



Communication and Culture: Igbo Names as Media of Everyday Language and Articulations of History

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Abstract: This paper explores names as media through which the Igbo articulate and communicate everyday realities as well as transmit elements of their culture and history. Using critical analysis, it interrogates select Igbo names, their meanings and the discourse around them, how the practice and lore (narratives) of naming and name bearing construct culture and transmit histories, as well as how they communicate the postcolonial realities of the Igbo world. To accomplish its task, the paper starts with presenting an overview of communication and culture, rooting its discussions in the theories that inform the discipline. Afterwards, it delineates the significance of names among the Igbo as a people and a cultural group; and then offers a detailed analysis of select Igbo names, exploring the worldview they communicate, the history they embody, and the stories they tell. The paper concludes by arguing that, for the Igbo, beyond demonstrating personal, familial, and communal aspirations and worldviews, names also articulate and communicate culture, cultural values, and histories of the people.

Keywords: Communication and culture, Igbo names, Names as media, Names and embodied history

Introduction

“Chim-bu-oyim” (my God/personal god is my friend), a name that spotlights the contemporary religious culture of the Igbo people, illustrates the depth, richness, and complexities inherent in Igbo personal names. A closer look at the name reveals the audacity contained in its use of the double possessives in “chi m” and “oyi m.” It is not any other chi, but “*my* chi”; and this chi is not just a friend, but “*my* friend.” Chimbuoyim, in this instance, offers a glimpse into the state of mind of the parents (of a child so named) that must have warranted their making such a bold declaration of divine friendship in their child.

Names provide the Igbo (like many other groups) a distinctive quality that sets them apart from other cultural groups. They embody, communicate, and mediate the multilayered individual identities that enrich the culture and its group dynamics. A closer look at the meanings and realities that these names embody and communicate reveals how central they are not only to distinguishing an individual Igbo person, but also to understanding the individual. Chinua Achebe (1975) encapsulates such an essence of Igbo names in his apposite statement that in order to understand “how life has treated” an Igbo person, one need not look any further than the names the Igbo give to their children. The people’s “hopes, [their] fears, [their] joys and sorrows; [their] grievances against [their] fellows, or complaints about the way [they have] been used by fortune; even straight historical records, all are there,” Achebe (64-165) aptly points out.



This paper explores names as media through which the Igbo articulate and communicate everyday realities as well as transmit elements of their culture and history. Using critical analysis, it interrogates select Igbo names, their meanings and the discourse around them, how the practice and lore (narratives) of naming and name bearing construct culture and transmit histories, as well as how they communicate the postcolonial realities of the Igbo world. To accomplish its task, the paper starts with presenting an overview of communication and culture, rooting its discussions in the theories that inform the discipline. Afterwards, it delineates the significance of names among the Igbo as a people and a cultural group; and then offers a detailed analysis of select Igbo names, exploring the worldview they communicate, the history they embody, and the stories they tell. The paper concludes by arguing that, for the Igbo, beyond demonstrating personal, familial, and communal aspirations and worldviews, names also articulate and communicate culture, cultural values, and histories of the people.

Communication and Culture: An Overview

Considering the interdisciplinary nature of communication as well as the fact that communication studies traditionally drew its theories from other disciplines, Michael Hecht, et al. (2005, 257) acknowledge that “one of the challenges for scholars studying communication and culture has been the ubiquitous nature of theory” (see also Samovar, et al. 2016). The ubiquity notwithstanding, James Carey’s (1989) articulation of communication and culture provides a theoretical perspective for this essay (see Schiller 2019). Culture, as the means through which, among other things, societies articulate and express their structures and functions, their conceptions of the world as well as their ethics and morality, “defines a group of people, binds them to one another and gives them a sense of shared identity” (Liu, et al. 2019, xx). As cultural traditions develop and are passed down across generations, culture – which derives from the Latin root “colore,” meaning “to cultivate” – cultivates a group’s language, customs, habits, and expectations. At the core of this cultural change and maintenance process, Liu et al contend, is communication, a word that derives from the Latin root, “communicare,” which means “to make common”—in the way of “sharing thoughts, hope and knowledge” (Liu, et al. 2019, xx; see also Schirato 2000).

