

# Igbo Anthroponyms: Linguistic Evidence for Reviewing the Ibo Culture

MATAEBERE IWUNDU

**I**GBO ANTHROPONYMS MAY BE DEFINED as potential language constructions used by the individual native speakers to identify one another. Of course this definition might also properly apply to most personal names of any natural language, and any natural language might be expected to have names attached to persons and used to identify them; but in Igbo, names frequently have the further purpose of expressing attitudes, sentiments or historical facts. Therefore, Igbo anthroponyms can be used effectively as linguistic evidence for reviewing the Ibo<sup>1</sup> culture. In fact, practically all the Ibos find in personal names a means of expressing, in a very special manner, their personal joys or sorrows surrounding the event of child-birth and/or making a comment on life or expressing an opinion about it. This means, then, that to study, to some extent, the social and religious affairs, historical and political issues in the Ibo society, one could rely on names of the people, because their names are, simply stated, communicative.

Because of this communicative process which is characteristic of personal names in Igbo, it follows that Igbo personal names are not just single nouns, even though they function as such; nor are they confined to mere etymological definitions which single words may represent in a natural language. Instead, each name must show lexical meaning of forms and the grammatical meaning which the forms have in syntax. For example, assuming that a particular meaning has been assigned to an intended name construction, two or more words of lexical relationships could then be strung together even without a copula to form a construction which fills a proper name slot such as

*Eberechukwu* < Ebere + chukwu  
*lit.*, (Mercy + God)  
(Mercy of God).

In some cases, too, a verb transitive or intransitive may be used to form a name construction as in the cases of

*Obijiaku* < Obi + ji + aku  
*lit.*, (Home (it) has + wealth)  
(The home that has wealth)

---

<sup>1</sup> Ibo is an ethnic group in Nigeria; the language of the people is Igbo.

and,

*Osonduagwike* < Oso + ndu + a gwu + ike  
*lit.*, (race life (it) does not exhaust power)  
 (The race of life is not tiresome).

Since all Igbo names are cast entirely in this grammatical mold, they are obviously meaningful, embracing different aspects about the life of the people. In fact, it is amazing how most names probe certain underlying realities of the Ibo culture.

A linguistic analyst will therefore find in personal names a good deal of intrinsic details for his purpose. To begin with, *Eberechukwu* (mercy of God) is a biographical name with the ring of eloquence. It fully articulates that it is God and God only who dispenses the gift of a child; in other words, that child-birth is purely of Divine mercy. Thus, by means of the name, *Eberechukwu*, we are given an insight into one aspect of the religious life of the Ibos. The religious overtone of that name further suggests a common practice among the Ibos of many years ago, when the people who desperately wanted children of their own would have to resort to fervent prayer (and sometimes special ritual sacrifices) to divine powers, as it was believed to be a never-failing means of obtaining that blessing of God. When a prayer of this kind was answered, the recipients normally would construct a name for such a child in relation to the circumstance of the child's birth. Such was the process that gave birth to the name *Eberechukwu* (mercy of God), which, parenthetically, happens to be my first name. Moreover, *Obijiaku* (home (it) has wealth) or (the home that has wealth), stands out as a simple and straightforward commentary on a complex domestic issue. And because it is a well defined construction, a native speaker of Igbo understands its meaning without pausing or encountering semantic confusion. By interpretation, too, the name fulfills a socio-linguistic function in that it is the voice of a happy and contented father asserting that he has attained substance for himself and therefore that his child can look on to life with hope. Furthermore, the connotation which we get almost immediately from such a name is one of social and economic significance because the question of material wealth is a very important one in the Ibo society. Anyone who has made a detailed study of Igbo names can see quite clearly that certain names seem to express a common view of the Ibos that poverty is an uninvited guest, or as most Ibos would say, a life without hope. Nevertheless, some Igbo names such as

