

# Praise Names and Power De/constructions in Contemporary Igbo Chiefship

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**ABSTRACT:** Praise names are very important means through which individuals in the Igbo society generally articulate and express their ideologies, boast about their abilities and accomplishments, as well as criticize and subvert the visions of the Other. With particular reference to chieftaincy in the Igbo society, praise-naming as a pragma-semiotic act ties up with constructions and deconstructions of power, and so does have serious implications for the meanings attached to chieftaincy, as well as the roles of the chief in the postcolonial democratic system. The present paper therefore discusses the semiotics of praise names in the contemporary Igbo society, drawing data from popular culture and chieftaincy discourses. It addresses the interface between signification and politics (and the politics of signification) in Africa, arguing that change in the understanding and relevance of chieftaincy in postcolonial Africa calls for attention to how chieftaincy is (re)staged at the site of the sign.

*Keywords:* Praise name, Chief, politics, power, Igbo.

**RESUMEN:** Los nombres laudatorios constituyen un importante medio a través del cual los individuos de la sociedad Igbo articulan y expresan sus ideologías, se vanaglorian de sus logros y critican, así como subvierten las representaciones del Otro. En referencia a la figura del jefe tribal, los nombres laudatorios, en cuanto acto pragma-semiótico, se relacionan con la construcción y deconstrucción del poder, de lo que se derivan importantes implicaciones para el significado endosado al jefe tribal y sus roles en el sistema democrático poscolonial. El artículo explora la semiótica de los términos laudatorios en la sociedad Igbo contemporánea, utilizando datos de la cultura popular y de los discursos de los jefes. Igualmente, aborda la interfaz entre significación y política (la política de la significación) en

África para concluir que el cambio en la relevancia y la manera de entender al jefe tribal en la África poscolonial se (re)escenifica en el nivel del signo.

*Palabras clave:* nombres laudatorios, jefe tribal, discurso político, poder, Igbo.

*Oke ntutu aha na-egbu nwa nkita*  
(A lot of praise-names spoil a dog)  
Igbo saying

## 1. Introduction

Niyi Osundare (1993: 3), a poet noted for his strong attachment to African verbal semiotics, tells us that: “Names serve as the door to the house of experience, a guide to hidden meanings in the shadowy nooks of time and place. Names tell stories, liberate or imprison; they may also serve as self-fulfilling prophecies”. Praise names, by extension, are texts of visions or ideologies. They can, as Osundare argues, either save or enslave, especially with respect to their use in the context of chiefship where power and personal ego are often involved. As part of the wide range of signifying practices in chiefship that include insignia, palaces architectural designs, regalia, wall relief paintings and sculptures, etc., praise names adopted by or given to chiefs clearly present competing ideologies, reminding us about the observation made by V.N. Volosinov (1986) that the sign (verbal or the non-verbal) is a site of ideological struggle. Indeed, they point towards the fact that chiefship is not homogeneous; even within the same culture and chiefdom, one could find competing ideologies which need to be taken into consideration in discourses on the roles of chiefs in the economic, social, cultural, and political lives of communities in postcolonial Africa.

This essay will explore how praise naming, as reflected in contemporary Igbo popular discourses, is a means of semiotizing chiefship in the Igbo cultural world and discuss the implications for social tenors especially in the context of the negotiation of difference and solidarity. Preceding the analysis is a brief background discussion on contemporary chiefship in Igboland. This background is important because there has been a lot of controversy in Igbo studies in recent times on Ezeship, and particularly on the issue of *Igbo-enwe-eze* (Igbo-Have-No-Kings), or the so-called “Ezelessness” (Afigbo, 2001) of the Igbo.

## 2. The Philosophy and Pragmatics of Praise-naming in Igbo Culture

The act of praising is performed in many cultures as a means of encouraging positive behaviour in people, although we know that in some cases it could be hypocritical. Within the Igbo cultural context, praising, as an ideal positive reinforcement act, is justified with the wise saying that *E too dike na nke o mere, o mechie ozo* (If a great person is praised for his or her achievement, he or she would achieve more). Indeed, for the Igbo, the cultural act of praising is often harnessed in making people become more committed to working for the public good in concrete terms, apart from trying to demonstrate personal excellence to others. By extension, praise-naming is a cognate pragmatic and semiotic act through which obligations and expressions of abilities and achievement are communicated. In other words, the praise name is not just an identity, but also a text that functions in the social context of relationships, power differentiation, and reconstructions of goals. Just like all Igbo personal names, as shown in Ubahakwe (1981) and Uwalaka (1993), Igbo praise names possess structures of meaning that relate to philosophical and cognitive experiences. As part of proper names, they are “not mere linguistic expressions but are also indicators of experiences which reveal much about the political attitudes and practices of the traditional Igbo” (Ebeogu, 1993: 79), viewed pragmatically.

