

Naming among the Igbo: A Comparative Analysis of Given and Taken Names

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Abstract

Names and naming is part of human person. There are different categories of names among the Igbo: birth day name or God given name (it can also be called pre-ordained name), given name (given around seven days the child is born), Christian name and “taken or acquired name”. The focus of this paper is to examine “given” and “taken” names among the Awgbu people, in Orumba North of Anambra. The study compares the two names on the areas of the circumstances surrounding the choice of the name and assessment of some selected names. The data were sourced from native Igbo speakers, with much focus on Awgbu. The findings of the study show that given and taken names are bestowed on a person at different period of life, there are procedures to obtain each name, there are some items expected to present before the naming, the names can be changed (but given names are rarely changed), there are restrictions on the use of given name compared to taken names. The names gathered were categorized into different themes: names associated with

chi (God), ike (power), aku (wealth), eze (king), and onwu (death). The study also reveals that most of these names tell stories and expresses the events and circumstances surrounding the family in general, and bearer in particular. Given names express the parents' life experiences and world-view, while and taken names expresses the ideology, achievement, and the desires of the name bearer.

Keywords: Naming, ceremony, society, given names, taken names, name change

Introduction

A name is a term by which somebody, something or a place is known and distinguished from others. From biblical perspective, name is as old as man, and no man has ever lived without a name, and no place has ever existed without a name. The notion of naming exists from time immemorial and apparently started with man (Genesis chapter 2 verses 19 & 20 (RSV). Name is an essential part of human societies as without a name anybody is nobody and anything is nothing. Everything on the surface of the earth differs from one another by their name.

Naming practices in African societies often reflect socio-cultural and ideological realities of these societies. According to Gerba (2015), names are important pointers of individuals in society. Parents of the child are principal actors. The name they give may generally be linked with the identity of the child as he grows. That means, the name parents give emanate from the social fabrics of their life. In the words of Akinnaso (1980), naming is a way of talking about what a person (especially the name giver) experiences, values, thinks and knows in the real world.

There are many important choices parents need to make concerning their children. A key one is choosing a name for their baby, which is a Life-long-label. A lot of significance is given to names among the Igbo. Parents believe that a name is not just a totem of identification but sometimes a prediction of what the child will turn out to be. So, chosen a name for a child needs a whole lot of assessing the situation of the family from the parents before the decision is been made. Often, the name embodies the story that led to the chosen name. Other times, parents anticipate the struggles of life and provide a name that will act as succour to the child. Traditionally, among the Igbo, the father names the child within a few weeks of his birth. Name-giver has great freedom in the choice of names among existing ones or even creating from the circumstances sounding the birth of the child. The given names are often unique, meaningful, emerging from circumstances at the time of naming. Among the Igbo, names point to individual persons and their different social status, it communicates information of bearer to others.

African names are not just mere tags but provide more insights into important social, religious, cultural and political events that occur around the time of birth. Names are arbitrary labels that refer to certain signified entries, the signifier and the signified may not share the same qualities, yet they can still bear the same name. According to Agyekum (2006) the notion is true when we consider situations where people who bear the same name behave differently, and having different stories surrounding their names. For Guma (2001), naming after events serves as a “recording” system. Individuals embody the meaning associated with their names and in the process, try to live up to the expected behaviour or personage that is dedicated to the name. According to Suzman (1994) in Zulu, Xhosa, Sotho, Tswana, and many other cultures, name

givers traditionally chose personal names that point to a range of people and circumstances that were relevant at the time of the child's birth, till the naming.

Among the Igbo, names (good names) are admired and adored. There is believe in *ezi aha ka ego* (good name is better than riches). Name is an identity and it takes a lot of sacrifice for one to build and maintain a good name. Some behaviours dent the family name. Such behaviour include: stealing/robbery, prostitution, laziness, adultery, gossips, etc. The important of "good name" is linked to identity. That is why when a child does something (either good or bad), people will always want to know, whose child he is" or which family he comes from - identity. According to Mensah and Mekamgoum (2017), naming is an essential aspect of a people's cultural identity, which provides a window that mirrors the people's socio-cultural assumptions, attitudes, beliefs and worldview.

