

CHANGES AND DEVELOPMENTS IN MARITAL NAMES AMONG THE IGBO PEOPLE OF NIGERIA: A SOCIOLINGUISTIC INVESTIGATION

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ABSTRACT

Marital names are names used among couples. It is observed that there are some changes in Igbo marital names. This paper sets out to investigate the changes. A qualitative approach was adopted and primary data were sourced through interviews. Thirty seven adult male and female respondents from different Igbo communities were purposively sampled and interviewed. The Afrocentric theory was adopted for the analysis of this work. Findings reveal that Igbo marital names changed from that of the Lord-Servant to companionship names. The later trend in the marital names is completely devoid of Igbo language and culture. The noticed changes are as a result of language contact. This paper concludes by advocating that though changes in society and language are inevitable, the Igbo should not lose sight of their culture especially as it regards marriage. Moreso, the Igbo should preserve her identity through her language by using Igbo marital names.

Keywords: Marital names, afrocentric theory, lord-servant, companionship

INTRODUCTION

Names are both cultural and linguistic expressions. Names are ways of identifying people and things. Every society has a way of identifying one another through names. Ogbulogo (1999:61) asserts that "... names constitute a major part of language universals, attracting to themselves a great deal of cultural and linguistic significance". For Uko (2004) in Abraham (2016:407), "names are functional and are given to commemorate a practice, express belief in or identify with something." The explanation implies that names are linguistic expressions. The messages in names are expressed through the use of language. Societal beliefs, practice and culture reflect in names which is an integral part of language. It has been noted that language is deeply entrenched in human culture. This is to say that language and society are intertwined (Opara 2013).

Names are rich in meanings. They carry important information. Wierzbicka (1992) in De Klerk and Bosch (1996:525) argues that "Names mean something ... They carry important pragmatic meanings which color and even shape the character of human interaction." The above assertion shows that names are powerful ways of expressing a lot of things. The fact that names carry important pragmatic meanings which have the ability to color and shape the character of human interaction shows the great importance of names in social relationships.

Several works have been done on names in different languages, ranging from personal to family and nicknames (see Ubahakwe, 1981, 1982; Arua, 2009; Maalej, 2009; Nnamdi-Eruchalu, 2009 and Nwagbo 2015). The focus of this study is marital names. The only accessed work, at the time of this research, in Igbo marital names is Anyachebelu, (2015). Her work is on patterns in Igbo spousal names. The present study goes beyond the patterns to a sociolinguistic investigation on changes and developments in Igbo marital names. Lyons (1970) in Onuoha (2008:224) stresses that "the study of observable or possible changes in all ramifications of a language is of significance to social changes and history of the language."

Marital names are mostly used among married couples. In the Igbo traditional society, a married man has a name by which his wife, and in some cases, his children address him. The man also has a traditional way of addressing his wife. In some cases, other relatives of the man call the woman by that name also for the Igbo believe that *otu onye adighi alu nwaanyi so ya*. 'One person does not marry a wife alone'. The Igbo society knows her limits in the saying. The form of address has undergone changes over time. The changes are the focus of this study.

METHODOLOGY

The participant observation method was used in this study. The researcher is an Igbo, grew up in an Igbo community and also joined her community's meeting at home and in her present location – Lagos, where she made out time to participate fully in general meetings. The researcher carefully noted, before and after the meetings, the names by which couples address themselves. The second method that was used for data collection is interview. The researcher added this method to source more information, based on the fact that it is not every couple that make bold to call each other their marital names in the public.

A purposive sample of thirty-seven adults were interviewed, sixteen were males while twenty-one were females. The reason behind the slant in the number of the interviewees is because it was easier for the researcher to reach the females than the males. The interviewees cut across different age levels. The older ones, seventy years and above were interviewed to ascertain what they and their parents call or called each other. Forty-five to sixty years were equally interviewed to find out if there is any difference between their marital names and those earlier interviewed. Finally, the younger generation, twenty-five to forty years were also interviewed to get information on the names the present generation of couples call each other.

The data collection method used is structured interviews, for the same set of questions was posed to the participants. The researcher tried to elicit from the interviewees, marital names used among couples in the Igbo society, their meanings, the reason(s) behind such names, the noticed changes in such naming practice, the effect of the names and also that of the noticed changes and finally, the way forward. The responses were carefully recorded. The Igbo marital names were translated into the English language. The data was organized under three headings. The Afrocentric theory was used as the theoretical framework for the analyses.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The theoretical framework adopted for the analysis of this work is the Afrocentric theory, espoused by Molefi Kete Asante. Afrocentric theory is based on the premise that the most serious crisis confronting Africans is the pressure exerted by foreign culture. For Asante (1998:2), Afrocentricity literally means “Placing African Ideals at the center of any analysis that involves African culture and behaviour”. The theory avers that Africa has lost her cultural centeredness, and has been moved off her own platform. The resultant effect of this shift is that Africans cannot truly be themselves or know their potentials since they exist in a borrowed space. The theory advocates the need for Africans to return to her own platform by relocating and repositioning themselves within their own culture and history. It is only when Africans stand on their own platforms that they can greatly enrich the world.

