

Traditions of Naming in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's Fiction

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Chim-a-ma-nda—My God cannot *fail*

Naming takes various meanings depending on the prevailing socio-cultural circumstances of each society. In Africa, personal names possess “strong historical [...] and ethno-pragmatic bearing[s] that go beyond mere identity or referentiality” (Bariki 46), implying that they are tied to familial and communal experiences and accomplishments, to cultural practices and external influences. Specifically, the incursion of colonialism, Christianity and Islam on the continent brought in and entrenched the giving of hitherto foreign names with more religious than ethnic implications. Such foreign names have been found to convey diverse forms of “subalterneity” on Africans and are mostly taken on by individuals due to the coercive nature of religion and Western cultural hegemony. Put differently, it is the coercion of European missionaries in giving foreign names as part of their induction into the Christian faith that necessitated the proliferation of non-native names among Africans as a mark of religion rather than ethnicity (Makoni, Makoni and Mashiri; Ndlovu; Neethling). Nevertheless, local ones are still being used profusely for identification and profession of group affiliations alongside foreign names. Such names are important aspects of “racist and anti-racist political, cultural and economic struggles” on the continent (Ndlovu 105). They are given for various reasons, and they synecdochically epitomize the essence of the bearers, sometimes informing “how their bearers act, think and feel, and how others react and respond toward them” (Mensah, Inyabri and Nyong 250).

In literature, names serve three main purposes: creating a make-believe world, characterization, and development of meaning (Izevbaye 162). Specifically, names encode “a central trait in a particular character’s signification” and embrace “crucial thematic motifs, ideological toning as well as even showing the particular writer’s point of view” (Wamitila 35). Oftentimes, within critical evaluations of literary works, names of fictional characters are needlessly ignored in comparison to other aspects of identity, plot, environment, and the outcomes of interpersonal relations within narratives. Nevertheless, “naming is often as creative in the sociocultural context as it is in the literary” because it “involves, in the

first case, the formation of a personality and, in the second, the creation of a character” (Izevbaye 169). This indicates that designating or inventing names for characters is part of the creative process in fictional writing. The work of novelists, for instance, in naming their characters correlates with that of parents who must give appropriate names to their newly born babies. Consequently, whether as a parent or as a creator of a fictional character, one significant consideration in deciding proper names for their wards is that “names carry specific cultural information about societal values, philosophical thoughts, world views, religious systems, and beliefs of the people” (Akinyemi 242). Put more succinctly, novelists create “not just by evoking names but by the more sustained act of naming” (Izevbaye 165), a creative process that entails using names that encapsulates the entire gamut of a character’s traits and experiences.

For the Igbo of south-eastern Nigeria, names and titles have significant sociological relevance that speaks to the circumstances of birth, family history, personal accomplishments, desires and religious affiliation. Igbo personal names are generally utilitarian as they are coined from words and meanings embedded in the language (Anyachonkeya). Twelve classifications of such personal names based on frequencies of occurrence have been identified and discussed, particularly showing how they are rooted in Igbo cultural practices (Ubahakwe 101-102). Another work examines names and how they aid the understanding of politics within and between several Igbo communities (Ebeogu, “Onomastics and the Igbo Tradition of Politics”). Apart from personal names, many praise names and titles extol individuals’ virtues and achievements (Igwebuikwe; Oha). These titles are not just praise words; they are also forms of greeting in traditional Igbo societies, meaning that the highest respect one can accord to an elder, parent, or any other older member of the community is to hail them by their title names. The Igbo child considered the most respectful does not genuflect to elders but can praise everyone with their correct titles. This tradition is evident in Achebe’s works, where children must go to their mother’s hut and their father’s *obi* (homestead, or building where the head of the family lives) to hail them by their title names, or in the way they greet other elders in public.

In inventive and peculiar ways, Igbo naming traditions and patterns filter into Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s fiction. Adichie’s pattern of matching character traits, personality, and names have also been identified in other writers of Igbo extraction, wherein the correlation between real-life and fictional naming traditions are compared (Ebeogu, “Igbo Proper Names in Nigerian Literature Written in English”). Among other things, Adichie creates suggestions of what Igbo names could be aesthetically and politically without being imbued with pretentious religiosity and pandering to Western and colonial preferences. She brings the meanings of these names into the discussions of her characters, firstly as a way of letting non-Igbo speakers understand the denotative and connotative relevance of the names; secondly, to underscore the importance of such names to the

stories of the personalities involved; and thirdly, to show that name selection, especially in her works, are not arbitrary, but expressions of craft and politics. Her experiments with naming commenced with her name, Chimamanda. This name became popular in Nigeria, especially among the Igbo after 2003 when *Purple Hibiscus* was published and Adichie became popular, thus leading to numerous Igbo parents giving the name to their newly born female children. Even without any supporting statistics surrounding Igbo names, my understanding is that among children born before this time, hardly any had that name. Being born about the same time as Adichie, I did not meet any child bearing that name while growing up in south-eastern Nigeria and did not encounter it until Adichie's novel was published.

