

Aliases Among the Anambra-Igbo: The Proverbial Dimension

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Abstract

Among the Igbo people in the Anambra State of Nigeria, aliases often bridge the gap between people of different social and economic strata. Aliases that are derived from proverbs, usually involving a call and response, allow humor and geniality and confer on their users recognition and worth.

"Chigo," Uloko whispered to me, "most of the people who will attend this party have titles and aliases. Please, don't fail to address them by these titles or aliases. They'll appreciate it very much." (Okoye 22)

Names and Aliases

The epigraph to this paper summarizes the place of aliases in the socio-cultural life of the people of Anambra State of Nigeria. Ifeoma Okoye's novel, *Men Without Ears*, treats this dimension of Igbo cultural life with a modernist, satirical touch aimed at the boisterousness of the seventies when Nigeria's oil was still booming. Nevertheless, the act of picking one's own alias has always been the practice among the people.

Aliases¹ must not be confused with nicknames or even titles, which are usually given to people either for what they do, like, or resemble or for what they represent, as in the case of warriors and great wrestlers of old. "Nicknames," John Njoku remarks, "are sometimes very friendly and at other times very harsh" (3). A nickname, as Njoku notes on the same page, has meaning but is "not publically used." The truth is that a nickname is often imposed by others, especially by peers or relations, and it is not used to address people in public because it is meant for closed interactions such as take place within families and among school-mates or age-grade members in Igboland. The privilege of nickname use is limited to a few groups of people.

An alias, on the other hand, is usually acceptable to the person being addressed because more often than not he or she has chosen it. In the

Western world, and perhaps in some African cultures outside Igboland, one who goes by an alias will likely create suspicion; such a person will at once be inviting some kind of personality analysis. In penal circles, especially, a suspect who bears an alias will likely attract more scrutiny than one who has none. Among the Igbo, however, and especially among the Anambra-Igbo, an alias has no such negative effect; on the contrary, it does the opposite by bridging the social gap which may exist between people who are strangers to each other or who may belong to different social levels. Since younger people, wives, or even one's children cannot or are not expected to call an older person by his or her real name, they often address him or her with an alias. An alias among the Anambra-Igbo is an invitation for participation in the decoding of the human and nature-regulated complexities; it can define its owner's past or give a hint as to his or her future outlook on life.

Most of the Igbo² live in Imo State and Anambra State, with additional aggregations in Bendel and Rivers States (Fig. 1), occupying an area of over 25,000 square kilometers. The Igbo constituted ninety percent of what was briefly known as *Biafra*. Until recently, they could be described as a largely rural people, and in a sense they still are since almost every Igbo person is a member of a certain village community. This has nothing to do with their level of "civilization," considering that they have been noted for their avid love for westernisms such as formal education, Christian upbringing, and enterprising, capitalistic traits. In spite of their attachment to rural origins, many live in thickly populated urban areas such as Owerri, Orlu, Okigwe, Umuahia, and Aba in Imo State and Enugu, Onitsha, Nsukka, Awka, and Abakaliki in Anambra State. E. M. P. Edeh estimates their current number at thirteen million. The population is not evenly distributed, most of the people living along the Onitsha-Orlu-Okigwe-Mbaise axis, "where the density is well over 2,000 persons per square mile"(9).

Among the Igbo, naming is very important. According to V.C. Uchendu, "receiving a name is an important event in a child's life, for he is socially accepted as soon as he is given a name"(60). Archbishop Arinze (now Cardinal) has this to say about Igbo naming:

A person's name is chosen with care. It has meaning of its own, sometimes the names of children in a large family are a short account of the fortunes of that family: its joys and its sorrows, its hopes and its fears. (188)

