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A Literary Anthroponomastics of Selected Igbo Plays

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Abstract

This paper discusses the literary anthroponomastics in Igbo plays. It explores names of characters to show the socio-cultural factors which influence the choice of names and the effect such names have on the roles the characters play. Selected Igbo personal names from Nwadike's *Nwata Bulie Nnaya*, Elu, Nwokelues' *slje Ego*, Egwuonwu-Chimezie's *Ahuhụ Na-Ata Oji* and Odunke Artists' *Ojaadili* are analysed using the classical or sense theory of proper names. The study reveals that naming is as important to the Igbo as the birth of a child. In literary works too, writers create characters whose roles in the texts are reinforced by the names they are given. Moreover, the findings of this work prove that the Igbo names given to characters, just as in real life, are influenced by the day of birth, gender, circumstances surrounding one's birth, the physical appearance of the child, titles taken by a person, his or her prowess, their occupation and their belief, especially religious belief.

KeyWords: Personal names, naming, Igbo, plays.

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Introduction

Onomastics is the study of proper names, especially the names of people (Smith 2016). Names are used to identify and describe people, roads, buildings, play grounds, business and other objects. A set of personal names is called anthroponymy and their study is called anthroponomastics, while a set of place names is called toponymy and their study is called toponomastics. This

particular study is based on anthroponomastics which is discourse on names in literary works of fiction. It aims to investigate the link between characters and their names. A writer can empty the textuality of the name in a play, using its connotations to produce an identity for the character. An investigation of the meaning of the names and their relevance will be instrumental in a grasp of how they attach to the consistency and aesthetics of the

literary work. Therefore, names frequently have an important function in literary works and confer a particular aesthetic quality on them (Iiiescu 2015). Literary names perform a stylistic and expressive function in works of literature. Igbo Literary texts are literary works written in Igbo Language. Characters in Igbo Literary works bear names which are symbolic. They provide an insight into Igbo culture, philosophy, language and environment. These personal names in literature are important tools for the identification of characters and characterization. Ennin and Nkasah (2016) note that Gonzalez (2010) stipulates that literary onomastics helps in the discovery of meaning which has a contribution to the interpretation of a text. There is therefore the need to study the anthroponomastics of Igbo literary works in order to ascertain why the authors employ the names they do and also the effects these names have on the roles of the characters.

Statement of the Problem

For the Igbo, a name is not just a tag of identity or personal label but a story and an expression of events and circumstances surrounding the birth of the child as well as the parents' life experiences and world view. To further demonstrate that names transcend mere nomenclatures to the Igbo but rather

reflect their deep philosophical and spiritual attributes, we need to take a glimpse at the Western tradition. To the West, as exemplified by William Shakespeare, there is nothing in a name because, according to him, "that which we call a rose/ By any other word would smell as sweet" (62). Some of the Igbo names are going into extinction because people now see them as being obsolete. It is now more likely to see these names in only literary works or as surnames. Most people of the newer generation bearing these names as surnames or seeing them in literary works do not know their meanings or symbolism. Therefore, it is the semantic and philosophical essence of Igbo names in written Igbo plays that is the focus of this paper, knowing that a good knowledge of the meaning of these names in literary works will help the readers in a great way in the interpretation of the texts.

Methodology

Four Igbo plays were selected through purposive random sampling. They are Inno Nwadike's *Nwata Bulie Nna Ya Elu*, Nwokelue's *Ije Ego*, Odunke Artistes' *Ojaadili* and Egwuonwu-Chimezie's *Ahuhuna-ata Oji*. These plays were read and the names of the characters were analysed to show the socio-cultural factors which influence the choice of names and the effects

that the names of these characters have on the role they play.

Review of Literature

The study of personal names in general is called Onomastics, and it is usually divided into anthroponomastics and toponomastics. Anthroponomastics relates to human naming, while toponomastics is the study of place names. In Greek, *anthropos* means man or human, while *Onoma* means name. According to Wikipedia, anthroponomastics is the study of anthroponyms, the proper names of human beings, both individual and collective. A name is a term used for identification by an external observer. They can identify a class or category of things, or a single thing, either uniquely or within a given context. The entity identified by a name is called its referent. A personal name identifies a specific individual.

