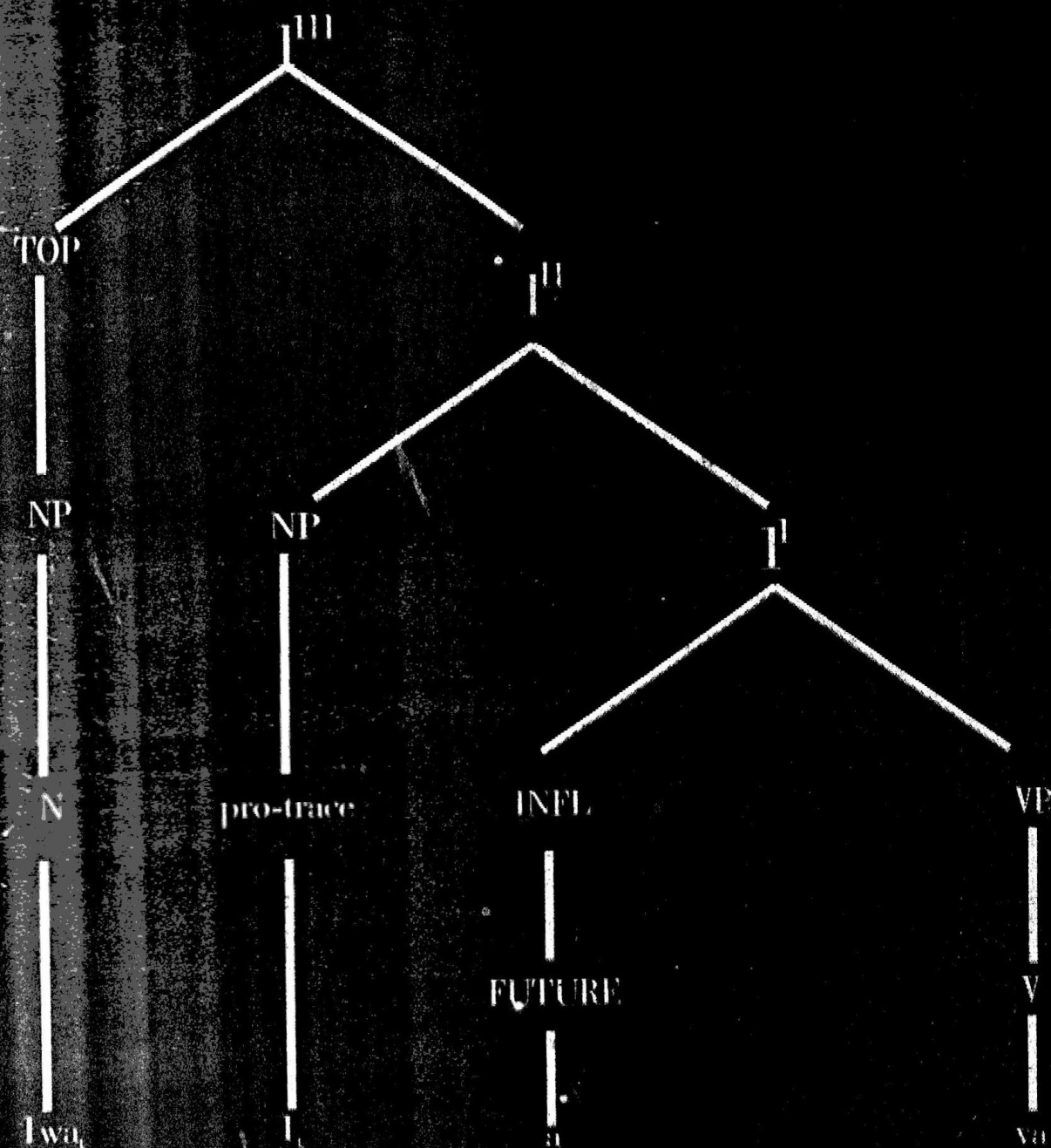


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Names as Cultural Identity: A Sociolinguistic Investigation of the Ibibio

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Introduction

The Ibibio people are found in South-Eastern Nigeria, in the South-South geopolitical zone. They are predominantly found in Akwa Ibom State but clusters of them are found amongst other ethnic groups and nationalities, especially in Cross River State.

