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Patterns of Igbo Spousal Names

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Abstract

Spousal names are integral aspects of Igbo culture and society. Igbo spousal names usually describe the character or nature of the bearer and are closely linked to the person and the state of his/her marriage. This paper focuses on a critical examination of how Igbo spousal names reflect the social values in Igbo society and how they make statements about the bearer, the givers of such names, and their family situations. It examines the impacts of the names and how they could be employed as tools for sustaining marriage institution in Igbo society. The paper discusses the Igbo pattern of spousal naming, their social relevance, and implications in the society. It takes a critical look at contemporary spousal naming pattern in Igbo land and corroborates existing notions that names are not just labels but fundamentals in the reflection, revelation, signification and sustenance of certain social

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values among the Igbo people. The paper concludes by suggesting parameters that could be used in designating spousal names in Igbo society.

Keywords: spousal names; patterns; Igbo; social values; parameters.

1. Introduction

Naming is uniquely a human affair ferried through the medium of language. Spousal names are employed in similar fashion in the context of marriage in Igbo society. Names are words by which reality is known, expressed, and appreciated in every culture. They signal various forms of socio-cultural information and belief. The basic purpose of human naming is to provide a symbolic system of individual identification. These names could be personal, maiden, family or spousal names. Spousal names in Igbo society are as old as marriage tradition in the society. In the Hebraic tradition, the first attempt at spousal naming was recorded in the Bible when Adam said of Eve:

This is now the bone of my bones, and flesh of my flesh. She shall be called Woman, because she was taken out of Man. ... And Adam called his wife's name Eve; because she was the mother of all living.
(Gen. 2: 23 & Gen 3: 20 (King James Version))

One can infer from this excerpt that there are some conditions and requirements that engender spousal names. One of such conditions is the context of marriage. Others include inherent or unique qualities of the spouse, his or her achievements, and

physiognomies. All of these will be interrogated in this paper. In the case of Adam, cited above, he only called his wife Eve when it was obvious to him that she was the ‘mother of all living’. Since spousal names are born out of marital relationships, it is imperative at this juncture to give an overview of Igbo marriage system.

2. Igbo Concept of Marriage

As with many African societies, marriage in Igbo society is a highly revered institution. It is to be undertaken by a mature man and a woman, hence the saying that *Òbúghí ókū nwátà nà-àgbá àgàdàwèéná-ányá* ‘It [i.e. marriage] is not the type of fire with which a child warms himself/herself standing’. The implication of this proverb is that marriage is a very serious issue in Igbo society and as such should not be toyed with by anyone who is of marriageable age. Marriage in Igbo society is for mature adults, not children. The Igbo marriage institution confers on any married person some level of respect. No wonder an over-aged bachelor in Igbo society is seen as *àkàrógòrì/èfùréfù* ‘a worthless person’. The value of marriage could be deduced from the huge expenses it attracts in Igbo land. Igbo marriage goes with several ceremonies such as *íjū àsè* ‘the inquiry’, *íkūákán’úzò* ‘the knocking of the door’, *ímēégō nwáànyị* ‘paying the bride price’, and *ìgbā ñkwú nwáànyị* ‘the traditional marriage proper’. Marriage for the Igbo is not an individualistic thing; rather, it is a communal affair as its essence is for the existence and continuity of the race through procreation, which is acceptable only in the context of marriage. Children occupy a central point in Igbo marriage; therefore,

marriage is deemed an indispensable factor for the continuity of the family.

It could be argued that divorce rate in Igbo society is not as high as it is in some parts of the western world. This is attributable to the rigorous activities that go with marriage and the high level of material, social, and monetary premium placed on it in the Igbo society. However, a couple can decide to go their separate ways for some specific reasons, in which case it is still possible for the two to reunite after a while. This is not divorce in Igbo culture. It becomes divorce only after they must have undergone *íkww̄ngò*, which is the returning of the bride price paid on the woman back to her husband's family. From the foregoing, the seriousness of marriage in Igbo society is clear. Little wonder every Igbo family strives so much to preserve its marriage. One of the avenues through which marriage institution is preserved and sustained in Igbo land is the use of spousal names.

3. Concept of Names in Igbo Society

Igbo names are not just mere labels for identification. They are very deep expressions of aspirations, joys, fears, beliefs, occupations, attitudes, grievances, etc. The names are closely linked with various events in the life of the individual as well as those of the family and even the society as a whole. Igbo names personify the individual and they are of high cultural content. These days, however, it is very rampant to see bastardized versions of these names either through Anglicizing or abridging them. For instance, instead of *Chijioke* 'God is the owner of all gifts', one hears *Jioke*. Instead of *Ọnwúchèkwá* 'Death, hold on',

one gets to hear *Chekwas*, and instead of *Chimamanda* 'My God will never fail', one hears *Amanda*, and various forms of such other names. This distortion destroys the original semantic status of such names. According to Nwagbara (2009: 167),

Names are a valuable source of information. They can indicate gender, marital status, birthplace, nationality, ethnicity, religion, and position within a family or even within a society.

