

WHAT IS IN A (SUR)NAME? IGBOS AND THE GRADUAL OBLITERATION OF THEIR IDENTITY: A CAUSE FOR CONCERN

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ABSTRACT

For the Igbo, globalization is one significant event that is considerably changing his/her values, culture, language, and practices. Time was when an Igbo could easily be identified by his cultural values and language. Today, the Igbo spirit of adaptation and adoption of the values and cultures of his/her place of birth and growth, education and residence, has been stretched to breaking point. The resultant effect is the evident loss of “some Igboness” of Igbos in diaspora and even Igbos at home in various states of Igbo land. It is the loss of ‘some Igboness’ that will lead to what we have described as the gradual obliteration of the Igbo identity. This is seen in the gradual but progressive penchant for change of Igbo ethnic surnames into foreign or Anglo-Saxon surnames. For instance, an Igbo formerly identified as ‘Okechukwu Okafo,’ accepts to be christened ‘John’ giving him the names – ‘John Okechukwu Okafo.’ When he becomes a parent, instead of bequeathing ‘Okafo’ as the surname to his children, he transmits to them ‘John.’ That makes the Igbo son born and christened ‘Michael’ to become identified as ‘Michael John.’ The new identification tag unfortunately deracinates him from his cultural heritage into Anglo-Saxon lineage of which he knows nothing about. This growing tendency poses a great danger to Igbo identity and calls for serious cause for concern. We investigated the new students in a faculty and found evidence of Igbo identity obliteration mostly by parental ignorance. Our approach is expository, educative and corrective.

INTRODUCTION

The question of Igbo identity is becoming more and more complex by the day given the complex and multifaceted history, culture, experiences, assimilative and gregarious nature of the Igbo. The vehicle of our culture and the expression of our ancient tradition—Igbo language—is threatened with extinction today more than ever. While some of the factors bringing that extinction are externally brought upon us, some are self-engineered. One of those self-engineered factors that is speedily leading to the obliteration of the Igbo identity is the change of Igbo surnames into Christian or baptismal or foreign names; foreign in the sense that such names are neither linguistically, ethnically, culturally, nor nationally inspired. It is the observation of Scassa that: “names form a part of a language system, that language is central to individual identity, and that language is an important tool in the construction of national identity” (1996, p. 168). How then will Igbos participate in the construction of their national identity, when they are busy denying their language and the visible mark of their identity, their Igbo surnames?

Today one can correctly assert that though mastery of Igbo language is a valid gage for ‘Igboness’ of an Igbo person, it is not indispensable. As a vehicle of communication, anybody from anywhere can conveniently master Igbo language if he/she deems the language necessary for his/her survival. Igbos in diaspora evidently mingle and thrive in foreign lands by, among other things, the mastery of the language of the place. More often than not, that language mastery does not suffice to make them autochthonous indigenes of their place of habitation.

Conferment of chieftaincy titles and other titles was one of the characteristics of Igboness of the Igbo person, when those titles were conferred by the true Kings of the communities and in some cases by the communities themselves. Other titles like Nze, Ozo, Ichie, Lolo etc., usually conferred upon meriting and worthy sons and daughters of various communities by which such receivers of the titles become privileged members of the special groups of honest, hardworking, and righteous people. The value of these titles has drastically been affected by among other things, the deadly and corruptive influence of money, which in some places has made the revered titles available to the highest bidder regardless of the character deficiency. Even in diaspora, these titles are now conferred on diaspora sons and daughters of Igbo parents, but who know little or nothing about the Igbo culture and the significance of the titles they receive. Can these diasporans stand and offer in traditional ways, the sacred Kola nut to *Chukwu Okike* and invite the hallowed assistance of our ancestors—the *Ndi Ichie*? Do they really understand the Kola nut which Achebe (2012) described as “a sacred fruit and had a very distinct and distinguished role in Igbo life and culture” (p. 10)?

