

Place-Names In Igbo Oral Poetry

Dr. Mercy Agha Onu

*Department Of Languages And Linguistics
Ebonyi State University, Abakaliki, Ebonyi State, Nigeria*

Dr. F. U. Chima

*Department Of English And Literary Studies
Mjc Echeruo Faculty Of Humanities And Social Sciences
Abia State University, Uturu, Abia State, Nigeria*

Dr. Egwu, Roseline Onyinyechi Uka

*Department Of Languages And Linguistics
Ebonyi State University, Abakaliki, Ebonyi State, Nigeria*

Dr. Obianika Chinwe Evelyn

*Department Of Languages & Linguistics
Ebonyi State University, Abakaliki, Ebonyi State, Nigeria*

Abstract

This study focuses on place-names in Igbo oral poetry. During oral poetry performances in Igboland, bards always weave into their arts place-names. Nonetheless, critics of oral performance seem not to have taken this common practice among bards seriously, which is the reason for the dearth of scholarly attention in this area of scholarship. This study, therefore, attempts to close this lacuna by looking at place-names in Igbo oral poetry. The study then explores the functions of names of places, beyond being a means of identification. Hence, the major means through which any Igbo man who listens, deciphers where a people as a sub-tribe in Igbo race came from to live in their present place of abode. This simply means through place-names, a people's history, socio-economic value as well as general belief and worldview are brought to limelight. With place-names, the reason for a place's name is also determined. However, the study contributes to the body of knowledge on toponym in Igbo oral poetry and recommends that future researchers explore the use of place-names by bards in specific areas in Igbo nation.

Keywords: *Origin, Place-names, Igbo poetry, bards*

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I. Introduction

The study of names of places in onomastics parlance is toponomastics. This, as an academic field of study, is an age long area of scholarship that studies names of places and their origins, meanings, uses and typologies. The issue of name (person or place) is an important cultural activity and tradition, which every human society has specific patterns to accomplish. In Igboland, it is one of the cultural medium of expression. Children's names, for example, are formed from names of things, events or market days like Eke, Ori, Afor and Nkwor. Therefore, names as *Nweke, Mgbeke, Ugoye, Nwoye, Okorie, Okafor, Okeke and Mgbankwo* are names formed from the aforementioned market days for the purposes of revealing the specific market day the bearer was born.

Festival days for some deities like *Njoku* and *Omalike* could also form a child's name if such a child is born on the day of their (the deities) celebrations. Similarly, the names of some deities like *Nkamalu, Kalu, Aliezi*, etc, may be given to a child in some parts of Igboland by the parents. In the Edda-Igbo area where the foregoing pattern of name derivation is popular, the names of deities may be given to a child, often times, to show the parents' respect or dedication for the diety. Nevertheless, in most cases, such names may be given to a child because a member of the family has had the name and not necessarily, because the parents have anything to do with the diety.

In most parts of Igboland, it is the circumstance on which a child is born that gives rise to the child's name. For example, in Anambra Igbo area, if a male child is born in the midst of many girls in a family, his

name becomes *Obidide* meaning 'let the lineage remain', *Amaechile* meaning 'let the clan not go into extinction', or *Obiechila* meaning 'let the lineage not end' or 'let there be continuity of the lineage' (Anyachebelu 6). On the other hand, if a female child is born in the midst of male children, she can take such name like *Obianuju*, meaning 'one born in the midst of plenty'.

This presupposes that, method of name derivation differs slightly from one area to the other in Igboland. In the Edda-Igbo area, names of children mainly come from any elderly member of the family or from the best friends of any of the child's parents, which at the instance the child refers to the person whose name is taken from, as his or her *ogbo m* (Ukpai 2018). In most other parts of Igboland, names of children come from mainly situations that surround the birth of the children or the entire family. It is as result of this common practice of naming system that Achebe concludes that:

If you want to know how life has treated an Igbo man, a good place to look at is the names his children bear. His hopes, his fears, his joys and sorrows, his grievances against his fellows, or complaints about the way he has been used by fortune, even straight historical records, are all there. (qtd in Anyachebelu 12)

