negatively, according to the meaning of the name. A christocentric view of prayer perceives words as the instrument of creation. God in the book of Genesis called names of things and asked them to come into being and they did. The New Testament affirmed that all things were made by the word that was in the beginning (John 1: 1-3). Names therefore are creative.

Antithetically, man use names in magic to manipulate spiritual forces towards realizing definite ends that most often are negative. Some magic aim at creating cosmic imbalance, a cosmic disequilibrium that is self-fulfilling, self-realizing and self-actualizing. Its effect on the individual is psycho-somatic (Madu, 2004). Magicians in witchcraft attack inflict harm on their victims by calling their names, as a proof that man is linked mysteriously to his name.

SUMMARY, RECOMMENDATION AND CONCLUSION

Igbo names are laden with meanings that are multivocal as each has the ability to speak of many issues at the same time. Consequently, different levels of cognition may be alluded to, thereby impinging on multiple spectrums, all condensed in one name. They are instrumental values of expression, communication, knowledge and control. According to Mbiti (1997:192), There is mystical power in words “names” especially those given by a senior person... The words of parents “as names” carry power when spoken to children: they cause good fortune, curse, success, peace, sorrows or blessings” Negative names equally inflict harm and portend misfortune.

Where local names borne by some persons have worked against their destinies, recent wave of Pentecostal prayers termed *Olu ezi na uno*-literally meaning family work but connotative of family prayers for remedying such anomaly have been embarked upon. Sometimes it is recommended that the individual or family that bore such vindictive name should change it for another that is more favorable. This is not out of place because some names chosen in times of despair have likewise attracted despair to the lives of the bearers. It will only be normal for persons who bear foreign or non-Igbo names which meanings are not known or they are known but do not reflect the innermost desires of the bearers, should be changed for rich meaning laden names of the Igbo.

This will not only instill cultural identity in the Igbo person, but enliven the potency of the meaning of the name in the life of the individual if Ejiofor’s (1981:21) submission that “the love of culture is not that blind. It is mystic. It is spiritual” is anything to go by. This will not only promote the culture of the Igbo that scholars like Ejiofor (1981) are warning that is being eroded but particularly kindle the fire of cultural renaissance in the hearts of the youth. Names are Igbo people’s medium of documenting their history which must not be allowed to be fizzle away (Idowu, 1979).



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