

Origin of Igbo Surnames, Past and Present

Felicia N. Ibemesi

Abstract

The formal use of Igbo surnames, which started with the coming of Western Education and the development of white-collar jobs, show by their contents and contexts past and present values. They have been identified in five different classes namely: Patronymic, matronymic, occupational, toponymic and pseudonymic/nicknames. Interest in Igbo names and their meanings continue to be on the increase as scores of entries on the websites show.

1. Introduction

This paper is not an attempt to produce a collection or a dictionary of Igbo personal and surnames. A large amount of literature already exists in that direction (Njoku, J.E.: 1978). An earlier work on a group of Igbo names we classified as “Assumed Names” made references to the long works on Igbo personal and surnames (Ibemesi, F.N.:1988). Interest in Igbo names continues to increase as people realize that there is much in name and in naming, particularly with respect to Igbo. Some entries in the websites even show that foreigners married to Igbo in the diaspora are seeking for Igbo names and their meanings for use for their children (Ladejobi-Ukwu,Dele: 2009; Zahymaka:2006). Naming is as old as humanity. The origin and development of family names do however vary among different nations of the world.

Some of the many descriptions of Igbo names show among other things, that they are not just mere identification tags on the bearers, but that they are also records of family and community history (Ubahakwe, Ebo: 1981). History itself is a chronological record of significant events in the society. Recorded events of the past are read as history. When people of different nations started taking on family and surnames the actions were then ‘recent’ development in history. Today these events are simply history. Surnames and family names originated in different nations as need for them arose. Oftentimes the origin and development of these names were consequences of the expansion of government in different nations. In England, for example, the need developed as a result of the expansion of the government after their conquest in the eleventh century A.D. Before the Norman conquest in the eleventh century A.D records of one sort or another had been kept by the English people. But after the conquest, the first inventory of the new dominions was completed as the great expression of the Norman genius for administration. After this period and till the present, the volume of paper work produced by the government has been increasing.

It is therefore deduced from the records that surnames gradually came into England between the eleventh and the end of the thirteenth century. Before that time a person usually had one name only belonging to himself and not necessarily to his father or grandfather. But after the thirteenth century, people almost always had a family surname. England and in fact, some other countries of Europe have therefore been able to find out the “why” and the “when” of surnames and family names in

their society. Some works have also tried to find out the “how” of those names (Reany, P.H.:1967; Levitt, John and Joan: 1959).

The above question about surnames and family names tries to find out historical facts. It is an attempt to investigate the “when” and the “why” of Igbo surnames that made them choose the topic of the origin of Igbo surnames, past and present. The study is historical. We chose to talk about patronymics and others because some knowledge of Igbo culture showed that Igbo names could be grouped under those classes. We are therefore going to talk about some of the representative names among Igbo surnames under the following classes namely: Patronymics, Matronymics, Toponymics, occupational names and others. The Igbo culture is rich in its stock of names, and one can never claim to be exhaustive in any discussion of Igbo names.

2. Study Approach

We interviewed and collected names and information from Igbo of the following areas: Onitsha local government, Idemili local government, Anaocha local government, Nsukka local government, Igbo-Etiti local government, Ohafia local government, Orlu local government and Ika local government. We do not claim to have exhausted all areas of Igboland.

3. Analysis

From oral interviews and written literature, we would first proceed to talk in general about the origin of family and surnames in

Igbo society. Then we would discuss some of the surnames in their different classes.

3.1 The origin and development of Igbo surnames

In many small and primitive societies, living an almost unchanging life in small villages, not more than one name would be necessary for each person. Such a society would have a big store of names to choose from in naming their children, so that confusion caused by people having the same name and living in the same village does not arise too frequently. This was the case with different areas of Igboland and other tribes in Nigeria before the era of colonization. The western world passed through the same primitive stage.

In many places of Igboland, especially in some towns in Anambra state, “God-given names” known as “Afa-chi” or “Aha-chi” were also very commonly used. These Afa-chi are names derived from the market days and every child automatically answered the name derived from the market day on which he was born until he was formally named. Oftentimes, even after the naming ceremony, some continued to be addressed by the Afa-chi. Males answer Okeke, Okereke, Okafo, Okoroafo, Okoye, Okonkwo, and other such market day derived names. Females answer Akueke, Mgbeke, Mgboye, Ugoye, Udeafu, Udenkwo and others.