In spite of the conflicting but controversial history of the relationship between the Ibibio speaking people and their immediate linguistic neighbours and the geopolitically motivated antagonism/conflicts between them, the Ibibio people of Akwa Ibom are known to have quite a lot in common with these neighbours socio-culturally, linguistically and politically as documented by European missionaries and colonial linguists. (cf Essien 1986:1, 2), Noah (1980) and Edet (1983). For this reason, therefore, some scholars regard the Efik, Annang, Oron, Eket and Ibeno peoples as Ibibio. For the purpose of this study, we restrict the term Ibibio to the Ibibio speaking people of Akwa Ibom origin and not to clusters which could be regarded as Ibibio.

The Ibibio people are very enterprising. They are predominantly farmers. A few are however, hunters and those who inhabit the riverine areas of the Ibibio homeland engage in fishing. Livestock farming is not uncommon amongst the Ibibio people as some farmers are known to rear domestic animals such as goats, sheep, cow and poultry animals. The Ibibio are an ethnolinguistic group with a complex but rich cultural terrain. One of the aspects of Ibibio culture is the name system, the focus of this paper.

1.0 The Name System in Ibibio Land

Ibibio names and indeed, names generally in Africa, tell a lot about the history of the people. This is because as Awoonor (1975:3) has noted:

History does not exist only in written records and books, but in such non documentary sources as oral traditions, the findings of archaeology, musicology and ethnology.

Awoonor goes further to assert that a people's history is:

... the sum total of a people's way of life, coherently developed in their material and spiritual cultures, in their tools, and implements, in their institutions and concepts of God and man, concepts that exist in an order that can be readily interpreted and examined. (Awoonor 1975:3).

From the foregoing, we gather that the history of a people can therefore, be elucidated through names, either as place names or personal names. In a predominantly oral culture such as is recorded among the Ibibio people, until in recent times however, place names and personal names act as undocumented historical records and landmarks to be passed on from generation to generation. On this then lie the beauty and significance of names and the name system in Ibibio land.

The name system in Ibibio land gives a lot of insight into Ibibio language and culture. The Ibibio people believe that a name is not just a mere word which identifies an individual, it gives alongside the personal identification process, such information as the religious beliefs of the people, the status of the individual in his family, the calendar of the people, their commercial activities, their geography in terms of land classification, seasons, 'forest' and the philosophical concepts of the people. Indeed, an Ibibio personal name tells a lot about the bearer and his socio-cultural background. On this ground therefore, Essien (1986:79) has noted that:

The cultural significance of names in Ibibio can be viewed from two perspectives – what names mean to the Ibibio – speaking people and what the names themselves reveal about the culture of the people.

3.0 Significance of Ibibio Names

Ibibio names have religious, geo-political, socio-cultural and philosophical significance. Not only do Ibibio personal names give insight into the world-view and the beliefs of the people, they also reveal the awesome wonder with which the Ibibio people behold nature and the divine. This is summed up by Essien (1986:87) who opines that.

Ibibio names reflect almost the entire gamut of Ibibio culture – social, economic, commercial, artistic and religious/philosophical.

Akpabio (1980:30) has equally noted that personal names amongst the Ibibio people sometimes reflect their struggles in life, their famine, sorrows, and joys, and their hopes and aspirations. Sometimes the names have connection with their beliefs.

Indeed, Ibibio names give rich insight into the spiritual, physical and social landscape of the Ibibio society.

Names as Cultural Identity: A Sociolinguistic Investigation of the Ibibio

3.1 The Religious Significance of Ibibio Personal Names

The Ibibio society, like other traditional African societies may not have documented records to show that their fore fathers had knowledge of a Supreme Being who created and sustains the universe. The absence of such documented materials and indeed relics of shrines or temples erected for the worship of God as is seen in some parts of Europe and Asia, had misled European traders, missionaries and colonialists to erroneously conclude that the Ibibio people like other ethnolinguistic group elsewhere in Africa, were savages who did not know nor believe in God. But a study of aspects of the Ibibio culture such as the present paper, the name system, has gone a long way in refuting this claim. One important lesson drawn from this research is that the Ibibio people are a deeply religious people whose personal names especially, reflect the inter-relationship that exist between the natural and the divine, between man and God. In fact, we discovered that religion permeates every sphere of our life. This is because the Ibibio cosmogony situates man beneath God, the deities and ancestors and presents them as being deeply involved in the business of human existence. Udo (1983:248) has noted that: "The Ibibio religious concepts emanated from the Ibibio mentality and represented Ibibio religious reality."

