

Philosophy of African Names

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Introduction

The proper names that individuals bear within traditional African societies have an ontological influence on the lives of these individuals. An attempt will be made to confirm the foregoing position by addressing the question, "what is in a name"? In other words, an effort will be made to ascertain the philosophy that informs African names. In order to achieve this objective, African names will be classified and addressed under the following headings:

- * Name as Cosmological Articulation
- * Name as Personal Identity
- * Name as Teleological Guide

Name as cosmological articulation

Names as cosmological articulation situates the traditional African in a world of activities in which the individual situates his daily experiences so as to have a better understanding and subsequent control of the events that surround him. In other words, names reveal the efforts which the African person makes, including critical questioning in order to improve the understanding of his world view. According to Achebe Chinwe, "a world view is the totality of each person's assumptions which reveal his beliefs, attitudes, values and concepts and to serve to impose an order on his experiences and to provide an explanation for every thing that happens" (Achebe, 1986:9). By the imposition of "order" and the "provision of explanation" to man's experiences in the society, a sense of purpose and direction is given to him so that he will analyze and control events concerning him in the society efficiently for a better living.

In traditional Africa, the possibility of names saying something about the cosmological grounding of one's birth, scarcely raise any doubt. It is in relation to this world view that Igbo for instance, believe that the trend of things in the cosmos determine the cosmological factors that inspire

the names an individual will possess. On this basis, one may like to know if names must follow the dynamics of these cosmological determinants.

Some scholars argue that an individual's name contains historical events or circumstances prevailing in the family at the time of birth. Nze attempted to offer reasons for this situation when he said that, "names are commutative. They denote a subject who bears a particular name and they imply his circumstance or attributes or those of his obi or family. They narrate and record accurately the unfoldings of events in an obi or family" (Nze, 1984). Implicitly, the name becomes an "instrument" for recording historical events prevailing in the clan or family at the point of one's birth. This suggests that the name unites the family with their past which helps them to control and predict the future of the bearer. Since the bearer's name represents the cosmological experiences of the family or clan, can we then say that names or the bearers are those experiences? By no means! Rather, they are symbols that stand for what has transpired in the life of a particular family. In other words, names are only the articulation of the reality they tend to represent and not the realities themselves which they do not seem to exhaust.

Taking a step further, it can be held that since names are only the appearance of a reality, it will not be easy to change that which appears. This is so, because a twist on what appears beclouds the reality it seeks to represent to the person, his family or clan. In other words, while Shakespeare says that "a rose by another name will smell as sweet", the traditional African will argue that "a name says it all and that any change of name hinders the ability of the individual to relate past experiences to a present one" since the name serves as a constant reminder of the past. Thus, the uniqueness of these experiences distinguishes one person from another.

If we accept that a name as cosmological articulator reveals one's philosophy of life, aspirations, values and perceptions, what factors then inspire the giving of these names? The articulation of aspects of Igbo cosmology by names tends to reveal "the social, economic, political and religious values of the society" (Ekwunife, 1996). But as aspects of African cosmological determinant of names, do these factors help us justify the

validity of the claim that African names serve as cosmological articulation? Nonetheless, Africans believe that names that articulate their cosmological outlook help to regulate and modify an individual's behaviour and perception of the cosmos. They often say something about the relationship between the individual and society. Thus, they help appreciate the structure of African communalism which makes one's success in life possible.

The cosmological articulation of names also portrays "the hierarchy of values in a traditional African society" (Ubahakwe, 1981:102). But does it mean that names always suggest values and virtues that are highly esteemed? It is because it does that they are given to individuals and this accounts for the frequency of most names in an African society. Hence, it can be held that it is in the wake of this cosmological articulation of names that we can come to realize why some persons tend to become name sakes. But does this mean that these persons will have similar perception of reality? Or can they both stand for or represent the same reality in the same way? If they may not have similar perception of reality due to their different backgrounds and environmental factors, what then is the position of the African if these persons cannot perceive the same reality which their names represent?