*Ndukaaku* < Ndu + ka + aku  
 (life + surpasses + riches)

signify that life is far more important than wealth. By implication, however, this concept of sustenance is just as natural as that of life and is

expressed with the name *Osonduagwuike* (the race for life is not tiresome). Strictly speaking, then, and from the Ibo viewpoint, the two names are not diametrically opposed in attitude, but express nuances of the common Ibo view of what constitutes the good life. So, the name *Osonduagwuike* still yields a unique epigrammatic quality in names. Its significance in the cultural life of the Ibos is striking, and the origin is as old as antiquity. A good number of cultural patterns such as these could be traced down to the four names I have worked with, and a lot more with other names. But so far, it is evident enough that personal names in Igbo do more than identify people. The wording of a name, for instance, certainly gives a dynamic rather than a static feeling to its semantic manifestation. In sum, then, I would say that by the syntax of their names, it is clear that Igbo anthroponyms make significant commentaries about the bearers, and the life around them. It is essentially this quality that makes Igbo personal names, however kaleidoscopic and unchronicled, an authentic means of describing, as closely as possible, both the Ibo language and the culture.

## Appendix I

### SOME IGBO ANTHROPONYMS OF EPIGRAMMATIC FUNCTION

1. *Iwueze* < *Iwu* + *eze*  
*lit.*, (law + king)  
 (law of king),

lays emphasis on one's duty as a good citizen and further reflects that the moral law governing kingship — as would be understood by the native speaker — would obviously be that which is contained in the Ibo proverbial saying, "Onye fee eze, eze eru ya" (to become a king, one should first serve the king), apparently a variant meaning of the name, *Iwueze*.

2. *Iwundu* < *Iwu* + *ndu*  
*lit.*, (law + life)  
 (law of life),

expresses a philosophical thought of the Ibo society in terms of good life and the essence of life, and so really maintains that like every other thing of the world, life has a law governing it. According to the Ibo concept expressed in this name, it would seem therefore that the law of life is founded on the basis of "live and let live," which is, as a matter of fact, the real meaning of the name, *Iwundu*.

3. *Uchendu* < *Uche* + *ndu*  
*lit.*, (thought + life)  
 (thought of life),

for example, is concerned with the Ibo philosophy about life. Although it can be explained in various ways, the important thing is that either way one looks at it, one may see from it that nobility of life consists in fair thought and just action on the part of the individual members of the society.

## Appendix II

### SOME IGBO ANTHROPONYMS OF BIOGRAPHICAL FUNCTION

1. *Akubueze* < Aku + bu + eze  
 (wealth is king),

says actually that wealth can make one become equal with a king. (Compare with [2.2] and [2.4] of the text.) The meaning of such names gives both the native speaker and a non-native who is acquainted with the meanings of such names, certain insight into the economic and cultural backgrounds of the bearers of the names. Yet again, it may only mean that people who answer such names come from families that had attained high social status through material acquisition.

2. *Azunna* < Azu + nna  
*lit.*, (back father)  
 (back of father).

As the name implies, *Azunna* designates a posthumous child — born after his father had passed away. As understandable as that is, it would even be believed, traditionally, and in a deeper sense, that the deceased father was really the genitor of such a child, so in such a case the name *Azunna* is a name adopted in memorable honor of the departed father.

## Appendix III

### SOME IGBO PERSONAL NAMES OF SOCIO-LINGUISTIC FUNCTION

1. *Anyakaoha* < Anya + ka + oha  
*lit.*, (eye + surpasses + community)  
 (the eye that surpasses community),

is a name in which some parents express their high social hopes in their son. By that they mean that he (the son) may become a great man and even may rise higher than any other person in the society. (Obviously such a name can be traced down to the Ibo society of the early nineteenth century, and therefore only exists in the modern Ibo society as a surname, but never a fore-name because the twentieth century Ibo society does not believe that one man is ever stronger or greater than the community.)

2. *Maduabuchi* < Madu + a + bu + chi  
 (man + not + is + God)  
 (man is not God),

seems to be one of the highest social understandings reached by the Ibo society in natural affairs. To the sociologically typical Ibo, every man has a destiny over which another man's influence, good or bad, becomes practically meaningless. In other words, while Appendix III (1) is a name that talks about man and the society, (2) views the relationships between man and God in a society and says quite simply that from God all good things come, both the gifts of a child and material wealth; which suggests that the Ibo man should always look on to God for his prosperity in life, and not to his fellow man or the society. The name *Maduabuchi* has become rather popular in the Ibo society especially since the past war (1967—70) in Nigeria.