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Otito Ntogbu Na Egbu Nwa Nkita: Igbo Naming, Identity, and the Decolonization Philosophy of Names

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Abstract

This article examines the cultural and philosophical significance of Igbo naming traditions within the framework of decolonization theory and African identity studies. Building on Oyeronke Oyewumi's thesis that gender was not the central organizing principle in African societies, the study argues that Igbo names encode moral, spiritual, and communal philosophies that challenge Western assumptions about hierarchy and personhood. Names such as *Nneka* ("mother is supreme"), *Nwakaego* ("a child is more valuable than money"), and *Chinualumogu* ("may God fight for me") illustrate how language serves as both ethical guide and spiritual invocation, foregrounding life, community, and divine providence over wealth and patriarchy. The analysis engages historical contexts, including the erasure and distortion of Igbo names during slavery, colonial impositions of Christian and European names, and the nationalist reclamation of indigenous identities by figures such as Nnamdi Azikiwe, Chinua Achebe, and Chukwuemeka Odumegwu Ojukwu. It also considers the persistence of philosophical depth in names recorded on slave ship manifests and the adaptation of Igbo names in diasporic and postwar contexts. By situating Igbo onomastics within debates about memory, identity, and reparative justice, the article demonstrates how naming functions as an archive of resilience and cultural continuity. Far from being arbitrary, Igbo names are deliberate philosophical texts, embodying prayers, blessings, and injunctions for ethical living. The proverb *ezi aha ka ego* ("a good name is better than money") encapsulates this worldview, reminding us that names remain crucial to decolonization identity and to struggles for dignity and justice in Africa and its diasporas.

Keywords: Igbo Naming Philosophy, Decolonization Theory, African Identity, Reparative Justice

Introduction

The debate around the cultural centrality of gender in African societies has been animated by Oyeronke Oyewumi's landmark work, *The Invention of Women* (1997).

Critics such as Bakare-Yusuf (2003) contend that Oyewumi overstates the alienness of gender categories, suggesting that Yoruba society, like many others, recognizes distinctions between men and women. However, Oyewumi never denied such recognition; rather, she maintained that Yoruba social organization placed greater emphasis on seniority, lineage, and respect than on binary gendered hierarchy. In markets, religious spaces, and communal decision-making, no domain was exclusively reserved for women, unlike the gender-segregated assumptions embedded in European patriarchal traditions. This position is found among the Igbo, who institutionalize generational difference through age grades, meat-sharing rituals, and egalitarian farming and trading practices. Their maxim, *ishiakaishi* (a head is no bigger than another), highlights a radically democratic ethos that resists gerontocracy or automatic deference to wealth and masculinity.

Within Igbo political culture, seniority is tempered by democratic practices that allow even children with demonstrated wisdom to contribute to councils of elders. Proverbs such as “when a child washes his hands well, he may eat with elders” reflect this philosophy of inclusion. Conversely, foolish elders (*ofeke*) risk losing credibility despite their age, illustrating that wisdom and morality, rather than gender or age alone, are central to authority. This democratic orientation contrasts sharply with the principle of primogeniture in European traditions, where even a newborn son could eclipse adult women in inheritance rights. African naming practices reflect this divergence: Igbo and Yoruba names are not simply identifiers but philosophical statements embedding generational, spiritual, and ethical priorities. By examining Igbo names and their associated cultural logics, this article demonstrates how African societies encode values that resist Western patriarchal hierarchies.

The diary as a Western cultural form offers a useful contrast to African modes of memory and recordkeeping. Among the Igbo, daily written diaries are rare, yet moral and spiritual records are embedded in names, prayers, and oral narratives. Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart* illustrates this through Unoka, whose wall inscriptions recorded debts but whose life testified to artistry and generosity, even if his community judged him by Europeanized standards of wealth and masculinity. As scholars have noted, African recordkeeping often privileges collective memory and forgiveness (*mgbaghalu*) over individualized grudge-keeping (Falola, 2001; Nzegwu, 2006). Thus, names like *Nkiruka* (“the future is greater than the past”) and *Azubuike* (“the strength lies in the supporters”) embody an orientation toward future possibility and communal strength rather than financial accumulation. These cultural forms resist the commodification of identity, contrasting with European traditions that tied family inheritance to male dominance.