Place-names in Igbo land, unlike those of persons, are differently derived. In some parts of Anambra state, Awka South and Anambra East to be specific, Uluocha in a paper titled "Typology of Igbo Toponym," points out that place-names come from various ways and means. The first way, according to him, is from what he terms flora and fauna. In this case, place-names are taken from animals, fishes, mountains, and hills. Examples are *Achala oji*, *Enu oji*, *Ama ukwa*, *Iru eke*, etc. The second one is from what he calls behavioural place names. Here names of places are from the self-concept the namer has about the place believing that a place can influence the way people who live in it behave. Examples here are *Ada ebebe*, *Mmuli ama*, *Iru ozo bia*. The third one is the one he says are from names of persons. Here, the progenitors and their children's name form the names of the places they found. Examples include *Umu beele*, *Umu jagwo*, *Umu anaga*, etc (88).

In some other parts such as the Edda-Igbo area, place-names always come from events that took place on the particular locality in question. An example is the name of a school called Ejikewu Primary School in Amoso Etiti Edda of Afikpo South Local Government Area of Ebonyi State. At the time of citing the school, the owners of the site did not want to let go of their land for the community project of building the school. It was out of struggle that the school was established, which gave rise to the school's name: Ejikewu Primary School. "Ejike" meaning "out of struggle, "ewu" to build". That apart, place-names also come into existence, like some parts in Anambra area, through the names of the founders that first discovered and settled at the places. Examples are *Amaukom*, *Amaekpu*, *Amangwu*, *Amaude*, and *Amancho* to mention but a few. These names are compound words made up of "Ama" that is, hamlet and the names of the various founders of the hamlets. Names of places in the Edda-Igbo could also come from the nature of the location of the area. Instances are place-names like *Ugwufie*, *Eddaagbo*, *Osisioma*, *Amamini*, *Amayi*, etc. In each of the above-mentioned place-names, the names are from the geographical nature of the places. On *Ugwufie*, the hamlet is on a hill where camwood are dug. Hence, the two words: "Ugwu" that is, hill and "Ufie" that is camwood that formed the name: *Ugwufie*. In the case of *Osisioma*, this is a plateau with trees arranged by nature. The trees are arranged in a way that today they serve for the Edda people a tourist centre and a traditional "high court". However, it is the nature of the place that formed its name: *Osisioma*. "Osisi" meaning trees and "oma" meaning good looking or beautiful. For *Amamini* and *Amayi*, these are villages surrounded by streams, hence, "Ama" meaning hamlet and "mmini" or "iyi" meaning the same thing, that is stream, hence the names: *Amamini* and *Amayi* respectively.

Generally, in Igboland, the importance of names on places is beyond the assertions of Cookey and Ijeoma that it is a mere combination of words by which a person, place or an object is designated, called or known; a term of reference and or an identification marker (17). Place-names are obviously no mere tags of identity. They serve purposes that are much more than identification of the places in question. Namers of places do not give names for the fun of them. The ideas behind the cultural practice of naming is to enable the people concern to maintain a particular incident in their lives or in the lives of the whole tribe that worths remembering for, for posterity. Quoting The United Nation Group of Experts on Geographic Names (henceforth, UNGEGN), Udoye agrees with this idea when she says "place names particularly in Nigeria, house many cultural heritages of the people and the collection and preservation of place-names would retain much of our culture, memory and historical information" (86). Nonetheless, she stresses the point that place-names are just not arbitrarily chosen; rather they are careful attempts to convey specific and useful meanings to the people. With the foregoing importance of place-names to Africans in mind, Uluocha opines that

As an enduring legacy, toponyms are revered by the people for their cartographic, cultural, ethnographic, social, historical, linguistic, economic, political, spiritual, intellectual, scientific and geographical significance. The distortion of the toponyms is a serious threat to the indigenous cartographic heritage and cultural identity of the people. (1)

With the above submission in mind, one would no longer be skeptical about the usefulness of place-names in oral poetry in Africa including the Igbo as a race. Obviously, Africa is an oral continent with the treasure of her voiced and auditory arts; the home of oral literature and the genesis and inspiration of voiced

tradition of the great Diaspora celebrated for over the years (Finnegan 1). As an oral continent par excellence, Africans are people with expert and dexterous use of words like place-names in their oral poetry especially to make their existence such as where they come from to the present place where they found themselves. Place-names in Igbo oral poetry have among other responsibilities, that of telling the people their history, socio-economic value, their general belief as a people as well as the reason by their progenitors for choosing the place they found themselves. However, the art of using place-names in oral poetry to perpetuate a people's history and other functions are the exclusive reserve of the bards in every society.