Afrocentricity liberates the African by establishing agency as the key concept for freedom (Asante, 1998). Afrocentric theory is useful to this work. The contact of the Igbo language with the English has some adverse effect on the Igbo naming practices especially in marital names. Society and language are not static. They are always in a state of flux. Societal changes notwithstanding, there is every need for the Igbo people to remember their base and not just be moving and floating in the air. Asante (1998:13), argues that: “those who do not move from a base are just floating in the air”. The Igbo need to understand the Igbo essence in marriage as reflected in marital names. They should not just take to the European's pattern of marital naming, thereby floating in the air without a base.

DATA ANALYSIS

In the traditional Igbo society, men and women are seen as unequal beings even in marriage. A married man is *dibiulo/dinweulo* ‘owner of the house’. For the woman, she is grouped together with the children hence the answer, *nna anyi* ‘our father’, whenever a man calls his wife. The man's office as the head of the family is held in such a high esteem that Achebe (1958:37) notes “no matter how prosperous a man, if he was unable to rule his women and his children (and especially his women), he was not really a man.” There are no contentions about the man's office. For the Igbo man, he holds his traditional office in high esteem. Consider this excerpt from Ubesie (1993)

*Ihe m na-alu bu ndi inyom isii
tinyere nne gi bu isi nwaanyị m.*

I marry six wives
Including your mother who is my first
wife.

O nweela ubochi m biara ikpesara gi

Have I ever come to

report to you

na o nwere nke nnu nara n'ofe o siiri m?

That there is much salt in the soup that
any of them prepared for me?

(p.37)

The pride of the Igbo man is that he has good control over his wives no matter their number.

Another look at Achebe's (1958) work, which mirrors the Igbo traditional society before the advent of the white man drives home a point. Okonkwo in his literally work calls the two wives by different names. The first he calls by the name of the first son *Nne Nwoye* 'Nwoye's mother' and the later by her first name *Ojiugo* 'Eagle's kolanut/premium kolanut'. For the women, they both answer him *Nna anyi* 'Our father'.

It is worth noting that *nna anyi* is not exclusively used by the man's family. Any wife or child could address the owner of the house by that name as a show of respect. As for the women, they are either addressed by their first names or by the name of their first child. It will be deduced from the above explanations that one cannot establish the fact that traditional Igbo couples have marital names which they exclusively use for each other. This is not to say that a woman may not have an additional name for the husband, most of the time, other people join her in calling him the additional name. Consider the following names:

- 1a) Okeagu Leopard
- b) Ogbuji Great Yam Farmer/Yam tycoon
- c) Dinta Expert Hunter
- d) Ogene Metal gong
- e) Azueruala He whose back does not touch the ground/great or expert wrestler

Respondents reveal the above names as additional names which a woman may call her husband in a lighter mood. The names have to do with special attribute and achievements of the man. The first name on the list shows the man to be very strong while the second depicts that the man is a great yam farmer – very rich. For the third name, the man must be a great hunter. The fourth name has to do with the man's special attribute – a very good voice. The last name shows that the man is a great wrestler. These names tell stories about the addressed. They are not the exclusive preserve of their wives for any other could address them by such names. All these show that names in the Igbo society are communal property.

The question at this stage is: Are there no such moments the Igbo traditional couples have intimacy or need to address each other by a unique name? Findings reveal that such names are used but not always open for public consumption. Such names are hidden under tones and in some cases, have a reduplicated back vowel /oo/ and *oma* 'good' attached to it. Other relatives might use the same name for either of the couple but the difference lies in the tone when the couples use such names for each other. Consider the following names:

Table I: Marital Names among Igbo Traditional Couples

	General Names	Intimate Names	Gloss
1.	Oriaku m	Oriaku moo	Consumer of my wealth oo
2.	Dimoma	Dimoma oo	My good husband oo
3.	Okeagu di m	Okeagu di moo	My leopard husband oo
4.	Ogbuji di m	Ogbuji di moo	My great yam farmer husband oo
5.	Ogene di m	Ogene di m oma oo	My (good) metal gong husband oo
6.	Ojiugo	Ojiugo nke moo	My own eagle's/premium kolanut oo
7.	Di m ukwu	Di m ukwu oo	My big husband oo

The attachment of *oo* and *oma* endears the couple to each other. They equally know when to call each other by such, hence, anyone who does not look deeply into the Igbo setting will swiftly run into conclusion that there are no spousal intimacy as are revealed in names among the Igbo.