African cosmological outlook encapsulate religious feelings. That is why religion permeates and influences the life experiences of Africans. Names in association with these experiences centre round certain religious objects of worship which reveal how dependent Africans are on them for their continued mercy, guidance and protection. This accounts for the fact that "African names cover a whole range of religious sentiments" (Ezeanya, 1967:10). In this regard, one begins to question the need for incorporating the names of religious objects of worship. Will the relationship of traditional Africans with these objects of worship cease if the names of the latter are not incorporated into the former? Africans go a long way to establish that the incorporation of the names of objects of worship "control the elements as well as specific aspects of the human life" (Ilogu, 1985:7). Thus, naming an individual in this manner helps to maintain their ontological relationship and helps humans respond to the controlling effects of their objects of worship. The above functions may constitute the

reason why Africans enshrine aspects of their assumptive world in their names. By incorporating the names of their objects of worship in their own names, are traditional Africans not giving themselves so cheaply to the objects of their thought? They allow themselves to be controlled and influenced by these objects. When Africans subject themselves to these objects of their hands, they strip themselves of their rationality and operate on the level of sentiments. This situation induces fear and compels them to believe that names reflecting religious objects of worship have a controlling influence in their lives. The implication is that when a person is unduly influenced by religious sentiments that are manifest in one's names, the individual lacks the ability to discover himself. The question whether names must follow the dynamics of these cosmological determinants is irrelevant. This is because names as aspects of African cultural heritage are indispensable elements through which everything that prevailed in the clan or family at the point of one's birth in relation to their cosmological outlook is revealed. Based on this position, enshrining these aspects of the African assumptive world in one's name becomes a necessity rather than an aberration, though the individual by his freedom will not be bound to acquire his name based on these cosmological dynamics.

In the light of the above exposition of the African claim that names serve as cosmological articulators, certain fundamental questions need to be addressed for a proper justification of the claim. First, by holding that when the individual situates his daily experiences accruing from his cosmological outlook in a name, that he improves the understanding of his world, does this mean that if names are not cosmological articulators that Africans cannot improve their understanding of their world? Second, if the function of name as cosmological articulator is centred on a family's experiences or conditions at the moment of birth, it implies that it concerns only the individual's family and relatives, and so has no direct dealings with the bearer. Moreover, if they are carriers of the intentions of the family or relatives, why burden the bearer with such intentions? Trying to limit his thoughts to the family and clan levels appears to interfere with his freedom of thought and action.

Third, when Africans claim that by giving names to an individual

which reflects circumstances and their experiences in life that they store and record their cosmological outlook, one wonders what has become of their memory. When the bearer dies, or changes his name, don't they still recollect those outstanding events and experiences? Also, does the giving of names inspired by cosmological factors negate or increase the value of these factors?

Fourth, apart from names, are there no other ways of keeping track of the cosmological events in the lives of traditional Africans? Among traditional Africans, it is evident that a name can be a condensation of a proverb. If this is the case, Africans should realize that the function of cosmological articulation which they assign to name is equally the function of proverbs. In this context, just like a name, an African proverb becomes another way of articulating African cosmological viewpoints.

Fifth, by the claim that names reveal African cosmological outlook on their historic past, present and future, African names may be claiming more than they can handle. This is because it may not be easy to justify or verify this claim since it is a historical account or recollection of the past experience of a family or clan. Sixth, names are aspects of African cultural heritage and making the claim that they reflect African world view as cosmological articulators may be difficult to defend. This is because African names as they strive to articulate African cosmology do not give a unified view of the cosmos which they claim to articulate. This situation arises because the articulative powers and what is uppermost in the thoughts and wisdom of a family differs from one to the other.

Despite the shortcomings of names as cosmological articulators, it is only when Africans take into account the implications of the function of names as cosmological articulators that the dynamics of African names become a valid cultural activity of man which in turn explains the cosmological realities of Africans that "not only say what reality is, but also shape the world to conform with this reality" (Ray, 1976:17).

Name as personal identity

In relation to one's personal identity, traditional Africans accept that "naming ceremony is an authentic way of ritual expression of a person's

identity. Without it, a child remains a nonentity since his name defines his personality in a community" (Ekwunife, 1996:37). By implication, one acquires his personal identity or character in a ritual of naming where he obtains a name that defines and cuts out for him the character expected of him. If this is the case, it means that the child may not have a chance to be otherwise. Thus, the dynamic nature of the human person becomes compromised. However, it is a common belief among Africans that "names are part and parcel of those elements of African culture that go to make African personhood unique" (Umorem, 1973:15). Based on this uniqueness, can't we hold that these names are meant to distinguish this individual from others through the uniqueness of his character? If this function is achieved, is the name not equivalent to his personal identity?