Understanding communication, thus, as “a symbolic process whereby reality is produced, maintained, repaired, and transformed,” Carey (23) expands the traditional conception of communication beyond the mere transmission of information to emphasize the relationship between “communication” and “community,” thereby spotlighting the place of communication in creating and shaping culture. As a result he sets for communication the mission “to engage the human conversation by comprehending what others are saying” (Carey 1989, 33). This engagement expands the space of communication and accommodates, in the context of this essay, an analysis of Igbo names towards comprehending them as media of Igbo worldview—media broadly understood as the plural form of medium, that is, a means by which something is communicated or expressed (see Shin and Hecht 2017, Somovar, et al. 2016, Fiske 2010).

From communication perspective, cultures share three common functions of “a) linking individuals to one another, b) providing a basis for a common identity, and c) creating a context for interaction and negotiation among members” (Ruben, no date; see also Storey 2015, Tood and Ruben 1992, Gudykunst and Kim 1984). These functions speak to the dynamic relationship



that exists between communication and culture. The two shape each other; communication makes culture happen and transmits it, in the same way that culture creates, shapes, and fosters communication practices. According to Brent Ruben (no date), “cultures are created through communication; that is, communication is the means of human interaction through which cultural characteristics – whether customs, roles, rules, rituals, laws, or other patterns – are created and shared.” Whereas individuals, groups, or societies do not set out to create culture when they interact, culture emerges through such interactions, as “residue” of this social intercourse. Without communication and communication media, then, the preservation and handing down of cultural characteristics across time and space becomes impracticable. Hence, Ruben (ibid) aptly maintains, “that culture is created, shaped, transmitted, and learned through communication” (see also Storey 2015, Durham and Kellner 2012, Barker 2008, Kim 1988).

When one considers the complex collection of attributes that constitute culture as well as the primary role of communication therein, language features prominently in the mix. Language here functions as “a conventionally designated system of communication that at once mirrors reality and stores the memory bank of a people” (Njoku 2012, 4). It captures the meanings and intentions of a people because both its structure and use enable the people to communicate not only about their identities, but also about their understanding of the world as well as their place therein (Bonvillain 2019). As a principle method of human communication, then, language – in its various kinds: word, speech, writing, or gesture – gives form to and articulates culture and cultural practices as well as embodies the desires and aspirations (personal and group) within the culture. At the intersectionality of communication and culture, language offers and equally impacts on an understanding of identity that is rooted in cultural consciousness of a people (Anderson 2022). Among the Igbo people of southeastern Nigeria, this ideal of communicating culture and individual and/or group aspirations becomes very pronounced in the names the Igbo bear. Largely, the environment generates the vocabulary of a language. This environment equally becomes the culture that, as this essay contends, fosters the communication of the richness of personal names among the Igbo (see Ezeigbo 2015, Okoye 2015).

It is worth reiterating that this communication-culture interaction and influence on each other is a dynamic process. Members of a group or society bring their previous experiences of culture and patterns of communication into their new cultural milieu, thus enriching the new relationship but at the same time being part of creating new shared experiences and group communication which will be transmitted to future members of the group. This way of understanding and contextualizing culture, together with the attendant interchange between communication and culture, demonstrate Michel de Certeau’s (1997) pathbreaking consideration of culture in the plural, which opens up the horizon for articulating culture beyond its exclusivist notion as “the best that has been thought and said” (see also Campbell, et al. 2021). This essay, thus, reads Igbo names as dynamic elements of a culture in an abiding conversation (communication) and enduring discovery (through language).

The Igbo and the Significance of Igbo Names



The Igbo are one of the three major ethnic groups in Nigeria who primarily inhabit the southeastern part of the country (Abia, Anambra, Ebonyi, Enugu, and Imo States) as well as parts of neighboring Delta and Rivers States. A sizeable Igbo population also lives outside Nigeria in Cameroon, Gabon, and Equatorial Guinea, as well as outside Africa (see Ozoigbo 2018, Afigbo 2005, Ofomata 2002, Isichei 1976, and Uchendu 1965). With a population of more than 40 million people (living in Nigeria), the Igbo also constitute one of the largest ethnic groups in Africa (CIA 2022). “Igbo” refers to both the people and their language, which belongs to the Niger-Congo language family. It is worth noting, as Elizabeth Isichei (1978, 1) points out, that the “Igbo world is profoundly local and particular, and ... no work of general synthesis can do full justice to this particularity.” Hence, this study focuses on parts of the southern region of contiguous Igboland that comprises the following local government areas: Nnewi North, Nnewi South, Ekwusigo, and Ihiala (Anambra State) and Oguta and Oru West (Imo State).