The question, "What's in a name?" treated rhetorically in Western

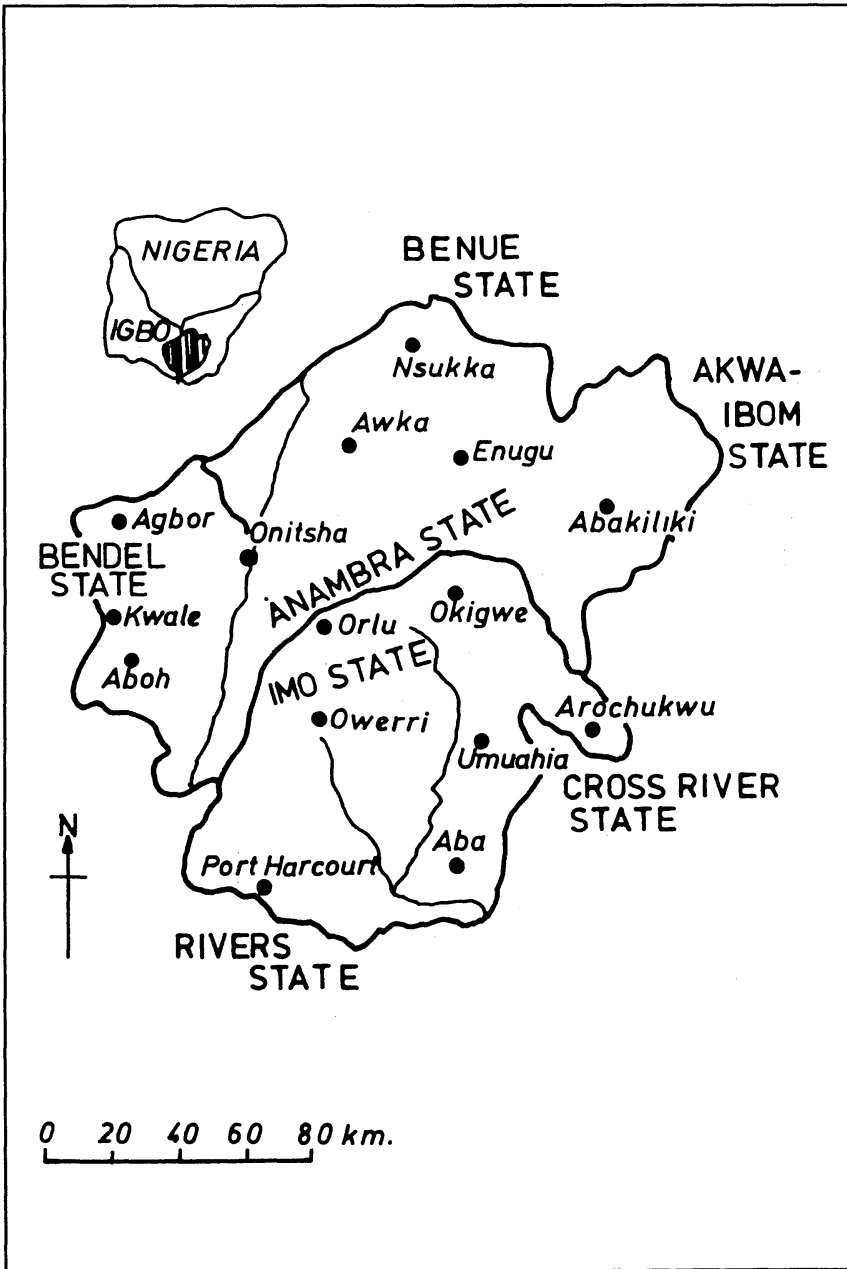


Fig. 1. Map of Igbo-speaking area of Nigeria.

culture, would embarrass an Igbo person—modern or traditional. The Igbo always make an unconscious effort to know the meaning of a name they hear a person call himself. Again, they believe that a name can determine one's fortunes or behavior in life.³ This is perhaps why the Igbo are careful in choosing names for their children or aliases for themselves. This may also be why "gloomy names ... are extremely rare among the Igbo"; one researcher found "not a single example in the 4,421 names covered" in his study (Ubahakwe 34).