African societies also foreground maternal reverence, undermining claims of universal patriarchy. No Igbo man would claim superiority over his mother or grandmother, whose roles as nurturers and protectors are sacrosanct. By contrast, European primogeniture established absurd hierarchies wherein an infant son could outrank his own mother and grandmother in inheritance. Such structures were not universal but imposed through imperialist and patriarchal greed, often motivated by the desire to keep property within male bloodlines (Goody, 1976). Igbo traditions instead affirm the sanctity of human life and relationality, privileging moral worth above material accumulation. Naming practices—such as *Nwakaego* (“a child is worth more than money”) or *Ndukaku* (“life is greater than wealth”)—testify to this philosophy. Far from being merely symbolic, these names encode ethical priorities that elevate human dignity above economic greed.

The Igbo cosmology also underscores divine providence as central to survival and resilience. Names like *Chinedu* (“God guides”), *Chinonso* (“God is near”), and *Chimamanda* (“my Chi will never fail”) articulate a theology of proximity and dependence on divine agency. During and after the Biafran war, such naming practices enabled survivors to reconstruct hope and resilience without descending into cycles of revenge. Scholars of postwar Igbo culture (Achebe, 2012; Ugochukwu, 2015) have emphasized that naming not only registers trauma but also projects future aspirations. This orientation toward divine guidance distinguished Igbo responses to crisis from European witch-hunting traditions, which led to the mass killing of millions of women under accusations of sorcery (Federici, 2004). By contrast, Igbo communities acknowledge the existence of *amosu* (witches) but rely on personal *Chi* and collective resilience rather than persecution.

The etymology of personal names within families demonstrates how naming intertwines with history, cosmology, and relational ethics. My father’s name, Agozino—short for Agoziem Inoko—means “I bless the enemy,” reflecting a priestly lineage devoted to the goddess of good fortune. This stands in stark contrast to the Italian name “Agostino,” which simply denotes the month of August. Similarly, my mother’s name, Inoakamma (“the enemy does not speak well of you”), illustrates how naming reflects the lived realities of enmity and resilience in Igbo life. These names are not isolated but part of an intricate web of intergenerational continuity, where surnames often trace back to grandfathers and grandmothers, though European colonial influence introduced fixed family surnames. Names are thus historical texts that index resistance, survival, and moral aspirations across generations.

The cultural economy of names challenges stereotypes of the Igbo as excessively materialistic. Popular myths during the Biafran war suggested that Igbo men would revive at the sound of coins, reflecting both mockery and a tacit acknowledgment of Igbo resilience in trade. Yet the Igbo word for humanity itself, *mmadu*, translates as “the beauty of life,” underscoring that human dignity—not money—is the central value. Historical experiences of dispossession, such as the postwar confiscation of Igbo savings and properties, further reinforced the moral weight of names over wealth. The proverb *ezi aha ka ego* (“a good name is better than money”) encapsulates this ethic, reminding communities that identity, integrity, and moral reputation outweigh material possessions. By embedding such philosophies into names, Igbo culture resists the corrosive effects of colonial dispossession and postcolonial corruption.

Family Histories and Naming Philosophies

The intergenerational significance of Igbo names reveals how identity is crafted through a careful balance of history, cosmology, and moral philosophy. For instance, my father’s compound name, Agozino (from Agoziem Inoko), linked him directly to his father, Inoko, and by extension to earlier ancestors. The meaning—“I bless the enemy”—was not incidental but reflected our lineage’s priestly devotion to *Ngu*, the goddess of good fortune. Names in this tradition function as theological commitments as much as social identifiers, articulating an ethic of generosity even toward adversaries. While European names such as “Augustine” are tied to temporal markers like months, Igbo names such as Agozino embody metaphysical responsibilities. They remind bearers of their obligation to act in ways that align with ancestral duty and divine expectation (Achebe, 1989; Ubah, 2020). This reveals how African naming cannot be reduced to linguistic labels but constitutes a moral and philosophical system.

The semantic field of Igbo names often includes references to danger, enmity, and divine protection. Names such as *Ironsi* (“poison of enmity”), *Inoanwushi* (“may the

enemy not die”), and *Aghadiuno* (“there is war at home”) acknowledge the inevitability of social conflict. Yet they simultaneously affirm resilience and divine guardianship, as seen in names like *Chinedu* (“God guides”) and *Chinaza* (“God answers for me”). Scholars such as Amadiume (1997) argue that these names articulate a theology of relationality, where the individual is never isolated but constantly positioned in a web of spiritual and communal forces. Unlike other Nigerian groups that may attribute misfortune to witchcraft, the Igbo emphasize the protective power of personal *Chi* (guardian spirit) as the ultimate safeguard against adversity (Okere, 2005). Consequently, even references to enemies do not imply fatalism but affirm divine sovereignty. The theological density of Igbo naming helps explain the community’s resilience in the aftermath of colonial trauma and civil war.

