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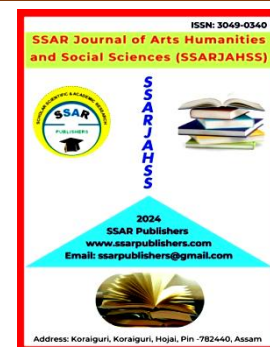
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REVISITING THE IMPORTANCE OF TRADITIONAL NAMING CEREMONIES IN IGBOLAND

By

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Abstract: This study, Revisiting the Importance of Traditional Naming Ceremonies in Igboland explores an essential aspect of Igbo cultural heritage traditional naming ceremonies. The practice of naming a child in Igbo society is not only a cultural rite but also a deeply spiritual and communal affair that embodies the values, history, and identity of the people. While modernization and external influences such as Christianity and urbanization have increasingly altered the landscape of cultural practices in Igboland, this research seeks to bring to light the enduring significance of these traditions in Igbo land. The motivation behind this work stems from a desire to preserve and revitalize these traditional practices, which are at risk of being forgotten or marginalized. By examining the process, rituals, and cultural values associated with naming ceremonies, the study aims to emphasize the importance of maintaining such traditions in the face of socio-economic and generational changes. Through this research, we hope to contribute to the ongoing dialogue on cultural preservation in Igboland, offering recommendations for integrating modern values with age-old traditions. This work would not have been possible without the guidance of scholars, cultural custodians, and the Igbo people, whose knowledge and insights have been invaluable. This work explored primary and secondary methods of data collection.

Keywords: Revisiting, Naming, Naming Ceremonies, Culture, Tradition, Igboland

INTRODUCTION

Naming ceremonies among the Igbo have been a longstanding tradition, deeply rooted in the people's history and spirituality. Historically, the Igbo naming ceremony, known as "*IguAfa*" or "*AfaUkwu*," is an event where a newborn is formally introduced to the community and given a name that reflects the family's aspirations, circumstances surrounding the birth, or attributes desired for the child. This practice is intertwined

with the Igbo worldview, which sees names as powerful symbols that can influence a person's destiny. Man is a religious being and whatever he does revolves around his religious belief. This is because human belief is what controls the physical and the supernatural controls the natural. All over the world, name has been an important aspect of human life. Some people of the world give their

children names without considering the implications of those names on their children.

Child naming is a form of tradition contracted under native law customs which is viewed from the traditional perspective, child naming is more of a social and religious affair than a personal affair involving several parties. Grice (1989) posits that child naming in Igbo land is an age long affair that is as old as the existence of the Igbo tribe. Igbo people hold this custom in high esteem as the practice serves as a great identity. Once a child is born, the child is entitled to a name with which to identify the child. The procedure of naming a child in Igbo land, however, varies from community to community depending on the aspect of that cultural practice they hold in high esteem.

In Igboland, when a child is born, it is joyfully announced in the kindred. The married women immediately go to the house of the couple to chant some interesting songs.

However, the high esteem that Igbo names command are deteriorating rather they are no longer proud to answer Igbo names; rather, they prefer foreign names and borrowed method of naming ceremony. In the past, naming ceremonies and names in Igbo land have been a matter taken very serious because a name given to a child in most cases affects the future of that child positively or negatively and the act of giving the name solidifies the name given and makes the name acceptable by both the living and the dead. In this present dispensation, the vision parents had in the past in giving their children names have been lost because of modernization and civilization. These days, most people prefer European names to Igbo names even when they do not know the meaning of these names. A good example is such name like Lynda which means serpent. Nowadays, mostly in Igboland for example no longer considers the importance of naming ceremony to both the community and the child and also the names they give their children, their meanings and their implications. Some people go as far as baptizing their child and given him/her only foreign names and those that changes their Igbo names to European names saying that their names are heathen, fetish and devilish. The change of names by many Igbo people has made them to lose their identity and

thus, can no longer be recognized by their people or ancestors, and this has negatively affected them both religiously and socially.

