

The Socio-Onomastics of “Okpongo” in Ibibio Land

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Abstract

This ethnographic research undertakes an anthropological examination of socio-onomastics of Okpongo as a naming system among the Ibibio people of Akwa Ibom State, Nigeria. The study was conducted within selected Ibibio local government areas of Akwa Ibom State. Two objectives were adopted to guide the study and the descriptivist theory of names was adopted as used as a theoretical framework for the study. A simple random sampling method was used to select at least 24 study participants from each of the clans. Study participants were purposively selected to be 21 years of age and above so that they may have better understanding of the norms, values and taboos of their culture. The interview guide was used for data collection. Collected data were analysed thematically with excerpts. Findings show that the socio-onomastic of Okpongo as a naming system among the Ibibio people of Akwa Ibom State is an ancient naming practice of name transfer from the elderly of late person to an infant or new-born. Finding also show that another socio-onomastic of Okpongo among the Ibibio people of Akwa Ibom State is the attainment of social mobility. Through Okpongo naming system, a poor child can attain a rich status, and a poor child can share in a rich man's inheritance as his Okpongo. Among others, it was recommended that the naming practice of Okpongo as a levelling mechanism should be projected to reduce selfishness that leads to corruption.

Key Words: Socio-onomastics, Okpongo, Ibibio, Naming system, Social mobility, Preservation and Names

Introduction

Ainiala and Östman (2023) in their work *"Socio-Onomastics and Pragmatics"* posit that socio-onomastics is a research discipline that began as a sub-discipline of onomastics, the study of names. It was developed as a systematic perspective for the dynamic analysis of names and designations. While onomastics has traditionally focused primarily on the etymology and typology of names, socio-onomastics deals with how names are used. Although socio-onomastics recognizes the historical dimension of names and names, the role of names in the construction of (social) identities is at the centre of recent developments in this field. Socio-onomastic emphasizes the importance of examining the use of names in everyday interaction: the variation in the use of names, why some names are avoided, why some names are associated with particular derogatory attitudes, and how name users themselves perceive the names they use. Socio-onomastics takes into account the social, cultural and situational domains in which names are used and this applies to all types of names, place names, personal names, business names, ship names, pet names, etc. Socio-onomastics is the study of names through a sociolinguistic perspective and is part of the broader topic of onomastics. Socio-onomastic "examines the use and variety of names through methods that demonstrate the social, cultural conditions, and the situation of the use of the name.

Indigenous African personal names are linguistic practices and means of interaction that have implicit meanings beyond what they communicate in practical situations. Names and naming practices are thus embedded in large cultural scripts that allow cultural insiders to understand and interpret cultural experiences. There are different layers of meaning embodied in personal names based on the values, norms and cultural semantics of the people involved. The use of personal names in various cultures has been recognised as a means of communication and speech, according to both past and present perspectives (Mensah and Iloh, 2021; Mandende *et al.* 2019; Ansu-Kyeremeh 2000). Mensah *et al.*, (2020) posit that personal names are symbolic resources that can reflect the ideological and social systems of some societies.

According to Mensah and Iloh (2021), the individual names of the Igbo of South-Eastern Nigeria can also be understood and contextualised within the limits of their cultural values, worldviews, emotions and economic resources. Personal naming practices are a significant aspect of different cultures around the world, and naming practices, traditions and patterns vary across cultures. Names are symbolic resources that provide a lens for accessing a people's view of life, the world and humanity, and are sources of ethnic, religious and linguistic identities. Personal names may also provide a subtle reference to a people's history and traditions (Mensah, 2021).

Mensah (2015) in his work presented a brief ethnography of the Ibibio by reporting that the Ibibio people are found in the mainland part of the Cross-River Basin in south-eastern Nigeria. They are the dominant ethnic nationality in present-day Akwa Ibom State. They inhabit 18 out of the state's 31 Local Government Areas. The population of Ibibio is 3.76 million (based on 2006 census demographic data). They have the Annang and Oro people as their closest neighbours within the state. They share their north-west boundaries with the clusters of the Igbo nation. They are bounded in the south-south hinterland by the Efik. They also share a coastal boundary in the south-west with the Okpobo/Ijaw in Rivers State and are bounded north-east by the

Ejagham-speaking people up to southern Cameroon. The Bight of Bonny washes its southern borders into the Atlantic Ocean. The Ibibio language belongs to the Niger-Congo family of the Delta-Cross subfamily, which constitutes the Lower-Cross family within the enlarged Cross-River group of languages. Ibibio, together with Efik, Annang, Oro, Ekid, Usakedet, etc. belong to this Lower-Cross family. The languages are mutually intelligible with Ibibio but the degree is unidirectional in some cases.

