Female Onomastics and the Tradition of Ogba Women Sobriquets

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Abstract

This paper discusses "onomastics", the system of names and meaning in societies, as it applies to the female gender, but narrowed down to the practice of "sobriquets" also known as "aliases" among the women in the Ogba culture area of Rivers State, in contemporary South-South of Nigeria. We argue that, evidences available in some references cited in the paper, onomastic practices are often initiated and executed by the men folk, though indications reveal that the opinions of women are often sought before a name is given to a female child. "Female Onomastics" in which some chose sobriquets (aliases) for themselves, or accept nicknames given to them as "aliases" afford such women an opportunity to express their own voice in the society. Twenty-two female sobriquets that are constant with more traditional Ogba situations are examined to show how normative they are, while some twenty-three contemporary Ogba female sobriquets are also examined to highlight their iconoclastic significations, with a view to concluding that contemporary Ogba women sobriquets (aliases) are indications of increase in the manifestation of the female voice in the Ogba society.

Keywords: Female onomastics, female, Ogba, sobriquets, aliases.

Introduction

Onomastics, the lexicological branch of linguistics that studies names and naming systems, is an ancient subject, even if its scholarship in folklore can only be dated back to the 19th century or so. According to Felecan in a very recently edited book, *Onomastics between sacred and profane*, "in the mentality of ancient Semitic peoples,

naming a place or a person meant determining the role of fate of the named entity, as names were considered to be mysteriously connected with the reality they designated" ("Foreword", P.Viii).

This is a re-echo of Doja (2006) who had argued that the name ensures a personal identity and consciousness of belonging to a lineage as well as to a community by assigning each person to the place he/she belongs and to occupy in his/her group. Names are thus integral part of the person's insertion into the social group (p.255). "An Ogba person who cannot trace his genealogy to three or four generations of his ancestors in the family is regarded worse than a slave" (Ohia, 2021, p306).

For folklorists and literary critics, names may appear quite trivial a subject to be given serious scholarly attention, but this field of study has offered opportunity for philological ingenuity and narrative expansion (Doja, 2006, p.237). But interest in names and patterns of naming has attracted the attention of linguists and anthropologists long before the emergence of persons who were proud enough to refer to themselves as "folklorists". "Names were and have been, given to individuals, but only in acknowledging the fact that those individuals are/were part of a communal group; just as an individual is part of the group, so an individual's name is part of the collective application" (Levi-Strauss, 1966, p.174). But beyond the marginal interests of anthropologists and linguists are contemporary students of folklore and oral literature who now devote substantial time and energy to the study of names and naming. "Names evoke the history and culture of a people; reflecting the way people think and see the world around them" (Meiring 1994, P.64). And for Finnegan (1970), names have great significance, especially in the way they, among other things, reflect immense literary flavour, in addition to the ancestral links and continuity which Mbiti insists they resonate. According to Chauke's study on "personal names and naming, practices among the vatsonga", "modern parents prefer to cultivate a spirit of onomastic individualism or creativity and search for a special, perhaps unique names for their child" (Chauke, 2015, P.306). This view is a reflection of when an East African linguistic folklorist says, in a study that explores the metaphoric dimensions of onomastics, that a name is like a book: one can read the history of the individual or the family in the time and space. People's names across African ethnic groups have a meaning tagged to them; an African name defines an

individual because it goes beyond an identity and is connected to an infant's character as it grows up, and can either build or demean its reputation (Onchoke, 2018, P.89).

Onomastics genre in folklore

There are aspects of relationship between onomastics especially place names and folklore which has given rise to them as valuable elements for the understanding of life today. "Names, like stories, are linguistic performances; so the twin disciplines of folkloristic and place name studies can learn from each other's methods. Some names offer straightforward evidence for traditional culture, but others are rhetorical, not literal" (Harte 2019, p.90). Allusions to goblins, giants, and the devil derive from playful storytelling rather than supernatural belief, while names of landmarks are used as pegs on which to hang local legends. The rules for coining names have varied through to highlight moral or imaginative content. As we move into a more semiotically aware onomastics, we find ourselves interpreting names from a realm of popular idiom and allusion which is already familiar from folklore.