This study will significantly shed new light on the cultural beliefs and practices of the Igbo people, which have not been thoroughly explored. This research work will have positive implications for other groups with similar cultural beliefs and practices. This study will provide valuable insights for those working in the fields of sociology and cultural studies. This research makes use of qualitative research which incorporates both analytical and historical method. This research made efforts in gathering information about the Igbo naming ceremonies. This research adopts both primary and secondary sources of data collection.

History behind Naming and Naming Ceremonies

In Igbo culture, names, naming ceremonies are deeply rooted in the community's cosmology, spiritual beliefs, and social structures. Naming is more than a simple label; it signifies the identity, destiny, and character of an individual. The Igbo believe that a person's name can influence their life and future, reflecting the circumstances surrounding their birth, the aspirations of the parents, or the community's expectations (Ekwunife, 1990). Naming ceremonies, known as IguAfa, have a rich history that reflects the interconnectedness of individuals with their ancestors, society, and the divine. In traditional Igbo society, names are carefully chosen and often bear profound spiritual and philosophical meanings. According to Onwuejeogwu (1993), Igbo names are typically theophoric, invoking the presence of a deity, reflecting the people's strong religious inclination. For example, names like Chinonso (God is near) and Chukwuma (God knows) underscore the Igbo belief in a supreme deity who plays a central role in human affairs. Additionally, names can be tied to personal or communal experiences. A child born after a prolonged period of barrenness may be given a name like Obinna (Father's heart) to reflect the joy and relief brought to the family.

The history of Igbo naming ceremonies is intertwined with ancestral reverence. The Igbo people believe in the concept of reincarnation, known as Ogbanje or IloUwa, where it is thought

that ancestors return to the family through the birth of children (Uchendu, 1965). As such, names often reflect this belief, with children being named after deceased family members as a form of honoring the ancestors. This practice ties the individual to their lineage and ensures that the ancestor's legacy is continued.

The timing of the naming ceremony is significant. Traditionally, it takes place seven days after the birth for a boy and eight days for a girl. These numbers hold symbolic meanings, with seven often representing completion or wholeness in Igbo spirituality (Okeke, 2012). During the ceremony, the elders and community gather to bless the child and invoke ancestral and spiritual protection. Sacred rituals, including the breaking of kola nuts and libations, are performed to ensure the child's good fortune and connection with the ancestors (Madu, 2004). The community plays a central role, symbolizing the collective nature of Igbo society, where the upbringing of a child is a communal responsibility.

The naming ceremony serves as a formal introduction of the child to the community. The child's name is declared in the presence of family and elders, signifying their entry into the social and spiritual fabric of the Igbo world (Oguejiofor, 1996). The ceremony also includes prayers and blessings, which are believed to guide the child throughout their life, ensuring prosperity, health, and protection from evil forces. Despite the influence of modernity and Christianity, which have altered some aspects of the traditional naming ceremonies, the core principles remain intact. Many Igbo families today combine traditional rituals with Christian practices, such as baptism, to maintain a connection to their cultural heritage while embracing new religious identities (Ezenweke, 2016). The history behind Igbo naming and naming ceremonies reflects the deep cultural and spiritual significance attached to names in Igbo society. Names are not just identifiers but carriers of history, destiny, and ancestral connection. The ceremonies underscore the importance of community, spirituality, and the continuation of tradition in shaping individual identity.

Traditional Naming Ceremonies in Igbo Land

The naming ceremony is a deeply traditional and symbolic event. It represents a

blend of religious, cultural, and social values that form the foundation of the Igbo worldview. The ceremony, which usually takes place on the eighth day after a child's birth, is seen as more than just the act of naming; it serves as the formal introduction of the child to the family, the ancestors, and the community. This event reflects the collective identity and spiritual connection of the community (Nwosu, 2017). In many cases, names reflect the circumstances surrounding the child's birth, such as names that mean "gift" or "blessing" if the birth was seen as an answer to prayers (Eze, 2008). Additionally, names often carry ancestral connections, ensuring continuity between the living and the departed. For instance, a child might be named after an ancestor as a way of maintaining a strong link to the past. This reflects the Igbo belief in reincarnation and ancestral presence in the lives of the living. Through names, the family honors its lineage while instilling a sense of identity and belonging in the child (Onwuejeogwu, 1981).