We know our people were overtly religious and still, to certain extent, are. One of the most powerful encounters that affected and still affect the Igboness of the Igbo person is the Christian religion. It is one of the signs of belongingness to a Christian denomination to accept a Christian name, which means foreign names introduced to us as those of saints, that is, those who have attained holiness through the practice of Christian virtues. Taking their names signifies that we have become new beings and have the assistance of our saint-models in our journey of faith. A once named ‘Okechukwu Ofoegbu’ would accept ‘Peter’ as a baptismal name to show his new status. That would make him the bearer of three names – ‘Peter Okechukwu Ofoegbu.’ The one change however which would cause much distress was the order to abandon Igbo titles as they were seen to be “unchristian.” I remember the experience of some of our titled men who were torn apart between keeping their titles received from so called “heathen chiefs and kings” and receiving conversion into Christianity which implied at that time, the rejection of those titles and their paraphernalia. We consider the interaction between Achebe’s father and his uncle Udoh on the need to accept Christianity and go along with the rest of the family and the society at large. As reported by Achebe (2012):

His uncle pointed to the awesome row of insignia of his three titles—*ichi ozo, ido idemili, ime omaalor*. “What shall I do to these?” he asked my father. It was an awesome question. He had essentially asked: “What do I do to who I am? What do I do to history?” (pp. 12-3)

That poignant passage has confirmed that titles were important in Igbo land for Igbo people. Titles defined not only history of the person but his identity as Igbo man and custodian of our ancient Igbo tradition. Those titles had Igbo names and meanings attached to them through which they conveyed the conviction, the traditional values and history of the people. Achebe’s uncle was at a crossroad: was he to keep his identity or “throw all that away because some strangers from afar had said so” (p.13)? Of course, Udoh held on to his identity.

We remember the famous passage where Shakespeare asked the rhetorical question: ‘What is in a name?’ Our sense in the use of that question is to address a phenomenon that is increasingly becoming normal among the Igbos of the Southeast Nigeria. It is about replacing traditional Igbo surnames with ‘foreign’ or ‘English’ names that were personal names acquired from Christian, sacramental baptism. For instance, ‘Okechukwu Ofoegbu’ after receiving baptism becomes ‘Peter Okechukwu Ofoegbu’ or simply ‘Peter Ofoegbu’. When he becomes a parent,

he hands over his personal, baptismal name ‘Peter’ as surname to his children. Thus, if the child is Michael by baptism, his full name becomes ‘Michael Peter’. How does ‘Peter’ as a surname culturally identify Michael as an Igbo man? Is this not an indirect and ignorant denial of one’s race and identity?

My write up is inspired by the startling discovery I made of the surnames of the newly arrived year one students in one departmental course of a university. Out of one hundred and seventy-nine students offering the course, twelve of them, though all Igbos, had foreign surnames that distanced them from identification with Igbo race, family or lineage. They had names, surnames first before personal names like: Kelvin Petra, Vitus Olive, Hyacinth Favour, Peters Teresa, Fidelis Angel, Josephat Stella, Henry Jude-Mary, Francis Benedict, St. Anthony Faith, Josephat-Nweke Sharon and Ben-Ezenwa Evelyn. The last two indicate a different trend among Igbos, a mixture of foreign and Igbo names perhaps to demarcate their own families from other families of the same parents having the same family name. Theirs is of lesser gravity than the rest.

When I went into other faculties and looked at the names, I discovered that such foreign surnames of Igbo families are gradually becoming *a la mode*. My interaction with the students bearing such names, revealed a total ignorance of the implications of bearing such surnames; almost all said that they were given the surnames by their parents who had them as their first or baptismal names. The first confusion it sows in the family is to have parents and children having two different surnames. How would they wriggle out of such self-inflicted wound when they are required to present certificates bearing proofs of the same parentage for their kids? The second confusion is that such ‘foreign’ surnames de-roots the bearers from their true family lineage and race into a foreign ethnic group who neither knows them, accepts them nor will ever identify with them. Are we not foreseeing the seeds of future identity crisis being sown in silence and ignorance? Thus, the importance of creating this awareness and educating our people on the reason for holding onto our Igbo surnames.