There is also a belief that a person should live up to his name. For example, one cannot bear "Udoka" (Peace is supreme) as a name and act on the contrary when issue arises. People will always caution the name bearer to act according to his name, as people belief that, "aha mmadu na-edu ya" (a person's name leads him). The meaning attached to names, plays a significant role in the definition of "personhood", because it is believed that a given name does not only serve as an identity but also determines the type of person the individual will be (Guma, 2001).

A name given to a baby according to Gerba (2015) could: distinguish him from the others serving as self-identification, involve him to the wider community or the physical world of human existence, given name attach a baby to society or

ancestors. Among the Igbo, there are different categories of names a person acquired at different period in the life: (1) God-given name (this is pre-ordained name which no one has power over); it is acquired based on the day a child is born, and it is gender sensitive. (2) Given name by the family, which is given around seven days after the child's birth. (3) Christian or baptismal name (given at baptism as a sign of admission to a Christian faith). (4) Family name (surname), which connect all the family members. (5) Taken names (a person takes name when he is older): This kind of name is used to express the bearer's ideologies, boast about his abilities and accomplishments, as well as criticize and subvert the visions of others.

Previous Study

There are a lot of works on names in Africa generally and Nigeria in particular. For example, Gerba (2015) and Marjie-Okyere (2015) worked on typology of Oromo (Ethiopia) personal names; Agyekum (2006), and Adjah (2011) worked on Ghanaian, while Chauke (2015) and Ngubane and Thabethe (2013) focused on South African names. However, Mensah and Offong (2013) examine death prevention names among the Ibibio, while Mensah (2015) traced the sources of the death prevention in Ibibio names to the belief in reincarnation. Emeka-Nwobia (2016) examines the namesake (ogbo) phenomenon in Ehugbo (Afikpo), while Mmadike (2014) assesses Igbo names associated with *ala* and categorises the names to reflect the various dispositions of the name-givers.

Gerba (2015) assessed the typology of Oromo (the largest ethnic group in Ethiopia) personal names and considers naming as an important aspect of the people. The data was

collected from native speakers through an in-depth interview and direct interactions. The data were analysed qualitatively; and the results show typology or semantic classification based on the how and when of naming a baby. The typology include circumstantial names, depict special physical appearance and Behavioral features at birth, names derived from animals, tempronyms, names associated with plants (flora names), names referring to agricultural work product and cattle amount, names referring to the Oromo days of a month, names reflecting joy and happiness, name denoting seasons, birthday names, seven days of a week, birth order names, names indicating birth places, twin names, clan name, names referring to grandfather, grandmother, and great grandfather (ancestor's names), names associated with trees, political related names, and teknonymy. The Oromo people also give a name to their children that relate to the name of grandfathers, and tribes or clan which indicates that the names have a referential function. Gerba's study suggests that the people of Oromo may give name to a baby through hammachiisa or ayyaana heda which means that the name is related to the fortune or fate of the baby with his birth day and name him accordingly.

Scholars such as Sowande and Ajanaku (1969), Akinnaso (1980), and Oduyoye (1982) grouped Yoruba names based on different socio-cultural dynamics such as: Amutorunwa (brought from heaven), Abiso (given name), Esin (religion- related), Ise (occupational names) and oriki (praise names). Sowande and Ajanaku (ibid) classified and explained Yoruba names as: Oruko Amutorunwa (name brought from heaven and these names are determined by circumstantial factors and clinical information of the child at birth) Orukoabiso (ascribed names and they are like normal names given to a child irrespective of the birth condition). Oduyoye (1982) classified

Yoruba names into four elements: Oruko (personal names) Orukoabiso (attributive name) Orukoalaje (nicknames) and Orukoorile (totemic names).

Furthermore, there are given names among Yoruba people according to the order of child's birth especially where there is twin or multiple birth. For example, Taiwo/Taiye (The first of the twins to come), Kehinde (The last to come), Etaoko or Ibeta (The name given to the third of triplets), Idowu (A child after the twin), Alaba (The child after Idowu), Koko (The child after Alaba), and Idogbe (The child after Koko), among others (Ideh and Ajala (2019). One does not have right or choice over these names as they are pre-ordained by God to determine what to be named. In the same way that one does not have full control of the socioeconomic contexts in which they were born into including the circumstances surrounding their birth and that is why they accept the names given to them by their parents or the one that God gives to the person.