Njoku classifies Igbo names into three categories: personal names, surnames, and nicknames. Nowhere in his classification does he refer to aliases, as important as they are in the onomatology of the people. Titular names come close to self-assumed names, but, like nicknames, they are imposed from the outside and are not usually chosen by the individual concerned. Njoku's failure to reckon with the importance of aliases among the Igbo may have resulted from his basing his inferences on Imo State cultural practices of naming with perhaps too little input from Anambra State. There is a danger in resting conclusions about Igbo cultural and social practices on sources derived from only one of the states. Experience has shown that while there is a general cultural unanimity between the two states, there are fine distinctions in the way in which cultural events are implemented. Thus, whereas the act of assuming aliases is acceptable in both states as an Igbo social and cultural norm, among the Anambra-Igbo it is taken for granted that each adult has an alias around which his or her attitude to life pivots. In other words, in Anambra State, the practice cuts across age-grades, sex categories, and class origins.⁴

There are reasons for the greater popularity of aliases in Anambra State than in Imo State. In the latter, most communities expect a younger person to attach some term of respect to the name of an older person. Hence a younger person would address his elder with a prefix such as *daa*, *ndaa*, *dee*, *dede*, or *didam*. In other words, if an elder's name is *Ike*, he would be addressed as "*Ndaa Ike*" or "*Dee Ike*," depending on the part of Imo-Igbo in which this is being done. However, in most Anambra-Igbo communities, the cultural practice of prefixing names with titles of respect for age is non-existent. Hence, it is not uncommon to see a ten-year-old calling a man of thirty or forty by his name. In the past, apart from one's parents, who were referred to as *nna* 'father' and *nne* 'mother,' there seemed to be no strict or well-defined mores as to how a young person should address an elder. While this did not give a license to a young person

to abuse his or her elders, it gave rise to a need for a name which if called without any prefix would be acceptable to both the called and the caller. An alias became not just a bridge between one's real name and a manner of address by a younger person; it also fostered a way for a relationship to develop between the *Ozo*,⁵ titled people who are usually property owners, and the not-so-affluent members of the community. Thus it became more acceptable for that ten-year-old lad to address the thirty- or forty-year-old elder by his alias rather than by his name.

Apart from serving as a bridge between classes, an alias is a personal motto, a philosophy of life, an expression of one's personality, or an attitude toward God, human existence, phenomena, and events. A self-assumed title or name gives direction to one's belief, one's response to the socio-cultural environment, or one's perception of experience and knowledge. It must be pointed out that an individual could have as many responses to and attitudes about life as there are life experiences, but since he or she must assume one alias at a time if he or she decides to have one, the person would perhaps take one which for that moment most represents his or her attitude. In other words, nothing stops an individual from deciding to change his or her alias, probably in the light of newer experiences or owing to the acquisition of a new status. For instance, a colleague was for several years called *Aya ji uba* 'War forestalls wealth,' probably as a way of explaining away his seeming poverty and failure to meet the pecuniary demands of his immediate campus social expectation of calling drinks in favor of colleagues. The war he is referring to in this alias is the Nigerian Civil War of 1967 to 1970. However, when this colleague was made a Senior Lecturer a few years back, he assumed a new alias: *eze di ugwu* 'a king who has honor and respect.' In other words, he has come out as it were from the ruins of the war and is now more comfortable. Although there may not be a strict correlation between the behavior of a person and the demands of his or her alias, the society expects one who has assumed a name to fulfill its demands or line of philosophic thought. Thus it would be strange for a man who is known by the name *Onye mala ife ga-eso okwu si ya emela ya* 'He who knows what will cause trouble should avoid it' to turn round and become a trouble-maker rather than a trouble-shooter. In fact, such a person will carry the burden of avoiding at all costs most of the troubles and provocations which might come his way and which ordinarily he might have physically challenged were it not for the slant of his alias. Otherwise if found guilty in such a circumstance such a person would

attract disapproval and condemnation, not so much for the case he has lost as for his failure to live up to the demands of his alias.