The survival of the Igbo after the Biafran war is often attributed to their capacity for renewal through culture. Names such as *Chimeeucheya* (“may God do His will”), *Uchechi* (“God’s will”), and *Ekene dili Chukwu* (“praise be to God”) embody the ethic of rebuilding without vengeance. Historians have shown that following the devastating loss of lives and confiscation of resources, Igbo communities rapidly reconstructed their economies and educational systems (Ekwe-Ekwe, 1993; Ugochukwu, 2015). Instead of perpetuating cycles of violence, families invested symbolic hope in their children’s names, projecting aspirations for justice and prosperity. These practices contrast with European histories of persecution, where crises often led to witch hunts and mass killings (Federici, 2004). By embedding spiritual resilience into names, the Igbo ensured that memory of suffering was transformed into a resource for collective regeneration. Naming thus functioned not only as a linguistic practice but as a postwar philosophy of survival.

Maternal naming traditions further illustrate the deeply philosophical nature of Igbo identity. My mother’s name, *Inoakamma* (“the enemy does not speak well of you”), demonstrates how women’s experiences of enmity were encoded into personal identities. Interestingly, the shortened form *Ino* was shared by both male and female family members, suggesting that Igbo names often transcend rigid gender assignments. Many of my cousins adopted *Ino* as a surname, though spellings varied due to Anglicization. This reveals how colonial influence reshaped Igbo naming systems by imposing fixed surnames, a departure from earlier practices where identity could be fluidly linked to either parent. Scholars such as Chukwuma Azuonye (2007) emphasize that these colonial distortions often stripped Igbo names of their philosophical depth by divorcing them from oral contexts. Nevertheless, names such as *Inoakamma* persisted, carrying within them narratives of resistance, survival, and maternal wisdom.

The logic of Igbo naming also privileges children as sources of wealth more valuable than money. My sister’s name, *Nwakaego* (“a child is more valuable than money”), captures this ethic of prioritizing life over material accumulation. Similar names such as *Nwakanma* (“a child is more valuable than wealth”), *Madukaku* (“a person is greater than wealth”), and *Ndukaku* (“life is greater than wealth”) illustrate a cultural rejection of European materialism. While European legal codes often equated human life with property rights, African naming practices elevated the sanctity of life above possessions (Goody, 1976; Nzegwu, 2006). This worldview is evident in Igbo proverbs that remind communities that wealth is transient but life and dignity endure. Naming thus functions as a critique of capitalist accumulation and an affirmation of humanist values. In this respect, Igbo onomastics anticipates broader African philosophies of *ubuntu*, where personhood is defined by relationality and communal well-being rather than ownership.

The Igbo are often stereotyped by fellow Nigerians as overly materialistic, yet their names consistently undermine such caricatures. During the Biafran war, it was cruelly joked that an Igbo man's death could only be confirmed by jingling coins near his ears. Such stereotypes mask the deeper truth that Igbo culture defines humanity as *mmadu*, literally "the beauty of life." This semantic root highlights that to be human is to embody beauty, dignity, and moral value. Achebe (2012) and Soyinka (1972) both observed that even amidst genocidal violence, Igbo naming retained its philosophical orientation toward life rather than material survival. Indeed, postwar recovery demonstrated that cultural capital, symbolized in names and communal ethics, was as important as economic entrepreneurship. Far from glorifying money, Igbo names reveal an abiding suspicion of wealth when unmoored from morality. The proverb *ezi aha ka ego* ("a good name is better than money") encapsulates this ethic, reminding the community that integrity outlasts riches.

Naming also functions as a mode of caution against hubris. Igbo elders warn that "a little dog given a big praise name may be tempted to fight larger dogs," a proverb that discourages arrogance. This humility is reflected in personal titles, which, even when boastful, invoke shared natural forces rather than individual dominance. Titles such as *Ogbuagu* ("lion killer") or *Dike* ("communal hero") describe collective defense rather than personal aggrandizement. Such conventions stand in contrast to European aristocratic naming, which often emphasized domination, ownership, or divine right (Anderson, 1991). Igbo communities valued strength, but only insofar as it was exercised for communal survival. Thus, even when personal names hinted at achievement, they remained tethered to philosophical humility and communal responsibility. Names therefore served not only as individual identifiers but as ethical guides for proper conduct.

Philosophy of Language and Igbo Names

The European fascination with naming as a form of mastery has long shaped philosophical debates about language. Hegel, for example, argued that the monarch's proper name crystallizes individuality by distinguishing the ruler from the collective mass. For him, the name is not merely a label but a fixed point of rest, stabilizing identity within the social order. Yet, as Derrida (1976) later observed, such Eurocentric thinking assumes that writing and naming originated in Europe, thereby justifying colonial hierarchies of "civilized" and "primitive" peoples. Derrida countered this by asserting that the capacity to name oneself is a universal feature of humanity, and thus, all cultures practice a form of writing. To deny Africans the philosophical depth of naming was to implicitly render them subhuman, paving the way for slavery and colonization. In this light, African onomastics exposes the limitations of European semiotics and demonstrates how names themselves constitute philosophical texts.