Ubahakwe (1981) categorized Igbo names into eleven: virtuous, kinship, natural phenomenon, social concepts, the Igbo calendar, titles, evil, physical objects, parts of the body, material assets, and occupation. Ibibio has the highest categories of names known among language communities in Nigeria according to Ukpung (2007) which is grouped into forty categories including: the Supreme Being, cult, animal kingdom, the plant kingdom, herbal medicine, parts of the body, place of birth, colour of appearance, order of birth, conflict, death, festivities, and reincarnation, among others (as quoted in Ude & Akpan, 2017).

Anyachonkeya (2014) examines naming in Igbo land to ascertain a range of implications it entails. The study assumes a

position that the names which the Igbo give their children have social, linguistic, historical, religious and philosophical colouring. According to her, the names reveal the people's sociological and ideological culture, 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. However, Nwoye (2014) undertook an ethnographic exploration of Igbo naming ceremony and the significant of the ceremony in the life of the child. According to Nwoye, the ceremony of giving a name among the Igbo to the new born child is one that comes immediately after the seclusion and the purification rites are performed. Nwoye's study shows that it is through ceremony that a newly born child gets to become defined as an individual human being through the act of naming whereby name is assigned to him. The study also reveals that the cultural practice of Igbo naming ceremony encompasses some common stage process: announcement, preparation, presentation of name(s) and entertainment.

The study by Uchegbue (2010) examines the celebration of the infancy rites among the Igbo ethnic group of Nigeria more especially, the Ngwa sub-group. The "Infancy Rites" are those ritual ceremonies that are associated with a child's life within the continuum of birth and puberty which include: the burial of the umbilical cord; circumcision; first hair/ nail-cutting; and naming ceremony. According to Uchegbue, naming ceremony is performed by the elders named by the oracle, and people present for the occasion must include: the eldest man and woman in the family, a daughter of the family married outside (Nwaokpu), and a son of a daughter of the family married outside (Nwadiala or Okenne). Several factors usually determine the name given to a child: the day of the native week on which a child is born, if a child

is born while the parents are on a journey or while sojourning in a strange land, to show the preference for boys or a certain concern for the future of the child, the name may be dictated by the diviner's opinion, names may be given in expression of gratitude to God, the spirits or ancestors, they may be given to express certain basic ethical values or to convey some moral lessons. Also, the names given to children may be determined by the philosophical or socio-religious faith which the child stimulates in the parents.

This study compares given names and taken names. Here, the study assesses the processes involved in the given and taken names, the reasons of the choice of names, and comparison on the semantic of both names. Though a lot of research have been carried out and written on this topic, "name", this study is novel because this paper is unaware of any research that have focused on the relationship that exists in given and taken names among Awgbu Igbo. The inquiry is hoped to represent a significant contribution to knowledge, since it will complement available literature on naming among the Igbo in general with particular reference to Awgbu.

Research Methodology

The data for this study were collected from both primary and secondary sources, as well as our intuition as native speakers of the language. The study gathered data on given and taken names, and their meanings, who gives and takes the name and procedure in giving and taking the name. The data were collected from people born and brought up from Awgbu. Some relevant elders in the community were purposively selected and interviewed. A total of forty-nine (49) people were interviewed (30 male and 19 female). The

respondents were between the ages of 32 and 72. Other sources of data collection were published materials on personal names such as Oha (2009), Ezenwa-Ohaeto (2021), Solomon-Etefia and Ideh (2019), among others. In all, a total of 80 names were selected from numerous ones and analysed

Comparative Analysis of Given and Taken (Acquired) Names

Naming ceremony is one of the oldest traditional practices among the Igbo but the practice varies from one community to another. It is viewed as one of the important rites in an individual's life, a time for the child to have a name to be identified with. The naming of a child among the Igbo takes place on the seventh day after the child's birth. However, taken or acquired name occurs at a later time in the life of a person, with no specific age of acquisition. Also, before naming a baby, the parents of the child invite all the extended family, neighbours and friends to be part of the celebration. However, taken name often occurs at the gathering of kinsmen, or during other gatherings. During interview with one Maazi Nnajofo, "taken a name" might be one of the agendas of "meeting" never a sole reason of gathering except when a title is been bestow on a person which goes with taken name. Nwaada Ezinne states that the official naming of a child around seven days from birth is fading among the Awgbu people, while taken name among the kinsmen remains strong.