NAMES AND SURNAMES: MEANING AND DERIVATION

Names and surnames in Igbo culture are not chosen by chance. While personal names are chosen by the parents, surnames are handed over from parents to their children while respecting the family lineage and the sacred traditions of our ancient culture. Surnames are in effect indicative of people tied together by the relationship of blood and passed down from one generation to another. Surnames are not only reflective of who we are, they are also indicative of where we are coming from. Davies (2011, p. 565) notes that “the potential of surname as a signifier of heritage and as a way of locating the family and kin group in a wider web of relationships.” Names usually come about because of so many factors affecting the birth and circumstances of a child or person, and surnames in most cases are the names of the patriarchs of the family. Personal names are chosen by parents in accordance with certain factors. They could be circumstances of birth, day of birth, events that took place before, during and after conception and birth, the family history and lineage, family values and dreams, etc. Thus, a child born during the war could be given a name like ‘Aghadiuba – war is multiple; ‘Aghaegbuna’ – let war not kill; ‘Aghadinjo’ – war is evil etc., to remind the parents the circumstances of the child’s birth and perhaps their survival of the war because of the child. Names—personal names—were conveyed through the language of the people and would

always resonate with the community whose heritage and values the names communicate. As observed by Nnamdi-Eruchalu (2018):

A personal name is a name that belongs to an individual and which serves as a label for him or her. It is the distinct identity which every individual bears. It is the standard practice in all cultures for every individual to be named at birth. (p. 171)

When Christianity became a major religion among the Igbos, the use of foreign or Christian or baptismal names as personal names became the mode. Apart from traditional names given by parents after birth, the child received a second personal 'Christian' name on the day of his or her sacramental baptism. These two names then precede the family name that we call surname.

Surnames are names that define a person according to parental, family, ethnic, national, linguistic and cultural heritage. For the Igbo, surnames reflect their cosmology; the Igbo understanding of the world in which they live and move, the belief system that shapes their relationship with visible and invisible forces, their values and ideology, their belongingness to a given society. It is a natural given that surnames which can communicate all these local experiences and historical values must be in the local language. Igbo tradition also makes room for a child born outside of marriage. If the father of the unmarried mother of the illegitimate child is still alive, custom would dictate that the child gets recognition by adopting the surname of the grandfather. By that, the child becomes automatically the child of the grandfather and a member of the family. Every surname as noted by Scassa (1996) has a "history which belongs to the community of people as part of their language" (p. 168).

The most important character of Igbo surnames is that they are mostly patronymic following from a culture that is patrilineal. Family references are usually made to the father of the family or a male ancestor of the family. In some exceptional cases and in some parts of Igboland, some surnames are metronymic where they refer to the contributions of the mother, for example Ezeakunne, Akunne etc. The surname as in 'Ezeakunne' references the kingly lineage that included a rich queen mother. As noted by Ibemesi (2011):

In Idemili local government area of Anambra State, people answer Akunne, which means "mother's wealth" to show that the bearer is enjoying the wealth of the mother. Nnewulu is another surname which means "mother graced me." Again, as with patronymic, the above names tell some story about the bearers. They are not just mere identification tags. When in a male-dominated society, families answer surnames that show they were made by a woman's "sweat," this goes to show the historical importance of names as records of family and community history. (p. 156)

Another significant function of Igbo surnames is the unmistakable identity it confers on the bearers. Those who are abreast with different ethnicities of the world would not find it difficult to localize the bearers merely by seeing the surnames in their vehicle of communication which is the local language. As succinctly captured by Scassa (1996):

Ethnic surnames are a useful model for making links between languages and individual identity, language and national identity, and the identification of the individual with the nation state. (p. 168)

Some Igbos in diaspora who fortunately are interested in knowing their root and safeguarding their cultural heritage adhere to the Igbo family surname transmitted to them by their parents. Though they may not understand the language of their roots, they do hold on to the fact that they have a family root that can be validly traced in time and space. The pride of knowing the cultural significance of their surnames, would keep them basically assured of a past rich in history.