Whether as a means of performing the act of praising or mere identification of its bearer, a name is universally seen as being very significant in the life of its bearer. To buttress this, Justin Kaplan and Anne Bernays in *The Language of Names* (1997: 16) explain that:

Names shape the language of the daily drama of gesture, avowal, and inference that is part of our social life. Full personal names, first and last taken together, stand at the intersection of opposing pulls: they set the bearer apart as an individual but also provide the bearer with family and extended kinship ties, and so focus both the present and the past. And beyond this, they have an occult associative and symbolic power. They are charms.

It is not only human beings that are given praise names. Communities, the supernatural, and even animals, are sometimes given praise names. With respect to communities, praise-naming is often used in constructing the pride of their identities, in fact for patriotic reasons. In the case of the praise-naming of the supernatural, it is a rhetorical means of gaining the favour or enlisting the support of the being in question, like in the case of several praise names given to God in Jewish religious tradition.

Many personal names given to or taken by people, as their identities, may be praise-oriented, and the praise may be directed to either the supernatural, the

bearer, or the giver of such a name, for example parents. In the present essay, focus is not on personal names that are praise-oriented but on the sub-class referred to in Igbo as *aha otito* (praise names), which are additional names taken by or given to individuals, either in backing up the traditional titles they have taken or in testifying to their competence in various vocations such as hunting, herbal healing, artistic productions, etc. There is a slight difference between *aha ntutu* (sobriquet used in greeting) and *aha otito* (praise name), just as there is a difference between *aha echichi* (title name), *aha ntutu*, and *aha otito*.<sup>1</sup> *Aha ntutu* may be praise-oriented, in other words, it may also be *aha na-enye otito* (a name that praises), or a name that generally teaches a philosophy of life without any tickling of the ego. Every adult in the Igbo society normally chooses *aha ntutu* with which people greet him or her. Most of the time, it is the person's age grade that asks the person to provide such a name, especially because within the context of the age grade, individuals discursively try to reconstruct their social identities with their abilities and philosophies. Also, in performances (dance, masquerading, wrestling, etc), the identities featured in the *aha ntutu* are particularly engaged in moving action. It tends to indicate how in the Igbo society attempts are made to harness the philosophies and perceptions of individuals, and to *identify* these philosophies and perceptions as people in social action. People who are unable to provide *aha ntutu* for themselves are normally regarded in their groups as being incapable of reflecting on life and perceiving their roles in life.

*Aha echichi* (title name) may be praise-oriented, and is normally *aha ntutu*, because titled individuals are supposed to be greeted properly, that is, greeted in recognition of what they are, or have made themselves for others to recognize. It is considered abnormal among the Igbo not to honour someone who has been properly honoured by tradition. Greeting an individual with his or her *aha echichi* is also a way of showing respect for tradition. Again, one who greets with the *aha echichi* and another who is greeted are brought together in a moment's conversation on, and perpetuation of, those philosophies intended/initiated by the bearer of the name(s). In some cases, the *aha echichi*, *aha otito*, and *aha ntutu* may be extensive, that is, they may be a very long rendition structurally shared by the bearer of the name(s) and the person being hailed or greeted in the ensuing discourse. In fact, what we have in such situations is a (verbal) performance on identity.

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1. Ubahakwe (1981: 108) recognizes three categories of names in Igbo: pet, unique, and given. This categorization is problematic because some pet names (for example, praise names) may be also given.

### 3. Igbo Chiefship: *Igbo-Enwe-Eze*, *Igbo-Nwe(re)-Eze*, and the *Nnukwu Mmanwu* Social Text

A very crucial matter that has arisen in relation to Igbo chiefship discourses in recent times is the validity or otherwise of the saying, *Igbo enwe eze* (“Igbo have no kings”). Authorities in Igbo studies such as Adiele Afigbo and Cyril Angulo Onwuejeogwu have been involved in serious and bitter debates on the issue, especially because it has some links with recent struggles for traditional leadership in Ala Igbo and redefinitions of the place of chiefship in Igbo cultural affairs. In *Igbo Nwe Eze*, a publication that resulted from Onwuejeogwu’s Iguaro Igbo Heritage Inaugural lecture, 2001, which is a response to Cyril Agodi Onwumechili’s Ahiajioku lecture in 2000 entitled *Igbo Enwe Eze?*, Onwuejeogwu had interpreted Onwumechili as claiming that the Igbo have no kings. Afigbo, in *Igbo Enwe Eze: Beyond Onwumechili and Onwuejiogwu* (2001), has criticized Onwuejiogwu as having misread Onwumechili, and as having written his treatise just to please the Nri traditional authorities who probably felt that Onwumechili’s thesis was a threat to their status in Ala Igbo. For Afigbo, Onwumechili has not asserted that the Igbo have never had kings, or do not have kings, but that *most* Igbo communities did not have kings (in the past). Onwumechili, he clarifies, “was not concerned primarily with the contemporary scene which passes belief when compared with the past” (Afigbo, 2001: 8).

