

Igbo Personal Names, Meanings, and Influence of the Christian Religion: A Historical Analysis (1857 - 2020)

Bridget O. DIOKA

Centre for Igbo Studies, University of Nigeria, Nsukka, Enugu State.

bridget.dioka@unn.edu.ng; 00234(0)8064876052

Peter U. IWUNNA

Department of Educational Foundations, University of Nigeria, Nsukka, Enugu State.

ugwumba.iwunna@unn.edu.ng 00234(0)8133523173

&

Joel. O. ALISON

Department of Educational Foundations, Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka, Anambra State.

alisonjoelonyekachi@gmail.com

07015426911

Abstract

This paper presents a discussion on the meanings of Igbo personal names, as well as the influence exacerbated as a consequence of the arrival of Christianity on the shores of Igbo land, starting from the historic 1857 when the foremost batch of English speaking missionaries from Europe arrived. It seeks to underpin the fact that all Igbo personal names convey meaningful meanings, which are often connected with specific family situations, dispositions, prayers, heart desires, fears, and concerns, among others. The indication is that every Igbo name is fully loaded with meanings. Among the people, giving or bearing of meaningless names to children and family members are nonexistent, but have the cultures of giving and bearing personal names which explain the hearty desires, wishes and prayers of the family of bearers. It is against this background therefore, that the arrival of Christianity in Igbo land seemed to create enormous negative impact on the Igbo attachment to their cultures of giving their children and wards culture based personal names, which were widely rejected as church baptismal names by the various missions. Made to believe that local names were idolatrous and pagan-rooted, Igbo families' contact with Christianity dampened their resilience in baptizing their family members with those names, most especially as the ministering officials rejected their use as church baptismal names. For them, bearing of local Igbo names were synonymous with idol worship. It is therefore, the argument of this paper that the religious hegemony of the Christian religion adversely impacted the Igbo culture of adopting traditional names at church baptisms. However, with the arrival of the 21st century, the trends of adopting vernacular names seem to be trending again among Igbo families.

Keywords: Christian, Igbo, Influence, Meanings, Personal Names, Religion

Introduction

Every human person has and bears a name. Similarly, every human community, town, village, or nation, has a name. At that, persons are known by their names. Individual persons are identified with their personal names. This is an indication that names borne by persons distinguish them all from other members of the community as well as define their uniqueness in the midst of a crowd. It is one's personal names that are used as baptismal names during church baptisms. Based on this

factor, Iroegbu (2000) concedes the uniqueness of personal names as one major human trait which distinguishes one person from the other. According to this source, it is a mark of selfhood. In essence therefore, it is on the strength of this factor that two persons from the same family cannot bear the same personal names.

Right from the beginning of history therefore, it is without doubt that every human persons has a name, just as towns, communities, animals, schools, rivers, mountains, churches, etc. have names which refer to them alone. Thus, it is a matter of fact that names-giving is a fundamental human culture and global phenomenon that cuts across the entire human race and their communities of residence irrespective of any differences in geographical locations (Uchendu, 1965; Iroegbu, 2000; Ebubechineke, 2018).

On the strength of this understanding then, the question arises: What does the concept of name connote? The opinions of a few authors shall guide the scientific dissection of this question. Thus, the Encyclopaedia Britannica defines a name as a word or group of words used to refer to an entity (real or imaginary). From this background, it is quite remarkable that names identify and define specific entities. Names are used in reference to particular entities, objects, or places. Therefore, it is the names given to specific entities that define their uniqueness and specificity at any particular point in time. In fact, it is a symbol of identity.

In view of the above, Dioka (2007) argues that names are meant to differentiate a person, place, idea or thing from another. This source maintains that names are used as a linguistic expression which exclusively refers to a particular person, place, or thing in which case, anything that does not have a name does not exist. It is names that identify the object, person, or thing being referred to. Coming from this background therefore, it is the natural responsibility of man to attach names to all other creatures made by God, as was ascribed to him from the day of creation, when, according to the Holy Bible, God invited Adam to give names to the other creatures of His. Significantly, this power of giving names (personal) is still being executed by man today. On the strength of this fact therefore, the cultures of names-giving are still highly celebrated and revered in all human communities, and most especially among the Igbo, located in the southeast areas of Nigeria, a culturally diverse people, and the country's third largest ethnic nation (Dioka, 2007; Iwunna, 2011; Ugwueje, & Mogbo, 2018).