The traditional Igbo naming ceremony involves several rites and rituals that are designed to protect the child and bestow blessings. One of the most important rites is the pouring of libations, which involves offering palm wine or water to the ancestors. This act is accompanied by prayers for the child's health, long life, and prosperity. The belief is that by invoking the ancestors, the family ensures that the child will be under their spiritual protection (Onwuejeogwu, 1981). Another key ritual is the breaking of kola nuts. This sacred activity signifies peace, unity, and welcome. The kola nut is shared among the gathered elders and guests, symbolizing the community's collective hopes for the child. The white chalk (nzu) used to mark the child's body represents purity, while a protective thread (ogwu) may be tied around the child's wrist or waist to guard against evil spirits (Nwosu, 2017). Traditional naming ceremonies in Igbo land are deeply rooted in the Igbo cultural and spiritual framework. They serve as a critical rite of passage, ensuring that the child is welcomed into the world with blessings and a strong connection to their ancestors and community. The roles of elders, the symbolism of names, and the various rites involved highlight the importance placed on names as carriers of identity, destiny, and continuity (Nwosu, 2017).

A child can be given names by different people in the community not only the parents. During this process, many persons that wishes to name a child brings a present; money, foodstuffs, jewelries, clothing etc. they would give them to the parents for the child, he will then be allowed to carry the child up facing him/her towards the direction of the sun and gives the child a name he want and he reserves the right to call the child by that name. Thus, the reason why an Igbo child can have up to five or more names.

Importance of Naming and Naming Ceremonies

Naming and naming ceremonies hold significant cultural and spiritual importance. The act of naming goes beyond the mere identification of an individual; it is deeply intertwined with the beliefs, values, and identity of the people. In traditional Igbo society, the name given to a child is believed to carry profound meaning, often reflecting the circumstances surrounding the child's birth, the family's aspirations for the child, or the family's connection to their ancestors and deities. Naming ceremonies, known as Ibaafa, are celebrated with much festivity and are considered a rite of passage for the newborn. This event is often attended by family members, friends, and the larger community. During the ceremony, elders and family heads play a vital role in the name-giving process, invoking blessings and guidance from the ancestors and deities. The involvement of the community underscores the collective responsibility towards the upbringing of the child, which is a fundamental aspect of Igbo culture (Obioha, 2002). From a religious perspective, names are believed to have a spiritual connotation. A name is not just a label but a medium through which the individual's destiny can be shaped or influenced. This belief aligns with the Igbo philosophy of Chi, which posits that every individual has a personal deity guiding their fate (Uchendu, 1965). A name, therefore, can symbolize the individual's connection to their Chi and the divine path they are expected to follow.

Furthermore, the spiritual significance of naming in Igbo land cannot be overstated. The Igbo belief system, as noted by Uchendu (1965), posits that every individual has a Chi, a personal deity or spiritual guide that influences their life journey. Names are often chosen to reflect the

individual's relationship with their Chi or to invoke spiritual blessings. For instance, names like Ifechukwu (The light of God) or Chibuike (God is strength) not only signify the parents' reverence for the divine but also serve as a reminder of the individual's connection to their spiritual essence. This belief that names carry spiritual weight further emphasizes the need for a carefully thought-out naming process, as the name is seen to influence the child's character, destiny, and success in life. Naming ceremonies also play an essential role in reinforcing social cohesion. These events provide an opportunity for community members to come together and celebrate, fostering a sense of unity and solidarity. During the ceremony, younger members of the family are introduced to traditional customs and values, as elders pass on their wisdom and guidance to the next generation. This intergenerational transfer of knowledge is crucial for maintaining the cultural integrity of the people. Okeke (2000) explains that these ceremonies serve as platforms where important life lessons about respect, responsibility, and communal living are imparted to the younger generation. The event thus becomes a crucial moment in the cultural education of the child, embedding them into the fabric of the community from a very young age.