In a strikingly revealing article on onomastics published in 2004 by Lantern, Ndlova and Sibanda, and entitled "Ndebele children's names as reservoirs of history and culture", the trio argues that names given to Zimbabwean children during and after the anti-colonial struggle in that country reflect the experiences of that struggle in various ways; such a name because an instrument of solidarity in so far so it encouraged members of the community to fight anyone who would invade their source of survival: these names were developed in an environment of conflict and are vital chronicle for popular resistance. They are a powerful expression of resistance and can encapsulate an experience in the past or can threaten an action in the future (Pfukwa 2007, P.10). Among such names were futuristic names given during the crisis and anticipating liberation, names marking the end of the war in 1980 and the expectation of the triumphant people and names reflecting whether situations, like tropical cyclones which now constituted new crisis areas that turned the citizen's attention from the foregone war.

Moving over to Nigeria, there have been onomastics studies in some of our ethnic groups that reveal some comradeship with the trend we have seen elsewhere, and a few of them can be mentioned. Modupe Oduyoye's Yoruba names: their structure and meanings, published in 1972, was the first in the publications embarked on by the Ibadan-based daystar press as a series that would go around some of the major ethnic groups in Nigeria. It reveals what can be regarded as African onomastics universals that include the following: the nature of life of a corporate personality; names as vehicle that drives identification, recognition, and relevance in the larger society, constituting integral part of human existence; names used to accentuate and situate the signification of experience, event or phenomenon. For the Yoruba, names are instruments of arousing, defining, manifesting and establishing the expectations, aspirations and consciousness of the bearers. While some of these names are believed to be bestowed on the bearers by virtue of some special extra-ordinary features and circumstances about their birth, some derive either as praise names/cognomen (Oriki) or as class-based names indicating some links with royalty. This is akin to what obtains in Ogba kingdom, the focus of this paper.

Again, some names reveal people's belief in certain deities like Ogun (god of iron), Oya (the river goddest) or Sango (the thunder deity), while some others, like Abiodun reflects that the bearer was born in a season of celebration. While some Yoruba names have something to do with family professions, others are historical indicators, like names that arose as a result of the Yoruba inter-communal conflicts exacerbated by the colonial presence and anti-colonial resistance. All these instances prevail in Ogba in a similar manner.

Oduyoye's book could be regarded as an inspiration to a similar book by Ebo Ubahakwe, published in 1981, and entitled *Igbo names, their structure and their meanings,* which could have been the first of its in Igbo but the following studies predate it: Wieschoft's 1941. *"The social significance of names among the Ibo of Nigeria"*. Ilogu's 1974 *Christianity and Igbo culture*, Obiechina's 1975 *Culture tradition and society in the west African novel,* and Ifemesia's 1979 *Traditional humane living among the Igbo (an historical perspective).*

The Ogba sources approached Ogba onomastics from sociological, socio-religious, chieftaincy and historical perspectives respectively and reveal such onomastics

considerations on the factors determining the name given to a child, like the day of the native work on which a child is born, the historical incident peculiar to the child's birth or circumstance of the parents and the philosophical or socio-religious faith which the child stimulates in the parents. Other onomastics revelations in these sources include whether they are pet names, unique names or given names, the social situation reflected at the time of the birth of the child, who is supposed to have reincarnated and the past and present circumstances of the child's family, including their hopes and aspirations.