Mbonu (2010) defines a personal name in Igbo as a story. She is of the view that a name functions as a place-holder, social location and a part of belongings in most African societies. She further reiterates that personal names in the Igbo society are powerful symbols and words that act as markers.

Nwigwe (2001:75) discloses that the names of the four market days in Igbo (Afo, Nkwo, Eke, Orie) derive their names from divinities

and that a child born on any of these days automatically adopts the market day names as his/her natural or general name. He however maintains that the other names given to the child are more significant and meaningful for the family and the relatives and, as a result, such names are carefully selected so as to remember and incorporate the circumstances and incidents of the birth.

A person's name is part of the referent with which he/she is addressed or referred to. A name draws affinity between the signifier and the signified. The essence of the thing it represents or identifies lies on the name that it bears. Not to have a name is not to exist. Agyekum (2006:2007) holds that Akan names, for instance, are representations of the Akan Culture, Philosophy, thoughts, environment, and their interaction with foreign culture. He adds that names are not arbitrary but based on socio-cultural and ethnopragmatic contexts. Names can be affected by social variables such as sex, hierarchy in birth, circumstance of birth, the person's structure, status etc. Agyekum (2006) further provides a typology of Akan personal names under birthday names, family names, circumstantial names, theophoric names, honorifics and title names, intimacy, proverbial, insulting and nicknames.

Ogunwale (2012) asserts that Yoruba personal names can perform pragmatic roles as constatives, predictive, commissives, encode acknowledgements, directives and personal authority. He states that the proverbial expressions used as Yoruba personal names establish that the concept of cooperative principle is guaranteed. Yoruba personal names fall into ideational, experiential/observatory, testimonial, admonitory, and monumental. Ideational names show the speakers' experience of the worldview while testimonial names are evidence of a person's achievements. Experiential names express the life experience of the names and the society based on the changes in life. Admonitory names express advice to guide individuals and guard his present and future. Finally, Monumental names extol the remarkable personal achievements in terms of physical or socioeconomic status.

Makaudze (2020) states that notable studies which include Wanutila (1999), Makaudze (2013, 2016), Ndigirigi (2015), Ennin and Nkansah (2016) and Miruka (2018), among others, affirm that African naming practices in general show that characters' names in literature are not mere linguistic labels and makers of identity, but are a source of a variety of information. Therefore, like name

givers in life, African writers do not arbitrarily assign names to their characters. He further states that the analysis of African literature (including literature in indigenous languages) remains incomplete if the nature and scope of names of characters therein has not been explored. This is because writers make use of characters' names to communicate important thematic aspects, to foreground their plots and to reinforce roles that those characters play in the literary works.

Makaudze (2020) agrees with Wanutila (1999) by stating that the role names play in Kiswahili literature is also crucial. The understanding of the meanings of characters' names makes for better appreciation of theme, events as well as characterization. Names play a big role in the general framework of the whole story. The use of meaningful names appears to be teleologically, thematically important, and sometimes even serving a foregrounding or a defamation role.

Theoretical Framework

This study employs Bal's (1985) classical or sense theory of proper names. The sense theory of proper names sees a name as naming by describing the object it names and as serving various purposes depending on the interests of the name giver. This

contradicts the proposition of a name as an mere abstract linguistic label. Bal states that names are not just merely deictic, but rather have specific meaning that integrates character into its fictional life. The theory considers names as pointers to qualities and/or behavior, or as suggestive of the experiences and plots the bearer is involved in. Bal's (1985) theory is important in the analysis of the names in the drama texts, in which the character traits and behavior of the individual characters are suggested and themes and/or motifs and other commentaries are conveyed through the names.

Analysis of Selected Names in *Nwata Bulie Nna-Ya Elu*, *Ije Ego*, *Ahuhu Na-Ata Oji*, and *Ojaadili*.