Before the colonial era people were addressed by their personal names and introduced as the sons or daughters of so and so. The inherited family names started with the introduction of the Christian religion and western education. With the spread of formal education

and the spread of white-collar jobs in the twentieth century Igboland, surnames and inherited family names became a compulsory phenomenon (Chuks-Orji, Ogbonna: 1972). This was necessary to avoid confusion among people working or learning in the same place. Even in those early days, some confusion still lingered on, because many people answered market day derived names like: Nweke, Okeke; Okeke, Okonkwo and others. When two or more people bore these names in the same work or learning place, it became difficult to know who was being addressed as the names were called. The result was that people started thinking of surnames other than Afa-chi. Some people started by suffixing personal names to market day derived names. Names like Okekeeze, Okoyeuzu and the like came into existence. Others added prefixes as in: Umeokafo, Obiokafo etc. The next step was that more people started thinking of inherited family names derived from other personal names that are not market day derived names. People took on family names that are characterized as any of the following: patronymic, matronymic. Toponymic, occupational etc. Surnames in Igboland are therefore as old as western education in the area.

When the Igbo started using surnames, the names used were often those of their parents. As generations passed by people were and are often found answering the names of grand-parents and great-grandparents as surnames. The result is that names of some generations of parents appear forgotten.

The past and present significance of Igbo surnames therefore shows that grand and great-grand-parents' names are often remembered through surnames than are parents' names. The result is that today, in

some large families, people from the same grandparents answer different surnames in the attempt not to let their father's names die. During the oral interview, we talked with a literate family, where the man (principal of a school) and his wife answer a surname different from that of their children. This is an effort not to let a name die. The couple answers the man's grandfather's name, while their children answer the man's father's names as surnames. Taking as identification tags, nothing can be as confusing as the above practice as far as parents and children are concerned. But the whole concept of surnames remains an indispensable phenomenon.

3.2. Igbo Patronymics

Patronymics are names that distinguish the bearers by reference to their fathers. Family names are personal names that people take on as surnames at any time of the family history. The reference to the father of the bearers of Igbo patronymic is done in a number of ways quite different from what we noticed in English names where patronymics are very common. For example the early English people derived their patronymics by adding suffixes to the father's names to show that they were the sons of so and so as in the names like Edwardson, Robertson, Williams, Adams, Roberts and others like these.

In some parts of Igboland, such as Ohafia, the first son of every man automatically answers the man's father's names. Therefore a personal name automatically becomes a surname in the next generation. The result, of course, is that the stock of surnames in this place is small compared with other areas of Igboland. It is the reason why repeat of

names is more common in the place than in other places, e.g. Kalu. U. Kalu could be one person's personal and surname.

In some parts of Igboland, patronymics are names that show people's belief in reincarnation. In Aku in Igbo-Etiti Local Government of Enugu State and some other towns, people answer names like Nnanna, which often means that the bearer is seen as the reincarnation of his father's father. People answer Nnamdi. Nnamdi means that the child is an exact replica of the father. Therefore anybody that knows the boy's father, automatically recognizes the bearer. Some bearers are seen as their father's favourites, and are given the name Oyinna. Other names reflect the wishes of the bearer's father as seen in the names Obinna and Uchenna. Some patronymics revere fathers as sources of strength as seen in the name Nnabuike or as personal god as seen in the name Nnabuchi. In Onitsha in Anambra State, it is often a practice by the natives to address individuals by reference to both father and grandfather. The interviewees gave a number of names showing this form of reference. This form of reference is however mostly oral and is a way the older people identify the younger ones through their lineage. Addresses like Omeludikebekwe, Ogbolumelifeonwu, Egwuatumaduneme, Omeluonyekwentoruka, Obiozoetukokwu were given as illustrations. The above names are compounded from fathers' and grandfathers' names. In the name Omeludikeibekwe, Ibekwe (meaning if fellow human beings allow me live) is the son of Omeludike which literally means (something strange has happened to a gallant man). Ibekwe's children would be identified by an elder from Onitsha as the children of Omeludikeibekwe. The same manner of

identification is applied to the bearers of the other complex names whose meanings we shall give at the end of this paper.