Moreover, the importance of naming ceremonies extends to their role in social hierarchy and identity within the Ajali community. The name given to a child can reflect their place within the family lineage, their societal role, or even their future aspirations. It is not uncommon for a name to be linked to the family's standing within the community or to honor a respected ancestor. This ensures that the child is immediately recognized as part of a particular lineage, with certain expectations and responsibilities tied to that lineage.

Many names reflect the circumstances surrounding the child's birth, family aspirations, or are symbolic of the family's connection to their ancestors. For instance, names like Chukwudi (God exists) or Ifunanya (Love) are common, embodying deep philosophical meanings rooted in both tradition and faith. For parents, naming their child formalizes their roles as custodians of the family's values and culture. The ceremony provides a moment of bonding and affirms their

responsibility to raise the child within the moral and cultural framework of the Igbo community. The ceremony presents an opportunity for families to receive gifts and financial support from the community, which can alleviate the costs associated with raising a child. Naming ceremonies serve multiple purposes: cultural, religious, social, and economic. They are pivotal in celebrating new life, strengthening social ties, passing on cultural values, and securing spiritual and material blessings for the child, making them a deeply significant aspect of the community's traditions.

Symbolisms and Values of Names and Naming Ceremonies

a. Naming Expresses Authority: The naming of a child is a mark or expression of authority over the child by the parents and the community into which the child is born. Since the father is the head of the family, it is the father that gives the child a name. According to Kanu (2019), this explains why during the naming ceremony, it is not the mother that pronounces the name of the child but the father. Even if in private, the mother suggested the name that the child would be called, it is the responsibility of the father to pronounce the name at the naming ceremony. Once the child is given a name, the child comes under the authority of the father, mother, family and community.

b. Naming Symbolizes Incorporation: The naming of a child is also symbolic of the incorporation of the child into the family or community. This is even more obvious in circumstances when the child is given the name of an ancestor of the community or family. In traditional African societies Kanu (2019), when a child is born, diviners are consulted to know the ancestor who has returned, and the name the child would be given would be determined by the name or personality of the ancestor who has returned.

c. Naming is Monumental: A name is said to be monumental when it speaks of an event that has happened in a community. In this case, the name is used as a monument to recall that event. According to Kanu (2019) the name is not just a name or an identification tag, the name becomes a historical text. Such names could be given at the birth of a child in whom an ancestor has reincarnated. The child, therefore, reminds the

community of the blessing of the ancestor. Such names include:

Nnanna: Father's Father

Nnennia: Father's Mother

Nnamdi: Father lives

Nnenne: Mother's mother

EnyiNnaya: His father's friend

Nnamele: Father's gift

Babatunde: Father has returned

Yetunde: Mother has returned

Yabode: Mother has returned

ii. If a child is born at a time when the family is going through pain as a result of death, the child may be named:

Onwudinjo: Death is bad

Onwuemerie: Death has conquered

Onwubiko: Death please

iii. If a child is born at a time when something good has happened to the family, the child might be named:

Chiamaka: God is good

Chijindu: God holds life

Chidiogo: God is generous

Chiemerie: God has conquered

Chiemeka: God has done great

d. Naming is Prophetic: The name given to an African child by the community can also be prophetic. A father could name a child as a prayer to bless the future of the child. Also, if after visiting a diviner and a bad omen is foreseen, a father can use a name to counter the bad omen. According to Kanu (2019) such names include:

Chimamanda: My God won't fail me

Chidindu: God lives

Chinazo: God saves

Ikechukwu: The power of God

Chinedu: God leads

Challenges of Naming Ceremonies in Igbo Land

Naming ceremonies in Igboland, have long been cherished as vital cultural and religious traditions. However, with modernization, socio-political changes, and evolving family structures, these ceremonies face significant challenges. These challenges impact not only the process and rituals but also the deeper cultural significance of naming in contemporary Igbo society.