According to Ubahakwe (1982:27), African names are aspects of African cultural heritage and have a lot of impact on an individual's personality. By implication, these impacts are such that they project or reflect the character of the individual. This is because "each person's name moulds him into and cuts for him his separate identity" (Nze, 1989). In this way, they depict one's personality. If this is the case, we may not need to encounter a person before we know who he is or what he can do, since we already know his name. Accepting this stand, we can say that "a name has meaning identical with and deriving from the bearer" (Ehusani, 1997:131). For instance, a name like "Ekwueme" (He who does what he says) among the Igbos supports this viewpoint. There is no need to doubt the bearer of the name or to take his words with a pinch of salt since he acts according to what he says. But a question arises whether this name is the cause of the person's action or the action, the cause of the name? Does the ability to act in accordance with one's name or to be the same with one's name lie in the hands of the bearer and the society that endorses his actions or in the name? Furthermore, by saying that a name "moulds" and "cuts" one's "separate identity", a problem arises. This is because the ability to "mould" and "cut" this unique identity, is the work of humans and not any other agent. Reducing a person to the status of a name appears degrading since names are not conscious of themselves.

It appears that in a traditional society, the individual is influenced by the way the person perceives himself, how the society sees him and how he wants the society to see him. That is why the "moulding" and "cutting" of his personality is not done in isolation from the society's customs and traditions. This stems from the fact that "the child gets the idea of himself which he finds expressed by those around him" (Iwundu, 1994:80), through his name. Thus, one becomes his name when he understands the society's customs and traditions embedded in his name and lives up to it. In African cosmology, the human person represents the reality which his name articulates. This is possible because for Africans generally, names "participate in the reality of the person, that sometimes they are equated with those answering them" (Ehusani op cit). This accounts for why they are said to be synonymous with their bearers. In other words, they personify and identify an individual as he is. Thus, one whose name may not be "equated with" or does not "participate in his reality" is made a laughing stock. But when one's name reveals his character, it is said to be his personal identity. Africans hold the position that asking whether a person's name is his personal identity or whether his name contributes to the discovery of his personal identity is irrelevant. This is so because a name projects one's character and helps one discover and understand oneself.

Despite the foregoing considerations, name as personal identity needs a critical look. First, personal identity as a philosophical concept has to do with consciousness. An individual can have an awareness of self but the same cannot be said concerning a name. On this basis, it becomes unimaginable how a name can serve as personal identity. Second, if personal identity means that "A" is identical or the same as "B", the claim that names serve as personal identity becomes impossible because the two things involved are not congruent. On this account, one wonders how Africans account for the unity they ascribe to a name and one's personal identity. In other words, at what point in time is the name said to become the person's identity and the person's identity becomes his name? Third, if Africans accept that, "names participate in the reality of the person, that sometimes they are equated with those answering them" (Edwards, 1967:95). It not only implies that the person is greater than

the name or names he bears but also that the equation of both should be understood in a qualified sense. Fourth, if it is accepted that "the identity of a person is the set of memories which he has or that the identity of a person is the identity of the body which he has" (Locke, 1959:444), where do we place name as personal identity? If in the former, it means that it is a body, but if in the latter, it implies that it is a "set of memories". But if it is none of the above, can a name subsist on its own, considering the fact that the mind and the body co-exist?

Irrespective of the existing flaws in holding that a name serves as personal identity, there is still merit in holding to this claim. This is because when "identity" is viewed as a kind of sharing in one's personality, we shall stand a better chance of understanding why Africans hold that names "participate in the reality of the person and fashion out for him his unique identity" (Iwundu, 1994:57). This participation and identity thus created are ontologically linked together. That is why the claim that names serve as personal identity is not out of place. Furthermore, if Africans attempt to resolve the issues raised against this claim doubts about the function of name as personal identity will to a great extent be cleared.

Name as teleological guide

In traditional African society, the question whether a name functions as a teleological guide may not arise because Africans believe that one's name calls him to action and in turn reveals him. In this context, the traditional Igbos hold that "afa onye na edu ya" (one's name is his guide). But among contemporary Africans, this question needs to be addressed because of the many changes African customs and traditions have undergone due to cultural interaction.

By teleological guide, I mean that which points to, models, directs, or shows the way to a proper end. This definition implies that there is a link between a name and one's desired end, or the reality it is meant to reveal. For Africans, names guide an individual towards his desired end since they are signposts on the way to self fulfillment. In this regard, the dynamics of name as a teleological guide disposes an individual toward giving proper attainment to his desired end. If this is so, does it mean

that the individual will end up as his name predicts? In other words, does a name say what a person will be or is it an invitation to the person to further discover what his rightful end is? It may be interesting to know if the attainment of one's end depends on the name, the bearer, the community or his destiny. In fact, is the teleological guide claim not a coincidence of fortune and a family's aspiration?