On the time naming takes place, our respondent are of the opinion that it occurs in the afternoon, a time the farmers, traders and other skilled labourers might have work better part of the day, and need rest from work. Who gives a

name? The study shows that for given name, the child's father is the major name giver. This is because, both the mother and the grandparents often give the baby names, but at the end, the child is addressed more with only one name.

There are some similarities that can be observed from both names. First most given and taken names depict the circumstances surrounding the choice of each name. For example, a name such as Mukosoro (it is my desire) was given to a female child by his father. According to the bearer, when the father brought her mother and introduced her (mother) to his family, they all rejected her and insist that he pull-out of the relationship and marry someone else; but his father refused all the oppositions and married her mother. After getting married, the first child comes, a girl. The second also is a girl, then came her (the third child, another girl) and the family start mocking his father and he stood his ground and told them, "Mu ka o soro" (it is my desire), and there came the name. In likewise manner, circumstances also lead to taken names. For example, Maazi Ebubedike narrated why he took the name, "Ebubedike" (the glory of the powerful). According to him, "the strength and glory of a man lies on money, and without this money, many people will not respect you or regard your words. People can also humiliate, and disgrace your person". In his words, "I was answering Nwachinemere (A child that is guided by his personal god) when some young boys with their sudden wealth came to the village with disrespect, intimidation and extravagant spending, and start turning our culture upside down". He said that it was not a small battle but at the end, he and good people of his community won the battle, and that is when he took the name (Ebubedike), which he attributed to the power of his genuine wealth, his role in the village, life experiences and wisdom in

tackling the challenge. Other names such as Ọluebubechukwu (Miracle), and taken names such as Emeteụwamma (one cannot satisfy the world), Ezinwannedịnamba (a good sibling can be gotten from another community), among others have different circumstances that led to the names.

Another category of name for both given and taken names are the one associated with Chi (God). Igbo belief on Chiukwu (God the Almighty), Chineke (God the creator) and also in the supremacy of this Chi. Everyone and everything own its existence from this Chi. There are many names (both given and taken names associated with this Chi. Example of taken names include “Chiadịkaobi(mmadu)” (God is not like human), and Chianumba (God cannot be admonished). For given names we have Munachimsoaga (I walk with my God), Chidiebere (God is merciful), Chinonso (God is near), Mmasichukwu (God’s desire), and Chibuikem (God is my strength).

Another category of name for both given and taken names are the ones with ike (power). Example of given names in this category include Ikedi (there is power), Ikemefuna (may my strength not get lost), Ikechem (the power that protected me), Ikechukwu (God’s power); while example of taken names includes; Ogbuagu (lion killer), Ọhamadike (community knows a great person), and Ọputaobie (when one appears, the trouble/problem ends), among others. The power, strength and energy associated with these names are not only physical but also financially.

Another area of comparison is on names associated with wealth. Wealth among the Igbo can be classified into four: wealth for money, material things, children, and

knowledge. Wealth, Hardwork and experience cum age are respected among the people. This study reveals some given and taken names in this category which include Akunne (mother's wealth) and Akunna (father's wealth), which can either be given (to female child) or taken (for adult male because their wealth comes from their mother or father or that the mother or father is brain behind their wealth). For given names we have Akuchukwu (God's wealth), Nwaku (child of wealth), Uzoaku (the road to wealth), and Akunnaya (the father's wealth). However, the names for taken names are; Akuenwebe (wealth does not have any permanent abode), Akwabata (wealth has entered), Akunbiokwu (wealth settles dispute), Akunesiobike (wealth strengthen the heart), and Akajiaku (the hand that holds wealth).

Names associated with eze (king) are another area of comparison. There are three dimensions to the perception and interpretation of the concept of eze: (i) Eze in relation to rulership (political). Here, the Eze is reserved to refer to the community head chosen by consent and/or through direct blood descent from the holders of the Ofo (Oha, 2009:106). Ezes are seen more as leaders not rulers, as he leads his people to war, interacts with the chiefs (council of elders - ndjichie) to come up with any resolution on any burning issue (Solomon-Etefia and Ideh, 2019). Second interpretation of eze is in relation to lordship (mastery). It signifies excellence and mastery in the art, activity or profession associated with the respective nominals. The names are given to the people who has distinguished themselves from others with their skills. The names include; Ezenkwu (the King of the palm tree), Ezeagu (the king of lion), and Ezeji (the king of yam). Lastly, eze in relation to wealth (see Ideh, 2023 - in press). For given names, we have Adaeze (princess), Chimeremeze (God made me

king), Ezenwaanyi (Queen mother); while taken names associated with eze include, Ezeugo (King of eagle), Ezeudo (king of peace), Ezeakwụsịuba (the king cannot stop wealth), Akụbueze (wealth is king), and Ezechimere (The king made by the God).