A male child is christened *Ekne* if the child is born on *Ekne* day or during a sacrifice or a masquerade performance. *Uzor* is given to a male child born on the road to the market, village and "an *Ogbanje* child" who repeatedly dies after birth. The female equivalence of the male names are *Eknemma*, *Ogalauzor*, *Oriema, Nkwomma, Ahwomma* and such other names that explain events an circumstances. Similarly, a male child in Ogba is named *Ikwuadi* meaning the absence of relatives at the birth of the child, indicating trouble in the family and *Ikwuladi* is the direct opposite, meaning the presence of relatives signifying peace in the family at the birth of the child.

In a recent study, Ohia (2020) in his Ogba Reader Project Book: *Ibido Olu Ogba Nwnaohnuna* which means "Beginning Ogba Language Book 1" touches on onomastics-names generally in Ogba language.

The discourse in *Ibido Olu Ogba Nwnaohnuna* raises the fact that practically all the names used are names of person, place and thing. The author places on record that names are very important as names in Ogba are gender-based what the male bears is different from what the female bears, the interpretation of meaning is the same. No matter the difference in name, it is clear that Ogba society features women who have contributed immensely to the social, economic, ritual and political power and influence in Ogba kingdom. This fact is reflected in the names or sobriquets given to women at birth and in marriage. The patterns of gender roles, in modern society and in Nigeria generally are changing drastically and modern Ogba male traditionalist no longer give culturally suggestive names or sobriquets to their daughters in-law as was the old practice.

Even the women are essentially resistant to the giving of such names to them. These women need to adapt to reality of full participation in culture-based issues in their husband's homes. One observes the increasing percentage of unisexuality in Ogba onomastics and it would not be surprising if such unisexuality invades the area of culturally suggestive names. The praise epithets which very economically successful women in Ogba society prefer to choose for themselves in modern times are clear indicators of the increasing unisexuality in Ogba onomastics. The rest of the present discourse can be said to have been inspired by this conclusion, and in the rest of this paper we shall devote attention to what the people call "Female Onomastics".

Preliminary observations on female onomastics

Most arguments aimed at highlighting the role of women in societies as revealed in folklore often began by recognising the dominant, perhaps hegemonic, positions of male issues over females. Nonola in her study on *"Gender, culture and folklore"* recognises that the shaping of most cultures the world over is selective and male-centred, and that explains why the goal of folkloristic feminism is to try to identify what part women have played in oral tradition, including what sort of traditions they have used and how. She argues in favour of a subaltern position in discussed folklores since "folklore as an instrument of contestation is a weapon used by the oppressed against those in power, in order to question, make ridiculous or invalidate dominant ideas and worldviews" (Nonola 1999, p.24). Elsewhere, in "The contribution of Queer-Theory to gender and language research" in a paper intended to investigate the meaning of "wifehood" for Luba-Kasaayi woman instantiated in folk song, Saunston (2008) argues that girls who sing and enact folk songs are unwittingly participating in constructing a biased culture in which they will be evolved later on as wives.

By passing down such a culture from generation to generation, oral literature in general, and the folk sing is particular, can be said to perpetuate woman's low status and marginalisation particularly in remote villages. But Sofola in Hudson-weems has argues that "as the female gender is the centre of life" in all cultures; "the magnet that holds the social cosmos intact and alive. Destroy her and destroy life itself". In this spirit as embodied in Sofola's thought, Aili (1989) in "women, names and power", opines that "research on the naming traditions of many

cultures… has revealed that women often control [name-giving] even where they have few other powers". This view is upheld by the practice for women, in some South African ethnic communities, to give "birth and fore names" to children which the men folk allowed because most of the men were away in cities at work at the moments of birth, pending when the family members are later given the responsibility of having to name the child; often they allowed the names already given by the women to stay (Herbert, 1992, Pp.1-19). An aspect of this female influence in onomastics practices is a revelation that, among the vatsonga of Mozambique, a child may be named according to the behavior of the mother, especially when under pregnancy. (Junob 1912, p.39).