LANGUAGE AND CULTURE:

Given that culture is the mode of life of a people, it must be communicated through language. This makes the two inextricably bound. As a means of communication, language reflects the values of a culture, and transmits the knowledge, traditions, laws and cultural history of a given people. The visible sign of such values is in the names and surnames with which a given people are identified. Language and culture, according to Akindele and Adegbite (2005), are connected in three major ways:

First, it is an aspect of culture – one of the very many objects and institutions of culture. Second, language is an instrument of thought. It helps to concretize thought and also to explore, extend and record the experiences in a culture. Third, language expresses culture. It is the only way by which the social experiences and values of a group of people are perceived and understood. (pp. 5-6)

Surnames or family names are very important and significant on both cultural and social contexts. At least in Igbo culture, the surname is a vehicle that conveys lineage and family history. It immediately indicates, in most cases, ethnic origins and nationality. Ethnic origins are engraved in languages that vehicle surnames throughout the world. A classic example may be given with the names displayed by professional footballers on their team jerseys. I remember immediately the professional footballer for Crystal Palace Football club in England. His name reads: ‘Eberechukwu Eze’ on his team jersey. The name automatically tells those familiar with the language and the name that this player has Igbo roots in Southeastern Nigeria, though he may be representing England on international assignments. Those interested could meet him to know about his roots, and his history. That is what surnames do; they convey identity and immediately connect individuals to their ancestral lineage and community.

Those who hold on to their Igbo identities in their surnames, understand and value their traditional Igbo history. They understand the value of their language in conveying meanings that go beyond time and locations. Unfortunately, those who replace their Igbo names for foreign or exotic names, not only disparage their origins and history, but more importantly showcase themselves as ignorant of who they are and where they are coming from. They help to perpetuate the evil of colonialism, and have become in themselves, enemies of their own Igbo race and identity. They are in fact displaying badges on themselves perpetually asking “who are we?” “What is the meaning of our existence?” “Our lives perhaps belong to others.” In short terms, they are saying that they have obliterated their identity and would become specimens for identity crisis in the future.

THE MOST IMPORTANT SOURCES OF IGBO SURNAMES

Having seen the meaning and importance of surnames and given that there is nothing more traditional than surnames, it is important to note some of the known source or sources from which the Igbo derive their surnames. The Igbo surnames are usually derived from the following factors:

i. Ancestry:

This is the most important determinant of Igbo surnames. Fortunately, it is not only the Igbos who take their surnames according to ancestral lineage. Ancestors signify the source and origin of families. Surnames pay homage to these founders of families and are pointers to a shared lineage and heritage. The biblical accounts of Jewish families bear witness to the importance of having names taken from ancestral lineage. A good example is the event of the birth of John the Baptist. When it was time to name him, the relatives objected to the name “John” prechosen by divine fiat and made known to the parents Zechariah and Elizabeth. They wondered how the parents came about that name and objected, “no one in your family has that name” (Lk 1:61ff). Outside of names chosen by divine fiat, Jewish families give names to their offsprings with strict adherence to their ancestral and family lineage. This still holds in various races and ethnic groups of the world. The Igbos as noted by Onwuatuegwu (2023) pay much attention to their ancestral lineage as it is a link to the community’s past, “fostering a sense of communal identity and continuity” (p. 92). When ancestors are rightly honoured and respected, they bestow blessings upon their descendants. Conversely, they allow curses to make their paths very rough and unprogressive. One of the ways of disrespecting our hallowed ancestors is by throwing away their names from the family lineage and heritage. The ancestral lineage is a vital link between the living and the spiritual realm which ensures continual guidance and providence. In certain cases, families who have maintained the same ancestral lineage for centuries get easy access by the mention of that name, to so many closed doors. It only suffices to have an ancestor in the lineage that lived well and rose to a position of high status and respect in the society, for the descendants to be accorded such privileges.

ii. Occupation and Titles:

In some cases, in Igbo culture, surnames also reflect traditional occupations or titles that were once the identifiers of ancestors. Names like “Igwe,” “Eze,” “Ogbuefi,” “Ogbuagu,” “Ogbuinyinya,” “Agu,” “Nze,” “Ezeudo, Ezeoke, Ezeigwe, Ezeakacha, Ezeabata,” etc., are synonymous with titles, occupations and achievements. The surnames portray the kingly lineage of the families who answer them. That gives you a special honour and privilege knowing that you share the lineage of kings and chiefs. Some of these occupational names highlight specific excellencies of the bearers, and in such a way chronicle the historical achievements of the bearers in question. For example, “Ogbuagu” refers to a man of courage and valour, who is not just a hunter but one who has the courage to encounter and kill lions. “Ogbuehi” shows a wealthy man who kills cows and offers them for the benefit of others.

iii. Names of Gods, Deities and Markets of the Land:

In Igbo cosmology, there are spirits who also control the Igbo week called ‘izu.’ The days are named after gods or sky-spirits like ‘Eke,’ ‘Oye,’ ‘Afo,’ and ‘Nkwo.’ According to Afigbo (1983):

The Nri say that the days of the Igbo week—Eke, Orie, Afo (Aho) and Nkwo—were revealed to them in the beginning by Chukwu, and that these names were the names of sky-beings or spirits. (p. 62)

These market days are fundamental names uniting all peoples of Igbo stock throughout the world. Those who count those names as their market days inevitably belong to the Igbo race whether they have been severed from the Igbo race by colonialism, war or state creation. Such surnames are formulated from these cardinal market days and come either as prefixes or suffixes to signal that some people are children of these spirits or are specially guarded by these spirits. For instance, in Metuh (1981) ‘Nweke, Nwankwo, Nwafo and Nwoye’ are surnames signalling sonship to the spirits as mentioned (p. 73). In other cases, the names signal that the bearers were born on the specific market days denoting their names. In this sense, ‘Nweke’ means a child born on Eke market day. ‘Nwoye’ signals ‘a child born on the Oye market day; ‘Nwafo’ denotes a child born on Afo market day; and ‘Nwankwo’ refers to a child born on Nkwo market day. Above all, these names taken after market days, according to Cekiso (2016), “are used as tools to record important events for future references” (pp. 260-2).

Other names as noted by Afigbo (1981), reflective of attachment to certain deities include ‘Ezeala, Igwekala, Ani, Udeani,’ where -Ala or Ani (Earth) is a deity responsible for fertility, morality, and the custodian of law and custom (p. 9). Be that as it may, surnames in Igbo are conveyors of historical and traditional heritages of the people. In the days when proper documentation was rare, these surnames were codes guarding the secrets, the histories, the cultural and family values of the Igbo ancient tradition.

Culturally, Igbo people take names from their personal god –‘Chi’ or after the Igbo Supreme Being–‘Chukwu’ (Great God), in recognition of the personal protection or relationship that exists between them and their personal god or between them and God Almighty. Among other things, these ‘Chi’- surnames “portray the religious belief of the Igbo people.” Names like ‘Chiwetalu’ – God provided,’ ‘Chinagolum,’ – ‘God intercedes for me,’ ‘Chikadibia,’ - ‘God is greater than doctor,’ ‘Chidubem,’ – ‘God leads me,’ ‘Chieloka’ – ‘God is thoughtful,’ etc., are some examples that refer to some form of relationship with a personal ‘Chi.’ Such names also denote the religious significance of God in the lives of the families bearing such names.

iv. Titles of Sacred Cults and Spirits often are taken as Surnames.

This shows that persons and places who take those names have special connection to the sacred cults and some form of respect to and relationship with the spirits. For instance, names like ‘Nwosu’ – child of a deity, ‘Osuji’ – the yam deity, ‘Osunkwo’ – the Nkwo deity, ‘Osuala’ – the earth deity, ‘Osueke’ – the Eke deity, etc., bear us out. Some of those names reflect respect for individuals who have distinguished themselves in certain spiritual or practical fields of Igbo life.

Other identifiers like ‘Mmuoma’–the spirit knows, ‘Mmuojekwu’ – the spirit will talk, ‘Mmuoneke’ – the spirit shares, ‘Mmuobuike’ – the spirit is strength, ‘Mmuonwendu’ – the spirit owns life, ‘Mmuolokwu’ – the spirit responds etc., are typically Igbo. These and many other unspecified surnames signify the belief the Igbo has in the abiding presence and providential care of the spirits. A Westerner can never answer related names because they signify nothing for him and have nothing to do with his/her culture, language and belief system, and can never give him power of identification. Why then do Igbos reject their own and go for

those of the Westerners? Are Igbos not the major protagonists to the obliteration of the Igbo identity in the world?

v. Historical Events:

Igbos sometimes perpetuate their remembrance of historical events in their lives by formulating names from such events. In the case of wars, deaths, births, and famines, names become vehicles of transmitting the events and their lessons to the younger generations. Though they could be traumatic experiences, families do not forget them easily. That is why such experiences enter into the family history as piece of evidence and remembrance of what nearly destroyed the family and how the family avoided it. For instance, 'Onwuegbuchu' which means 'let death not kill prematurely.' 'Onwubiko' meaning 'death please,' is a prayerful request to death to spare the living. 'Onwudinjo' is a reminder of how wicked death is, 'Onwuegbusi' means 'death do not kill' etc.