In his work, Udo discovered that religion was/is the underlying force in the life of the traditional Ibibio people. He goes further to assert that the life of the Ibibio was regulated by the tenets of his religion. To buttress this point, Udo states that:

... in farming, marriage, fighting or fishing, in play, in initiation into various secret societies, and clubs, in the naming of his children, in trade, during journeys, while eating, in the morning, afternoon, or night, his life is tied up with his religion.

In its existence, therefore, the Ibibio society strongly affirms its belief in the Supreme Being (Abasi Ibom) which translates (God); the clan gods or deities which are regarded as agents of the Supreme God and its ancestors as indicated in the names with religious implications that are borne by some Ibibio people. These names are important because they reflect the tenets of the Ibibio people's religion as illustrated below:

a.i. Names which reflect the Supremacy of Abasi Ibom (God).

Abasi – akara	(God rules)
Nkpoikana-Abasi	(Nothing is greater than God)
Anietiente-Abasi/Aniebiet-Abasi	(Who is like God)

ii Names which reveal the attributes of God

Ima-qbqoñ/Ima-Abasi	(love)
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Uyai-Abasi	(beauty)
Odudu-Abasi	(power)
Mfon-qbqñ/Abasi-ofon/Abasi-mfon	(goodness)
Obot	(creator)
Nsidibe-Abasi	(Omnipresence)
Emen-qbqñ	(peace)
Eno- Abasi/Ebo-qbqñ/Oto- Abasi	(Giver)
Nsikak-Abasi/Abasi-ekeme	(ability)
Idara-qbqñ	(joy)
Ime-qbqñ	(patience/endurance)

iii Names which reflect man's dependence on God

Mbet-qbqñ/Ntiense-Abasi/Nse Obot	(I trust in God)
Abasi-ifreke	(God never forgets/has not forgotten)
Idotenyin/Idorenyin/Ndotenyin	(I put my trust in God)
Mbuotidem	(My hope is in God)
Iberedem	(I depend on God)

b) Names which reflect belief in clan gods or deities:

Ndem	(deity)
Ekpenyong	(male deity)
Ekandem	(female deity)
Idio	(farm deity)
Abasi-Okure	(family deity)
Abasi-atai	(foreign deity)

c. Names which reflect ancestral worship or veneration.

Ekpo
Iso-Ekpo
Akpan-Ekpo

c) Names which reflect certain traditional religious practices amongst the Ibibio:

Mbiam
Idiñ
Inam
Ikpaiñ
Oku.

Names as Cultural Identity: A Sociolinguistic Investigation of the Ibibio

3.2 Geo-political Significance of Ibibio Personal Names:

3.2.1 In the traditional Ibibio society personal names were used to record geographic information such as seasons, trees and animals found in the Ibibio environment, physical landscape and housing pattern as shown below.

i) Names which reflect the seasons

Ndaeyo (dry season)

Ukwo (rainy season)

ii) Names which reflect trees in the forest

Ukim

Ukana

Ukpa

Oton

iii) Names which reflect rocks

Itiat.

iv) Names which reflect the geographical classification of land.

Ndon

Ekpene

Ikot

Akai

v) Names which reflect the Ibibio housing pattern.

Iboto

Ufok

Essien/Atai

Okure

vi) Names which reflect the Ibibio Calendar:

Isua (year)

Etaha

Usen (day)

Affioñ

Etim

vii) Names which reflect birds in the Ibibio environment.

Ituen

Inim

viii) Names which reflect the elements

Utin (sun)

Offioñ (moon)

Ikan (fire)

Inyañ/Ikpa-inyañ (water)

3.2.2 The political structure of the Ibibio people also influenced their names system.

Udo (1983:117) has noted that the political organisation of Ibibio land was based on a social organization which consisted of some administrative divisions such as ufok (a group of families related by blood); idun/Obio (the home village of the people) and ikpa isoñ (a clan or group of villages with a common historical origin). Ubon (a group of people with a common paternal ancestry). Some Ibibio people therefore, give their children names which reflect the administrative divisions listed above.

These are:

Ubon
Ufok
Iduñ/Obio
Ikpa isoñ.

The Ibibio as a people strongly believe that their strength lies in their being united. The concept of their unity/togetherness underlies their political as well as their social ideologies. A united family/clan or people are a strong people as revealed in the names 'mboho' and 'ikemesit'.