According to Mensah *et al.*, (2021), in certain societies including the Ibibio of Akwa Ibom State, South-Eastern Nigeria, naming is a distinctive system of communicative practice which is used to express emotion and construct the personhood and identity of the name-bearer. Among the Ibibio, just as in most African societies, personal names provide information about their bearers' future expectations and givers' past experiences. They reflect social networks, socio-cultural values, traditional beliefs and worldviews, in addition to emotions. According to Mensah, Rowan and Ekpe (2004), among the Ibibio people, personal names serve as symbolic linguistic resources and provide insight into the Ibibio universe of meaning, where individuals are at the core of all social connections.

Among the Ibibio of Akwa Ibom State, "Okpongo" is a naming system whereby a set of parents for a diversity of reasons decide to name their child or children after a person living or dead. In the Okpongonaming epistemology, the name of a man or woman, living or dead is given to a new-born child who is expected to bear the name beyond the initial bearer of the name. In Okpongopractice among the Ibibio people, the name of one person is transferred to another particularly, the name is transferred from an older person to an infant during the naming ceremony by the parent of the child. Okpongonaming practice plays many roles in the social and cultural settings of the Ibibio people and the Ibibio society. Apart from continuity which plays a key role in Okpongonaming practice, there are other key roles performed by this practice. This anthropological investigation was set to examine the roles of Okpongoin the socio-cultural setting of the Ibibio people.

Objectives of the Study

The main objective of this study is to examine the socio-onomastic of Okpongoas a cultural practice of naming patterns among the Ibibio people of Akwa Ibom State, Nigeria. The specific objectives were to:

1. examine the role of Okpongo in name preservation among the Ibibio people of Akwa Ibom State, Nigeria.
2. Investigate the role of Okpongoin attaining social mobility among the Ibibio people of Akwa Ibom State, Nigeria.

Theoretical Framework

Descriptivist Theory of Names

The **descriptivist theory of proper names** (also the **descriptivist theory of reference**) is the view that the meaning or semantic content of a proper name is identical to the descriptions associated with it by speakers, while their referents are determined to be the objects that satisfy these descriptions. Bertrand Russell and Gottlob Frege have both been associated with the descriptivist theory, which has been called the *mediated reference theory* or *Frege–Russell view*. In

the 1970s, this theory came under attack from causal theorists such as Saul Kripke, Hilary Putnam and others. However, it has seen something of a revival in recent years, especially under the form of what are called two-dimensional semantic theories. This latter trend is exemplified by the theories of David Chalmers, among others.

The Descriptive Theory and its Merits

A simple descriptivist theory of names can be thought of as follows: for every proper name p , there is some collection of descriptions D associated with p that constitute the meaning of p . For example, the descriptivist may hold that the proper name *Saul Kripke* is synonymous with the collection of descriptions such as

1. the man who wrote *Naming and Necessity*
2. a person who was born on November 13, 1940, in Bay Shore, New York
3. the son of a leader of Beth El Synagogue in Omaha, Nebraska etc.

The descriptivist takes the meaning of the name *Saul Kripke* to be that collection of descriptions and takes the referent of the name to be the thing that satisfies all or most of those descriptions.

A simple descriptivist theory may further hold that the meaning of a sentence S that contains p is given by the collection of sentences produced by replacing each instance of p in S with one of the descriptions in D . So, the sentence such as "Saul Kripke stands next to a table" has the same meaning as the following collection of sentences:

1. The man who wrote *Naming and Necessity* stands next to a table.
2. A person who was born on November 13, 1940, in Bay Shore, New York, stands next to a table.
3. The son of a leader of Beth El Synagogue in Omaha, Nebraska, stands next to a table.