Similarly, the Webster Reference Dictionary of the English Language (1983) concedes the concept of name as that appellation by which a person or thing is known, called, or designated, in distinction from other creatures and beings made by God. Names are identity bearers. Names are indicators of who we are. Names distinguish one person from the other. With the use of personal names therefore, uniqueness of every human person is defined and identified.

Having made these clarifications, it has now become paramount to shift the discussion to the historical narratives connected with this brief paper. At that, it is quite significant to underpin the fact that the Christian religion entered Igbo land in the historic year of 1857, when a team of the CMS mission from England, let by Bishop Ajayi Crowther, a former slave of the Yoruba (Nigeria) descent arrived Onitsha, renowned as the heartland of the Christendom within the Igbo area. This historic entry into Igbo land was remarkable for being the foremost point of contact between the Igbo world and the Christian religion. Having arrived at that particular part of the Igbo world, the missionaries then dispersed to other communities of Igbo land where they spread the gospel of Christ and imparted skills of literacy through the auspices of schools and educational institutions.

With the tools of evangelization to the Christian faith at hand, as was supported with the erection of mission outposts, the projects of winning converts commenced in earnest. This was conducted alongside with the erection of schools and other forms of learning centres where young and middle aged learners were introduced to the rudimentary arts of reading and writing (Fafunwa, 1974; Njoku, 1980; Omenka, 1989; Iwunna, 2011).

From their operational base at the shores of the River Niger at Onitsha, the CMS missionaries navigated their ways into other neighbouring towns and villages surrounding the area, where they made contacts with the local populations who embraced the Christian faith, and enrolled into schools. Meanwhile, as the activities of evangelization and education necessitated the establishment of mission outposts alongside schools, the need to enrol learners became eminent. The training and recruitment of teachers became a matter of crucial necessity. There was also the need for the recruitment of local evangelizers, and local interpreters, a situation which compelled the mission to employ local personnel as mission catechists and pastors. As a matter of practical reality therefore, it was the participatory activities of the indigenous personnels that facilitated the mission's activities within and around neighbouring communities as Obosi, Asaba, Abo, Awka, and Alonso, Nteje, and Okija areas of Igbo land (Ekechi, 1972; Nwosu, 1982; Ekechi, 1996).

Following the earlier arrival of the CMS mission in Onitsha, favourable grounds were cleared, with the effect that entry of other Christian missions who joined the race for the evangelization of the Igbo world became quite seamless and devoid of unnecessary impediments. This became quite eminent on 5th December 1885 when a team of Catholic missionaries, led by Rev. Fr. Lutz, a French missionary arrived Onitsha, being the riverine gateway into Igbo land. As was expected, the arrival of this mission opened the way for severe missionary rivalries between the Catholics and their CMS counterparts, with the effect that elements of unfriendly relationships became pronounced.

However, the earlier arrival of the CMS smoothed the missionary activities of the Catholic missionaries who enjoyed the services of the local personnel already trained by the arch-rivals, the CMS. Thus, in the course of a short time, the Catholic missionaries were able to recruit a number of catechists, interpreters, school teachers, and local guides who were already trained by the CMS mission. Moreover, through the navigational guides of the local personnel who knew the terrains fairly well, it was possible for the Catholic missionaries to move around, make contacts with several communities, established contact points, mission outposts, churches, and schools as they travelled around. Thus, in the shortest of time, the missionaries were able to extend their tentacles to towns which included Atani, Aguleri, Nteje, Obosi, Awka, Nnewi, Owerri, Mbaise, Nkwere, Aba, Bende, Arochukwu, Nsugbe, Ogidi, Ogbunike, etc (Kalu, 1971; Ekechi, 1996).