Influence of Christianity and Westernization:

One of the most significant challenges facing traditional naming ceremonies in Igboland, is the influence of Christianity and Western culture. Many families now blend Christian practices with traditional Igbo customs, often leading to a dilution or modification of the traditional rites. Uchechukwu (2019) states that in some cases, families forgo traditional elements like the breaking of kola nuts, pouring of libations, or invocation of ancestors, replacing them with Christian prayers and blessings. This shift reflects a broader change in cultural identity where younger generations often prioritize religious beliefs over ancestral customs. Westernization has also influenced the type of names chosen during these ceremonies. Names with biblical or English origins are increasingly common, which sometimes leads to the abandonment of traditional Igbo names that hold cultural significance. Nnadi (2021) remarks that while biblical names reflect the family's faith, they often lack the ancestral and historical meanings traditionally conveyed through Igbo names. This shift affects the cultural continuity that Igbo naming ceremonies traditionally sought to preserve.

Socio-economic Challenges: Economic factors also present a significant obstacle to the continuation of traditional naming ceremonies. As in many other parts of Igboland, these ceremonies are often large, community-wide events that require substantial financial resources. Families are expected to provide food, drinks, and entertainment for the community, which can include large quantities of kola nuts, palm wine, yams, and occasionally livestock. For many families, the financial burden of hosting a traditional naming ceremony is overwhelming, especially in today's economic climate where poverty and unemployment rates are high. As a result, some families either opt for simpler, less elaborate ceremonies delay or not carried out the ceremony at all. In some cases, modern naming ceremonies are held privately or limited to a small circle of family members to reduce costs, leading to a decline in the communal aspect that was traditionally central to these events.

Urbanization and Migration: Urbanization and migration have also posed challenges to the continuation of traditional naming ceremonies. Many Igbo people now live in urban centers, far from their ancestral villages, due to economic or educational opportunities. This distance makes it difficult to gather the necessary community members, elders, and extended family for traditional rites, which are typically conducted in the family's home compound or village (Nnadi, 2021). Furthermore, the migration of family members abroad or to distant cities has created a disconnection between younger generations and their cultural roots. Many urban Igbo families may not have the elders or spiritual leaders available to lead traditional rituals, and they may not feel compelled to adhere to all the customs if they live outside of their cultural setting. As a result, many traditional practices, including naming ceremonies, are being lost or adapted to fit urban lifestyles.

Generational Disconnect and Loss of Cultural Knowledge:

Another major challenge is the generational disconnect between older and younger Igbo people. Many younger Igbo, especially those who have grown up in urban areas or have been influenced by Western culture, do not fully understand or appreciate the cultural significance of traditional naming ceremonies (Uchechukwu, 2019). This disconnect leads to an erosion of traditional knowledge, as the customs and rituals are not passed down effectively from elders to younger generations. In many cases, younger parents may not consult with elders on the naming process or the significance of names, choosing instead to rely on more modern or religious influences. Without the active transmission of these traditions, younger generations may lose touch with their cultural heritage, leading to a decline in the practice of traditional naming ceremonies.

Conflict between Traditional Beliefs and Modern Values: There is also a growing tension between traditional beliefs surrounding naming ceremonies and modern values. In traditional Igbo culture, names are often chosen with a deep connection to the ancestors, spirituality, and the events surrounding the child's birth. However, in modern Igbo society, many parents prioritize names that reflect their aspirations for their children in a globalized world, such as names associated with success, power, or Western influence (Nnadi, 2021). This shift can lead to a conflict of values between the older generation, who seek to preserve cultural traditions, and the younger generation, who are more concerned with aligning their identity with modern aspirations. This tension reflects broader changes in Igbo society, where the pressures of modernization and globalization are at odds with the preservation of cultural heritage.

Ways of Preserving Traditional Naming Ceremonies

The preservation of traditional naming ceremonies is essential for maintaining cultural heritage and identity. With the impact of modernization, Christianity, and urbanization, it is critical to find ways to keep these ceremonies alive while adapting them to contemporary society. The following are various strategies that can help ensure the continuation of this important cultural practice.