But, all told, onomastics practices in most parts of the world are shaped by male influence and ideology, arising most often from the factor of patriarchal domination. The rituals, circumstances and personalities participating in naming ceremonies are often male-centred, with the result that at times, sociological circumstances involving naming are manipulated, often subtly, by the women in order to create a voice for themselves. It is in this light that one can discuss women sobriquets (aliases) in the Ogba culture, ancient and modern.

Women sobriquets among the Ogba: then and now

The typical, traditional, naming ceremony among the Ogba usually takes place seven native weeks (28 days) after the birth of the baby. This may not be the situation now that most Ogba families have embraced the Christian faith and so reserve a child's naming only to the usual christening ceremony, a church-affair that takes pl̄ac̄e a few months after the birth of the child. In the traditional set-up, the ritual of the naming ceremony is superintended by the eldest man in the family *imulo* who may not even be the father of the child. The name to be given to the child is usually determined by the father of the child, though he usually does this after prior consultation with the child's mother. The child may be given many names some of which are contributed by the child's grandparents, though the name that remains popular is usually the one chosen by the parents.

The onomastics tradition in this context is thus a patriarchal affair; children are expected to bear names that perpetuate male-centred expectations in the kindred and community. Even when the child is female, she is still the daughter of the clan

who is expected to promote the interest of patriarchal hegemony. Names of a female member of most Ogba communities are thus determined for them rather than by them and the only opportunity for a woman, when she is grown, to be addressed by what she prefers is through the choice of sobriquets. The practice is therefore for daughters and wives of families to choose for themselves sobriquets for which they are known both at home and in the larger society, though, more often than not, it is the larger society that broadcasts the sobriquets more than the home. However, for the married women (wives) they are mostly addressed by the name given to them by their father-in-law and mother-in-law on the day they were escorted to their husbands' home.

A sobriquet is thus a "nickname" or "false name" in the sense that it is not usually the original name by which a person is known from birth. It is an assumed name, often chosen for the bearer or by the bearer of the name himself or herself. Some of them, though, may have been given by outsiders who may have noticed some habits or traits peculiar to any individual and have decided to "nickname" the individual by that name. For example, a fair complexioned child or lady may attract to herself the sobriquet *Nwnaynaochna* (the fair/yellow woman or *Utukpe* (the shinning lantern). She may be addresses as this as a young person, but as she grows up, she may want to be addressed as Madam *Nwnaynaochna*, in which case a "nickname" matures into an alias. For the man, he may be called "*Nwoknochna*" meaning fair man.

It is these sobriquets/aliases that we want to address in the rest of this paper. Because the bearers are often mature and established, they often choose these names by themselves and or accept (it given to them by another person) and use them as medium for female affirmation; they enjoy being called by the names and they popularise them socially in their women meetings, business enterprises and even female church organizations. In this family marriage, they are addressed by such names as adopted by the parents-in-law only. They must not be called by any other names. Such names include the following:

S/N	SOBRIQUETS	SYNTACTIC STRUCTURE	MEANING AND SOCIAL/METAPHORIC VALUES
1.	Nwnaynaoyibo	Nwnayna oyibo	"Child of the white man". Usually borne by wives of educated people whom society looks up to travel abroad with their wives.
2.	Ogbnoynialụa	Ogbnoyni alụa	"Poor person cannot marry". Given to extremely beautiful women who are expected to be married by rice people.
3.	Oyibolalụ	Oyibo lalụ	"The white/English man will marry". Given to wives who are intelligent and presumed to be married by an intelligent man or English man.
4.	Diabịagwụ	Di bịagwụ	"So many husbands come and woo her". Given to a woman who had rejected so many suitors before her marriage.
5.	Oyneure	Oyne ure	"A proud person". Title given to a beautiful proud wife who moves with elegance and respect.
6.	Nwnabrịaori	Nwna brịa ori	"Child who came to enjoy wealth". Title given to a wife presumed to enjoy her husband's wealth.
7.	Orianụ	Ori anụ	"Meat Eater". Title given to a child born into the family hunters as such enjoys much meat.
8.	Odozniaknụ	Odozni aknụ	"Protection/keeper of wealth". Usually given to the first wife of a polygamous family and whose husband enjoys her support in the creation of wealth.