The advent of the western culture had great impact on the Igbo society. Nduka (1964) in Nwala (1985:242) notes that "... hardly any other people in Nigeria took more readily to the whiteman's religion and education than did the Ibos." Lending his voice to the contact of the Igbo with the Western culture, Ijoma (2002) avers that:

... Christianity had adverse effects on the institutions and the culture of the people, because Christianity is culture bound, the missionaries wanted the Igbo society to change ... way of life. The customs and practices of the people were considered primitive and "pagan". The Idea of European cultural superiority was manifested in the actions of the missionaries. Western civilization was equated to Christianity (p. 50).

Marriage is part of the Igbo custom. It was equally affected by the European culture. It has earlier been stated that language and culture are interwoven. Language is the vehicle for cultural transmission (see Njoku, 2006; Nwadike, 2009; Onwudiwe & Ugochukwu 2012). Changes in culture reflect in language. The Christian religion has a different view on marriage. One of the teachings on marriage in the Christian religious book – the Bible – has it thus:

... Have ye not read, that he which made them at the beginning made them male and female, And said, For this cause shall a man leave father and mother, and shall cleave to his wife: and they twain shall be one flesh? Wherefore they are no more twain, but one flesh. What therefore God hath joined together, let not man put asunder (Matthew 19: 4-60).

The teaching here centers on the man and his wife, giving no room for the extended family. The Christian culture has a sharp contrast with the Igbo. In the Igbo culture, the extended family is involved from onset in any marital move and continues thereafter, hence, a wife is *nwunye anyi* 'our wife'. With the culture contact, came new teachings on marriage which brought about a different way of life. It equally resulted in changes in marital names. Consider names on the following table.

Table II: Marital names after the advent of Christianity

	Name	Gloss
1.	Papa Emeka	Emeka's father
2.	Mama Emeka	Emeka's mother
3.	Misiisi	Mrs.
4.	Odoziaku	Beautifier of wealth
5.	Onyenkuzi	A teacher
6.	Dike m	My hero
7.	Odjukọ m	My rare person
8.	Ihe m	My light
9.	Ike m	My strength
10.	Ebube m	My glory
11.	Onyeoma m	My good person
12.	Nneoma	Good mother
13.	Nwaoma	Well nurtured child
14.	Onwa m	My star
15.	Nwaanyịoma	Good woman
16.	Nwoke oma	Good man
17.	Nne m	My mother
18.	Nna a	Father (an endearment name for a boy)
19.	Apunanwu	One who does not go out under the sun
20.	Mma	Beauty
21.	Achalugo	The eagle of the forestland among other women
22.	Ugbana	A specie of bird known for its whiteness
23.	Enenebeejghuru	One whose beauty prevents admirers from going to

		work
24.	Omaljcha	Beauty
25.	Asa m	My beautiful specie of fish
26.	Onyemjirihiriisi	The one on whom I rest my head
27.	Nzube m	My desire
28.	Ahudiya	Husband's body
29.	Kpakpando m	My star
30.	Eke m	Mine from creation/God
31.	Ututuoma m	My fortunate morning
32.	Iko/Ugadiya	Husband's lover
33.	Obidiya	Husband's heart
34.	Ezenwaanyi	Queen
35.	Igwe	King
36.	Enyidiya	Husband's friend
37.	Otonahudiya	One who grew up under the husband's nurture
38.	Ogbom	My sake
39.	Ntam	My younger one
40.	Omasirim	My pleasure
41.	Urem	My pet
42.	Objagelim	One who has come to eat
43.	Odakunaahudiya	One who leans on the husband's body
44.	Deedim	My elder brother and my husband
45.	Didiuto	Husband that is sweet
46.	Ukwudiya	Husband's legs
47.	Ugboaku	Boat of wealth
48.	Dimaanum	Husband who knows how to marry me
49.	Oyiridiya	One who looks like the husband
50.	Nkem	My own/mine
51.	Akwam	My egg
52.	Ndom	My shelter
53.	Utom/ Usom	My joy/ sweetness
54.	Ugogbe m	My mirror
55.	Mmaahum	My body beauty
56.	Oyooyom/Oyoom	My lovely one/pal
57.	Obioma m	The joy of my heart
58.	Anyanwuututu m	My morning star
59.	Nwanne m	My brother / sister
60.	Mmiriakum	My stream of wealth
61.	Ugoeze	The king's eagle
62.	Uremma	Beautiful pet
63.	Akum	My wealth
64.	Odimnobi	One whom I hold to heart
65.	Ugwum	My prestige
66.	Onyeeze	A ruler
67.	Ozongadiyazoro	One who hides where the husband hid
68.	Udo m	My peace
69.	Okpueze m	My crown
70.	Ngala m	My pride
71.	Osodiemeogo	One who joins the husband to do favour
72.	Odijiridi	That which belongs to the husband