In reality, the evangelizational and educational conquest of Igbo land was not abandoned in the hands of the CMS and Catholic Mission alone. There were other Christian missions that were involved in the huge projects of converting the huge populations and communities of Igbo land to Christianity, as well as arming them with the tools of western education. Thus, the other missions which joined the race included the Presbyterian Mission, led by Rev. Hope Masterton Waddell, which entered Igbo land through Calabar in 1846. From its headquarters in Calabar town, the mission spread its tentacles to Igbo towns and villages like Afikpo, Ngwa, Aba, and Arochukwu areas, etc and registered its presence through high quality educational and technical trainings it provided to the teeming young learners from the south-eastern areas of Nigeria. It was the products of this renowned institution that became the high ranked technicians deployed to several

missionary establishments in Nigeria during the colonial era (Macrae, 1956; Iwunna, 2011).

In the race to consolidate the Igbo area as Christian nation was the Primitive Methodist Church (1910), which later changed its name to the Wesley Methodist Church in 1932. History informs that it was from Uzuakoli, her initial point of entry that the mission spread into other Igbo areas such as Ngwa, Arochukwu, Umuahia, Abiriba, Owerri, Bende, Ohafia, etc. Having arrived at those towns and villages, it also embarked on the projects of establishing schools and missionary outposts, which drew converts and education-hungry Igbo children to its doors and mission stations. Even at that, the other missions which joined the race of evangelizing the Igbo world also included the Qua Iboe Mission (1887), the Adventist Mission, and the Apostolic Church of Christ. The fact remains quite clear that the large geographical size of Igbo land definitely, required and attracted the attentions of several Christian missions that were bent on spreading the gospel of Christ and its educational cousin to all the nooks and crannies of Igbo land.

With the collaborative participation of several Christian missions in the Igbo project therefore, it became possible to mount the lasting beacons and life-long signposts of Christianity and western education in all the towns and villages of Igbo land, with the positive implication that schools were erected. Countless converts were won for Christ. Several of the local cultures and traditional values which were earlier inimical to life and endemic to the Christian faith were transformed or abrogated completely. Even at that, several qualified local personnel were recruited into the various missionary establishments created by the various missions, all with the intentions of encouraging them to partake actively in the project of educating their fellow country men and women, as well as joining hands with the Christian missions to spread the gospel among their own kits and kin (Macrae, 1956; Kalu, 1986; Ekechi, 1996).

Against this background therefore, this paper seeks to argue that the influence of the Christian religion made elaborate negative impact on the continued retention and adoption of Igbo personal names. The influence of Christianity and western education downplayed the earlier attachment and connectivity which the pre-missionary Igbo had on this indigenous culture of giving and adopting traditional personal names. Putting this opinion in perspectives therefore, it is quite remarkable that the double barrels attacks of Christianity and her western educational cousins on the culture of bearing Igbo names left indelible marks which are yet to be overcome in the entire Igbo landscape. The impacts are loud enough and speak in large volumes. Even in these post-independence years, they still remain visible and indelible. Making a thorough investigation into the effects of this historic contact becomes crucial in view of the need to determine the enormity of the impact which Christianity and western education, both of which are core European cultures made on their Igbo counterpart. Considering the fact that it is the natural prerogative of only human beings to arrogate names to fellow human beings, as well as other entities and objects, one then begins to wonder whether this trait of hegemony could be responsible for the downgrading of the Igbo culture of giving their children and family members culture-based personal names.

The Culture of Names-giving (Igụ aha) Among the Igbo

Names-giving is a huge cultural ceremony among the Igbo. Among the people, the birth of a new baby is celebrated with great feasting and merriment. At such a hilarious ceremony, culture demands that friends, relations, and other well-wishers are invited to join in naming the new baby. These involve elaborate eating and drinking, while gifts of cash and other materials are donated to the family of the new baby. Usually, Igbo tradition requires that children are named after *izu asaa* (seven Igbo native weeks) or a month. However, there are no hard and fast rules about the time

period involved. The implication is that the choice of the date for the naming of the new born is usually the choice of the hosting family. This is an indication that names children are given at birth usually stand as their birth names, which are also known by authors as personal names. By implication therefore, it is the names parents give their children as soon as they are born that stand as their first names, personal names, or birth names (Ogbalu, 1974; Nwagbo, 2018).