The assertion, *Igbo enwe eze*, controversial as it is, has some multi-acculturality which those involved in its debate ought to recognize. It could be read as a declarative sentence (that the Igbo have no kings) and as a nominal (the Igbo that have no kings). Both may be used by the neighbours of the Igbo in criticizing or ridiculing them, or even by the Igbo themselves as a form of self-criticism and expression of regret (as in the case of the name, *Igboamaeze* (the Igbo have no regard for kings)).

Afigbo (2001: 17) in *Igbo Enwe Eze* draws our attention to the indigenous Igbo criterion for investing somebody with Ezeship, namely: headship or authority that “derives from correct standing in or descent from the blood line”. Such an authority is supported by the *Ofo*, in other words, by the gods and ancestors, and is therefore normal beyond question. In some cases, the Eze may be identified as *aka kpa ofo* (literally, The Hand that Holds the Ofo), or by other names identified by Afigbo, such as “Nna Anyi” (Our Father), “Onye Nwe Ala” (Owner of the community territory), “Isi Ala” or “Onye Isi Ala” (Community Head) (Afigbo, 2001: 17-18), names which suggest his being a natural custodian of the land and people. The confusion on who is an Eze and who is not in contemporary Igbo society where values have become confused is cleared by Afigbo (2001: 18):

Any (other) person laying claim to or indeed holding an office in the group to which the title Eze has been attached, with or without government recognition, but whose position does not derive from the blood line is not an Eze by culture and usage. He is at best a phenomenon which has become embarrassingly common since the colonial period. He is a warrant chief. In other words there are today in post-colonial Igboland many Ezes who are mere warrant chiefs. They are Eze because of their wealth and/or learning, because they were able to buy the people's support and win the approval of Government!!

Some Igbo communities have tried to overcome the problem of the confusion in the status of an Eze by making a distinction between a "chief" and an "Eze". The Eze is reserved to refer to the community head chosen by consent and/or through direct blood descent from the holders of the *ofo*. The title of "chief", on the other hand, is normally conferred on any deserving person by the Eze, with the former being inferior and not in any way entitling the holder to rulership of the community. In some Igbo communities, for instance, it would amount to an inferiorization to refer to the traditional ruler of the community as a "chief" instead of "Eze" or "Igwe". Perhaps this differentiation has resulted from the abuse of the title of "chief", and the fact that the confusion has led to a conflict in the distribution of powers. Moreover, the title "chief" has been identified as being colonial in origin, and is not an appropriate translation of "Eze". An Eze is a king, but because the colonial masters would not recognize any African "king" within their colonies, they preferred to call the traditional rulers "chiefs" and even "chieftains" in some cases.

One should also take very seriously the observation made by Afigbo (2001: 28-29) about the changes that have occurred in Igbo traditional rulership since 1896:

The sources of these changes are many. These include received European ideas, examples taken from other parts of Nigeria (especially Yorubaland, Benin, and Northern Nigeria). It is for this reason that we have a wide variegation in the institution in Igboland. With many there is a gap between splendour and wealth on the one hand (palaces, symbols, carriage and comportment) and reality on the other. There is the old unresolved conflict between the institution and the new elite, seen particularly in unending wahala between traditional rulers and town unions. There is the conflict between the conception of traditional rulers as royal fathers, as patrons of culture and as colourful decorations on the cap of national life on the one hand, and the attempt to assign them duties which they have no means of carrying out such as in the matter of helping to track down robbers, drug peddlers and other hoodlums.

As a matter of fact, the status of a chief has become more important than ever before among the Igbo; in fact the chief is configured as *Nnukwu Mmanwu* (the

Big Masquerade) that must be feared and respected. The *Nnukwu Mmanwu* semiotic is a paradox because by nature, the Igbo resist aristocracy but it nevertheless appears attractive. In recent times, there is a kind of scramble for chiefship and other titles in Nigeria as a whole, all in the attempt to signify the self as outstanding in the society, to create respect, indeed awe and worship, for self. Many would want to be perceived as *Nnukwu Mmanwu*, as a way of negotiating survival in a society that seems to thrive on might is right. Praise names are among the means used in constructing this image of *Nnukwu Mmanwu* for the self in contemporary Igbo chiefship, and so it ties up with the issues of power struggle and the crisis in/of traditional governance.