Birthday Names

These are names given to a child based on the particular day he or she is born. Igbo names which are identified in *Ije Ego* are affected by the day of birth. The Igbo in Nigeria are very enterprising people who believe in commerce, they have four days in the week and these correspond to their market days. The names of the market days are Nkwo, Eke, Orie, and Afo. Each Igbo town therefore adopts one of the days as its own market day. Children born on a particular market day are named after the very market day, according to Ennin and Nkansah (2016). Okonkwo is a male

name born on Nkwo market day. In the drama text, Okonkwo is the father of Ikpeama. Also, Mgbeke is a female name born on Eke market day and in the same text, Mgbeke is the mother of Ikpeama. Most of these names that are given after the market days are going into extinction. Only very few are still there as surnames which are most likely to eventually go into extinction because Igbo people of the newer generation see these names as outdated and no one likes to give his/her child such names anymore. Even the market days themselves are no longer remembered by many of the Igbo people in the urban areas. It is only the people in the rural areas, whose livelihood mainly depends on the market days, and the intellectuals and cultural workers, whose vocation mandates them, that remember and observe them.

The Igbo also name their children depending on the circumstances surrounding the birth of the child. There are different circumstances which can determine the name of an individual. These circumstances can be related to anthroponyms (place of birth), temporonyms (period of birth), manner of birth and death prevention, and survival names. In *Ahuhu Na-Ata Oji*, Obinna is the first child of Onwubuariri and Nneoma. The Igbo value male child a lot that almost every man will love to have a male

child. Thus, Onwubuariri naming his son Obinna (the heart desire of the father) is to show that it is his utmost wish to have a male child.

Names as Pointer to the Qualities and Behaviours of Characters and as illuminators of the plot.

Apart from the general interpretations of names in Igbo setting, the play text also contains names that have implications for characterization. Emuka is the protagonist in *Nwata Bulie Nna Ya Elu*. Literally, his name means ridicule, Emuka serves satiric purposes. Emuka like the prodigal son in the Bible told his father to give him his own share of his wealth. He took the money and travelled to town and squanders everything with women and drunkards. He later became a laughing stock to them all. He is held up as a subject of ridicule. Those people Emuka used to pay for their drinks, that were praising him, later use ridicule to expose and criticize his stupidity.

Emuka serves to foreground the theme and moral lesson in the play. Ndigirigi (2015) rightly observes that understanding the way characters are named is a way of getting to the theme and to the meaning of the work under consideration. In the first instance, Emuka is ridiculed by his kinsmen, Okoroigwe and Madumere, for staying in the

village, farming, notwithstanding that he is educated. They tell Emuka that his education is a waste. They tell him that he cannot become somebody while staying in the village. Because of shame from their ridiculing, he tells his father to give him his own share of his wealth. He collects his share of money from his father, travels and squanders the money. When he sees that there is nothing left for him, he goes back to his father seeking forgiveness. The name, Madumere, one of the people that deceives Emuka, simply means, 'the human factor,' the human beings who are the architects of Emuka's problem. Had he not listened to their advice to leave the village, he would not have been through such suffering. He neglects his father and later bears the consequences to the extent that a son of a richman like him temporarily takes the image of a mad man, dirty and smelling. Also, Emuka's father's name, Iloka, literally means 'enemies are greater in the home'. Truly, it is Iloka's kinsmen that deceive Emuka and they are the same people to ridicule him when one of them, Kamalu, sees him in another town looking dirty, in tatters and smelling. Kamalu's wife, Ahudiya, equally hates Emuka because he refuses to give Kamalu a share of his wealth that he requests for. On the other hand, another character, Nneezi

being a good mother, as her name implies, observes how Emuka is lavishing money every day in school and decides to visit his parents and inform them about it. According to her, it is not only one person that trains a child.