In the traditional milieus of the Igbo, all names have their meanings. Among the people, names are not just given for the sake of the giving. They are loaded with meanings, which convey the wishes, prayers, heart desires, challenges, history, fears, and remarkable events in the life of giver-families. Even at that, such names also convey parents' special blessings on the lives of their new born babies. Thus, when parents and relations gather to give names to the new born baby, such names speak from the heart, and convey some specific message which giver-families wish to communicate to friends and well-wishers through the names they give to the new member of the family.

It is in appreciation of these factors then that Igbo families give their new babies names such as Chukwuebuka (God is great), Nwachukwu (son of God), Nneka (Mother is supreme), Ogadimma (It will be fine), Nnaemeka (Thanks be to God), Sọọrọnnadi (Beware of the kinsmen), Chimmaramma (My God is good), Maraizu (Be wise), Nwanneamaka (Bond of brotherhood is great), Chukwudimma (God is good), Oluẹbubechukwu (Miracle of God), Onwuka (Death is powerful), Tabugboo (The day is still young), Ugwumba (Pride of the community), Enyioma, (My good friend), Echiebuka (Tomorrow is unpredictable), Soronna (Follow the footsteps of your father), Chukwudi (God is alive), Ngoziichukwu (Blessings of God), Chimeremeze (God made me king), Ahamefule (My name shall never be lost), and Iheanacho (My heart's desire), etc. The indication here is that the culture of names-giving among the Igbo presents a useful forum for the manufacture of several meaningful names, which could be given to one single child. In which case, the guests who gather at the child-naming ceremony could grace the child with other names apart from the ones given by the birth parents. It was these meaningfully loaded names that the earlier Christian missionaries rejected and categorized as pagan names, in preference for those accepted as Christian, English, or Latin in connotation (Arinze, 1982; Nwagbo, 2018).

The culture of names-giving counts among the core Igbo values which are held in appreciation of God's gift of new babies to any family. During the ceremony then, encomiums of prayers and blessings are bountifully poured on the baby. In the Mbaise area, it is usually the eldest person among the invited guests who makes the official pronouncement of the personal name given to the new baby by his or her parents. It is through the mouth of this elder also that prayers of long life, abundance of God's blessings, and bountiful favours are showered on the new baby. Starting from the conclusion of the ceremony however, the new baby begins to be known and addressed by such personal name throughout life and beyond. However, the big difference is that in the era of Christianity, the child-naming ceremony is followed up with the church baptism, while in the pre-missionary period; new born babies were rather taken to the shrine of the local deity where they are named and dedicated to the ancestral gods. Obviously, it was this point of departure that re-enforced the utter rejection of those local Igbo names which were earlier interpreted to be idolatrous by the missionaries (Kalu, 1971; Ogbalu, 1974; Njoku, 1980; Iwunna, 2011).

Influence of the Christian Religion

Having arrived at this stage, it has now become relevant to underpin some of the key areas of influence which the arrival of Christianity introduced into the Igbo culture of names-giving which

are reflected in the personal names children receive at birth. These shall be discussed under the subheadings that follow:

Basic Requirement for Church Baptism

One remarkable influence which the Christian religion made on the cultures of names-giving is the outright rejection of such local names as baptismal names in the church. In the minds of the earlier Christian missionaries, the bearing of Igbo names were associated with idolatry, pagan worship of false gods, and act of non-conversion to the Christian faith. For them, the mere presentation of Igbo vernacular names at church baptisms is indicative of the unrepentant backgrounds of the parents of the new born. As a pre-condition therefore, parents of infants were required to convert to the Christian faith, give their children Christian names, English names, or Latin names which are approved by the doctrines of the church. Anything short of that was conceived as an attitude of idol worship, and consequently rejected at the baptismal font (Kalu, 1971; Njoku, 1980; Ekechi, 1989).