Hegel's claim that a proper name makes the individual unique collapses under closer scrutiny. In many European families, identical names recur across generations, necessitating suffixes such as "Junior" or Roman numerals to distinguish individuals. Moreover, the reliance on thumbprints, signatures, and later photo identifications reveals that names alone cannot guarantee unique identity. African philosophies of naming, by contrast, emphasize meaning over mere differentiation. Igbo names, for example, are often composed of full sentences or moral injunctions that articulate relational ethics and communal aspirations (Okere, 2005). Unlike European names, which are increasingly divorced from their original etymologies, Igbo names remain deeply tied to cultural narratives and theological commitments. This difference highlights the philosophical richness of African languages, where names do not simply identify but instruct, guide, and preserve memory.

The anecdote of Fela Kuti's libel trial against Obasanjo and Abiola illustrates the performative dimension of naming. When Fela called out "Abiola" and "Obasanjo" in the courtroom, multiple individuals responded, humorously undermining the plaintiffs' claims to unique ownership of those names. This episode highlights how names in African societies are social rather than proprietary—shared across communities rather than monopolized by individuals. The story also resonates with Bakhtin's (1981) notion of heteroglossia, in which meaning is always dialogical and shaped by multiple voices. For Fela, the fact that many people bore the same names destabilized elitist claims to power, reminding the court that names carry social multiplicity. Such instances expose the artificiality of European legal traditions that attempt to stabilize identity through rigid documentation. In African practice, names resist closure and instead invite communal resonance.

The European philosophy of language tends to strip names of their connection to nature, treating them as arbitrary signifiers. This abstraction contrasts with African traditions, where names often invoke natural elements, spiritual entities, or ethical conditions. Among the Igbo, names can function as prayers (*Chigozie*, "God bless"), thanksgiving (*Chinualumogu*, "may God fight for me"), or blessings (*Obioma*, "good heart"). Falola (2001) notes that naming ceremonies are public events where the entire community contributes, reinforcing the idea that a child belongs not only to parents but to the larger collective. Individuals often carry multiple names—lineage names, day names, occupational names, and praise names—each layering meaning upon identity. This multiplicity resists the European binary logic of the signifier and signified, demonstrating instead a polysemic system of identity. By embedding prayers and philosophical reflections into names, African societies transform the act of naming into a form of moral pedagogy.

Unisex names within Igbo culture further complicate European assumptions about gendered naming. Names such as *Uche* ("thought"), *Ngozi* ("blessing"), and *Chika* ("God is greater") are commonly given to both male and female children. The tonal variations of Igbo allow the same orthography to yield different gender associations without rigidly fixing identity. This flexibility undermines claims that African societies lacked gender distinctions, while also showing that such distinctions were not the primary organizing principle. As Oyewumi (1997) argued, generation, seniority, and communal morality often outweighed gender in structuring social relations. The persistence of unisex names reflects a democratic ethos in naming, where the emphasis is on the meaning of the name rather than its alignment with a gender binary. By comparison, European naming conventions historically enforced gender boundaries, with deviations only emerging in recent decades through feminist and queer activism. Igbo practice thus prefigured a more fluid understanding of identity.

Cognomens, nicknames, and praise names (*akpo aha*) illustrate another dimension of Igbo linguistic philosophy. Achebe's character Amalinze "the Cat" exemplifies this tradition, where an individual acquires a metaphorical identity based on reputation or achievement. The name signified his wrestling prowess, as his back never touched the ground, yet the philosophical undertone was that even the mighty are sometimes humbled. Such cognomens serve as communal commentary, affirming virtues, critiquing flaws, or immortalizing deeds. As Falola and Genova (2009) observe, these names function as living archives, transmitting history and philosophy through performative speech acts. Praise names are not mere nicknames; they are philosophical epitaphs in motion, continuously interpreted and reinterpreted by the community. In this way, Igbo language philosophy collapses the distinction between name and narrative, embedding life histories within linguistic forms.