3.3 Socio-cultural Significance of Ibibio Names

3.3.1 We mentioned earlier that the Ibibio people were and still are very enterprising. They engage in different occupations for their livelihood. These occupations also influence the name system amongst the people. Names which reflect the occupation of the ibibio people include:

Urua	(Market)	Trading
Inwanñ	(Farm)	Farming
Udeñ	(Paddle)	Fishing
Ubom	(Canoe/boat)	Fishing
Abia	(Expert)	Occupational expertise

Personal names were also given to mark important social events or occasions among the people. Such events included war, famine, socio-cultural festivals and harvest. These names include among others:

Ekqñ	war
Usqro/usen-ndia	harvest/festivals
Akañ	famine

Names as Cultural Identity: A Sociolinguistic Investigation of the Ibibio

Personal names among the Ibibio people also reflect the order of birth of the children in a family and in some instances, the time of occurrence of birth of some children as shown below:

Akpan	1 st born	son
Udo	2 nd "	"
Udofia	3 rd "	"
Adiaha	1 st "	daughter
Nwa	2 nd "	"
Etoknwa	3 rd "	"
Okon	a boy born at night	
Akon/Okonanwan	a girl born at night	

In addition to these, Ibibio personal names reflect issues and problems which are of concern to the people and their society. For instance, death, sickness, poverty, hatred and sorcery were and still are problems and issues which deeply affect Ibibio people and their society. Names are therefore, given to children to reflect these social problems and issues, some are shown below:

Mkpa/mkpandiok	(death)
Udoño	(sickness)
Ifot	(witchcraft/sorcery)
Una/Unaowo	(poverty)
Esara/Esuene	discrimination/disgrace
Usua	hatred

The Ibibio society is not without its ethics. Certain moral values were and are perceived to be indispensable in the maintenance of a just society. The people have not lost sight of these values as they are equally reflected in their personal names. The value of 'endurance'/'patience' is reflected in names like as: 'Ime', 'Ataime', 'Ofonime', 'Inibehe' and 'utitofonidara' while wisdom is reflected in names like: 'Amaitem ama ifiok' and 'Ifiok'.

The Ibibio people also celebrate virtues such as beauty, bravery and goodness. These are equally reflected in personal names such as:

Uyai	(beauty)
Uko/Ide	(bravery)
Mfon	(goodness)

There is an Ibibio adage which states that "akpa nkpo k'uwem ado uwem". This translates "the most important thing in life is life itself". This means that Ibibio people are not oblivious of the gift of life endowed by God. To this end, personal names are given to reflect their concept of life. These include:

Uwem	(life)
Uwemedimọ	(life is wealth)

From the socio-cultural perspective, there is a lot more that could be said about Ibibio personal names. We discovered, that names do not only express social problems and issues, they also act as reminders of occurrences that have taken place in the past, present realities or future hope and aspirations. These names have therapeutic effect as they not only enable the family members of the bearer reflect on such happenings but also comfort them (where the events have been unfortunate). Such names include:

Utip/Udot	(reward)
Sidikisoyọfọn	(I expect a better future)
Isań	(journey)

The advent of christianity into Ibibio land has far reaching consequences on the Ibibio name system. Oduyoye (2001) has rightly observed that Christianity and Islam have led to the adoption of foreign names by the Yoruba people. This observation is equally true of the Ibibio people in contemporary times. Christianity, in particular, has led to a reduction in the theophoric names. People no longer give their children names which reflect anything to do with the deities or ancestral worship. Where such names still exist, they are best used as surnames. The names which reflect the supremacy of God and such as reveal his differing attributes are best promoted.

In addition to christianity, contact situations between the Ibibio people and people from other ethnolinguistic groups have led to new trends in the name system. Some parents adopt the names of their friends, business partners or names they find particularly interesting from some other language group for their children.

In all of these, however, caution still prevails as the Ibibio people strongly believe that one's name does not only identify one, but could also influence one's behaviour and fortune in life as expressed in the Ibibio adage, "enyiń esesọp owo".

4. Conclusion

In this paper, we have tried to explore the sociolinguistic dimensions of creating and assigning names to persons in Ibibio land. We have found that, the task of naming has several dimensions to it. This is to say that names do more than identify an individual, they tell stories about him and his people politically, economically, socio-culturally and ethically. Names are representative of a people. They are historical documents which authenticate a people's distinctiveness as a group. Ibibio personal names not only paint cultural images but they project the distinctive cultural identity of the Ibibio people and society.

Names as Cultural Identity: A Sociolinguistic Investigation of the Ibibio

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