It might be necessary to observe that the pre-missionary Igbo names given by non-Christian parents to their children were typically unchristian, but rather seemed to celebrate and honour the ancestral gods of communities. Such names had no connections with the Almighty God, who is the creator of the entire globe, but rather exalted the efficacy of the powers of different deities. Based on the fact that the givers of such names were un-repented yet, un-converted to the Christian faith, and repulsive of the doctrines of Christianity, the missionaries had no options but to reject such names at the baptismal fonts. Such names included the following: Nwanyanwuagwu (Child of the Sun-deity), Ugoagwu (Eagle of the god or deity), Agwuocha (White thunder god/deity), Agbarakwem (May the gods allow me), Agbaraji (The yam goddess), and Ajofia (The evil forest), etc. It was names as these, which provoked the Christian missionaries, and prompted their outright rejection of them all as baptismal names in churches (Achebe, 1958; Kalu, 1971; Njoku, 1980).

Primary Condition for School Enrolment

In the same vein, the various Christian missionaries who evangelized the entire Igbo landscape deployed the tool of conversion to Christianity, as a pre-requisite for enrolment into schools. In which case, conversion to the Christian faith must be attained before such a person qualified to enrol as a candidate in any of the Christian mission schools. Without presenting one's candidature as a Christian therefore, opportunities of enrolling into mission schools were unattainable. Thus, it became imperative that only converted school attendees who bear Christian names were accepted as candidates in any Christian mission owned schools anywhere in Igbo land and beyond. It is this policy that guided the educational activities of the various Christian missions who operated in Igbo land, starting from the historic 1857 when this expatriate religion made contact with the Igbo. Even in the post-independence years in Nigeria, this policy still stands (Njoku, 1980; Ekechi, 1989; Iwunna, 2011).

Primary Requirement for Enrolment into Teacher Training Colleges (TTC)

Similarly, it was only converted young Christians who were accepted as candidates in the various teacher training colleges run by the Christian missions anywhere in Igbo land. For the Catholic Church, for instance, such candidates must be baptized, confirmed, committed Christians who attend Masses and other church services regularly. Persons with lukewarm attitudes to the Christian faith were never given opportunities to enrol into mission-owned teacher training colleges. This was considered quintessential as graduates of those institutions were given the responsibilities of participating in the activities of evangelization of the upcoming generations of

the Igbo, through their classroom activities and active roles in the church (Njoku, 1980; Okwor, 1998; Omolewa, 2001).

Putting these into perspectives therefore, it is without doubt that the following TTC's established and operated by Catholic missionaries in Igbo land had no rooms for non-baptized, non-confirmed, and un-converted applicants who wished to study there. They included: St. Charles College, Onitsha (1924), Bishop Shanahan Teacher Training College, Orlu (first catholic TTC in Nigeria), Teacher Training College, Okpala, Holy Ghost Teacher Training College, Umuahia (1948), Women Training College, Nguru, Mbaise, etc. It was these Christian-mission-owned institutions, plus several others that produced the best teachers, school administrators, and indigenous educational personnel which Igbo land, Nigeria could boast of during the colonial and post-colonial years of this country (Njoku, 1980; Iwunna, 2011).

Key Requirement for Recruitment into Schools and other Missionary Establishments

The Christian missionary policy was that applicants who were not baptized in the church were never qualified for recruitment into any of the educational healthcare establishments run by any of the Christian missions anywhere in Igbo land. This rule applied to schools, hospitals, maternities, and dispensaries operated by the Christian missions. Such candidates were counted as unqualified. Without meeting this essential religious requirement therefore, chances of securing jobs in any institutions run by any of the Christian missions in Igbo land amounted to zero. It was therefore simply unimaginable to allocate any job to an un-baptized person in a Christian establishment during the missionary era. Thus, the rule was that only baptized persons, who were committed to the work of the Christian faith qualified for positions in those establishments operated by any of the various Christian missions (Njoku, 1980; Arinze, 1982; Ekechi, 1989; Okwor, 1998).