The philosophical depth of Igbo names challenges the reductive logics of European linguistics, which often seek abstract equivalences between signifier and signified. For the Igbo, names are not inert signs but active forces that shape identity and destiny. They serve as moral reminders, communal bonds, and spiritual invocations that accompany individuals throughout life. Derrida's (1976) critique of Western logocentrism is instructive here: he argues that European philosophy mistakenly privileges written signs over lived meaning. Igbo naming practices invert this hierarchy, treating the spoken name as a lived philosophy, inseparable from social and spiritual life. This explains why naming ceremonies are collective events where multiple names may be bestowed, allowing individuals to navigate identity through layered meanings. Far from being arbitrary, African names are deliberate, thoughtful, and constitutive of personhood. By attending to these traditions, scholars can recognize that African languages have always contained rich philosophies of being.

Slavery, Colonization, and Naming Practices

The history of slavery and colonization profoundly shaped African naming practices, often through violence and erasure. Enslaved Africans were stripped of their birth names and forced to bear the surnames of their enslavers, which served as markers of domination rather than identity. For people of Igbo descent, this imposition represented not just a loss of individuality but also the severing of ancestral and spiritual ties embedded in names. Scholars such as Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o (1986) remind us that the colonial project was always linguistic as well as physical, aiming to rename and thus reorder colonized peoples. Yet enslaved and colonized Africans consistently resisted these erasures by retaining traditional names in private spaces, renaming themselves after emancipation, or bestowing African names upon their children. This act of renaming signaled a refusal to surrender identity, even under conditions of dehumanization. Naming therefore became an arena of both repression and resistance in the long history of slavery.

Examples of such resistance abound in the African diaspora. Figures like Molefi Kete Asante, Maulana Karenga, and Assata Shakur deliberately rejected European slave names in favor of African or revolutionary ones. Alex Haley's *Roots* dramatized this struggle through Kunta Kinte, whose name was violently suppressed and replaced with "Toby." Olaudah Equiano also navigated this tension, renaming himself but encoding Igbo linguistic elements into his chosen name. Scholars have speculated that "Olaudah" may derive from *Oluada* ("voiceless" or "sister's voice"), reflecting both his kidnapping alongside his sister and his lifelong search for her (Carey, 2000). His surname, Equiano, resonates with the Igbo phrase *ekwua anu* ("unheard voices"), underscoring his role as a witness to the silenced. These linguistic echoes reveal that even when forced into European orthographies, enslaved Africans preserved fragments of their cultural and philosophical worlds. Naming thus served as a site of coded resistance.

The suppression and alteration of Igbo names also reflected colonial illiteracy and violence. European recordkeepers often mangled spellings, producing distorted versions that obscured original meanings. In Virginia, for instance, Douglas Chambers (1996) notes that Igbo captives were suspected of poisoning Ambrose Madison, grandfather of President James Madison, and were brutally punished. Yet their names disappeared from plantation records, leaving only hints in oral memory and agricultural vocabulary, such as the survival of "okra" from *okwuru*. This selective erasure illustrates how enslaved Igbo identities were deemed too dangerous to preserve, given their reputation for rebelliousness. As a survival strategy, many enslaved individuals may have abandoned overtly Igbo names to avoid harsher

repression. Such patterns continue today, where post-Biafran Nigerians sometimes conceal Igbo identities to avoid discrimination in national politics. The erasure of names, both historical and contemporary, demonstrates the enduring vulnerability of linguistic identity under oppressive regimes.

One of the rare archival windows into Igbo naming during slavery is the nominal roll of the ship *Amalié* in the early nineteenth century. As documented by Chukwuma Azuonye (2007), this ship carried 121 Igbo captives from Bonny to Martinique, where they were enslaved by the French state in 1822. The nominal roll, though distorted by French orthography, preserves unmistakably Igbo names such as *Nwabara*, *Amadi*, and *Onwuchekwa*. Azuonye classified these into male and female categories, noting that while some were unisex, gender distinctions were clearly recognized. Many of these names contained prayers, moral injunctions, or lineage markers, showing that even in captivity, enslaved Igbo retained the philosophical richness of their onomastics. Remarkably, nearly 80 of these captives survived until liberation in 1838, a testament to cultural resilience. The *Amalié* roll thus serves as a fragmentary archive of African selfhood amid the violence of slavery.

The philosophical messages embedded in enslaved Igbo names also reveal continuities with contemporary practices. Male names such as *Amadi* ("free-born"), *Emenike* ("success is not by strength"), and *Izuchukwu* ("wisdom of God") emphasize freedom, humility, and divine wisdom. Female names such as *Ada* ("first daughter"), *Agbomma* ("beautiful lady"), and *Nnendiora* ("mother of the community") highlight kinship, beauty, and social responsibility. Even in the midst of enslavement, parents bestowed names that affirmed dignity, community, and hope. This stands in stark contrast to European naming practices during slavery, which often reduced individuals to numbers, generic labels, or degrading nicknames (Lovejoy, 2000). By preserving names that carried moral and spiritual significance, the enslaved refused complete dehumanization. Names became vessels of memory, carrying ancestral wisdom across the Middle Passage and into the plantation societies of the Americas.