9.	Nwnaohu	Nwna ohu	"Very tall child". Usually reserved for elegant and tall wives.
10.	U̲ro̲kra	U̲ro̲ kra	"Full of pride". Given to a wife whose moving gait is admired by her husband's family.
11.	Egoyibo	Ego oyibo	"English money". Name given to a girl who is presumed to be a source of wealth to her family or husband's family.
12.	Ugirimanna	Ugiri manna	"An elderly woman". Name given by a woman to elderly co-wives.
13.	Ewhnagwu̲	Ewhna gwu̲	"Exhaustive name". Usually given to a woman who was used to name calling.
14.	Ehuyiriaznu ̲	Ehu̲ yiri aznu ̲	"Body that resembles fish". Usually given to a woman with soft and smooth body like a fish.
15.	Nwnaynaukwu	Nwnayna ukwu	"Huge woman". Usually given to a woman who is huge both in stature, status and financially stable.
16.	O̲do̲bo̲nwnayna	O̲do̲bo̲ nwnayna	"Big and strong woman. Often given to a woman who has an imposing physical and financial stature.
17.	Ogirigirinwnayna	Ogirigiri nwnayna	"Grandeurous woman". Often given to a woman whose husband enjoys her support.
18.	Ojeoyibo	Oje-oyibo	"Travelling abroad". Usually given to successful philanthropic woman who travels to overseas at will.
19.	Nwnaynau̲zo ̲	Nwnayna u̲zo ̲	"Road woman". Given to a child who has died severally and

			returned to family or an influential woman trader.
20.	Asamma	Asa mma	Beautiful "gymmardius niloncus" fish Given to a woman with the grandeur of the "asa" fish.
21.	Eynaasa	Eyna asa	Eye of "gymmardius niloncus" fish. Given to a woman who has the small, romantic and beautiful eyes of the "asa" fish.
22.	Nwadilaekwo	Nwa di la ekwo	"Child in the book". Given to a child regarded as a gift from God to the community because of her exemplary character and disposition to education.

The sobriquets above represent those that are traditional and have been enjoyed by women right from the olden times to the contemporary situation. They are achievement-oriented names which highlight a society characterised by capitalist predilections for which the Ogba society has been known for long, characterised by the following respect for self-made persons; a love for competitiveness in all aspects of endeavour, an admiration for the spirit of pushfulness, a readiness for adventure, a preference for titles, a tolerance for acquisitiveness and a brusqueness for the less-successful person. Some of these sobriquets were/are chosen by the bearers, while some were/are attracted by the bearers from those either close to them or who admire them. The sobriquets therefore uphold values in support of the statuesque for being the socio-political and cultural structures that promote patriarchy and they subordination of women in the society. They are not iconoclastic but may promote female independence and voice. But they do differ from the new forms of sobriquets peculiar to contemporary Ogba women which we now turn to:

S/N	SOBRIQUETS	SYNTACTIC STRUCTURE	MEANING AND SOCIAL/METAPHORIC VALUES
1	Eresi̲a	Ere si̲a	"Pigeon". Given to a woman that is very calm and well-behaved.
2	Obulo̲r	Obu lo̲r	"Restful mind". Given to a woman whose parents have passed through the vicissitudes of life.
3	Nwnaynaebe	Nwnayna ebe	Woman pungent, straight and unequivocal.
4	Nwnaoji	Nwna oji	"Black child". A dark complexioned woman and full of elegance.
5	Nwnasa	Nwna asa	"Child of asa fish". Name given to a beautiful woman, full of ideas and very influential.
6	Onynewnonka	Oyne ewno nka	"The person that has no personal property". The person that lacks her personal property is not respected in the society.
7.	Ibuzo̲akwnu̲	Ibuzo̲ akwnu̲	"First wealth". A woman who creates wealth jointly with her husband.
8.	Whneo̲mabu̲ego	Whne o̲ma bu̲ ego	"A good thing is wealth". Given to a woman, an elegant, beautiful and well-dressed woman.
9.	Oriaznu̲	Ori aznu̲	"Fish eater". Given to an expensive woman who enjoys the wealth of her husband.
10.	Ewhuyiriaznu̲	Ewhu yiri aznu̲	"Body that glitters like fish". Borne by a beautiful and elegant woman.