The above listed names do not show unequal relationship. It rather reveals partnership which the Christian religion teaches. Most of the names are personalized with the addition of 'm' which stands for mine. In the first two names,

‘Emeka’ was just used as an example. It could be any other name. It used to be *nne Emeka* ‘Emeka’s mother’ in the traditional Igbo setting. For the woman, she answers *nna anyị* ‘our father’. The argument here is that teknonyms are new developments in Igbo marital names. The third name on the list shows a shift. It used to be *oriaku* ‘consumer of wealth’. It is worth noting that the name has metamorphosized from *oriaku* ‘consumer of wealth’ to *odoziaku* ‘beautifier of wealth’ then to *osodiemeogo/aku* ‘one who joins the husband to do favour’ and with the cry for women emancipation, **okpataaku* ‘producer of wealth’¹ (some feminists verbally argue that women are breadwinners in some families and therefore should equally answer the name *okpataaku* ‘producer of wealth’).

The fourth name on the list was anglicized. ‘Mrs’ is an English title that comes before a married woman’s name(s). Names six to eighteen have to do with personal attributes the couple found in each other. The difference between them and the traditional Igbo society is a slant in the names. Examples 1 (a) to (e) show that it is the man’s and not the woman’s personal attributes that are highlighted. A praise name could be used for the man but rarely for the woman in the traditional Igbo society. Other names on the list show closeness, oneness, and companionship as the Christian religion recommends. It will be recalled that the missionaries were Europeans. They did not only teach the Christian religion but their culture, which subtly gained ground over the African culture that, was considered primitive. All these were done through language. One other striking thing about these names is that most couples use the names openly, if not for anything, to show that they love each other and live peacefully. This level of openness in the use of marital names is contrary to what was obtainable in the Igbo traditional society.

Names nineteen to twenty five eulogize the beauty of the bearers. The traditional Igbo society has an indirect way of praising people. A beautiful child may be referred to as *nwa bu sọ njo* ‘a child that is very ugly’. It is believed that if a person is praised openly, it gets into his/her head. The belief is equally expressed thus: *E tobe ogili, o ghoba ara* ‘when a fermented oil bean seed is praised, it gets mad’. A fermented oil bean seed is a local and delicious spice that is indispensable in the preparation of bitter leaf soup among the Igbo especially in Anambra State. Bitter leaf soup is a special type of soup that is used to eat pounded cassava especially during ceremonies.

The use of praise names falls in line with the Christian religious teaching. God the creator praised his works by declaring that they are good. Names twenty six to seventy two show close companionship of the couples that bear the names. It will be recalled that the Christian religion advocate oneness in marriage. The names show strict adherence to the Christian religious teaching. For example, the twenty sixth name *Onyemjirihiriisi* ‘the one on whom I rest my head’ connotes that the partners are indispensable. A person cannot survive on this planet without lying or leaning his or her head on something. Other names in this category highlight closeness which indirectly shows the state of the couple’s marriage as been peaceful even when the opposite is the case. The traditional Igbo society was not used to such showoff. A lady is meant to understand on time that *di bu ndidi* ‘husband (marriage) is patience’. In other words, one must make it work out well. The lady is further warned that *agbara ju ndo, o kwuru n’ anwu* ‘when a woman refuse shelter (husband), she stays under the sun’. The focus in marriages was taking good care of one’s husband and children, and the man providing for his household and not in names that showcase the state of one’s marriage.

The changes around the world, which has been facilitated by the social media, thereby making the world a global village, brought in a new trend in Igbo marital names consider the following names:

Current Marital Names

1. Frank
2. Wendy
3. Daddy
4. Mummy
5. My dear
6. Best
7. Honey
8. Sweet
9. Sweetie

¹ *The name okpataaku is not widely acceptable in the Igbo society, especially among men.