The violence of naming persisted into colonial Nigeria, where Christian missionaries and administrators imposed European first names as signs of "conversion" and "civilization." Igbo surnames were often Anglicized, with references to deities removed or simplified. Achebe's family, for example, originally bore the name *Anichebe* ("may the land protect"), but missionaries modified it to Achebe to erase references to *Ani*, the earth goddess (Echeruo, 1979). Such changes reflect the colonial fear of African spirituality, which missionaries sought to suppress through linguistic manipulation. Yet even within these imposed frameworks, Igbo families preserved traditional names as middle or last names, maintaining continuity with indigenous cosmologies. The tension between imposed and indigenous names reveals the dual consciousness that W. E. B. Du Bois (1903/2007) described: Africans learned to navigate both colonial expectations and cultural heritage through carefully managed identities. This duality continues in contemporary naming practices across the diaspora.

The persistence of Igbo names in the diaspora also shaped cultural landscapes in subtle ways. Place names across the Americas—such as Kanawah (from *Ka anyi wáa*, "let us go home"), Chilhowie (from *Chineke hu onye*, "may God bear witness"), and Calabar (from *Ka la bara*, "let us go home")—may preserve Igbo linguistic traces (Alagoa, 2003). Though often misattributed to Native American or European origins, these names suggest that enslaved Africans inscribed their presence onto the geography of the so-called New World. This echoes Gilroy's (1993) idea of the "Black Atlantic" as a space where African cultural forms survived through creolization and

adaptation. By embedding fragments of Igbo language into place names, enslaved communities subtly asserted belonging in foreign landscapes. Such acts complicate narratives of total erasure, showing instead that African identities persisted in coded and dispersed forms.

The philosophical implications of slavery and naming are not confined to historical memory but extend into demands for reparative justice today. Caribbean nations have increasingly pursued reparations from former colonial powers, citing the economic and cultural devastations of slavery. For the Igbo, the nominal roll of the *Amalié* and similar records provide evidence of direct state involvement in the enslavement of their ancestors. As Adesanya (2021) argues, reparations discourse must acknowledge not only economic exploitation but also the epistemic violence of erasing African identities. Naming is central to this claim, for the suppression of names was part of the broader assault on African personhood. To recover, preserve, and reclaim African names is therefore to demand recognition of historical injustice. By situating Igbo onomastics within this reparative framework, scholars and activists highlight the ongoing legacies of slavery in shaping cultural and political struggles.

Nationalism, Modernity, and the Politics of Naming

The rise of African nationalism in the twentieth century intensified debates about naming as a marker of identity and resistance. In colonial Nigeria, European missionaries and administrators imposed Christian and Anglicized names as markers of civilization and conversion. Yet, as nationalist movements gained momentum, many leaders deliberately reclaimed indigenous names to assert cultural pride and political autonomy. Nnamdi Azikiwe, for instance, was baptized “Benjamin” but later dropped his European first name, choosing instead to foreground his Igbo identity (Azikiwe, 1970). His decision was more than symbolic; it reflected a broader intellectual movement to dismantle colonial epistemologies. By refusing European names, Azikiwe aligned himself with decolonization thinkers who understood language and naming as sites of power. Naming thus became a tool of nationalist resistance and a statement of sovereignty.

Azikiwe’s autobiography, *My Odyssey* (1970), traces both paternal and maternal genealogies, demonstrating how lineage names carry historical memory. He linked his ancestry to Eze Chima, the legendary founder of Onitsha, thereby grounding his identity in indigenous political traditions. Yet the narrative also illustrates how colonialism distorted these genealogies by imposing European orthographies and titles. For example, the very spelling of “Onitsha” reflects an anglicization of *Onicha*, the indigenous name. By reclaiming indigenous genealogical names, Azikiwe not only preserved family history but also resisted colonial misrepresentation. Scholars such as Ohadike (1991) argue that nationalist leaders like Azikiwe consciously deployed names to affirm cultural legitimacy in the face of imperial domination. This underscores the dual role of names as personal identifiers and political statements within nationalist struggles.