11.	Nwnaoyneọzọ	Nwna oyne ọzọ	"Child of another man". The bearer is regarded influential and important as another man's daughter.
12.	Ekajụa	Eka ajụa	"No hand will touch her". Borne by a dependable woman who is highly respected by her husband and his people. Usually born by wealthy parents.
13.	Ireju	Ire ju	"Thinking too much". Borne by a woman whose parents were in a deep thought as a result of losses.
14.	Ucheju	Uche ju	"Too much thinking/sense". Borne by a woman who thinks/condemns evil without fearing that she could be guilty of what she condemns.
15.	Oriasa	Ori asa	"Asa fish eater". Borne by a universal, beautiful and dependable lady.
16.	Ọgaluzọ	Ọga la ụzọ	"Moving on the road". A woman who made her wealth through trade or an "ogbanje" child.
17.	Whneọmamadụ emeniibna	Whneọma madụ emeni ibna	"A good thing that a person cannot give to another person". The bearer is very influential person who cannot be joked with.
18.	Omenọgọ	Ome nim ọgọ	"God did good". Borne by a rich and very expensive woman. She is believed to be a gift from God.
19.	Oriemma	Orie mma	"Good orie day". A woman born on orie day, the first day of ogba week.

20.	Eknemma	Ekne mma	"Good Ekne day". A woman born on Ekne day, the fourth day of the native week meant for sacrifices.
21.	Madam Hoha	Madam Ho ha	Woman known for her sociability. Borne by very gregarious ladies who are always accepted by women in social gatherings.
22.	Madam Show-working	Show working	Woman known for her progressive views. Borne by a woman who always advices that there must be achievement in life's activity.
23.	Madam Beer	Madam beer	Woman known for selling and drinking beer. Borne by a woman who sells and drinks beer.

The above sobriquets (aliases), collected from old and contemporary female persons in communities in and around Ogba, Rivers State, Nigeria are borne by women who can be regarded as elites in their communities. They are not equally educated but most of them are literate. They live in both local and semi-urban areas but always frequent their native communities for their meetings and other social and religious activities. These activities are purely female-centred and the men folk are not often involved. It can be seen that the sobriquets boost the ego of the women and they derive joy being together and referring to themselves with the men breathing over their shoulders, some of the things they say and claim to do are iconoclastic in so far as they can determine that authority and ego of the men. For example, some of them can be larger than life, so huge and authoritative that they could be a kind of "terror" to some men. Madam Hoha may be too sociable for her husband's liking, and could "electrocute" even the men folk. One could argue that the actions of the women are still a triumph over patriarchy, and it must be admitted that the situation upsets patriarchal hegemony, since women were not allowed to bear such names in the community before then.

Conclusion

A good number of the sobriquets like *Oriasa*, *Whne-oma-bu-ego*, *Omenogo*, Madam Beer and others, emphasise the beauty and enlarged economic stature of the women. This emphasis could degenerate into an issue that could cause status imbalance in the home; husbands could feel super-jealous, whether rightly or wrongly, and the homes become destabilised. There are others of such sobriquets we have examined which have the potential for threatening male hegemony. One is not actually frightened by this, for we do not believe in a society of perfect or near perfect hegemony, without contestations. The change in gender re-alignments in our contemporary Africa (Ogba) society is an inevitable adjustment occasioned by forms by women emancipation in the society.

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