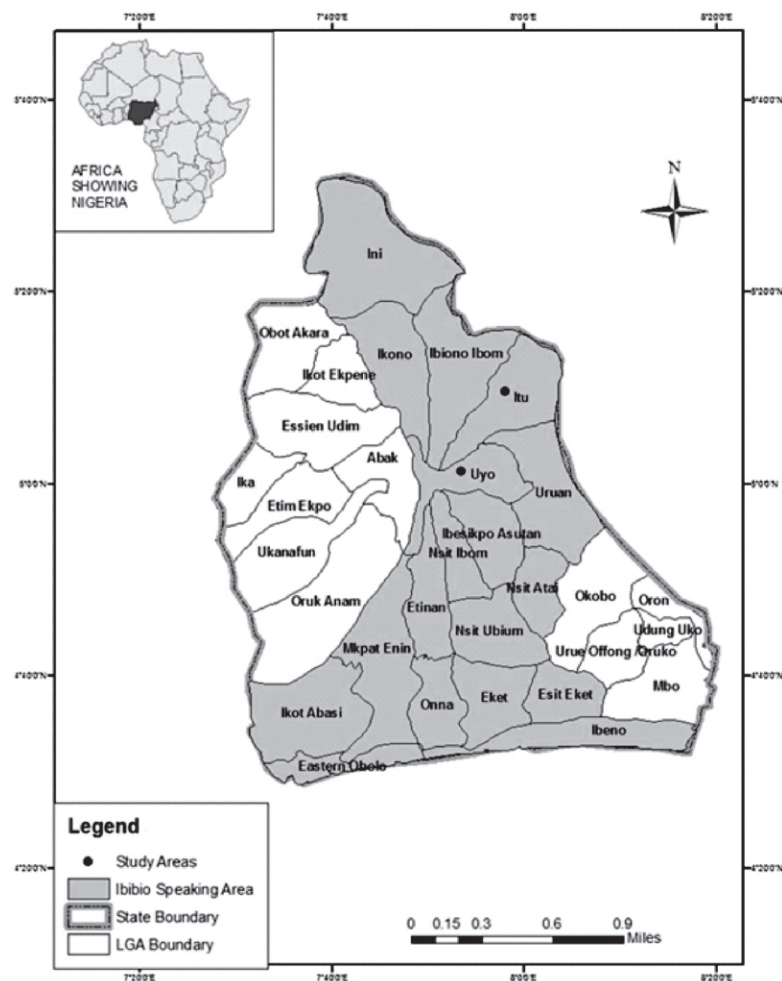
The Descriptive Theorisation of Okpongo

From the analysis of the Descriptive Theory which explains that for every proper name p , there is some collection of descriptions D associated with p that constitute the meaning of p . The concept of Okpongo explains that the name of an older person p is allocated to an infant D . The allocated name D conveys the meanings and expected descriptions of the p in the original context, and the expressions are conveyed by the new bearer of D . Okpongo is the social network between the P and D . It is the description of P and its meaning which are expressed in D .

Methodology

The study was conducted within selected local government areas in Ibibio land in Akwa Ibom State. An ethnographic research design was adopted for the study. Adult Ibibio people drawn from the 16 clans randomly selected from all the clans in the Ibibio-speaking local government areas of Akwa Ibom State selected for the study. Akwa Ibom State was divided into three based on the existing senatorial district, then Local Government Areas were selected randomly taking borderlands and hinterlands into consideration. Ikono for Ikot Ekpene Senatorial District, Uruan, Ibesikpo Asutan and Nsit Ubium for Uyo Senatorial District, and Mkpato Enin for Eket Senatorial District.

A simple random sampling method was used to select at least 24 study participants from each of the clans. Study participants were purposively selected to be 21 years of age and above so that they may have better understanding of the norms, values and taboos of their culture. The study participants were interviewed using an open-ended semi-structured interview guide. This was done on individual study participants using the language each understands. Responses were recorded. Afterwards, focused group discussions were conducted using the same interview guide on six to eight study participants per group. The researcher recorded responses based on the group in which each study participant fell. Key informants were engaged at least one per chosen community. The observational technique and voice recorder were used to obtain the qualitative information through focus group discussion.



Source: Mensah (2015)

Findings

Okpongo in name preservation among the Ibibio People

Gathered data revealed that among the Ibibio people, Okpongo is a socio-cultural practice of name preservation whereby names are passed from one person to another with specific attachments to the first or older bearer by the new or infant bearer. Narratives of the

interviewees presented a fact among the Ibibio people within the practices of Okpongo whereby a set of parents give names already allocated to someone who might be influential in the society or within a family setting, someone who is wealthier, someone who is admired by the said parent, and to someone who shows love to the new-born baby, to their new-born child. According to one of the study participants, this practice is voluntary. In his words, he reported that:

This Okpongo practice is an ancient practice that has been practised by our fathers long ago. In those days, some parents always wanted their children to be brave and strong, some always wanted their children to be successful in life more than they were. So the Okpongo practice is where these parents will now search for someone brave and strong, someone who is successful and they will give their children the names these people bear to their children with the supernatural and superstitious belief that the spirit that has guided those men to be brave and strong, to be successful in life will be transferred same roles and duties to their children and cause them to be courageous, strong and successful under the name transfer (male, 69 years, traditional ruler, interviewed on 8th July 2024 at Edeobom 1, Nsit Ibom Local Government Area).