The Bards

Bard is a name that identifies the individuals in every society (including Igboland) who carry out the role of composing and performing oral narratives patterned in various forms, mostly, songs and poems. In these oral songs and poems, the tribes' philosophy, worldview and mode of life are weaved into them. Therefore, they (bards) are individuals with natural talents and gifts of reminding other members of the society of their past. This is because with their arts, they mirror the past and present of their societies. Their subjects in trade are all embracing and range from nature through devotional lyrics to encomiums of praise or protest directed at rulers or any other member of the society. It could be in retrospective communal praises directed at the culture's native history in saga or chronicles of gods, heroes and mythic creatures. The subjects could be on people's genealogy and family history; on anybody's great deeds or failure. Their arts give them the responsibility of maintaining histories of the society and the genealogies of the people therein. They have the responsibility of recording events, keeping and relaying it to other members of the society with dexterous word-use. In addition, they have the responsibility of reconstructing incidents heard, seen or participated in, into differing forms of song-tales like historical, heroic, birth, ritual, hunters' and funeral songs among others (Akinyemi 90).

Every human society has their bards. Confirming this assertion, Nwahunanya says, "The presence of bards in every society is true but are variously identified" (7). The existing variant names for bards depends on many factors that include the language or dialect of the region concerned, the occasion, and the purpose for performance, et cetera. Perhaps, it is on the knowledge of the foregoing that Hale, who preferred to call them griots, remarked that,

In each African language, there is not only one term for griot, but often several words. In many cases, there is considerable ambiguity about these local terms because of overlaps between the profession, the name of ethnic group, and the descriptor for the sub-group of artisans. Societies that count griots among their various professions however have their own words to describe them . . . (260)

As rightly affirmed by Hale, the names for bards vary from region to region. For instance, in Mandinka, Bambara, and Malinka, among the Mande peoples, bards are called *jeli*; in the *Moor*, they are called *iggio*; in Wolof, they are called *guewel or gewel*; in Hausa, they are called *Marok'i*; in Soninke, they are called *gesere or jaare*; in Songhary, bards are called *Jesere*, among other names (Hale 260). In Edda-Igbo, they are called *onye aka*, in plural, *nde aka* or *onye ebu*, in plural *nde ebu* (Ukpai 1).

The presence of bards in all societies is a fact one need not doubt. First, there are no human societies that do not have such groups of individuals in their midst. The authorities of Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia confirmed this fact when they said ". . . villages also had their own griots, who told tales of births, deaths, marriages, battles, hunters, affairs, and hundreds of other things" (3). Again, Africa as an "oral continent" has her cultures and traditions stored in the memory of talented and gifted bards who are variously named depending on the dialect, the occasion for the performance and the part of African territory in question. Therefore, it is from the bards' memory that events, cultural practices, and traditions of the people are transmitted orally from one generation to the other. One of the sure ways the bards in our societies educate us about the past is the idea of constructing their song-poem on place-names.

Bards and Place-Names

Generally, the use of place-names in oral poetry has immense significance in every African society (Uluocha 2015). In Igboland of South-Eastern Nigeria, bards always bring in place-names into their arts during performances. This is obviously not for the simple purposes of embellishing their songs for aesthetic and entertainment reasons, which are parts of the tripartite functions of art. It is rather a means through which they carry out other silent and vital rolls in the society. Such other functions are what the remaining part of this study addresses.