The influence of Azikiwe inspired other prominent Igbo intellectuals and leaders to embrace indigenous naming. Chinua Achebe famously dropped “Albert,” the colonial name given after Queen Victoria’s consort, choosing to publish as Chinua Achebe. His novels, particularly *Things Fall Apart* (1958), elevated Igbo names and cosmologies onto the global literary stage, challenging stereotypes of African societies as nameless or cultureless. Similarly, Chukwuemeka Odumegwu Ojukwu, educated at elite institutions in England, retained a fully Igbo name despite his aristocratic upbringing and exposure to colonial culture. These choices demonstrated that nationalist elites

recognized naming as part of decolonization politics. Their insistence on indigenous names disrupted colonial hierarchies of prestige, asserting African authenticity in political, literary, and military domains. The act of naming thus became a cornerstone of both cultural nationalism and intellectual resistance.

Not all nationalists, however, abandoned European names. Figures such as Obafemi Awolowo, Jeremiah Obafemi, or Anthony Enahoro retained Christian or Anglicized names alongside indigenous ones. This duality reflects the pragmatism of nationalist movements, where leaders balanced local authenticity with global recognition. Scholars such as Barber (1991) suggest that names in this context functioned as a form of “double consciousness” (Du Bois, 1903/2007), enabling African elites to navigate both colonial modernity and indigenous identity. While some leaders, like Azikiwe, fully reclaimed indigenous naming, others maintained hybrid identities as a way of mediating between tradition and modernity. This variation underscores that naming was not merely personal preference but a political calculation shaped by historical circumstances. In all cases, however, naming remained deeply entangled with the politics of colonialism and resistance.

Cultural nationalism also extended to popular culture, where musicians and performers grappled with the politics of naming. Artists such as Oliver de Coque, Prince Nico Mbarga, and Stephen Osita Osadebe often adopted hybrid stage names, combining European honorifics with Igbo elements. These names served commercial purposes, ensuring recognition in both local and international markets, but they also reflected colonial legacies. By contrast, performers such as Onyeka Onwenu and Chinyere Udoma foregrounded indigenous names, emphasizing cultural authenticity. Barber (1987) notes that the adoption of stage names in West Africa was shaped by both pragmatic and ideological concerns: musicians sought to balance marketability with cultural pride. Thus, even within popular culture, the politics of naming reflected broader negotiations between colonial inheritance and nationalist assertion.

The postcolonial era saw continued contestation over names as markers of legitimacy and belonging. In some contexts, Igbo families deliberately Anglicized names to avoid discrimination, especially after the Biafran war. Spelling variants such as “Iyke” for *Ike* or “Chuks” for *Chukwuma* illustrate how names were adjusted for assimilation into national and global cultures. Yet nationalist intellectuals criticized such practices as forms of cultural erasure, urging a return to indigenous names. As Nzegwu (2006) argues, cultural identity cannot be disentangled from linguistic heritage, and the reclamation of names is central to African self-determination. The persistence of indigenous names despite pressures to conform demonstrates the resilience of cultural traditions. Even when reshaped by modernity, Igbo names continue to carry philosophical depth and historical memory.

The politics of naming also intersected with gender in complex ways. Igbo names such as *Nneka* (“mother is supreme”) and *Nnenna* (“father’s mother”) underscore the esteem accorded to women within indigenous philosophy. These names complicate claims that African societies universally subordinated women under patriarchal systems. Oyewumi (1997) emphasizes that gender in Yoruba and Igbo societies was not an organizing principle of hierarchy; rather, seniority, morality, and communal contribution carried more weight. Naming thus offered women symbolic authority even in male-dominated political structures. By celebrating mothers as supreme or foundational, Igbo names encoded respect for femininity within cultural philosophy. This contrasts with European patriarchal traditions, where naming often reinforced women’s subordination. In nationalist discourse, the reclamation of such names helped reassert African values that countered colonial and patriarchal distortions.

The interplay of nationalism and naming reveals how identities are negotiated across history, culture, and politics. For nationalist leaders, intellectuals, and artists, names were never neutral; they carried symbolic weight that could affirm or undermine cultural legitimacy. To reclaim indigenous names was to resist erasure, while to retain European names was often a pragmatic adaptation to colonial modernity. Both strategies, however, reveal the centrality of naming in shaping postcolonial identities. As Falola (2001) observes, African names are not just linguistic markers but repositories of cultural memory, embodying prayers, histories, and philosophical orientations. Nationalist struggles, therefore, cannot be fully understood without attending to the politics of naming. The decolonization of names continues today, as African writers, activists, and families choose identities that affirm heritage while navigating global realities.