An alias also has a social angle. It is a social bridge not only between close relations of different ages, but also between strangers who may be both of different ages and of different socio-economic backgrounds. One of the easiest ways of striking a new relationship is to ask a person one is meeting for the first time, "*Kedu ihe m turyi gi?*" ("What would I call you?") The inquirer is not asking for the person's real name, since that could be interpreted to mean rudeness, especially if the two people are not of the same comparable age or of a similar class background. This question would at once initiate a lightheartedness between the two before the questioned announces his alias and then proceeds to seek the inquirer's own alias. This sets off a genial atmosphere in which two people, until then complete strangers to each other, can now, in most cases, begin a lasting relationship based on mutual respect. It is an act of aggression or a sign of unsociability if the questioned does not announce his alias or chases away the questioner. In a situation where the questioned has no alias, he may need to assume one even for that singular moment. Usually such a person would address himself as *Eze amalụ na o ga echi* 'a king who will ultimately be crowned' or *nwa bu nna ya* 'a son who takes after his father.' In the second example, the person is saying that he is still enjoying his father's protection. In public too, people are called by their aliases, especially in traditional public functions. This is what the epigraph alludes to. In such functions, the *ozo* title holders and some other titled people are addressed by such names as chosen by them. For these people such names are aliases insofar as they are names outside the one with which a title-holder had been known before his title-taking; otherwise the new name could become the only one by which a titled person is later known throughout his or her life.

Aliases take their roots from different sources depending on one's experience or one's attitude toward life. Like real names, they are derived from various sources, including a belief in God, one's color, majestic trees, great historical figures, feats accomplished, number of wives taken, number of titles assumed, attitude toward fellow human beings, a recent historical experience of the community, a wish, an expectation.

Aliases from Proverbs

The focus in this paper is on aliases derived from proverbs and

sayings.⁶ Proverbs, as we know, are the common property of a community. Every full-fledged social member of a society has access to them and they are preserved by their being passed from one generation to another. Proverbs are hard to define. In fact, Archer Taylor has warned that "the definition of a proverb is too difficult to repay the undertaking; and should we fortunately combine in a single definition all the essential elements and give each the proper emphasis, we should not even then have a touchstone"(3). B.J. Whiting paints a similar picture when he says, "...several centuries of experience and endeavor have shown that there is nothing so elusive, so evasive, as the exact sentence, or a group of sentences, which should constitute such a definition"(273). However, in his study of popular notions of proverbs, Wolfgang Mieder has a deductive definition: "a phrase, saying, sentence, statement or expression of the folk which contains above all wisdom, truth, morals, experience, lessons and advice concerning life and which has been handed down from generation to generation"(117).

A number of issues in the definition will be useful in an examination of the proverb-based aliases among the Anambra-Igbo. The first is that this category of aliases is taken from the common pool of community knowledge located in capsules of age-old wisdom. In other words, the aliases easily make sense to an average member of the Igbo society. Secondly, proverb-aliases are usually sentences composed of clauses or phrases detachable as the alias itself while the other segment becomes the response. Thirdly, they bear elements of truth, wisdom, morals, experience, lessons, and advice; and above all they indicate the owner's approach to life and to living. Finally, they are age-old, striking, and memorable.

Ordinarily, any proverb can qualify as a proverb-alias. However, the proverb to serve the alias function must be thought-provoking, uncommon, expandable, and replete with layers of meaning. Such a proverb must command auditory attention and have a call-response structure that both caller and answerer can recognize. For instance, one sees an approaching figure, recognizes him, and then calls out his alias: "*Okọ nwoke n'aka...*" ("If a man has nothing..."). This demands a response from the owner of the alias such as "*...umunna ya eloꝝo ya*" ("...his kinsmen forget him"). It is one of those proverb-aliases that could elicit multiple responses, all pointing to the sorry plight of that man who is materially poor. Other responses are possible, such as: "*...oꝝi ka o na yi ala*" ("...it is as if he is mad"), "*...akpo ya onye ala*" ("...he will be

called a madman”), “... *arapu ya jibe ekpe*” (“...he will not be reckoned with in village court cases”), “... *akpo ya ka-osuṣo nli*” (“...he will be asked to pound foo-foo”), “... *nwaanyi amaa ya asu n'iru*” (“...a woman sprays saliva on his face), and many more. This alias has its converse: “*O di nwoke n'aka...*” (“If a man has something in his hands...”). The responses are also plentiful, each directed at the fussiness shown to a rich and affluent member of the community: “... *akpo ya 'ogbuefi'*” (“he will be called ‘killer of cows’”), “... *agbaba izu elota ya*” (“...when crucial meetings are being held he is remembered”), “... *agbako-agbako chie ya ozo*” (“...the community will with one voice give him the *ozo* title”), etc.