Nwagbara believes it is right to say that naming is as old as human race. It is as ancient as a people can recall, and as universal as any other endowment of nature, that humanity is able to enact being and engage the world through the act of naming. He is of the view that naming goes beyond the traditional ritual of conferring identity. He further postulates that beyond representation of nomenclatures and identity items; that names are also linguistic and communicative acts that express some functional, aesthetic and assertive meanings and attributes.

Nwagbara's assertion, buttresses the point that names, spousal names inclusive, are not just mere labels. These names are communicative acts making statements of sources of deep cultural significance, messages, landmarks or even sources of information relating to some important historical events in a family or the society in general. Names such as *Ónwúchèkwá* (Death, hold on) or *Ónwúbikò* (Death, please!) are invocation on the Supreme Being to ward off the ugly trend of death in a

family or society. Okafor *et al* (2005:25) captures the essence of Igbo names as follows:

The name an Igbo family gives to its child is considered a serious matter. A well thought out Igbo name can encapsulate the immediate or remote history, present circumstances, hopes and aspirations of the parents' extended family, clan and even of the Igbo nation itself. The name *Dikedinigbo*, for instance, celebrating the profoundest strength, valour and bravery of *Ndịigbo*.

Igbo names could be categorized as follows:

1. Personal Names (names given to children by their parents)
2. Family Names (owned by people of the same family or kindred)
3. Maiden Names (family name of a young lady before marriage)
4. Praise Names (Names given in praise of somebody)
5. Derogatory Names (Names given to scoff a deviant person in the society)
6. Female contextual marriage names (A family name or surname adopted by a person upon marriage)
7. Spousal Names/Pet Names (Names given by husband to their wives and vice versa)
8. Peer names (Names given to a woman married into a family by the 'Umuada', i.e. Daughters of a family.)

4. Igbo Spousal Names

The Igbo have a pattern of spousal names in which the husband and/or the wife bestows upon each other a special name. Most of the time, the names are exclusively to be used by both, but in some other cases, the names could be adopted and used by family members and the members of the society in general to address the individual to which it is given. The practice of wife-naming by the husband is more prevalent than husband-naming by the wife. This could be attributed to the fact that Igbo society is a patriarchal one where the men folk are in dominance of the society.

In Igbo society, like most other societies, spouses exchange names as a symbol of their endearment to each other and as tokens of their love for each other. In essence spousal names are exchanged as symbolic of endearment. Sometimes, a particular spousal name given by the spouse could be informed by some conspicuous natural endowment possessed by the wife or the husband, physical qualities, or attributes. Some of the names encapsulate aspirations and expectations of spouses from their husband or wife. They could also emanate in praise of some achievements or may be given with some expectations in mind. On the other hand, spousal names could be a social signification that engenders some positive attributes in the bearer. Igbo spousal names usually describe the characters or nature of their bearers and are closely linked to their persons.

These spousal names go a long way to aid the couples in maintaining good marital relationships and in the sustenance of the marriage. Spousal names could also be making some philosophical statements about the marriage and serve as a

means of impacting on the marriage. These names also serve as checks and balances on the couple because the Igbo believe that *onū ná-étū èkpèrìmààháná-èdúnyē yá óhī*, ‘one who praises a criminal urges him on’ and *ètòóonyē àkídì, ò gwòtá ózọ́* ‘when you praise a woman who prepares a local bean, she prepares more’. For instance, a woman that calls her husband *Dibueze* ‘a woman’s crown is the husband’ or *Dibumma* ‘husband is the source of beauty’ is probably making a statement that she perceives her husband as her king and her beauty respectively.

These Igbo proverbs buttress the fact that most of these spousal names are in appreciation of some good attributes possessed by their bearers and as a medium of encouraging them unto better behaviour. For instance, a woman whose husband calls *òmàsìrìm̀* ‘my pleasure/delight’ is a reference to the fact that her character is pleasing to her husband. This kind of name is motivational to ginger the bearer towards a better way of life. To the society, the name obviously tells other members of the society, that the marriage is a happy one, thus sending a signal to other couples whose union may be going through challenges to emulate the way of life of the referenced couple. This however is not to say that a couple without any spousal name is necessarily having marital challenge. Our intention in this work is to point out the fact that Igbo has a system of spousal name that should not be allowed to die out. This is because they are of great relevance to the sustenance of the Igbo marriage and Igbo society in general.