Place-Names and Identity

One of the vital functions of place-names in Igbo oral poetry is its use by bards as means of identifying places in our society where certain events took place. In our day-to-day business transactions, names of places are important for the description of our surroundings and for telling others where we have been or plan to go; where one incident or the other happened. Ormeling seems to agree with this assertion when he says, "place-

names fulfill the duty of identifying places thereby distinguishing them from one another” (7). This is apparently so remembering that various places in our society have names for which they are known and identified with. However, the Igbo bards using place-names in their songs are not for the purposes of identifying the existence of the places only but also to help register their existence in our memory. In a song titled *ebu egbela* by Ukwa Ufiem Ude, collected and translated by King Agwu Ude in 2005 that reads:

Chie, chei, chei	We deserted Ogba to Neni
Edda I salute you	When the boa killed Okoro Amanta’s sons
Hoa	We ululated
I salute you	“He-e, he-e, e-e
Hoa	We-e, he-e, we-e
We started our journey from Isagha	Okoro Amanta’s offspring
From Isagha we came to Ijibit	Have you left us for Une?
Here we sojourned but very briefly	When a corpse stares the sky in the
If you want to extol Egbela	We beset it with question
Call him Egbela Juu	Corpse, where are you travelling to?
We left Ijibit to Ogba	Are you travelling to Owi?
Ogba was as large as Ogbaja	Are you travelling to Une?
We also left Ogba	Are you travelling to Aliliali?
When a boa turned its tail on us	So we left Ogba (pp 38-40)

With this song, the bard is able to acquaint us with the existence of some places like Isagha, Ijibit, Ogba, Neni, Owi, and Aliliali. In addition, but for the bards’ inclusion of those aforementioned place names in his performances, we would not have known that such places had existed. Thus, with the song, we are able to understand which place some incidents happened in a people’s history. For instance, it was at Ogba that a boa which killed Okoro Amanta’s sons that made the people to relocate to Neni. Similarly, in a funeral song performed by another bard, Oma Olughu Elekwa which was collected in 2018 by these researchers, the use of place name as means of identification is also evident. The song reads thus:

Uka Agha Ebini.	That assassins have blocked the road against him.
It was Igboke Ebini	He swallowed his medicine’s bag
They said, it was his relation.	Transformed himself into a pregnant woman.
Who was a herbalist	He walked in that manner
And was good at it.	And crossed the assassins.
He went to Eru of Izu Ogu.	He and the assassins exchanged greetings.
After preparing, he said	The assassins asked him:
‘Let me go and inform	‘Pregnant woman, did you see
Those at home that I’m wealthy’.	The native doctor
He prepared to go	Who was coming with his medicine’s bag?’
To inform those at home	He said he did not see him.
That he is wealthy.	He walked in the manner of a pregnant woman!
And returned home.	
Assassins then blocked him on the way.	At Uche Ekpa e-e.
Ebini Uka Agha looked forward and found out	

Like the bard in the first song, the one in this song also used place-names and as a result, we are again able to identify places where Ebini Uka Agha the native doctor, had been to and where the assassins had blocked him as well as where he as a person comes from which is Uche Ekpa. These pieces of information are made possible because of the place-names used by the bards.

Place-Names and History

Bards also bring in place-names into their arts for historical reasons. With place-names, they could trace the historical origin of a tribe to tell us where they came from to their present place of abode. Lawal pointed out this particular function of place-names and some others when he says:

Place names that are used in the lore of Nigerian society have historical significance. They do remind people of the places passed through during the period of migration. They . . . signify important historical events. In land disputes, place names have been very useful in finding solution to entitlement to land and have offered

some explanations to the course of migration. Place names could be used as a source of information about the demographic structure of the past. (17)

A perfect instance of the above idea is in the song performed by Ukwa Ufiem Ude, already cited above, collected and translated by King Agwu Ude in 2005. Let us look at the song again:

Chie, chei, chei	We deserted Ogba to Neni
Edda I salute you	When the boa killed Okoro Amanta's sons
Hoa	We ululated
I salute you	"He-e, he-e, e-e
Hoa	We-e, he-e, we-e
We started our journey from Isagha	Okoro Amanta's offspring
From Isagha we came to Ijibit	Have you left us for Une?
Here we sojourned but very briefly	When a corpse stares the sky in the
If you want to extol Egbela	We beset it with question
Call him Egbela Juu	Corpse, where are you travelling to?
We left Ijibit to Ogba	Are you travelling to Owi?
Ogba was as large as Ogbaja	Are you travelling to Une?
We also left Ogba	Are you travelling to Aliliali?
When a boa turned its tail on us	So we left Ogba (pp 38-40)

With this song the Edda-Igbo history could be deduced. This is because the bard traced for us where the progenitors of the clan had been before now. As he puts it, the people started their journey from Isagha through Ijibit to Ogba down to Une. Similarly, a funeral song performed by Ugo Ama Okoro in 2018, which these researchers collected is another song with place-names and peoples' history. The song reads:

It is Oko Nkalu, the war lord,	Udeazi are the people
Who founded Eke Ugbagha	Who got kingship by struggle.
Who founded Abiwere Obo	Ichita Okwu Efi,
Oko Nkalu, the war lord e-e!	Ekenta Utumakpa,
He came and lived in Amangwunta e-e	It was them that founded the Utumakpa hamlet
He lived therein e-e!	For the first time in Edda.
As he lived in Amangwunta,	The child of Ichita Ukpai
Lived in Amangwunta.	He lived in Nguzu Edda,
Mm-m.	At Eziukwu in Nguzu,
Nnanna Ichita Ukpai,	It was where he lived.
Came to join him as a neighbour.	
Nnanna Ichita Ukpai, took a bag	
And hung at Ububa Nnanna	

This song is a very long one, which space may not allow us reproduce in full here. However, an iota of it given here captures the point we wish to put across. This is because the bard used place-names for purposes of relaying history. From the song, we are able to decipher the founder of Ugbagha village in Edda-Igbo. As the saying goes, when a tale about an incident is with names mentioned, it gives the story some level of credibility. This is what happens in this song as the bard mentions names of places and their founders; the places they lived before coming to settle where they found as their own.

Place-Names and Pronunciations

Apart from telling the people their history with place-names, bards with their songs tell an Igboman the real and proper pronunciation of place-names in their society, which hitherto has changed due to the influence of some foreign expertraites' languages and culture. Uluocha acknowledges this idea succinctly this way:

During the colonial era, most Igbo place names were transferred from native Igbo language to certain European language by phonetically rendering the same place name in their own language, creating at best a close approximation. For example, the British colonizers anglicized names of towns and cities in Igboland by penning down place names using English language spelling for the sounds; and this was how, for instance, Oka in Anambra state became Awka. (185)

Obviously, the alteration of African toponyms during the colonial time followed certain identifiable common processes. Reflecting names in some parts of Igbo-speaking South-Eastern Nigeria, Okpala- Okaka (1995) identified three forms of place-names deformation during the era of decolonization. He puts these three forms thus: (i) Anglicization—this has to do with wrong transcription of local names into English spelling for

easier pronunciation, eg Nawfia from Nne-Ofia, Awka instead of Oka, Nawgu instead of Nogu, Orifite from Ora-Ifite. (ii) Corruption—this is a deliberate change of a name to a nickname, or dropping of a letter (alphabet) from the spelling of the original name and replacing or not replacing the dropped alphabet with another, for easier pronunciation. Examples include Ozubulu from Ozo-Ubulu, Abagana from Mba-Agana. (iii) Truncation (or contraction) – this is the cutting of a single or compound name into two parts and retaining (using) the first part and dropping the rest, for shorter pronunciation. For example, Ibeku from Ibekume-Nwaonyeozo, Utuh from Utuh-Mbadike, Opi from Opinato, Leja from Leja-Ugwoke, Aba from Aba-Ngwa, etc (qtd in Ulocha 185). But for a research of this nature, hardly would the real names of these places come to limelight. Therefore, it is only through the bards in our different Igbo communities who still use the real names of these places during their performances that still reminded us of the real and proper pronunciations of these place names. An instance is in the song performed by Onwuraa Ikem of Abo Ivite, edited and translated by Chukwuma Azuonye, wherein the real spelling and pronunciation of the Anglicized place-name Awka is given to us as Oka.