Death is one of natural occurrence among human people. Given names associated with death are; Ọzọemena (another death should not come), and Ọnwụka (death is supreme). For taken names, we have Ọnwụasoanya (death is no respecter of a person), Ọnwụmaeze (death knows no king). The common thing about this category of names is that the bearers has bad experience of death and uses these names to express the effect of death, the fear the families have, or ideology towards death.

The study reveals Igbo belief in dignity, leading to name and expression such as, “Eziahakaego” (good name worth more than riches). This name expresses that no matter how wealthy a person might be, he should ensure that his name is not associated with any form of evil or abominable acts such as murder, stealing, laziness, dogging of responsibilities, rape among others. Taken names in this category include; Akajiugo (The hand that holds the eagle), Nnanyereugo (father gave him honour), and Ugobueze (eagle is king). Ugo (eagle) is considered the strongest, bravest, holiest and fearless, tenacious, high flyers, never eat dead meat, and possess vitality among other birds. The name indicates that the bearer has either attained, or aspires to attain the immaculate purity, nobility and regality which the Igbo usually ascribe to the eagle, the king of the birds. Dibuugwunwaanyi (husband is the dignity of a woman) is

also a taken name expressing dignity but specifically for female.

Another area of name comparison is on name avoidance and replacement. Igbo culture imposes restriction on who call the other by their personal names and who avoids the name but use alternative terms in addressing people who are older than we are in a way that he will not feel disrespect, belittle or insulted. The study reveals that not everyone is allowed to call everybody by their given name in all contexts. For example, there is restriction on children, son-in-law, and daughter-in-law calling their mother, mother-in-law, and father-in-law (among others) by their personal names, while there is no restriction on taken name.

Furthermore, English names are finding their way among the Igbo for both given and taken names. Example of English taken names includes the following for male: Ichie Million, Dollars; while Sample, Pattern, Simple, Pleasure, Treasure among others are for female married women. For given names (which most of them has Igbo equivalent), are Promise (Nkwachukwu), Emmanuel (Chinonye), Happiness (Anụrị), Mercy (Ebere), and Gift (Onyinye). The reason for chosen the English over the Igbo equivalent is beyond the scope of this study

Another area of comparison is in the name Change. The study observed that given names are rarely changed. We are made to know that a child has more than one given name. The child is given name by the father (sometimes another name comes from the mother, child's grandparents), but the child is often addressed more with one of the names. So, a child may decide to change a name which is well known to

people to the unpopular one. According to one Maazi Nnamdi, change of taken name is more common among the people, follows by family name (surname). The reasons for the change of name as gathered from the study include; 1) when the name is associated with deities, or ancestors (often with given name). For example, the study observed that a name, “Agwunobi” (Agwu is in the obi) was changed to “Chinedu” (God leads). 2) When a person is expected to take a name but delays, a closest person or even anybody can choose name for him or her. If this happened, the person bears the name temporary. Once the bearer comes with preferred name, he can buy drinks and Kolanut/garden egg present to the group and declare the new name.

Conclusion

This paper discusses personal name, and compares two kinds of this personal name: given and taken names among the Igbo people and discusses some of the circumstances leading to the names, the procedure of adopting the names and relationship between the names. Igbo name is not just a tag of identity or personal label but a story and an expression of the events and circumstances surrounding the chosen name. The results from the study reveals that both given and taken names have names associated with: Chi (God), Ike (power) aku (wealth), eze (king), and onwu (death), among others. There are also “new generation names”, which are in English but have their Igbo equivalent such as Mercy (Ebere), Joy (Anuri), and Promise (Nkwa) which can be attributed to the influence of western culture and the dominant position of English among the people.

Finally, we have a culture of name avoidance or the use of alternative names. This is where we move from given names to taken names, and is a kind of respect, and being polite in addressing “the other”. In other words, to call certain people by their personal names (given name) among the Igbo is disrespectful, while there is no restriction on the use of taken names.

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