In summary therefore, one can say, judging from the few names given here that there is always a tendency among people in different parts of Igboland, to record their family history through naming. Through these names individuals can start off drawing their family trees.

3.3. Igbo Matronymics

Marriage in most areas of Igboland is patrilocal. This often makes it imperative for people to answer surnames from father's side. But in many places, people have surnames that make reference to their mothers. In Igbo-Etiti Local Government Area of Enugu State, people answer names like Ogbonneye which means mother's favourite. In some other dialects, people answer the same name as Ogbonne.

The surname Aneja means grandmother reincarnated. In some other dialects, the same name is Nnedi. Nneguja means "direct mother" and is answered as surname. In Idemili local government area of Anambra State, people answer Akunne, which means "mother's wealth" to show that the bearer is enjoying the wealth of the mother. Nnewulu is another surname which means "mother graced me"

Again, as with patronymic, the above names tell some story about the bearers. They are not just mere identification tags. When in a male-dominated society, families answer surnames that show they were made by a woman's "sweat" this goes to show the historical importance of names as records of family and community history.

3.4. Occupational Surnames

While the English and German occupational surnames simply tell the occupation of the bearer as in Miller/Müller, Baker/Bácker, Carpenter/Zimmermann etc, Igbo occupational surnames often show two characteristics. In addition to showing the occupation of the bearer, Igbo occupational names often specify the area of excellence of the bearer in the profession. The Igbo name ‘Ogbuagu’(literally meaning lion killer) not only shows the original bearer as a hunter, but also as a brave hunter, for it is not every hunter that can face and kill a lion. The name Jibue, with full meaning–Jibueogalanya(literally means yam made wealth) not only shows the bearer as a farmer, but also as one who has made wealth due to success as a great yam cultivator. Yam is also the king of crops in such parts of Igboland where people answer this name. There are also names like Ogbuji (great yam farmer), Omenka (creative worker like carver, weaver etc). There is also a name like Ogbuefi (Ogbueshu, Ogbuehi in other dialects). this name shows a prominent person who kills cows for ceremonies. Ogbuanya (Ogbuanyinya in some dialects) also shows a prominent person that kills horses for ceremonies. The name Ugwuanyi as explained by one interviewee figuratively means “our umbrella” and is usually a name given to a herbalist because of his achievements as a traditional healer.

The achievements illustrated by the above names would certainly have different values in the present-day society. Many such achievements could earn but praise-names in today’s society. This is how names have present and past significance.

3.5. Igbo Toponymic

A few areas in Igboland have surnames that refer to the places the bearers come from. In Opi in Nsukka Local Government area of Enugu State, the surname ‘Abonyi’, as explained by an informant shows that the bearer originated from a shrine by the Uhere river, which is a tributary of Abonyi river.

There are names like: Okwuaku (Aku affair), Nwakubuokwu (an Aku person is precious). Igboeli which means (May Igboland not be my doom), Nwosuigbo (an Igbo child of an outcaste); Okpalaononigbo(Okpala is one of ozo titles in Igboland and Okpalaononigbo is one who took the title residing in the land) , Ezeigbo means king or chief or leader of the Igbo . Imo is a river in Imo/Abia, and anybody bearing such a name already shows where he comes from. Idemili is a river in Anambra and the bearer shows where he comes from. Nwofia means a person born either on farmland or in the wilderness. All these names show the physical environment of the bearer’s origin.

3.6. Pseudo-Surnames

There are names we regard as pseudo-surnames because although they are not real names, they identify the bearers and their offspring. Some of these names are nick-names of different types while others are not.

In Nkpor in Idemili Local Government of Anambra State, somebody is known by the name, Nzowaonono (breaker of bottles). The bearer’s children are better identified as the children of