The thirty-two proverb-aliases in Table 1 are classified according to their explicit content or implied allusion, not with a view to exhausting them, as that would be impossible, considering that every person is free to choose any proverb as his or her alias, but with the intention of calling attention to their variety and latent aesthetic appeal. Their beatific, alluring properties are made more manifest when their meanings are explained and their context of usage underscored.

Esthetic Utterances

As already pointed out, it is not possible to exhaust all the proverb-aliases which people could assume, nor is it desirable to do so. However, the proverb-based aliases in Table 1 are the common ones which I have heard people from various strata of Anambra-Igbo society call themselves. What remains now is the underscoring of these self-assumed proverb-names as esthetic utterances. The initial comment to be made for them in this direction is that each of them taken together with its response— in the case of those having such a segment—is a complete utterance. Each of them is imbued with a witty, somewhat ventriloquistic feature: each combines the plausible with the sententious so that as soon as it is announced to a person for the first time, it sets his mind working as to its compass of meaning. Once its meaning and connotation strike the hearer— as strike it must— there is a revelatory excitement from him, marked by a hilarious laughter and a warm handshake. Sometimes the various implications of the alias are discussed for a while by the caller and the answerer before a more elaborate exchange of greetings is carried out, especially when there is time for the two to do so. There is a need to point out that the response rhythm may be given by the owner of the alias or by the person uttering the adopted name. In most cases

Table 1. Typical proverb-aliases classified according to content.

Content/Allusion	Proverb-Alias	Response	Contextual Meaning
God	<i>Onye Chukwu naegbuo...</i> (He who is spared by God...)	... <i>onwero onye ga egbu ya.</i> ... nobody will kill him.)	God is the sole author of life; no one can end another's life except with God's sanction.
	<i>Ebe onye dala....</i> (Where one falls ...)	... <i>chi ya kwatulu ya.</i> ... his personal god has a hand in it.)	One's personal god determines one's success or failure in life.
Truth	<i>Etigbuchaa eziokuw...</i> (Beat truth to a pulp...)	... <i>oma se.</i> ... it floats still.)	Truth cannot be buried.
	<i>Nmiri machie okpa...</i> (If rain wipes out our foot prints...)	... <i>o machiene onu?</i> ... does it wipe out what has been said?)	Truth, and uttered truth for that matter, cannot be erased.
Child	<i>Nwata rie awo ...</i> (If a child eats toad...)	... <i>o ju anu.</i> ... he rejects real meat.)	Do not clamor for things not yet due you.
	<i>Nwa akwo n'azu</i> (A child borne on the back...)	... <i>amaro n'uzo di anya.</i> ... does not know the road is far.)	Experience makes one wiser and more reasonable in one's demands and expectations.
Money	<i>Okwu ba n'ego...</i> (Once a discourse has to do with money...)	... <i>nwaogbenye esele onu ya.</i> ... a poor man withdraws from the discussion.)	Do not be involved in issues beyond your knowledge and influence.
	<i>E selu enu ego...</i> (Remove the top of a bag of money...)	... <i>ego ka dolu</i> ... a lot of money is still left untouched.)	Don't scratch at the surface of things.
Wealth	<i>Aku bu ntuuko.</i> (Wealth means collecting here and there.)	-	To have money demands a lot of hard work.
	<i>Aku n'esi obi ike.</i> (Wealth gives confidence.)	-	Wealth makes one confident and acceptable too.