It could happen that a family could know barrenness after marriage for a long period of time. When a child eventually arrives, names like 'Sochukwuma' – 'Only God knows,' 'Ogechukwu,' – God's time, 'Uchechukwu,' – 'the will of God, 'Iheanacho' – 'what we are looking for' bespeak of answered prayers to long years of waiting and seeking for answers to particular problems of childlessness or lack of male issue in the family. It is interesting to note that some of these names which begin as personal names eventually mature as surnames for younger generations. Sometimes, hard times successfully navigated give rise to surnames which become markers of hope and expectation. After all, we say where there is life there is hope. Names like 'Umejiaku' – 'breath holds wealth,' 'Umeasiegbu' – 'life is stronger than hatred,' 'Umendu' – 'breath is life,' etc. 'Ume' means 'breath' which involves life. Once the breath of life is safeguarded, adversities would be overcome and turned into joy.

vi. From Symbols of Authority – Ofo.

Igbo people respect authority and hold it in high esteem. A man of authority is marked by among other things, his 'ofo,' an emblem which he carries around or holds conspicuously to demark his status. 'Ofo' has been variously described by Afigbo (1981). This is given the multidimensional function and status of 'Ofo.' In one instance, it is described as a 'ritual symbol of office and status' (pp. 38-46). In another instance, it is seen as a symbol confirming one's descent from a certain kingly lineage (p.38). In certain cases, it designates the lineage heads of families and communities. And yet, in a more comprehensive manner, 'Ofo' is described as "the all-important Igbo ritual staff for controlling virtually every known spirit force" (p. 50). Given the horizontal and vertical abilities associated with this symbol, and the importance and meanings attached to it, Igbos also take their surnames after 'Ofo.' For instance, surnames like 'Jidefo' – which deeply encourages one to be blameless in dealing with others; 'Ofobuike' – authority is power; 'Ofodile' – authority is potent; on a deeper level, it signifies that righteousness is more effective; 'Ofoegbu' – authority or status does not kill, 'Ofomata' – authority is knowledge; 'Ofokansi' – authority is more potent than poison; 'Ofokaja' – authority is more potent than sacrifice, etc., make reference to the importance of this in ancient Igbo tradition and custom.

BELONGING TO A COMMUNITY

The sense of belongingness that comes with a name is second to none. It is a belongingness that is innate and not given as a sign of favour to you. It comes as an inalienable right to you and

cannot be taken away from you by any jurisdiction. Once your name is written, it inserts itself into the cultural lineage of your family and gives you a sense of identity and belongingness that your social status, education, job, etc cannot give you. Our brothers and sisters living and working in foreign lands understand this so well that many parents now christen their children with their traditional names.

Igbo people take pride in their family origins and names, hence the expression *Afamefuna*—literally meaning ‘let my name not be lost.’ The advent of Christianity brought with it a lot of changes in the life, naming, and cultural standing of Igbo people. As something new, it literally became a sacred tradition to signify the change in religious status by adopting a new name, what has been called a Christian name. Thus, a child known as ‘Okechukwu Okafo,’ adopts the name ‘Michael’ by the fact of receiving the Christian sacrament of baptism. This newly adopted name, let us say, identifies the child as belonging to the family of Christians, those who have accepted to follow Jesus Christ, as saviour and redeemer of the human family. Some eventually forget the traditional name ‘Okechukwu’ and grow unto adulthood with the Christian name ‘Michael’ Okafo. Regardless of this addition of ‘Michael,’ the family name ‘Okafo’ remains intact and fully identifies this ‘Michael’ wherever he might go as fully belonging to the Igbo race.