As a sign that projects one's personality and desired end, a name may be said to be an invitation to further personal discovery since they do not exhaust the content of what they signify. In the words of Iwundu, names sometimes "make suspicious predictions for the person's future". But does the attainment of one's end depend solely on the prediction made by his name? Other factors seem to come into play. Alongside the name that points to that end, there is the bearer who disposes himself to attain the end, the community that moulds and regulates the individual's modes of aspiration and destiny from whom all things come and which guides and directs human affairs. Thus, the ability of a name to guide an individual to his desired end is not sufficiently dependent on the name and so, it does not suffice to state without qualification that names are teleological guides.

For Africans, "names mould the character and shape the destiny of the bearer" (Ehusani, 1997:125). That is why they believe that the predictions a name makes inspire the individual and encourages him to conform to the demands the name makes on him. This conformation will lead him to his desired end through the "signpost" that is his name. It is on this account, that "African names are able to import some controlling effect since one's name is the rail on which one rolls though life" (MacMurray, 1978:23). It appears that the reason for holding name as teleological guide is that traditional Africans believe that they know the laws of the land, the taboos and customs of the society. Therefore, faithfulness to these in relation to the predictions made by one's name leads to a desired end. In other words, with a name as a model, a future predicted based on one's antecedents may be reached by one's ability to be faithful to his name as a "sign post" that directs his affairs toward this end. When one is faithfully following the guidance of his name, an inexplicable self fulfillment

is acquired. This is possible when one keeps away from all that is not in agreement with the predictions made by his name. This nullifies the question of whether name as teleological guide cannot be explained as a coincidence of fortune and family aspiration.

Change of name by Africans deserves attention at this point. This is because they believe that proper reflection is made by the parents of the bearer who takes into consideration their family history, their aspirations for the child and the values they esteem before giving the child a name. Parents do this because for traditional Africans, names teach, instruct, motivate and inspire generation after generation in the religious and philosophical truth that lead to proper self fulfillment. This is why the choice of names is important since names carry with them "every thing" about the bearer's family and they project before the child the goals he is to attain. On account of these factors, any change of name will be rejecting this goal set before the bearer and a destruction of his family's hopes, history and esteemed values which his name contains. But does this change of name remove the essence or the form of this end in one's intellect? It may not, but for traditional Africans, it is believed that altering this phenomenon twists the reality which it reveals.

It appears that due to cultural imperialism, most contemporary Africans tend to believe that "a rose by any other name will smell as sweet". This accounts for the reason behind their change of name. The implication of this is that they lack the knowledge of what their names stand for and so cannot see how they guide or direct the individual to a self fulfilled end. Thus, when one calls to mind the goals his name sets before him, he can then work himself in that direction. The individual is urged to seek his end by keeping his name before him and doing all within his reach to strive toward that goal predicted by his name.

From the above discussion, it can be deduced that a name serves as a positive sign that inspires the bearer to acquire the required virtues and characteristics that will guide him to a desired end. But, looking closely at the dynamics of name as teleological guide, one would easily notice the one dimensional nature of self fulfillment. This is because the traditional African is not given the chance of discovering himself since the name has

moulded and cut out for him a fixed goal to attain. On this account, African philosophy of names may be accused of not recognizing the dynamic nature of the human person.

Having examined the African claim that a name serves as a teleological guide and the criticisms it received, there is need to point out that if names are teleological guides, then Africans have a feasible construct which aids them toward a purposive end by ascribing functions and goals to that which they wish to actualize. This is because projective consciousness is the special property of the human person which helps him to raise a structure in his imagination and erect it also in reality (cf. Edeh, 1985:95). The implication of this is that the human person has the capacity to anticipate his future because he is a projectively conscious being. On account of this position, the pre-knowledge which the human person has of his end guides him toward arriving at what he has set out to do which is outlined in his imagination. When this is accomplished, a name can stand as a teleological guide.

Conclusion

From the exposition of the philosophy of names, the various ways through which a name manifests itself are inter-connected. They all seem to have something to reveal or project. This is against the Western background where names appear to be labels or tags for identification. By the study of the dynamics of African names, the reasons behind the fuss Africans make about their names becomes clearer. Even though the name articulates reality to a certain extent, and functions as a personal guide, it is basically the one who bears it. Though these positions have veritable objections, the essence of African names is ascertained as not just "anything" but "everything" about the person. Irrespective of the loopholes found in the African articulation of names, it still sounds unreasonable to ask an African, "What is in a name?" or to tell him that a person called by another name remains the same. This is because the dynamics of African names is concerned with "the inherited pattern of thought and action customarily and mysteriously in harmony with the dynamic creativity of being within the totality of all that is".²²

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