Greatness	<i>Agba aka echi ozo?</i> (Do you become an ozo title holder without material resources?)		To be great entails some expenditure.
	<i>Agbawo dike izu...</i> (Deny a great man the initial whispering...)	<i>... agba ya ugbono ibua.</i> ... there'll be a second whispering.)	It is not easy to do anything at the back of a great man.
Hard Work	<i>Aliyo n'anwu...</i> (Work under the sun...)	<i>... elie na ndo.</i> ... eat under the shade.)	Enjoyment must be preceded by sweat and hard work.
	<i>Aka aja-aja...</i> (Soiled hands...)	<i>... n'ebute onu mmanu-mmanu.</i> ... ensure oiled mouth.)	Labor ensures plenty and abundance.
Futility	<i>Agwo na-atu mbe...</i> (A snake pecking on a tortoise...)	<i>... na ebibi onu ya.</i> ...is merely damaging its mouth.)	Do not grapple with an issue beyond your scope.
	<i>Okilikali ka ana agba ukwu ose...</i> (Round and round is the walk round a pepper plant...)	<i>... adiyo ali ose enu.</i> ... a pepper plant cannot be climbed.)	Certain things must be done in particular ways or else we should expect no fruitful results.
Patience	<i>Ana abacha ji...</i> (As we peel yams...)	<i>... ana ene ite anya.</i> ... we consider the size of the pot.)	The judicious use of resources involves attentive observation.
	<i>Aku fecha...</i> (After the termite-fly has exhausted itself flying...)	<i>... o dala awo.</i> ...it falls down and becomes a toad's food.)	With patience, one gets one's due.
Enmity	<i>Ndi ilo kalija</i> (When enemies become numerous...)	<i>... atufulu fa nkwi.</i> ... a libation of palm wine is poured.)	Uprightness is the solution to unwarranted enmity.
	<i>Ojemba mba...</i> (A traveller...)	<i>... enwe ilo.</i> ... avoids enmity.)	One who needs the companionship or services of other people must be friendly and sociable.

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Pragmatism	<p><i>Agbala aka n'azo anj ...</i> (If those without means are struggling over a parcel of land...)</p> <p><i>Ana ekwu-ekwu...</i> (As we talk...)</p>	<p><i>... onye ji ji ana konye.</i> he who has yams continues to plant them on the land in dispute.)</p> <p><i>... ana eme-eme.</i> ... let us also act.)</p>	<p>The practical person is more effective than the theorist.</p> <p>Seeing is believing, or action speaks louder than voice.</p>
Heedlessness	<p><i>Anu ana agba egbe...</i> (An animal being shot at...)</p> <p><i>Ana agwa ntị ma q nuro...</i> (If the ear is warned and it does not hear...)</p>	<p><i>... q na ata nli.</i> ... and it eats food without bother.)</p> <p><i>... e bele isi e bele ntị.</i> ...when the head is cut off, the ear follows it.)</p>	<p>It depicts a person's uncaring nature.</p> <p>Paying heed to admonition saves a lot of chain repercussions.</p>
Stubbornness	<p><i>Isi kote ebu...</i> (If the head bumps on a wasp's hornet...)</p> <p><i>Ukpana ntị ike ...</i> (A stubborn grass-hopper...)</p>	<p><i>... q gbaa ya.</i> ... it stings it.)</p> <p><i>... n' e zu ike n'afọ ukwu nnyu.</i> ... rests in the stomach of a bird.)</p>	<p>One pays for one's stubbornness.</p> <p>Death is the reward of recalcitrance.</p>
Ripeness	<p><i>Ukwa ruo oge ya...</i> (When a breadfruit is mature...)</p> <p><i>Ugo gbuzue...</i> (When an eagle has completed its cycle of killings...)</p>	<p><i>... q daa.</i> ...it falls down.)</p> <p><i>... q chakee.</i> ... it sprouts a white fluff.)</p>	<p>Everything has its own time.</p> <p>Ripeness is marked by a new look, a new attitude, and a new stage in life.</p>
Humanity	<p><i>Ima nka...</i> (If you know this one...)</p> <p><i>Ka onye di...</i> (However a person stands...)</p>	<p><i>... ima nke ozo?</i> ... do you know the other one?)</p> <p><i>... ibe ya malu.</i> ... his fellows know.)</p>	<p>A human being cannot know everything.</p> <p>A person's life cannot be completely hidden from his neighbors.</p>
Mutuality	<p><i>Ife kwulu...</i> (When something stands...)</p> <p><i>Nze zeele ibe</i> (If an nze title seeker shows respect to others...)</p>	<p><i>... ife akwudebe ya.</i> ...another thing stands beside it.)</p> <p><i>... o chie.</i> ... he gets crowned.)</p>	<p>Every person needs every other person.</p> <p>Honor goes to one who honors others.</p>

the call-response is shared by the two. What is important is that the two arms of the proverbial sentence, articulated, invoke a total, recognizable meaning with its myriad of emotions and passions. Sometimes without taking these two elements together, the alias appears shapeless and meaningless to someone who had never heard the two taken as an utterance. It will be observed that each proverb-alias achieves its power and appeal by a built-in rhythm.