#### 4. Praise Names, Power Struggles, and the Crisis of Traditional Governance

The history of chiefship in the Igbo society has been a history of “rise and fall in the power of chiefs” (Inyama, 1993: 222). From Afigbo’s account, the British colonial authorities in Nigeria were at some point not comfortable with the local chiefs thinking that they were privileged people, or leaders of their people, even though these colonialists at first did invest the chiefs with authority to deal with their own people.<sup>2</sup> This discomfort is understandable since the white colonialists were not really interested in creating respect for traditional African institutions in the first place, and would not want to create powerful institutions that would later turn to challenge their colonial authority. Chiefs who proved stubborn or challenged such authority were usually demoted, flogged, or sometimes exiled.

In contemporary Igbo chiefship, the power and legitimacy of the chief are still important issues. Apart from the long-standing conflict between the modernity of the town unions and traditional rulers in Igbo communities, there is a power struggle between the chiefship institution that appears to promote class distinction and individual quest and expression of democratic freedom in the Igbo society. Such ideological struggle often manifests in contexts of decision making in which the chiefs, seeing themselves as the *voices* of their people, sometimes try to forestall the Igbo tradition of *Onye kwuo uche ya* (everybody speaking their mind) that is based on the Igbo belief that “Power and authority belongs to all [...]” (Nwala, 1985: 168), and try to impose their own personal

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2. Afigbo (2001) also enumerates the following phases through which “chieftaincy” has passed from the colonial times to the present: (1) the phase of the Native Council, characterized by the imposition of patterns of leadership found among the neighbours of the Igbo; (2) the phase of the Warrant and Paramount chiefs that produced tyrants; (3) the chief-as-delegate phase; (4) the Eze Okacha Mma (the Most Acceptable Chief phase); (5) the Elite/Progressive/Improvement Union phase; (6) the County Council/Elected Chief phase; (7) the classification of chiefs phase; (8) the reinvention phase, under military rule.

wills on the people. As means of articulating political visions and attitudes, praise names adopted by chiefs play an important role in negotiating acceptable and respectable images for their bearers in the context of this power struggle. Writing on Igbo personal names as expressions of orientation to democracy, Ebeogu (1993: 81-82) has noted that:

Virtually each of these names indicates the distinctiveness of the individual bearing the name, but this distinctiveness is rooted in a people's recognition of the need for a corporate will. Each name suggests that the bearer is a leader, but this leadership is bestowed by the people. The circumstances under which such names are given often suggest that the bearer of the name has achieved certain successes, not necessarily material, for which the community bestows a leadership position on the individual. It chooses for him a name which reflects his status either as the Spokesman, the Glory, the Light, the Redeemer, the King or the Voice of the People. In contemporary Nigerian socio-political dispensation, many Igbo traditional rulers and so-called chiefs bear such names. [...] It is obvious that such people play the role of power brokers in their community, and often beyond.

The lion (sometimes the tiger) is often represented in Igbo folktales as the king of the animals, the logic being that this powerful carnivore could kill and eat any other animal. The rulership of the lion is not one based on consent but might. That it protects other animals (as imagined in the name "Agu-na-eche-mba" (the-lion-that-guards-the-society) is an irony, for, seen from the angle of Bentham's panopticon, the lion watches to maintain the subjectivity of the other animals (whom he could kill and eat when he wants), or to prevent other lions from coming to rule. Being Ezekwesili (one-who-is-worthy-to-be-king) on the basis of this might, or Omekagu (one-who-acts-like-the-lion), does not agree with the consensus spirit which Kwasi Wiredu (1997) believes is the hallmark of African democracy. Of course, the great cat does not welcome the kind of extensive deliberations that Wiredu has in mind; it merely rules by virtue of the awe and fear it is able to instill in other animals, as suggested in the name *Ebubedike* (the-grace-of-the-mighty/powerful), and perceives self as being indispensable because of its might – something that appears implicit in the name, *Agbawodikeizu* (When-a-great-one-is-excluded-in-consultations, such consultations must be remade because the former would not accept this exclusion). The chief so-named almost seems to assert, along with Louis XIV, "The state/community is I".

Indeed, some of the praise names suggest orientation to democracy as Ebeogu (1993) argues, for instance, *Eze Mbakwe* (If-the-community-consents) or *Eze Ummnakwe* (If-the-kinsmen-consent). Such an orientation deconstructs lionized chiefship or any chiefship that invokes the might and awe of a given individual as was common in the warrant chieftaincy of the 1920s whereby chiefs were given so much power (Inyama, 1993) with which they terrorized

their communities and promoted their subjectivity to the colonial masters. It does also seem to recall and endorse the *Eze Okacha Mma* model introduced by the colonial government as a means of raising chiefs acceptable to their communities especially with the definition of a chief in the revised Interpretation (Cap. 89) Law of the federation 1958 as “any native whose authority and control is recognized by a native community” (cited in Inyama, 1993).