The tragedy now occurs when ‘Michael Okafo’ becomes a parent. In the wrong understanding of ‘Afamefuna,’ ‘Michael’ registers his own child baptised ‘John’ as ‘John Michael’ where ‘Michael’ now takes the place of his child’s surname. By that singular act, the identification name ‘Okafo’ gets obliterated. Though the generation of ‘John Michael’ goes about speaking and identifying as Igbo, nothing in his document attests to that. On paper, some Europeans could easily identify with the name, but they would completely and totally reject the bearer as not being of European stock given his physical appearance. The ‘Afam’ which ‘John’ intended to guard by transferring his personal, baptismal name to his child, becomes eventually lost. It is lost because in the genealogy of Igbo people, ‘John’ is not a word that comes from Igbo language or culture and does not communicate any meaning as a name to any Igbo person. It does not and can never give a sense of belonging to the Igbo family to the bearer. It must not be forgotten that Igbo names are self-explanatory and self-identifying. Once these characteristics are missing, your name is ‘lost’. The onus and the pressure will eternally be on you to prove your belongingness to the Igbo race. Such conscious change of ethnic surnames is legally viewed in some countries as denial of one’s race and fraudulent action. The logic is that there must be some form of impersonation going on where one adopts a surname that has absolutely nothing to do with his ethnicity.

A time will still come when autochthonous people with autochthonous surnames will be fighting against foreigners who change or adopt foreign names for whatever reason without obtaining legal permission from the owners of such ethnic identities expressed in surnames. How could people be assuming names to which ethnically they have no legitimate claim?

Surnames are ethnocultural identifiers. Any change of surnames becomes automatically suspicious of the motive. Is the change trying to erase the history, the ethnicity and cultural background of the bearer, and for what reason, are some of the questions that come to mind. Are those who change their surnames into Anglo-Saxon names trying to conceal their past and their origin from the public?

There are circumstances that can lead to change of surnames. It has happened in history when in 1938 there was a racial cleansing and persecution of the Jews by the Nazis. Thus, for

purposes of security and survival, some Jews did “change” their surnames. This change would normally be temporary given the disappearance of the circumstance leading to such crimes in the first place. Politics can also motivate change of surnames as does happen in Nigeria where some people from a certain section enjoy greater privileges than the rest. Minorities would think that their ethnic surnames constitute some hindrances to their accession to higher places and work positions in the society, thus leading to change in their surnames. Those are practical instances of what Karl Marx would call ‘social and economic’ conditions shaping identity. Religious conversion especially Islam could also be another factor influencing change of surnames.

Though the law permits freedom of religion, it is doubtful whether such change of surnames is also covered by the law. Eze (2020) avers:

In view of the above, westernizing our surname means loss of identity which would result in the loss of the people’s culture and language as well ... We cannot do away with our surnames because they define us, our belief system, socio-cultural values and ethno-religious practices are embedded in them. (p. 64)

According to Anyachonkeya (2014) “We should love our language and live our language by giving our Igbo names, for our culture is our essence as a people” (p. 121), not only to identify with our Igbo names but also maintain our surnames for they are our cultural identity and heritage. We cannot do away with our surnames because they define us, our belief system, socio-cultural values and ethno-religious practices are embedded in them.

CONCLUSION

The phenomenon of change of surnames is on the rise in Southeastern part of Nigeria. Though some could argue that it is their right to change surnames, we must not forget that the society and the culture from where they come possess a social right to be respected. One factor which may also be unconsciously inducing the change into Anglo-Saxon surnames is colonialism. Where the later is the case, it even becomes more dangerous. Adopting an identity imposed by a foreign culture, is like wearing what Frantz Fanon (1952) called a “white mask” to gain perhaps some form of social respectability and acceptance. These people according to the language of Du Bois (2015) suffer the psychological disease of “double consciousness and alienation” (p. 5). This entails being alienated from their own sense of self and their own cultural heritage, and conforming to an identity that is not theirs, an identity that is a sign of violence to one’s culture. Is this not the self-obliteration of one’s identity that we are drawing attention to? The gradual replacement of ethnic surnames with foreign surnames is a tacit approval for the destruction of one’s native language as a vehicle of cultural transmission. Whether it is induced by ignorance, convenience, social or economic factors, the rejection of ethnic surnames must be halted. Igbo people must go back to reclaiming their rich, ancient and sacred tradition of choosing their surnames according to the major factors that determine such in Igbo tradition and as such respecting and valuing their ancestral, linguistic, cultural, ideological, spiritual and historical roots.

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