Notwithstanding the local and the particular that Isichei calls attention to, names and naming are essential to the Igbo conceptions of their world. As used in this essay, “name” refers to given name, “part of a personal name that distinguishes an individual from other members of a group, clan or family” (Britannica 2023). Yes, “a rose, by any other name will [still] smell as sweet”; but, among the Igbo, a given name does much more than identify an individual. It epitomizes an essential marker of an individual’s identity; it communicates one’s identity and connects one with and to one’s heritage. A name tells the story or history of the circumstances surrounding the birth of the individual. According to Ebo Ubahakwe (1981, 24), a name not only “personifies the individual [and] points to the values of the society in which the individual is born, [... it also] tells some story about the parents or the family of the bearer.”

Ubahakwe’s observation ties to Achebe’s (1975, 164-165) incisive remark in the introduction above that if one wants “to know how life has treated an Igbo [person], a good place to look is the name [their] children bear. [Their] hopes, [their] fears, [their] joys and sorrows; [their] grievances against [their] fellows, or complaints about the way [they have] been used by fortune; even straight historical records, all are there” (see also Opara 2020 and Azuawusiefe 2019). Names for the Igbo, then, become existential manifestations of the wisdom enshrined in the Igbo proverb, “I choo I ma oria riana Enwe, lee Atani fuuru ya oku ka I fu ka anya di ya.” Barring any nuance that could be lost in translation, the proverb essentially says: Should one desire to probe the gravity of the illness that the monkey has survived, one need not explore any further than take a look at the eyes of the monkey’s relative, Atani (potto), to see the extent of the weariness the latter suffered from keeping aflame the bedside fire that had kept the monkey warm during the illness. In the days of yore in traditional Igbo society, a bedside, steady, low-burning hearth constituted an essential component of the therapeutic regimen for curing or alleviating sundry illnesses.

So, even beyond articulating their life’s realities through the names they give their children, the Igbo also have proverbs that communicate comparable realities in their human-animal-plant ecosystem. In a similar way that the potto’s eyes might serve as a window for glimpsing the misfortune of the monkey, names can also serve as a portal for perceiving a family’s situation, fortune, and history at the time of the birth of the individual that bears the name (see also Nwagwu 2022, Uruakpa 2020, and Madubuike 2012). Hence, beyond serving as “a



significant instrument of Igbo identity [as well as] cultural ... memory retention,” names also function as “a vehicle for [conveying] pride in one’s native language” (Okoro 2015). Personal names, then, become linguistic resources for identifying the individual as well as expressing and communicating family prayers, aspirations, and cultural affinity. In that sense, Igbo names are culturally relevant tools for communicating and narrativizing history, in the way they express the events, calendar, and/or circumstances surrounding a child’s birth as well as the emotions, aspirations, and prayers of the parents (see also Cookey and Ijioma 2019, Okagbue, et al. 2017, Onumajuru 2016, Mbonu 2010, and Onukawa 1998).

Unique Igbo Names: The History They Bear and the Stories They Tell

Names, for the Igbo, serve both as a medium of communicating history and a means for memorializing the past. Hence, to deconstruct the meanings and realities they embody is to read the names as items of temporalities of history—its construction and narrativization. This understanding enables one to bring interpretations to the names that are akin to treating them as cultural, religious, historical texts. This writer begins his reading of these “texts” from a position of discovery and fascination; but the texts themselves open up myriad intersectional areas for/of exploration into the world and worldview of the Igbo. In foregrounding narrative as a common and compelling motif in the study of intercultural interactions, for instance, Covarrubias, et al. (2017), point to how names among the Igbo embody a compelling potency of stories.