10. Baby
11. Babe
12. Sweetheart
13. Darling
14. My love
15. Precious
16. Excellent
17. Better half
18. First lady
19. The greatest
20. Mine
21. Sugar
22. My heart
23. My angel
24. My choice
25. My red rose
26. Treasure
27. Genuine love
28. Cherish
29. My valentine
30. My joy
31. My prince
32. Bobby
33. Honorable
34. Pumpkin

The above names are completely devoid of anything Igbo. Afigbo (1979) in Ahukanna (1990:180) laments that: “Whatever the cause, the Igbo, more than most other Nigerian people tended rather recklessly to abandon their indigenous culture for European culture.” The first two names are only examples of couples addressing each other by their first names. The third and fourth names have to do with parenting. It falls in line with the Christian religious teaching which came in through the colonization of the Igbo society by the Europeans. It will be recalled in the Bible that God the creator changed the names of Abram and his then barren wife, Sarai to Abraham and Sarah respectively, denoting father/ mother of many nations. The marital names ‘daddy’ and ‘mummy’ are currently used among the Igbo, without distinction between the couples that have children and the ones still expecting theirs, with the later towing the line of the Biblical Abraham and Sarah who called each other father/ mother of many nations even when they had no physical children. Other names on the list, one may claim, have to do with the level of closeness or relationship between the couples. Before this conclusion on intimacy is drawn, one needs to look at the resultant effect of the intimacy. One hundred percent of the interviewees argue that the rate of divorce is higher in the present dispensation, their so-called level of intimacy which is manifest in marital names notwithstanding.

It is here argued that most Igbo couples, in the present dispensation completely embraced modernity and the European culture at the expense of the Igbo way of life. These couples did not only import marital names but the culture of divorce at the slightest provocation. This is not to say that there is nothing like divorce in the traditional Igbo society. Divorce was rare. Ogbalu (1981:80) states that “... *igba alukwaghim n'ala Igbo abughị ezigbo ihe. O bu ya kpatara ndi Igbo ji aju ase nke oma tupu ha aluwa di na nwunye*”. ‘Divorce is not a good thing in Igbo land. That is the reason why the Igbo make good enquiry before they embark on marriage.’ The culture of enquiry is very far from what is obtainable at present. Aside intertribal marriages, there are intercontinental marriages too. Sometimes, it is on social media that some relatives get to know about their younger one’s marriage. The Igbo traditional society has stages before divorce (see Ofofata, 2012). The present dispensation equally lost sight of the reasons for marriage (see Emenanjo, Dike, Agomo & Ezeuko (1999)). It is of little wonder that marriages fail.

Behind every name in traditional African societies stalks a history, a history that is shared by the group or society and becomes its veritable communal property (Tsaaior, 2009). The message shared by the society through names is not limited only to first names. *Nna anyi* ‘Our father’ tells a story of the man as the overall head of the family. One cannot tell adequately his or her story in another man’s language. The usefulness of one’s language cannot be

overemphasized. Opara (2013:249) declares that "... language has the socio-cultural functions of signifying group identity, social stratification, social grooming, and entertainment." The above listed are found in Igbo traditional names which are integral part of the Igbo language. Opara (2012:156) had earlier noted that "... language ropes the individual into a society and also enables him to contribute to the sustenance and integration of that society." Individual contribution to the sustenance of the society is completely absent in the last list of names.

The issue of group identity, social stratification and grooming are completely absent in the last list of names. Henslin (2010) notes that:

By means of language, we pass ideas, knowledge, and even attitudes on to the next generation. This allows others to build on experience in which they may never directly participate. As a result, humans are able to modify their behavior in light of what earlier generations have learned (p. 43).

Apart from grooming the younger ones through language, the issue of social identity is very important. Almost every society tries to maintain their language because it identifies them. Millar (2007) observes that:

Egyptian Christians whose ancestors abandoned their native Coptic language for Arabic by the sixteenth century, still use a Coptic liturgy in their churches, probably as an identity marker ... many communities which have abandoned a language have retained turns of phrase and words which come in handy as a partly joking identity marker (p. 432).

There is every need for the Igbo to identify fully with their language even in marital names. The Igbo should return to her platform and seize from existing in a borrowed space. It is only when the Igbo stand on their own cultural spaces as Afrocentric theory advocates, that they will contribute maximally in a multicultural society thereby enriching the world.

CONCLUSION

This work explored changes and developments in Igbo marital names. There are several changes in Igbo marital names as a result of language contact. Language can only be static if the society did. The noticed changes are not favourable to Igbo language and culture. This work advocates the need for the Igbo to protect her language which is her identity. Communities are fighting to preserve their cultural essentials. The Igbo should not be left out. When the Igbo preserve their traditional marital names, they preserve their marriages. When they preserve their marriages, they preserve their culture and create the right atmosphere conducive for grooming the future Igbo giants.

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