In the plays, the names used by the writers serve to reveal something about the fictional characters and also illuminate the plot. In *Ahuhu Na-Ata Oji*, Obidike means “strong heart” Morphologically, the name is a compound word which has two words Obi (heart) and Dike (Strongman). The name inherently suggests that the bearer has strong heart. In the story, he kills his blood brother, Onwubu, in order to acquire (take) his land. Obidike commits this evil act notwithstanding how close he is with his brother. When Obinna suspects that Obidike’s hand is in the death of his father, his mother, Nneoma, does not believe it until the native seer tells them that Obidike is the person that killed Onwubu.

In the same vein, the name, Ikpeama, the protagonist in *Ije Ego* means “guiltless”. In the play, Ikpeama is the son of Okonkwo and Mgbeke. He is being unduly pressured to marry, build house and buy car, that all his mates have gotten theirs. This prompts Ikpeama to beg his friend Nnabuihe to take him to the native doctor that prepared charm

for him to become rich. He told his friend that he is ready to do whatever the native doctor tells him to do in order to achieve all that his father, Okonkwo, wants him to have. Nnabuihe takes Ikpeama to the native doctor called Odomodo and Odomodo tells Ikpeama that he will use his father for ritual for him to become rich. He accepted and his father dies after three days. After his father’s death, he becomes rich, got married and bought a car. Ikpeama married three wives and none of his wives was able to conceive. At last, Ikpeama kills himself. So his name suggests that he is blameless for all that happened. Names borne by the characters influence their entire lifecycle in their sundry behavior, integrity, success, etc. (Yusuf, Olatunji and Issah 2014) The purpose served by these names have significant roles in the interpretation of the literary works.

One of the most basic qualities of a name is the relationship with a particular culture. The choice of names reveals the ethnic society which inhabits the fictional works’ recognized setting. Igbo culture attaches a lot of significance to names. The Igbo believe that the name reveals they also express their experience as well as their expectations that may have manifested in the child that has just been born. For instance, a male child born as the first child is given such names as

Chimaobim (God knows my mind), Obinna (the mind or heart yearning of the father), Kamsiyonna (exactly what I asked from God), Obiechina (let this lineage never close) i.e. where the father is an only son.... state of mind of the parents, what they expect the maker, the giver of that child to fulfill in their lives through the child and literary analysis; one can talk of the name revealing the fictional character.

In a case where a male child is born after many girls, the names Obialo, Obiedoro, Iroanuna or Iroanusi, etc. are given. Where a girl child is born after many boys, especially in a wealthy man's house, the name Obiaraeriaku or Obiagaeriaku or Adaku is given. Ugo (eagle) is a symbol of beauty. So the Igbo gives a child they perceive to be endowed with streaks of beauty such names as Ugomma, Adaugo, Ojiugo, for female, and Ugochukwu, Ugonna, Nwaugo etc for male children.

In *Ojaadili*, the qualities or spirit of heroism is central to the play. Also, dramatized in the play is the tragic essence in overweening heroism. Therefore, the major characters in the play all bear names that either exhibit an aspect of heroism or gourd and aid heroism. There is also the central role of praise singing exhibited through percussion or wind instruments in the gongs

(ekwe and ogene) and in particular the popular Igbo flute (oja).

The hero of the play, Ojaadili, is an embodiment of heroism. The name Ojaadili denotes the inseparability of the heroic character from both his flutist (onye oja) and the flute (oja) itself whose evocative sound and message can inspire a person to limitless adventures, as it does Ojaadili. The other shade of meaning to the name, Ojaadili, is the pejorative that relates to the tragic essence in the hero's illusive drive to attain omnipotence.

The other major characters of high onomastic value in the play include, Udumeje – meaning, the one that leads me on or inspires me, my muse. This is Ojaadili's flutist.

Omeire – (dibia) the one whose medicine or magic is so potent.

Otiaba – The one that struts about screaming and threatening.

Ugonwa – A child as beautiful as the eagle or simply an eagle child (a female name)

Ozo Dimgba – An expert-wrestler animal (the chimpanzee)

Onukwube – Let the mouth keep talking (whatever it wills)

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