Another study participant in her narratives agreed that this practice according to narratives has become a cultural pattern for the preservation of names among the Ibibio people of Akwa Ibom State. In her narratives, she explained that:

Okpongo is a practice in which some people want to preserve either their father's name or their mother's name and they will take a look at a new-born child of someone who might have served them as house help or servant or their close relative and give the name of their late father or their late mother to the child. This is mostly done with the late mother's name because in our society we answer names to our fathers. So, as a means of preserving their mother's name, they give the name to a new-born child. By so doing, they treat the child as their mother's name-sake and take care of the child as a means of transferring their responsibilities toward their late mother to the child just because the child is bearing their late mother's name. So, their late mother's name continues even when their mother is late. SO, Okpongo helps in the preservation of names (female, 52 years, trader, interviewed on 12th July 2024 at Uyo, Uyo Local Government Area)

Okpongo has been within the naming culture of the Ibibio people. Narratives have shown that the cultural practice has been one of the traditional patterns in name preservation among the Ibibio people of Akwa Ibom State, Nigeria. In some cases, this practice was discovered to be practised within a given immediate family. According to participants, some family members preserve their parent's name by transferring their parent's name through name-giving to their children. One of the study participants reported that:

Members of the same family very much practise Okpongo. Here you will see some families whereby a child is born and the father will name the male child after his late father and a female child is named after the late mother. That is why you hear a child answer a name like Ukpong Ekerete Ukpong. Here Ukpong is the grandfather's name which is the father's father's name and the immediate father decides to name his son after his father to preserve his father's name by the next third-generation child through the naming process of Okpongo. You will also hear the name Okpo Okpo Ufot. Here, Okpo is the name of the immediate father who transferred his name to his son as his Okpongo (Male, 48 years, civil servant, interviewed on 15th July 2024 at Idu, Uruan Local Government Area)

Another study participant in his narratives said that:

This naming practice call Okpongo are practiced by some people in such a way that the transfer the name of a renowned person or a successful person, sometimes these persons do not even know them and they are not related to the persons. They give their children such names in act of belief that the grace that make those people successful will also come on their children to make them successful. For instance, like Chief Godswill Obot Akpabio was the governor of our state Akwa Ibom, a lot of parents gave their children Godswill because of the successful story of the governor who grew from PA to former governor to SSA, to Commissioner and then to Governor of Akwa Ibom State. The same was the case of President Goodluck Jonathan. If you check this state, the children who answer Godswill and Goodluck are children who were born within the time Godswill was governor of Akwa Ibom State and Goodluck was the President of Nigeria (Male, 56 years, businessman, interviewed on 12th July 2024 at Nung Udoe, Ibesikpo-Asutan Local Government Area).

Narratives through interviews of study participants have revealed the practice of naming known and called Okpongo is an ancient naming practice which has been passed from one generation to another as a traditional means of name preservation. This practice has preserved names through the process of transferring names bear by either the living or the dead to a new-born child. Okpongo has enabled continuity of names and name-giving among the people of Ibibio in Akwa Ibom State, Nigeria.

Okpongo and Social Mobility among the Ibibio People

Okpongoh as played many roles including the role of social mobility among the Ibibio people in Akwa Ibom State, Nigeria. Data gathered from the field through narratives revealed that some low-class families have used the naming practice Okpongo as a means of helping their children to attain social mobility in life. Okpongo is practised in a way that the name of the wealthy man or woman, and a more capable human, is transferred to a new-born child of a poor family or low class with expectations, that the wealthy ones will take care and sponsorship of

the child which ordinarily the parent could not, to see the child grows and attain higher class in life which is correlative to the class of the origin of the original bearer of the name. One of the study participants said that:

Okpongo has many functions when it comes to giving a name to a child. It has been a helping practice to the poor class who use it as a means to seek help for their children, and to get their children out of the level of poverty which they don't their children to continue. By this, these low class families will seek a rich family member and transfer the name of the one they love to their child. This is normally done through official presentation of the child to the person after seeking the consent of the person. In acceptance of the person, the person will know that there is certain transfer of responsibilities of training the child to him/her. The parent of the child while nurturing the child at infant stage will from time to time take the child to visit his/her Okpongo with gifts from the parent and in return, the Okpongo give support back until the child grows to teenager whereby in some cases the child can go and stay with the Okpongo away from the parent and the Okpongo begin taking full responsibility of raising the child within the context of the rich class, sending the child to school, which in some cases to higher institution and then getting the child a job after graduation. By this, the child who was born into a poor family has been shifted by naming process from a poor class to a rich class (Male, 63 years, retired civil servant, interviewed on 13th July 2024 at Etinan, Etinan Local Government Area)