Perhaps the praise name *Edi* of *Ediokwe* (the hyena of *Ediokwe*), one of the praise names featured in Oliver de Coque’s music,<sup>3</sup> presents a more interesting paradox, for the hyena is a disgusting carrion eater that smells. It is also nocturnal, and the Igbo do not normally attach positive attributes to nocturnal creatures. Constructing an identity from this kind of animal is rather to move farther into the realm of dysphemism to valorize and promote the bad-boy syndrome. The choice of such a name indeed seems to agree with the idea of constructing a distinctive image for the self as chief, that is, that the chief must stand out, even if as the worst. The name *Ezeudele* (king of vultures) is even more eloquent as a verbalization of the worst-is-the-mightier-is-the-best ideology. Set within the historical context whereby there are folk narratives about men who, in the quest for money and power, were turned to vultures by spiritualists, this kind of praise name attracts a lot of negative connotations and revulsion.

The image of the chief as the mighty and the powerful is, nevertheless, reconstructed in such names as *Akajiugo* (the-hand-that-holds-the-eagle) and *Ononenyi* (one-that-sits-on-the-elephant). Oriented more to the ability to access or secure royalty (since only the powerful can catch and hold the eagle, and tame the elephant to be able to ride it), they appear more attractive and are the type that subtly address the ideal of working one’s way to prominence. The eagle and the elephant, incidentally, are commonly used as icons on Igbo chieftaincy regalia, as well as in palace wall reliefs, standing sculptures, caps, and fans.

There is, however, an interesting connection between wealth (money) and power in these chieftaincy names. The acquisition or possession of wealth and its philanthropic use as qualifications for chieftaincy are implicitly suggested in names like *Omere-oha* (one-who-does-for-others), *Onwanetirioha* (the-moon-

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3. Most of the praise names discussed in this article are featured in Oliver de Coque’s highlife tune, “A nanwe obodo enwe”. Noted for his orientation to the promotion of Igbo cultural values and praise-singing in his music, Oliver de Coque’s mention of these praise names represents one interesting function of praise names in the relationship between an artist (the one who praises) and the bearer of the name: the social image of the latter is boosted, while the economic and professional life of the former is sustained. Our research on these praise names that are mentioned in Oliver de Coque’s songs further reveals that they are actually used in addressing their bearers, were either adopted by them, or conferred on them by some communities. Only very few, for instance, *Aka-na-edere-ora-akwukwo* (the-hand-that-writes-for-the-people), and *Aka-na-akuziri-ndi-ocha-computer* (the-hand-that-teaches-computer-to-whites), were created by the musician as part of his praise-singing tactics.

that-shines-for-the-people), and *Ide* or *Ide-ji-Ogwugwu* (the pillar that holds the deity). This coalescence of royalty or chiefship and wealth, or the perception of one as the signifier of the other, appears to be promoting the mentality that chiefship could be purchased with money – something that is very common in Nigeria in recent times.

There is in the Igbo society today a struggle between monetized/lionized chieftaincy and chieftaincy based on the will of the people, between chieftaincy obtained through might of wealth and chieftaincy obtained through merit in terms of uprightness, promotion of culture and tradition, and leadership ability. The signing or signification of the space and power of wealth in the domain of chieftaincy is made also the “language of everyday practice” involving “new configurations of local difference and connectedness” (Pred, 1992: 153), as seen in the inter-cultural and intertextual metaphoric praise names like Adamu Dollars Worldwide, Dantata of Igboland, Alakoso of Isolo, Sarduana [sic] of Igboland, and Iduu I of Ihiala. Crossing the Igbo ethno-cultural space to obtain signifiers of supreme chiefship is one way of suggesting the local-with-a-difference, or the local-that-is-global, just as chiefship in Igboland itself was generally reinvented by cultural and political outsiders (British colonialists, military rulers, migrants, modernists, the educated elite, etc.). Alhaji Dantata, a rich businessman from Northern Nigeria, commanded admiration among many business tycoons who, indeed, followed his example in investments in trucking, manufacturing, and use of wealth in philanthropy. In fact, in the post-war era, the pet name “Alhaji” adopted by some Igbo people was meant to suggest that they were visibly wealthy. Just as in the metaphoric use of *Dantata*, the name *Adamu Dollars Worldwide* harnesses both the stereotype of the Hausa/Fulani as foreign currency speculator (indeed, many own bureau de change offices in Ibadan, Lagos, and Kano) and the invention of the dollar in discourse as “a standard for measuring real affluence in the West African context” (Oha, 2002: 78).