So they set out for Oka. In those olden days, Oka was famous for smithing. Oka controlled all our Technical know-how. When the Whiteman Had not yet come, It was at Oka that we saw About matchet-making, It was at Oka that we saw about that thing	With which we fish. That time when the whiteman had not yet come. So they went to Oka. And they went and called the people of Agulu Oka, Told them that Ozqemene Said that they should forge a hoe – It was at Oka that we saw about hoes; Told them that all Oka smiths working together would have to forge that matchet.
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(pp 19)

Place-Names and People's Culture and Worldview

With place names in oral poetry, bards bring in people's culture and worldview to limelight. The song by Onwura Ikem of Abo Ivite, edited and translated by Chukwuma Azuonye is a perfect example here. Let us look at the song again:

So they set out for Oka. In those olden days, Oka was famous for smithing. Oka controlled all our Technical know-how. When the Whiteman Had not yet come, It was at Oka that we saw About matchet-making, It was at Oka that we saw about that thing	With which we fish. That time when the whiteman had not yet come. So they went to Oka. And they went and called the people of Agulu Oka, Told them that Ozqemene Said that they should forge a hoe – It was at Oka that we saw about hoes; Told them that all Oka smiths working together would have to forge that matchet.
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(pp 19)

From this song, the culture and worldview of the Oka as people of creative mind is obvious. This is the same way Oma Olughu Elekwa in one of her funeral songs collected and transcribed in 2018 by these researchers is obvious in understanding the worldview of the people of Ena. The song reads:

If people of Ena brush their teeth,
They won't sweep their houses.
If you made to ask them,
They will reply you, saying
Do they travel with a house,
If not their teeth?
HE-E YE-E!
HE-E YE-HA!

From the song, we have come to know that the Ena people in their view belief that one better looks clean than look dirty with a fine house kept at home. This contradicts the view of the Anambra-Igbo man who believes that ones pucket speaks volume than ones appearance.

Place-Names and Reason for the Name

Bards in their songs also x-rays the reasons places have the names they bear. For example, in the song performed by Kalu Ishia, which we also collected and transcribed in 2018, we are told about a school in Abiriba in Ohafia LGA of Abia State called Enuda Secondary School and how the name of the school came to be. Let us hear the song:

The Akwums had been.	Nkamalu Ogba Enwo came from Ebiriba,
They're aborigine.	He passed through the bush to Ebiriba
They didn't come from anywhere.	He established and lived.
They're aborigine.	See that school
HE-E HE-E HA ELO!	That is called Enuda,
Part of them,	That's where the name came from.
Were Ebiriba Enuda.	Mm-m.
Part of them,	HA-A YO-HA YO-HA!
Were Ebiriba Enuda.	WO-O HA HE-YO HA!
E-M HE-E!	HE-E YE-E HE-E!

With this song, we can understand, with ease that the name of the aforementioned school, Enuda, is from the name of one of the progenitors of Abiriba. In fact, this gives vent to all we have been saying so far in this study concerning the credibility of place-name in Igbo oral poetry. The reason for naming the school after one of the progenitors is not far-fetched. For sure, that is to perpetuate the name of the ancestor. Without mincing words, Igbo place names stand in the centre of the people's cultural and religious life as it is one of the major arsenals for the people's history and culture.

II. Conclusion

In this study, we looked at the uses of place-names in Igbo oral poetry and discovered that although an inclusion of place-names into oral poetry by bards in the Igbo area is a common practice among them, yet critics of Igbo oral literary studies seem not to have given the required scholarly interest due for the area. As it is, with this study, therefore, we have come to the understanding that the importance of place-names in Igbo oral poetry is enormous. This is because with place-names, the identity of the Igbo race is straightened; the real and proper pronunciations of various places are made available for all and sundry. Finally, we are able to understand that place names in Igbo area are not arbitrarily done; rather, they are, among other things, consciously done for the purposes of reminding us of yester years. From these names, we can reconnect the past and then decipher where we were before now and why we are where we are.

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