Igbo names vary as much as the stories they tell. Beyond what they embody, names, for the Igbo, constitute cultural rhetoric and narrative pattern, through the language that communicates them. But some of them have an unusual, alluring appeal that stand them out. They captivate and enchant one the deeper one reflects on the meaning and the history they embody. This section of the essay will consider a handful of such names, beginning with Chimamanda. In a 2016 webchat hosted by *The Guardian* for award-winning Nigerian writer Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, one participant asks her: “What is the secret behind the unique way you name your characters and the philosophy behind it?” Adichie responds: “I love unusual names. At my book-signing events, when I come across a beautiful name – from any part of the world – I write it down and plan to use it in my fiction” (Adichie 2016). Then, she goes ahead to locate her fondness for unique names in her Igbo culture: “I am Igbo so obviously unusual Igbo names mean even more to me. I think Igbo names are so beautiful and so full of poetry and many of them are not often used because the same few post-Christian names are now in circulation. I love the idea of names as history” (ibid).

Adichie herself would, five years later, tell a fascinating story of the history of her own unusual name, Chim-ama-nda. Before 2003, she discloses in a 2021 *Bounce Radio Live.com* interview, “Chimamanda” did not exist. Adichie created the name that year. “I made up the name... I invented Chimamanda; I created Chimamanda,” she says with a smile (Adichie 2021). She was born Ngozi Grace, but her mother was Grace, and Adichie did not feel like Grace, growing up. Ngozi, on the other hand, felt too common. For her Confirmation name, as a Catholic, she chose Amanda, inspired (not by a saint’s name, as her priest had insisted, but) by a novel character. When she arrived in the United States for her college years later and noticed that five other students in her class bore Amanda, a name she had thought unique, she realized she could not continue with the name, more so, given what she considered a ludicrous way people



pronounced it. She then started thinking of how to change her name again (she had gone from Ngozi to Amanda). For a while she merged the two names; but shortly before the publication of her first novel, *Purple Hibiscus*, in 2003, she pondered how she would be introduced to the world. Certainly, not as Amanda; and not as Ngozi either, for although she earnestly “wanted an Igbo name,” she “didn’t feel like Ngozi [and] Ngozi felt too common” (Adichie 2021). Then, in what “felt like a revelation,” “Chimamanda” came to her while she was visiting with her brother in England, “lying on a narrow bed, in a tiny guest room.”

Twenty years later, the richness of that name, my God/personal god will not fail or fall, as well as the grace, accomplishments, and fame of the originator and pioneer bearer has continued to appeal to a lot of Igbo people. A plethora of young Igbo girls in these two decades have been named Chimamanda. Adichie acknowledges with glee the popularity of the name in Igboland today, noting that she has, albeit in a small way, proven wrong those who insist that culture (particularly around gender issues) cannot be changed for the better. Adichie has been a strong global advocate of gender equality. In her 2012 TEDx Euston talk, “We Should All Be Feminists” (which has been published into a book), she maintains that “culture does not make people, people make culture.” So, among other things, she considers the acceptance of Chimamanda among the Igbo as a win in that direction.

While Chimamanda tells a contemporary story, Azu-awu-si-efe tells one that dates back to circa 1915. The parents of Azuawusiefe the person had suffered a number of infant mortalities. When he was born, his father could not afford the luxury of celebration. Those who had come before him had all gone, and too soon too. There was no guarantee that this one would survive. So, the father made a supplication instead: “Azu gi a wukwala efe” (may you back not be light/lightweight). In other words, may you be heavily supported by those who will come after you. The gods heard that prayer and three more siblings came after him, and they all lived. Azuawusiefe is cognate with more common Igbo names like Azu-ka (the back or support is paramount), Azu-bu-ike (the back or the past is strength), Azu-di-alu (the back is heavy), and Azu-ata-lam (may my back not dry up). The names speak to comparable realities, articulating a similar concept of the importance of human support in the different expressions that speak to the diversity of Igbo cultural subgroups.