The globalization of the chiefship<sup>4</sup> is even more visible in the configuration of *Ichie Gburugburu* (all-round, overall, or global Ichie) and in the adoption of *Iduu* (an Igbo name for the Ancient Bini Kingdom) as a title/praise name, obviously a metonymy for the Oba, the ruler of the kingdom. Igbo folk narratives about *Eze obodo Iduu na Oba* (The King of Benin Kingdom), paradoxically sometimes represent the Oba as heartless (for instance when he has to pull out the

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4. Chiefship is indeed becoming globalized through the emergence of Igbo chiefs-in-diaspora, that is, outside the Igbo homeland. For instance, in Ibadan, the Igbo king in Ibadan is HRH Eze Dr Alex C. Anozie, the *Eze Digbo Mma I N'ala Ibadan* (the king that is acceptable to Igbo people). Chief Chukwuemeka Odumegwu-Ojukwu, the Ikemba of Nnewi, is also currently regarded as Eze Igbo Gburugburu (the overall king of the Igbo). These obviously indicate a globalizing trend and a widening of both the concept of Igbo chieftaincy and the idea of the Igbo cultural space.

teeth of his subjects to celebrate new yam festival), and sometimes present his splendour and enviable authority. The idea of an Igbo chief as an *Iduu* therefore indicates the undecidable status and character of contemporary Igbo chiefship itself: it is both foreign and local, both human and brutal, both democratic and undemocratic.

The signification of the chief as the moon that shines for the society, as a luminary, suggests not only his distinctiveness but also his desirability that is beyond the ethnic and cultural. Other metaphorizations in the naming of the chief – mostly the archetypal – such as *Orimili* (sea) and *Iyi* (River/Oath) evoke the primordial fear associated with such images in primitive imagination. The large body of water is awe-inspiring and fearful especially with its storms, dangerous aquatic creatures, etc. The sea represents a destructive power in its immensity, although its mysterious nature again appears admirable. Locating a chief within this archetypal frame means not only naturalizing the power wielded by him but also asserting subjectivity to him.

Praise names adopted by many Igbo chiefs and those adopted by some non-chiefs to parody those titles reveal the crisis in the conceptualization of the power and roles of the chief in contemporary Igbo society. The praise names rhetorically present desirable images of their bearers, whereas the parodic praise names subvert and laugh at the credibility claims implied in the praise names of the chiefs. For instance, one non-titled person in Uli decided to go by the praise name *Eze Atugha* (Chief Liar/False Chief) in indirect response to his kinsman who became chief and took name, *Eze Eziokwu* (Truthful Chief/True chief). Traditionally, the credibility of a leader in the Igbo society mainly derives from an ability to speak the truth at all times and to be impartial. In the traditional ozo title, which is partly sacerdotal, truth is regarded as a major pillar (Amadiume, 1988: 18); and thus the ozo titled man is regarded as a holy man. The deconstruction of the claim to truthfulness is a major expression of opposition to the nature of contemporary Igbo chiefship.

Although this article has focused primarily on praise names in the context of traditional Igbo chiefship, it should be noted that the politics and rhetoric of praise naming also feature prominently in post-colonial democratic politics in the Igbo states in Nigeria. Generally, Nigerian politicians try to use the indigenous chiefship to construct their legitimacy and power, and many have chains of chiefship titles either conferred on them by traditional rulers whom they have favoured (or who desire to be favoured), or personally taken to build their public image. In this regard, the ideological and philosophical significance of praise names is sometimes invoked in contemporary political discourses in the Igbo-speaking areas in Nigeria to consolidate this rhetoric of legitimacy and increase liking. An example is Chief Chinwoke Mbinjuju's presentation of his praise

name, Odera (which means “If he has ordained (it)”), to project his ideological and spiritual vision of his presence in Anambra State politics in Nigeria.<sup>5</sup>

The former governor of Anambra State, through the reference to his praise/greeting name, attempts to show how impossible it is for any politician to stop him from achieving his political ambitions, based on the cultural and religious beliefs about destiny underlying the name, “Odera” (literally, “If he has written”). In Igbo culture and traditional belief system, one’s destiny is believed to be unchangeable, even though the same traditional system subscribes to the notion that *Onye kwe, chi ya ekwere* (If one affirms, one’s God also affirms). The Igbo traditional belief system seeks the clarification of one’s destiny through a range of semiotic practices like reading the palm of one’s hand (palmistry), reading the positions of divination seeds, and narratives such as dreams, as well as recurring incidents in one’s life. Chief Mbadinuju, incidentally, is a Pentecostal Christian who, while a governor in Anambra State, insisted that civil servants in the state should participate in communal prayers at their workplaces before commencing duty for the day. As in many other cases of double-consciousness in Nigerian life, he still appears to hold fast to the Igbo traditional notion of destiny, which, understandably, serves as a rhetorical appeal in his political discourse. His appeal to the semiotic of predestination is also a means of suggesting that his opponents in Anambra politics have no chances over him, an indirect way of telling them also to give up what he considers their “conspiracies”. Given that predestination is a fairly shared belief in the Igbo society, Chief Mbadinuju could therefore be seen as appealing to this shared belief and ideological system to win support.