Key Requirement for Engagement into the Civil Service

As well, it was a strong rule of the British colonial government that only baptized and converted applicants received job opportunities in the then civil service. As powerful allies of the Christian missions, this requirement was enforced to the letter. Britain being a Christian nation, and the colonial power entrusted with the authorities to run Nigeria following the conclusion of the Berlin Conference of 1884 therefore saw the reason to support the missionary efforts of the various Christian missions operating in Igbo land with all strength and might. As the authorities in power, it became the standard practice that strong bonds of collaboration were established between the Christian missions and the colonial government in power. Based on this principle, the British government went the extra miles to lend the Christian missionaries all the relevant logistic and material support they desperately needed to survive. Thus, in the Igbo areas, the attainment of the sacrament of church baptism counted as one of those basic conditions which local Igbo personnel necessarily met, to qualify them for jobs in the civil service during the colonial era (Lugard, 1922; Fafunwa, 1974; Calvocoressi, 1987; Ekechi, 1989).

Requirement for Church Leadership Positions

Significantly too, the reception of the sacrament of church baptism was a fundamental requirement for the qualification for leadership positions at church levels. At that, persons who solicited for positions of church catechists, Sunday school teachers, translators, lay readers, and evangelizers, etc. were baptized and committed Christians. Without meetings this fundamental requirement, these mission-based positions definitely eluded them (Njoku, 1980; Okwor, 1998).

Basis for Enrolment into Nursing Schools

Finally, it is without doubt that various Christian missions who invested in the Igbo missionary project, also established and operated various nursing schools. Behind this project was the need to impact the healthcare conditions of the Igbo world, all with the intentions of evangelizing healthier and stronger populations of Igbo converts. Engagement in this area became prominent in view of the need to eradicate the negative influences which native doctors (dibia) and their unorthodox medications inflicted on the populations. The understanding was that with the availability of nurses, greater awareness was anticipated in the understanding that 'knowledge is power.' Thus, through the establishment of nursing schools in different parts of Igbo land, greater healthcare awareness was created among the populations. Communicable diseases were placed under tight control. Lessons of effective disease handling and management were circulated to various communities. The result of this development was that precious lives were saved among the populations, while disease spread was placed under strict control (Njoku, 1980)

However, it was also required that candidates who applied to study nursing in any of the church-owned nursing schools must be baptized Christians, first and foremost. Such applicants were also required to active and practicing students who were expected to use their positions as nurses to disperse the gospel of Christianity to their patients. Thus, devoid of this stringent requirement therefore, affected candidates never qualified to study nursing in mission nursing schools in Igbo land. Prominent among them was the Catholic Mission-owned School of Nursing, Emekuku, parented by the St. Brigid's Hospital, Emekuku, which still plays a significant role in the healthcare sector in Imo State in this millennium era (Njoku, 1980).

The Way Forward

Having arrived at this stage in this brief paper, it is considered relevant to make a few suggestions. First and foremost, the Igbo cultures associated with the giving of personal names should be sustained and maintained with all respect and reverence to God Almighty. Any areas of this culture which have attachments with local deities and ancestral shrines must be stamped out with impunity. Only personal names which accord due reverence to God should be adopted and given to family members. This becomes significant in view of the fact that idolatrous names bear the hallmarks and ugly signatures of paganism. Therefore, families should be encouraged to find enough reasons to adopt personal and family names which glorify the name of the Almighty God, instead of the other way round.

Conclusion

This discussion cannot be concluded without highlighting the fact that the cultures of names-giving constitutes one major power given to man by God Almighty. This is clearly reflected in the Book of Genesis where God invited Adam to give names to all the other beings that were made by His omnipotent power. The implication is that it is man that exhibits the inalienable power and intellectual strength to accord names to other beings. As a matter of fact, no other entities created by God have the physical, mental, or intellectual ability to arrogate names to themselves as well as other beings. It is only man that accords a name to all other beings, and such names remain permanent. Because the authority to give names to other creatures on earth, man inclusive, lies squarely in the hands of man himself, it becomes crucial that this power must never be abused. A situation whereby persons bear derogatory names, abusive names, and names which celebrate criminality, encourage dishonesty, support indolence and honour evil, must be discouraged and completely removed from the compendium of Igbo personal names. This explains the factors that compelled the earlier Christian missionaries to reject culture-based local names as baptismal

names on conversion to the Christian faith.

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