Conclusion: Naming, Identity, and Reparative Justice

The thesis advanced by Oyewumi (1997) that African cultures decenter gender as a primary organizing principle finds strong support in Igbo naming traditions. Evidence across generations shows that names encode moral, spiritual, and philosophical messages rather than rigid gender hierarchies. Although the Igbo distinguished between male and female names, this distinction did not confer systemic privileges, as it did in European patriarchal traditions. Instead, authority and respect were tied to seniority, wisdom, and moral standing. Names such as *Nneka* ("mother is supreme") and *Nwakaego* ("a child is more valuable than money") demonstrate that women and children could be celebrated as sources of life and wealth. Such naming practices undermine claims of universal patriarchy by foregrounding values that resist gender subordination. In this sense, Igbo onomastics offers empirical grounding for decolonisation theories of identity.

Where Oyewumi's argument gains even more force is in the colonial and postcolonial adoption of European names. From the era of Azikiwe onwards, educated elites often combined indigenous surnames with European first names, reflecting the imposition of colonial epistemologies. In many cases, even indigenous names were anglicized to remove references to deities, as seen in the transformation of *Anichebe* into Achebe. These practices illustrate the epistemic violence of colonialism, which sought to erase spiritual and cultural meanings embedded in African languages (Ngũgĩ, 1986). Yet the persistence of indigenous names in family lineages and nationalist movements demonstrates cultural resilience. To disown foreign names and reclaim African ones is not only a symbolic act but also a decolonization strategy of self-definition. Naming, therefore, remains central to struggles over identity in postcolonial Africa.

The pragmatism of the Igbo, however, tempers cultural nationalism. Common proverbs remind us that "names are not food" (*adighi eri aha*), emphasizing that survival often requires adaptation. After the Biafran war, many families anglicized or abbreviated names to facilitate social mobility in hostile environments. Variants like "Chuks" for *Chukwuma* or "Iyke" for *Ike* illustrate compromises made to navigate national and global spaces. While critics may decry these adaptations as erasures, they also represent strategies of survival and cosmopolitan engagement. As Falola (2001) notes, African identities are dynamic, shaped by both internal traditions and external pressures. The Igbo demonstrate that cultural continuity can coexist with pragmatic adaptation. What matters most is not the orthography of names but the moral and philosophical commitments they encode.

The resilience of Igbo naming practices also points toward a larger philosophy of reparative justice. Records such as the nominal roll of the *Amalié* document the direct

involvement of European states in enslaving Igbo men, women, and children. These names, distorted yet recognizable, provide evidence not only of individual lives but also of collective trauma. Adesanya (2021) argues that reparations discourse must attend to the epistemic violence of erasing African identities, not only to material losses. To recover and preserve African names is to honor ancestors whose voices were silenced by slavery and colonialism. By situating naming within the politics of reparations, scholars and activists emphasize that linguistic and cultural restitution are integral to justice. Naming becomes both a memorial and a demand for accountability.

At the same time, Igbo culture insists on forgiveness and renewal. Proverbs such as *mgbaghara bu ndu* ("forgiveness is life") reflect a philosophy that prioritizes reconciliation over vengeance. Following the devastation of the Biafran war, Igbo communities rebuilt rapidly, investing in education, trade, and cultural revival. Naming practices played a central role in this process, with children given names like *Chimeeucheya* ("may God do His will") and *Ekene dili Chukwu* ("praise be to God"). These names affirmed a collective commitment to resilience and divine providence rather than revenge. Scholars such as Ugochukwu (2015) note that this postwar philosophy of naming enabled survivors to transform trauma into moral strength. Thus, while reparative justice demands recognition of past injustices, Igbo naming also offers a model for renewal rooted in dignity, hope, and spirituality.

The politics of naming continues to shape contemporary identity struggles. Within Nigeria, debates over the *osu* caste system still affect marriage and social relations, with some families changing or concealing names to avoid stigma. Yet migration and cosmopolitanism increasingly dilute such hierarchies, as younger generations embrace education, urbanization, and interethnic marriages. In the diaspora, African-descended communities confront similar struggles with European surnames inherited from slavery. Some choose to reclaim African names, while others emphasize solidarity over nomenclature, insisting that justice lies in collective struggle rather than individual labels. In all these contexts, names remain central to debates about identity, belonging, and justice. They carry histories of oppression but also embody the possibility of transformation.

In conclusion, Igbo naming traditions reveal that names are not merely linguistic markers but philosophical texts. They encode prayers, blessings, ethical injunctions, and historical memory, serving as both personal identifiers and communal narratives. The study of Igbo onomastics thus contributes to decolonization scholarship by demonstrating how African languages resist reduction to Western categories. At the same time, the pragmatism of adaptation shows that cultural continuity need not preclude cosmopolitan engagement. A good name remains better than money (*ezi aha ka ego*), not because names provide material wealth but because they anchor identity in moral worth. To honor African names is to affirm the dignity of African lives, past and present, and to continue the unfinished work of reparative justice.

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