The adoption of the praise names that advertise and suggest the prominence or supremacy of self is just one of the numerous signifying practices that many individuals seek to obtain chieftaincy titles in Igbo communities in recent times. Other forms of the signification include modes of regal dressing (indeed, *costuming*, for it is the acting or performance of self-in-power that is involved), architectural designs of their palaces and places of abode, including the types of icons used in wall paintings and relief sculptures in the palaces, and of course, the types of cars driven by the chief (most probably a Mercedes Benz, a jeep, and other one-in-town crawlers, but not any of those small cars often identified as “pure water” due to their commonness). A chief is configured as rare and outstanding, and so is located in the semiotic space of those signs of power that command respect and even worship. Interestingly, these other forms of the signification of the power and meaning of the chief are connected with the praise names adopted by the chief; in fact, one could see the praise names as

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5. See Chief Mbadinuju’s interview with *Elendu Reports* (28 March, 2008) at <[http://elendureports.com/index.php?option=com\\_content&task=view&id=630&Itemid=1](http://elendureports.com/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=630&Itemid=1)>.

verbalizations or “trans-semiotic” translations of the chiefship as imagined by their bearers. Just one example: a chief in Mbaise in Imo State bears the praise name *Agu-na-eche-Mba* (The-Lion-that-Watches-Over-the-Community). The main gate to his premises is the mouth of the sculpture of a lion, so that entering the premises also ironically means entering the belly of the beast. Watching over the community becomes an ambivalent engagement: it is both *protecting* the community and *devouring* it, or rather, *protecting* the community so as to be able to devour it. Indeed, governance in the tradition of moneyed chiefs in contemporary Igbo society and in Nigeria as a whole is such a paradoxical business of terrorizing and devouring the community whose interest the chief professes to defend or pursue.

The paper thus throws up the issue of the crucial nature of signification in chiefship politics and the politics of signification in traditional governance in Africa. These interrelated issues indeed justify the perception of cultural signifying practices as domains where power, rights, and roles have to be negotiated or confronted. The “political economy” of verbal and non-verbal signs in Igbo chiefship is one that shows a society that is engaged in a conflict between a monetization/lionization of traditional governance systems and the governance through consensus/ familiar Igbo systems.

## **5. Some Concluding Remarks**

The focus in this article has been on praise names in Igbo chiefship as signs of power, which demonstrate the power of signs in culture and society. Locating the analysis within the context of debates on the ontology and practice of chiefship in Igbo culture and history, the article has attempted to show that these names express competing ideologies. Praise names adopted by chiefs are sometimes indirect responses to, or interrogations of, other chiefship names and leadership styles. In other words, an indirect verbal exchange on chiefship is always already going on among chiefs (and non-chiefs) through praise naming.

There is no doubt that chiefship needs to be made more meaningful and relevant to the contemporary culture and democratic governance. As African chiefs have already started moving from the chiefdoms of their local communities to the chiefdoms of virtual global community, there is the need for a proper ideological transformation of the institution. African chiefship needs to be revolutionized so that chiefs become means of liberating their communities from political oppression, hunger, disease, and above all, ignorance. The figure of the chief as the panoptical lion encourages enslavement and feudalism. The gold rings and flowing kente of the chief signify wealthy and expansive personality paradoxically performed in a social context where many barely have something

to eat. A chief would still be a chief, and even a better one, if he reduces the number of his gold rings and size of his kente cloth so that somebody who is hungry and naked somewhere in the chiefdom would have something to eat and something to wear.

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**Annex****Praise names of some Igbo chiefs that feature in “A na-enwe obodo enwe”,  
a highlife tune by Chief Oliver de Coque**