Azuawusiefe is my surname and I have loads of stories to tell about my encounters with people on the account of its uniqueness—from the most ridiculous to the uber hilarious. Someone, for instance, once insisted that I must be from Ghana because of what he said was the etymology of Azuawusiefe. Not that I mind being from any of the equally culturally rich and industrious peoples of Ghana, but I found it bizarre that the person making this audacious blunder is not even from West Africa; neither is he a historian, a linguist, or an onomatologist. Then, I had a remarkable experience at a radio station in Rome. I had arrived at the station in summer of 2007 to begin my broadcast internship. On the bulletin board was a sticky note that read: “Welcome, OK!” I thought nothing of that and so went about my first day of work until the head of the section (a Caucasian) drew my attention to the note. I did not see the connection, apparently, between Chijioke and OK and I told her that much. “So, we can’t call you OK?” she asked. “I am afraid, no, you can’t,” I replied. In Nigeria, I told her, “OK” is a brand name of biscuits and plastic bottles.” “Do you have another name, then?” she inquired further, “because this one [referring to Chijioke] is too difficult.” “Sure,” I said, “Azuawusiefe.” “What



was the first one?” she asked immediately without even attempting to pronounce Azuawusiefe. “Chijioke,” I responded, smiling and extending a handshake to her.

In his seminal novel *Things Fall Apart*, Achebe (1994 [1958]) tells a similar story to the loss suffered by the parents of Azuawusiefe, albeit one with a sad ending: Ekwefi had suffered a good deal in her life. She had borne ten children and nine of them had died in infancy, usually before the age of three. As she buried one child after another her sorrow gave way to despair and then to grim resignation. The birth of her children, which should be a woman’s crowning glory, became for Ekwefi mere physical agony devoid of promise. The naming ceremony after seven market weeks became an empty ritual. Her deepening despair found expression in the names she gave her children. One of them was a pathetic cry, Onwumbiko — ‘Death, I implore you. But Death took no notice; Onwumbiko died in his fifteenth month. The next child was a girl, Ozoemena — ‘May it not happen again.’ She died in her eleventh month, and two others after her. Ekwefi then became defiant and called her next child Onwuma — ‘Death may please himself.’ And he did. (Achebe 1994 [1958], 77)

Ekwefi’s story further illustrates the role existential experiences play in the names parents give their children in Igboland. While, like the scholars mentioned above, Chidozie Ogbalu (2006) reiterates the point that the Igbo name their children according to the circumstances that surround the child’s birth, Tagbuo Nzeako (1972) argues that no matter the experience, however, more often than not, the Igbo are careful not to give to a child a name that might negatively affect the child’s fortune, given that the Igbo believe that when one is named, their personal god receives the name and then directs the destiny of the individual accordingly.

The following names borne by individuals from the generation of Azuawusiefe and beyond indicate some of the interests and values that preoccupied some parents from that era: i) Mma-ezu-ahu (beauty never covers the entire body) speaks to the fact that no one is without blemish, no one is perfect; and, as such, the name represents a cautionary admonition for whoever hears the name to be mindful of human imperfection. ii) Uto-di-no-onu (friendship resides but in the mouth). The name assumes a double meaning: on the one hand, it counsels that the mouth makes or mars friendship; on the other hand, it calls attention to the reality of some friendships not being deeper than the mere proclamation of their existence—what contemporary Nigerian popular culture will call “audio friendship.” iii) Okwu-di-oghom (utterances/words are lethal and always fraught with danger); hence, any mis-speak could not only hurt the one addressed, but could also come back to haunt the utterer. iv) Given the precarity of words, then, O-kwuru-nu-rotu (let the one who speaks be cognizant of his or her utterances). v) Nko-bu-odu (to chastise is to advise); so, pay attention, it says, for it is the one that one loves that one chastises. vi) Onu-ekwuzu-mma (the mouth never tells of all the good deeds one receives). vii) Aguru-obi-onu (no one takes count of the mind’s content). viii) Ihu-ka-eje (the face goes farther); forward advancement benefits one more, in the sense of forward ever backward never. ix) Nga-aku-di (where wealth is present, exists, or abounds). One can only imagine the comfort of material wealth enjoyed by the parents or forebears of the child so-named to warrant eternalizing that joy in the child.