Cultural Education and Awareness: One of the most effective ways to preserve traditional naming ceremonies in Ajali is through cultural education. Teaching younger generations about the significance and rituals of traditional Igbo naming ceremonies can help bridge the generational disconnect and ensure that the customs are passed down. Schools, community centers, and families should take an active role in incorporating lessons on cultural heritage, particularly the meanings behind traditional Igbo names, their spiritual importance, and the role of ancestors in these ceremonies (Nwosu, 2021). **Integration of Modern and Traditional Practices:** To preserve traditional naming ceremonies, it is important to find a balance between modern influences and traditional customs. By adapting the ceremonies to include both spiritual and religious elements, families can ensure that the traditional aspects are

retained while meeting the expectations of modern society (Eze, 2019). Families can continue to use traditional Igbo names alongside Christian or modern names.

Documentation and Archiving of Cultural Practices: Another key strategy for preserving naming ceremonies is to document and archive the rituals and processes involved in these events. Through written records, videos, photographs, and oral history projects, the community can create a repository of knowledge about traditional naming ceremonies. Such documentation ensures that even as the older generation passes on, the knowledge and practices associated with these ceremonies are preserved for future generations (Nwosu, 2021).

Encouraging Community Participation: Community involvement is a key element of traditional Igbo naming ceremonies. Reviving communal participation in these events can help strengthen the bond between individuals and their cultural identity. In Ajali, the community should be encouraged to actively participate in naming ceremonies, regardless of economic or religious backgrounds. This could involve simplifying ceremonies to make them more accessible or rotating responsibilities so that community members share the cost and organization of the event (Umeh, 2020). Community elders, as the custodians of tradition, should take the lead in ensuring that the traditional elements of the ceremonies are maintained.

Revitalizing Traditional Festivals: Another way to preserve naming ceremonies is by incorporating them into broader community festivals and cultural events. In Ajali, traditional festivals can provide an opportunity for families to perform naming ceremonies as part of a larger cultural celebration. Such events not only draw attention to the significance of the ceremonies but also foster a sense of pride and identity within the community (Ezeokeke, 2018).

Conclusion

The traditional naming ceremony, known as "IguAfa," is a symbolic ritual that goes beyond the act of naming. It is a celebration of life, continuity, and community. The name given to a child often reflects the circumstances of birth, the family's aspirations, and ancestral lineage, embedding a sense of identity and belonging from

the onset. In Igbo culture, names are not arbitrary but are carefully chosen to convey significant meanings and expectations. They often encompass elements of spirituality, and familial honour, thus ensuring that each name carries a story, a prayer, and a blessing.

This research portrays traditional naming ceremonies, as vital aspect of Igbo cultural heritage. They serve as a medium for preserving and transmitting cultural values, fostering community bonds, and ensuring the continuity of identity through generations. As such, revisiting and revitalizing these ceremonies is essential in maintaining the rich cultural legacy of the Igbo people.

This research further reveals that names can affect people's lives negatively or positively. In this light, parents or other qualified people should be careful not to give wrong names to their children without considering the implications of such act simply because they want to be connected among the modernized or polished people in the community. It is a reality that there are some powers linked to the names when these names are given or received, especially in Africa, although some people still ignore it and decide not to take this reality into consideration. This research shows that a person's names are of a concern for the community and the society as a whole because an individual does not belong to their family alone but mainly to the whole community on the one hand and because of their natural and necessary involvement in the life of the society they belong to on the other.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations were made:

- i. There should be educational initiatives in schools and communities in order to teach the significance and rituals of traditional naming ceremonies by ensuring that, the younger generation understands and values this cultural practice.
- ii. There should be a documentation of traditional naming ceremonies through written records, audiovisual materials, and digital archives in order to preserve and share the knowledge with future generations.
- iii. Schools should organize annual cultural festivals that highlight traditional naming

ceremonies along with other Igbo customs thereby providing a platform for celebration and education.

iv. The media should facilitate programs where elders can share their knowledge and experiences related to traditional naming ceremonies, emphasizing their role as custodians of culture.

v. There is a need to enforce the use of traditional names for baptism: for the Ajali people and even Igbo people who prefer Christian way of naming their children.

vi. The media should use all media platforms including radio, television, and social media platforms to raise awareness and educate the public about the importance of traditional naming ceremonies and the need to lean towards ones culture and tradition.

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