REAL NAME OF BEARER/ADDRESSEE	PRAISE NAME(S)	MEANING(S)
Sir Emma English Egemole	Ichie Gburugburu	All-round Ichie or Ichie that is generally accepted
Chief Clement Ezekwemba	Sarduana (sic) of Igboland	Sardauna (the Sokoto Islamic monarch) of Igboland
Chief Dr Emeka G.S. Nwadike	<i>Okaa-Omee</i> of Amandugba, Oke Osisi	One-who-does-what-he-proclaims of Amandugba, The great tree
Chief Callistus Ezeukwu	<i>Aku-ruo-ulo</i> I of Isiekenesii, <i>Omere-oha</i> I of Orlu, <i>Dantata</i> of Igboland	When-wealth-reaches-home I of Isiekenesii, One-who-does-for-others I of Orlu, Dantata (name of one of the richest men in Northern Nigeria) of Igboland
Chief Dr Barrister Obinna Duruji	<i>Ohamadike of Umuaka, Agunchemba na Dallas USA, Nnukwu Mmanwu di na Lawyer, Lawyer Afurukwe International</i>	People-know-the-great-person of Umuaka, The-lion-that-guards-society in Dallas USA, Big Masquerade Lawyer, Lawyer Seen-and-Believed
Chief Chris C. Uche	<i>Ozuo-Omee of Orifite</i>	One-who-considers-and-does of Orifite
Chief Dr Richard O. Nwachukwu	<i>Ekwueme I of Igboland, Aka-na-edere-ora-akwukwo</i>	One-who-says-and-does
Engineer Mike Okey Amuzie	<i>Ezekwesili V of Umuaka</i>	One-worthy-to-be-king V of Umuaka
Chief Victor Okoye	<i>Ide Umuoji, Ide-ji-Ogwugwu</i>	Pillar of Umuoji, Pillar-that-holds-the-deity
Hon. Sir Gabriel Ejioogu	<i>Ochili Ozua</i>	One-who-gathers (people)-and-trains (them)
Prince Ikechukwu Adogu	<i>Adamu Dollars Worldwide, Eze-chukwu-debele I of Agulu Uzoigbo</i>	Adamu (Hausa name)(who has) dollars Worldwide, King-Kept-by-God I of Agulu Uzoigbo
Chief Raymond F.C. Okonkwo	<i>Isiehi I of Ehime Mbano</i>	Cattle-head of Ehime Mbano
Chief Dr Emeka Nkwo	<i>Oputa-obie of Igboland, Computer di na mmadu, Aka-n a-akuzili-ndi-ocha-computer</i>	When-who-appears-and-It (trouble/problem) ends, Hand-that-teaches-computer-to-the-whites
Chief Engineer Solomon Azubuogu	<i>Eze Mbakwe Okutalukwe, Ochiagha I of Uga</i>	King If-the-community-consents One-who-gets-wealth-and-accepts, War Commander I of Uga

REAL NAME OF BEARER/ADDRESSEE	PRAISE NAME(S)	MEANING(S)
Chief Jerry Josiah Uwaezuoke	<i>Ogborodike I of Houston, Ezebunafu I of Ojoto, Orimili, Ebubedike Ndiigbo</i>	Powerful-one-that-Prevents (Problems), King-in-the-womb of Ojoto, The-Grace-of-Powerful of the Igbo
Chief Onwuka Kalu	<i>Okpuzu of Atriba</i>	The blacksmith of Atriba
Chief Charles Orié	<i>Aku-atu-egwu nke izizi of Ohaji</i>	Wealth-is-awesome the First of Ohaji
Chief Clement Anaghara	<i>Iyi of Uruala</i>	The River (also Oath) of Uruala
Sir Nze G.N. Iheaku	<i>Omenkeahuruanya of Osina</i>	One-whose-deeds-are-visible of Osina
Chief I.K. Oranusí	<i>Alakoso of Isolo, Ojemba Nnewi</i>	Alakoso (Yoruba title) of Isolo, One-who-goes-places of Nnewi
Chief Anthony Ezeweputa	<i>Omeifeukwu I of Oraukwu</i>	One-who-does-great-things
Chief Aloy Imo	<i>Ezeudele of Nnewi</i>	King-of-vultures of Nnewi
Chief Philip Nwosu	<i>Agbawodikeizu of Mbano, Eribe-agwu-agwu of Igboland, Eze-ama-na-oga-echi of Osuama</i>	When-a-great-one-is-excluded-in-consultations, one-whose-wealth-is-inexhaustible
Sir Louis Enwegbara Chief Henry Achiekwelu	<i>Akajiugo of Ihiala Ononenyi I of Achi, Omekagu I of Achi, Ebubedike I of Isialangwa</i>	The-hand-that-holds-the-eagle of Ihiala, One-that-sits-on (rides) the elephant I of Achi, One-who-behaves-like-the-lion I of Isialangwa
Chief L.U. Dikeocha	<i>Onwanetirioha I of Ahiazu Mbaise, Edi of Ediokwe</i>	The-moon-that-shines-for-the-people I of Mbaise, The Hyena of Ediokwe
Chief Hope Uzodimma	<i>Onwanetiriora of Omuma, Oputa obie of Oru, Omeiheukwu of Orlu</i>	The moon-that-shines-for-the-people of Omuma, One-who-appears-and-it (problem)-ends of Oru, One-who-does-mighty-things of Orlu
Prince Collins Amukamara	<i>Eze-ama-na-oga-echi, Eze-ekulie of Awo-Omama</i>	The-King-whose-coronation-was-always-known/expected
Chief Augustine Okolie	<i>Iduu I of Ihiala</i>	The Bini (synecdoche for Oba) I of Ihiala