Another study participant added that:

Okpongo as a naming practice has really helped us in this land. It has in the social networking and transfer of wealth from one family to another. It can be said to be a means of levelling mechanism within some families who practices it. For instance, through Okpongo, a family has decided to share their inheritance with someone who was not originally born by a member of that family, but because the father was named Okpongo of the poor boy, in his will, he gave some of his inheritance to his Okpongo. So, the poor boy becomes richer and richer than his entire real parent (Male, 61 years, Welder, interviewed on 13th July 2024 at Afaha Offort, Uyo Local Government Area)

Okpongo naming practice among the Ibibio people of Akwa Ibom State is a practice that has a level as a levelling mechanism among some people within the Ibibio society. According to narratives from interviewees, Okpongo has provided medium whereby wealth is shared from the rich class to the poor class. Study participants reported that many families have attained change in their economic statuses through Okpongonaming practices in Ibibio land. It has also

provided the people with a medium through which the rich can share their wealth with the poor.

Discussion of Findings

The findings of this study show that the practice of naming people known as Okpongo is an ancient naming practice that has been passed down from one generation to another as a traditional way of name preservation. This practice preserved names through the process of transferring names held by the living or the dead to a new-born. Okpongo enabled the continuity of names and designations among the Ibibio people in Akwa Ibom State, Nigeria. Okpongo is a sociocultural practice of name preservation, where names are passed from one person to another with specific links to the first or oldest bearer from the new bearer or child bearer. Gathered data also revealed that among the Ibibio people in the framework of Okpongo practices where a group of relatives gives names already assigned to a person who could be influential in a society or a family environment, to a person richer, to a person admired by the said relative, and to a person who shows love to the new-born. According to one of the study participants, this practice is voluntary. In some cases, this practice was discovered to be practised within a given immediate family. Some family members keep the surname of their parents and pass it on to their children. These findings give credence to Mensah and Iloh, 2021; Mandende *et al.* 2019; Ansu-Kyeremeh 2000 who posited that the use of personal names in various cultures has been recognised as a means of communication and speech, and is transient through both past and present perspectives.

Further findings revealed that some lower-class families used the practice of the name Okpongo as a way to help their children achieve social mobility in life. Okpongois practised in such a way that the name of the rich husband or wife, and a more capable person, is transferred to a new-born from a poor or low-class family in the hope that the rich will care for and sponsor the child. The practice of Okpongo among the Ibibio people of Akwa Ibom State is a practice that has a levelling mechanism among some people in the Ibibio society. Gathered data also shown that Okpongo provided a means by which wealth are in some cases distributed from the rich class to the poor class. The participants in the study said that many families have achieved a change in their economic status through the practices of Okpongo name on Ibibio lands. It also provided the means to the population through which the rich can share their wealth with the poor. These findings give credence to Mensah *et al.*, (2021) who posit that in certain societies including the Ibibio of Akwa Ibom State, South-Eastern Nigeria, naming is a distinctive system of communicative practice which is used to express emotion and construct personhood and identity of the name-bearer.

Conclusion

The socio-onomastic of Okpongo as a naming system among the Ibibio people of Akwa Ibom State is an ancient naming practice of name transfer from the elderly of late person to an infant or new-born. It has been a naming pattern of names preservation whereby names are preserved. In some cases, children preserved their parents' names by transferring the names to their children. In some cases, they transfer the same names to relatives or a new-born child of neighbours and anyone who desires to get the name of his/her child. Another socio-onomastic

of Okpongo among the Ibibio people of Akwa Ibom State is the attainment of social mobility. Through Okpongo naming system, a poor child can attain a rich status, and a poor child can share in a rich man's inheritance as his Okpongo. This has made Okpongo naming system a levelling mechanism in some families among the Ibibio people.

Recommendation

Based on the findings of the study, the following recommendations are made;

- The Okpongo should be given more publicity as a cultural practice to help build unity and togetherness among the people.
- Okpongo as a social mobility mechanism should be encouraged among the Ibibio people to achieve human capacity development in Ibibio society.
- The naming practice of Okpongo as a levelling mechanism should be projected to reduce selfishness that leads to corruption.

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