On the other hand, a husband whose wife calls *Íkēm̀* ‘my strength’ typifies the fact that the woman sees her husband as her succor, strength, and a kind of pillar against any external

threat. The man will strive to live up to the essence of the name. Other examples of Igbo spousal names include:

Òkpúéẖèdíyā	Husband's crown
Nwàányìmmā	Woman of beauty
Nwàányìómā	Virtuous woman
Déèdèdíṁ	My honoured husband
Ñnàmúkwú	My master
Òdàkùnàhúdíyā	One who leans on her husband's body
Òmàsìrìṁ	My delight
Òméṁnóbì	My heart's desire
Ényìdíyā	Her husband's friend
Àkùdíyā	Her husband's wealth
Àhúdíyā	Her husband's body
Dìbùndò	A husband is a shelter
Ùgòdíyā/Ùgòdíṭùbèlù	Her husband's eagle (honour) / Honour bestowed on the wife by her husband.
Ùgègbèdíyā	Husband's mirror (a reflection of her husband)
Dimààlú	Husband's excellency in marriage
Ùgòbèdíyā	The eagle in her husband's place (An honour in her husband's home)
Ójìùgò	Eagle's kola (The prestigious one)
Ògbónàńchà	Sponge and soap
Òyìrìdíyā	Her husband's resemblance
Óbìṁ	My heart
Ñkèṁ	Mine (my own)

Díbū̀ògò	A woman's gracefulness is accessible through her husband.
Díbū̀ugwù	A woman's prestige lies in having a husband.
Nwókḗomā	Handsome man
Òsòdíemé	One who assists her husband (A co-philanthropist with her husband)
Nwókḗjìjèjēmbà	A worthy man
Àchàràùgònwáànyị̀	The eagle of the forestland among other women (The distinguished one among other women)
Ímā́díyā	Her husband's beauty
Òbútḕàkùbédíyā	A woman who attracts wealth to her husband's home
Òdózī̀àkù	Wealth conserver
Èbù̀bèrín	My glory
Èchètáámúrī̀ā	The pleasant one
Ìtò̀m	My joy

The spousal names in Igbo society could be given based on some parameters that I will proffer here.

- i. The person's physique/physical endowment
- ii. The person's character
- iii. The person's achievements/accomplishments
- iv. The level of cordiality existing between the couple
- v. Social expectations
- vi. Name of any of their children, especially the first son or daughter

In some cases, the spouses may not actually ascribe any special name of endearment to each other. Instead, they may address each other using the name of their first son or daughter such as Nna, Adaobi, Nne Adaobi (for couples whose first child is named Adaobi) or Nna Emeka and Nne Emeka (for couple that have Emeka as their first child). The pattern of spousal naming could be seen in the names Okonkwo calls his two wives in *Things Fall Apart*. Okonkwo's first wife is called *NneNwoye* 'Nwoye's mother'; the second wife called Ekwefi is sometimes referred to as *NneObiageli* 'Obiageli's mother'; while the third wife is *Ojiugo* 'the eagle's kolanut' which implies that she is the prestigious one/woman, probably in praise of her beauty.

The spousal names, no matter what engenders them, whether they are born out of endearment, the person's attribute or the ones originating by virtue of their child's name, are sometimes taken over in usage by members of the society. But there are some of the names that are exclusively shared between the couple themselves. Such names as *Obim* 'my heart', *Nkem* 'my own / mine', *Nnamukwu* 'my Lord', and *Omasiri* 'my delight' can only be used by couples.

5. Contemporary Igbo Spousal Names

As a result of contact with the western civilisation, and in a seeming move to become more western than the westerners, there has been a decrease in the level of patronage of Igbo spousal names. Most couples, especially the literate or elitist ones, feel that the indigenous Igbo spousal names are old-fashioned. These groups of couples, instead of using names such as *Mmadiya* 'her husband's beauty', *Ahudiya* 'her husband's

body', *Nnamukwu* 'my Lord', prefer to give and bear such names as my Queen, Princess, Babe, Daddy, Mummy, Honey, Sweetie, Angel, Sugar, Sunshine, my Star, Soul Mate, and so on.

These contemporary spousal names, as good as they may be, do not have any cultural reflection of Igbo values. Such names do not in any way portray the Igbo philosophy and culture. Neither do they reflect the Igbo marriage system and socio-cultural life. Instead, they invariably act as agents of extinguishing the Igbo language and culture.

6. Conclusion

Igbo spousal names are not just mere tags that could be discarded at will. They are part of Igbo cultural heritage and means of upholding and sustaining the Igbo cultures and traditions. Our submission in this paper, therefore, is that the tradition of Igbo spousal names should be upheld instead of allowing it to slide into extinction more so since the Igbo believe that *Ìhē ónyē kpòrò ñkítā yā kà ógà-àzá* 'whatever name one gives to the dog is the name it will answer'. This implies that Igbo natives should make conscious effort to protect their culture and cultural heritage since no other people will do it for them. In this age, the crave to be identified with everything western, whether detrimental or not, is on the increase. It will be a welcome development if Igbo couples could revert to the old fashion of spousal-naming which has a lot of cultural values and positive implications. This we hope will aid a positive cultural activism, sustenance, and perpetuity of the marriage system in Igbo society, and in turn act as a medium of cultural expression.

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