Nzowaonono. This name does not even tell a pleasant story about the bearer but has assumed the role of identification tag for the bearer and children, and only in a formal gathering like school does one learn the real surnames of many of these people who are often identified with pseudo-surnames. Another person was known as Anwulukwua (when smoke goes up). Until today, the children of the bearer and the family are referred to as the children and family of Anwulukwua. The story has it that the bearer of this name was an orphan. As a child, he would usually go to wherever he saw smoke in the hope of getting something to eat. Another pseudo-surname is “Aziebilugod” (younger generation does not act in fear of God). In other words, youths are erratic and do not place God before their actions. Again, the children of the bearer are referred to as the children of Aziebilugod. Many children in the towns of the above names grew up with the notion, that these names are real. In Ohafia, some nicknames are at times used as if they were surnames. Somebody whose name is Okoro is at times called Edu. Orji is at times called Okosisi (the tallest tree in our part of the world). Addressing somebody as Orji means the person has a large stature. Onugu is at times addressed as Ogbuebulu(someone who is rich in animal husbandry that he slaughters sheep for ceremonies). The different interviewees do not have an explanation for the above practice. But what is clear is that the names are interchangeable with what they seem to represent as in the name ‘Orji’. Orji is known in Igboland as the king of trees, thus, the name ‘Okosisi’ paints the picture of the bearer as somebody of substance. The other names may well represent the same type of picture as the name ‘Orji’.

4. Conclusion

The aim of this paper has been to find out the “when”, the “why”, and the “how” of Igbo surnames.

It has been suggested that the formal use of surnames started in Igboland with the coming of western education and the development of white-collar jobs during the colonial era. This was at the earliest part of the twentieth century.

On the reason for taking on family surnames, it was suggested that it started in order to reduce or possibly eliminate the confusion that existed among people answering similar personal names that were working or learning in the same institutions. This was the time when many people in different areas of Igboland answered market day derived names (Afa-chi or Aha-chi) as personal names. There exist only a limited number of these market day derived names.

In places where market day derived names like Okeke, Okafo, and others were commonly used, people later started finding suffixes and prefixes to such names to minimize or eliminate confusion among bearers of the same names. Others thought of other surnames or family names derived from personal names of parents and grandparents.

In summary, Igbo surnames show by their contents and contexts past and present values. They have also been identified in five different classes namely: patronymic, matronymic, occupational, toponymic and pseudonymic/nicknames.

References

- Ezude, Enuma Edwin(2000). *Igbo Names*. NP: Dorrance Pub. Co.
- Ibemesi, F.N.(1988) “Alias Okeome-Ochilozua. An Analysis of the concept of assumed Names in Igbo society”, *Africana Marburgensia*. Vol XXI,I Marburg.pp.18ff.
- Ladejobi-Ukwu, Dele Chinwe(2009). *The Standard e-Dictionary of Igbo Names A-Z*. <http://culture.chiamaka.com>
- Njoku, J.E.E.(1978). *A Dictionary of Igbo Names, Culture and proverbs*. Washington: NP.
- Okibedi, Agnes Ada-Nwaneri(2004). *Nigerian Igbo Names for homes and hospitals*. NP: Ark Publishers.
- Reaney, P.H. (1967). *The origin of English surnames*. London: NP. Levitt,John and Joan. *The spell of words*, London: NP.
- Ubahakwe, Ebo.(1981). *Igbo Names*, Ibadan: Daystar Press. Chuks-Orji, Ogbonna(1972). *Names from Africa*. Chicago: Johnson Publishing.
- Zahymaka(2006). *Igbo Names and their Meanings*
<http://www.nairaland.com>
<http://www.kwenu.com>
<http://umunumo.com>
<http://z11.invisionfree.com>
<http://ngmamas.com>
<http://www.onlinenigeria.com>

Onitsha Complex Names and their Meanings

Ogbolumelifeonwu: Melifeonwu is the son of Ogbolu. Melifeonwu means the bearer did nothing to deserve death (this is a name in the family which experiences frequent deaths). Ogbolu means let there be an end to deaths or calamities.

Egwaatumaduneme: Egwuatu is the son of Maduneme. Egwuatu means the bearer or the one giving the name is afraid of death or unknown. Maduneme points accusing finger at fellow mortals as cause of the ill-fortune of the person giving the name.

Omelonyekwenteruka: Kwenteruka is the son of Omelonye. Kwenteruka is a plea that God may allow the bearer to survive. This is another name given to people where there is a lot of infant mortalities. Omelonye is an interrogative name asking “who could bear the ill-fortune if it came to him” (again the name shows someone lamenting ill-fortune like deaths in the family).

Obiozoetukokwu: Etukokwu is the son of Obiozo. Etukokwu is a name calling on people not to consider every word or every unpleasant outcome in human relations for, otherwise people cannot live together. The name Obiozo shows that the bearer is from a prestigious family of ozo title.