In most cases the segments are equally balanced and their propositions equally weighted against each other. The proverb-aliases without a manifest response are usually uttered in full since they are often short and concise. They include such ones as *Aja egbu udene* 'Sacrifice does not kill a vulture'; *Ofo ma onye ji ya* 'The *ofo* staff knows who is really holding it'; *Mma nwoke bu ego* 'A man's own beauty is money'; *Mbeledemele dike* 'Suddenness shows who is a strong or great man'; *Osondu agwu ike* 'The race for life is never tiresome.'

These proverb-names derive their beauty from the depth of their meanings and what they speak of their owners. They command attention when their meanings are reckoned as true or possibly true, when, for instance, an effect is traced to a hidden cause, when there is an element of factuality in the assertion of the proverb-alias, or when it has a human and humane appeal.

The listed proverbs above have these qualities and more, but I will employ some proverbs to illustrate these features. When a man is asked his alias and he announces thus, "*Uzu kpulu egbe kpulu onwu*" ("The forge that molded the gun molded death"), the "truth" there is apparent. An effect has been traced to a cause. Another proverb-alias is *Nwoke na ibe ya ra bu n'onu* 'The claim that all men are equal is empty.' There is a built-in factuality in this because both in terms of size of human beings and in their ability to possess material resources, it is impossible to expect all men to be equal. A similar strain appears in the proverb-alias *Odudu beere n'akpa amu di ike na-ogbugbu* 'A tsetse fly that perches on the scrotum is tricky to kill.' There is humanism in *Egbe bere, ugo bere; nke si ibe ya ebele, nku kwa ya* 'May the kite perch, may the eagle perch; anyone saying no to the other, may its wings break.' This proverb-alias is used to underscore the human principle of "Live-and-let-live," an accommodating spirit which is the wish of most people on earth. It must be mentioned that these proverbs, as aliases, are usually shortened, although in the course of the exchange of civility and the excitement that usually follows, the entire proverb is uttered by either of the two interlocutors.

In conclusion, proverb-aliases have their specific appeal which the other categories of names may not have. This appeal relates to the common ownership of their meanings, to their social significance, to the depth of their significance for character and personality. In social functions, as the epigraph has hinted, they are greatly appreciated because they are evidence of recognition and worth. Aliases in general break the social barrier between strangers, sex categories, and people of different socio-economic classes.

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Notes

1. "Alias" translates Anambra-Igbo *aha ntutu*, where the emphasis is on the invented nature of the name (*aha* 'name'). A "nickname" (*aha oruro*) is usually given by someone else and is often frowned upon by the one receiving the nickname, whereas an alias is chosen by oneself for playful and lighthearted reasons. In most cases it replaces one's actual name.

2. *Igbo* is the name of the ethnic group and the language. Colonial administrators, who had difficulty with the *gb* sound, often wrote *Ibo*. *Imo* is the name of a major river and of one of the twenty-one states in Nigeria. Ninety-nine percent of the population of both Imo State and Anambra State is Igbo.

3. For a treatment of the relationship between names and personality in Igbo culture and elsewhere, see Wieschhoff, Iwundu, Ogbaa, Jahod ("Note on Ashanti Names," later revised and included in Irvine and Sanders), Hartman, Ryan, Mahome, and Akinnaso.

4. I know a Roman Catholic monsignor from Anambra-Igbo who is addressed by his parishioners and peers alike as *Ojemba (enwe ilo)*, meaning "A traveller should not court enemies on the way."

5. Dotted vowels are pronounced with more tenseness than undotted vowels.

6. Ennis, Omijeh, and Ojoade discuss proverb-names as they pertain to personal names and surnames without sparing a mention for proverb-aliases.

7. *Ofo* is the Igbo ritual symbol of justice, fairplay, and goodwill. It is often a short, "processed" and canonized staff meant to be held by the eldest male in the Igbo family. For a detailed examination of this sacred object in traditional Igbo belief system, see the book and the earlier paper by Ejizu.

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