Over and above the meanings and stories behind these names, and Igbo names in general, some of the names (especially the following and more contemporary ones) offer an additional uniqueness with the sheer beauty of their sound. Take Chimaaraoke, for example. It has a beautiful ring to it. Its measured cadence echoes like sweet music to the ears. Chi-MAARA-oke. (God/personal god knows the bounds, the boundaries, the limits, the extent) of whatever favors that are due the bearer and his or her family. Then, there is “Ifem-yolu-chukwu” (that which I implored God); a name made more melodious by its rendition in the Onitsha-Anambra regional dialect. “Chim-kalii-fa,” another name whose beauty is informed by the same dialect, is accompanied by an equally exceptional surname, “Ora-jim-eto-chukwu,” to form a symphony of a most melodious full name: Chimkaliifa Orajimetochukwu. That, for sure, is not a name to forget in a hurry. Chimkaliifa (my God/personal god is greater than they), or than they can ever be, in the spirit of the biblical verse: “He that is me is greater than he that is in the world” (1 John 4:4). Orajimetochukwu (people/others make me their reason for praising God); more like, others praise God on the account of my life, my good fortune.

Beyond the depth of the realities and life experiences that these names communicate, one key feature that they share is the element of history, the time stamp that they bear. The names span multiple generations of name-giving in Igbo society, starting with those of the early 1900s which reflect more the wits of the people of that era in weaving the wisdom of their lived experiences into names that communicate volume. The following generations, beginning from the 1940s through the end of the century, reflected the ascendancy of Christianity in their names: Chi-me-zie (let God perfect it), Ike-chukwu (God’s power), Ari-nze-chukwu (God’s generosity), Chi-ji-oke (God holds my share of life), Chi-no-nso (God is near). “Chi,” traditionally, personal god, has come to mean for the Igbo, in the aftermath of their encounter with and reception of Christianity, the Supreme God (see Azuawusiefe 2019, Nwoga 1984, Achebe 1975). Okagbue, et al. (2017, 77) contend that given “the influence of God in the naming systems of the Igbo people,” the Chi-Chukwu (variations of the rendering of God) names account for “almost 50% of Igbo personal names.”

The more contemporary names of the Gen Z generation bear the trendy, congenial, ebullient disposition and attitude of their parents to life as well as a much warmer, friendlier, and individual relationship with God, fostered, to some extent, by the pervading Pentecostal and charismatic approach to Christianity in Nigeria from the dawn of the millennium. Hence, this generation bears names like “Chi-sim-di” (God decreed that I exist), “Ife-nlo-ta” (that which is remembered, worthy to be remembered, should be remembered—and celebrated, of course, as a result), “Otu-omasiri-chi” (how/however it pleases God) “Adim-chi-nobi” (I exist/reside in God’s heart/mind), “Ife-aka-ndu” (nothing is bigger than life), “Ife-emelu-mma” (that which is done well), Mmeso-oma-chukwu (God’s kind and generous disposition), and Chim-bu-oyim (my God is my friend).

Conclusion

This paper has articulated the place of names among the Igbo people, at the intersection of communication and culture, as media of history and cultural narratives. Grounding its interrogation on communication and culture theories and employing critical analysis, it demonstrates the richness of Igbo names and the everyday language that communicates them, as it contends that at their core, Igbo names articulate and communicate culture, cultural values,



and histories of the people. Beyond the stories they tell, the names and the discourses around them continue to invite further interrogation of the histories they bear and the meanings they embody. The names indicate how the practice and lore (narratives) of naming and name-bearing construct culture as well as transmit history. To have a complete understanding of an Igbo name, then, one has to take into consideration the circumstances that surround the birth of the individual that bears the name, the importance of the birth to the parents of the individual, as well as the message that the parents intend to communicate through the name.

The names, through the different generations considered in the essay, reflect the questions of temporality (the production of time as past, present, and future) and the production of history (as well as how history is valorized, used, and narrativized through) names. A closer attention to the particularities of these names and the times/periods of their location in Igbo culture problematizes the difference in approaches to engaging everyday existential questions through different generations. Central to this temporality is the engagement of Igbo culture with Christianity and the Christian God. Although Christianity had been present in Igboland at the time of the first generation considered in the essay, its overarching supremacy within the culture had not yet been complete. Converts only took non-Igbo baptismal names. However, by the time of the following generations, Igbo names began to assume attributes of the Christian God, replacing, in most cases, the established local gods hitherto occupying the summit of the divine hierarchy. As Christianity further entrench itself and its teaching and values into the life and culture of the people, Igbo names began to be more God-centered and eventually assumed the familiarity with the Christian God which is now evident in a name like Chimbuoyim.

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