In an earlier publication, a stage play published in 1998, *For Love of Biafra*, Adichie presents herself as Amanda N. Adichie. But by the time *Purple Hibiscus* came out in 2003, she had migrated from "Amanda" to "Chimamanda". This transition is erroneously attributed to Adichie "anglicizing" her name to appeal more to a wider range of audiences (Harris 30). This supposition appears logical, especially given that "Ngozi" appears just as "N," though her surname could have also been altered in some ways. In an interview with popular Nigerian television personality Ebuka, Adichie describes how the name came about, establishing that she wanted an Igbo name that has "Amanda" (her English name) in it since she had used it for her passport, bank accounts, and other official documents. Then citing how her invented name has become popular among the Igbo, Adichie asks rhetorically: "Who says we cannot change culture?" (Bounce). She alludes to the way the name she invented spread like wildfire as she became popular across Nigeria. In the interview, Adichie is also asked how her parents came up with the name Chimamanda in the late 1970s when she was born but in actuality, they did not. She did. Indeed, Ngozi, her middle name, is a more period-appropriate name for that time, while names likened to Chimamanda did not come until the 1990s when prosperity varieties of Pentecostal Christianity became widespread in Nigeria.

"Chimamanda" ties/rhymes with the ruling Pentecostalist Christian names that Igbo people now give their children, starting with "Chi" or "Chukwu". A good number of Igbo names have borne "Chi" or "Chukwu," but they do not have the form of performativity that Chimamanda and more contemporary Christianized Igbo names have. Older Igbo names have become obsolete as they get supplanted by newer versions that express, in multiple forms, the capabilities of God, and are often portrayed in personalized ways that make the Supreme Being appear to belong to these individuals alone. Inventing names and using unique Igbo names is an art that Adichie has perfected, as seen in the ways characters are named in her works. Of course, for non-Igbo speaking readers, the inventiveness of these names may hold no significance. But for those with some knowledge of Igbo names, it might become obvious that her characters do not bear common names like Emeka, Ifeanyi, Ebuka, or Ngozi, Nneka, and other popular Igbo names. Instead, the following names can be found: Kambili and Jaja (Adichie, *Purple Hibiscus*), Ifemelu and Obinze (Adichie,

Americanah,) Odenigbo and Olanna (Adichie, *Half of a Yellow Sun*,) as well as Zikora and Mmiliaku in the eponymous short fiction (Adichie, *Zikora*). Adichie takes names and naming seriously due to her own experience at getting an appropriate Igbo name that matches her English name, which filters into her fiction.

Categories of naming in Adichie

My take-off point is to state that Adichie uses uncommon Igbo names for her characters. It will appear that she steers clear of stereotypical Igbo names, such as Emeka, Ngozi, Ikenna, Nneka, at least for her major characters as seen above. In line with Izevbaye's observations above about the function of names, Adichie's naming pattern identifies and categorizes her fictional personae. *Americanah* and *Zikora* are bolder in their inclusivity and multi-ethnic portraiture of personae, are more globalized, and even touch on a plurality of forms of sexuality. With the opening of the narratives in this manner, names play increasingly vital roles in aiding readers to keep up with the character delineations as each story progresses. More importantly, names, especially among the Igbo and other Nigerian ethnic groups, are used to distinguish between gender, religion, ethnicity, and nationality. In Adichie's case, the fact that she uses unusual ones shows that she intends them to bear and convey specific details.

Purple Hibiscus is told from the first-person perspective of a taciturn 15-year-old, Kambili, with action restricted to Igbo-speaking areas of south-eastern Nigeria, specifically the towns of Enugu, Nsukka, and Abba. Adichie gradually opens her identity representations to include a more diverse character range. So, when we meet any of the characters—Jaja, Aunty Ifeoma, Father Amadi, Eugene Achike, Beatrice Achike, Papa-Nnukwu, Obiora, Amaka, Doctor Nduoma—we see them as Kambili sees them. In this novel, there are three major name classifications: Igbo, English, and “title names.”¹ Of the Igbo personal names used in this novel, there are two variants—regular and irregular. The first category includes Ifeoma (good thing), Obiora (goodly heart or heart of the masses), and Amaka (short for *Chiamaka*—God is beautiful, but can also be *Nwamaka* – a child is beautiful among many others).² These regular Igbo personal names are fast falling out of use due to the current preference for more Christianized alternatives. The second consists of irregular personal names such as Amadi (freeborn man) and Nduoma (good life) that have become unusual in today's Igbo naming practice. It is apparent that Adichie selected these irregular names specifically to highlight their beauty, importance, and the need to immortalize them in the face of their increasing extinction.

When it comes to English names, Adichie rarely uses these for obviously Igbo characters except for minor and weak characters, or for villains, like Beatrice and Eugene, respectively. Beatrice is portrayed as docile and annoyingly submissive except at the end where she eventually turns against her husband in defense of her children. She obviously bears an English name because her father was a devout

Christian, which her husband had found appealing in the first place. In the case of Eugene, his personality undoubtedly makes him the antagonist in the narrative. The name Jaja, which I consider a title name, is explained in greater detail below. The other title name used in the novel, Papa-Nnukwu (big father) is the Igbo term for grandfather, and as Adichie notes in the narrative, *nna-ochie* (aged father) refers to one's maternal grandfather (pp. 50-51). It is also noteworthy that the English terms, Papa and Mama, are used by Kambili to refer to her parents at different times.³

Half of a Yellow Sun, an account of the Nigerian-Biafran Civil War (1967-1970), has a more complex plot than *Purple Hibiscus*. This novel incorporates more Nigerians from other ethnicities and a Briton, but action remains within the country, expanding to Lagos, Port Harcourt, Kano, and more towns and villages in the south-east due to the frequent movement of Odenigbo and his family owing to the war. There are interesting Igbo names in this narrative. Ugwu (mountain or a hill) is a peculiar name used in northern Igboland around Nsukka, where people now bear it as surname after their forebears who must have had it as first name.⁴ The twins Olanna and Kainene are defined by the latter as follows: 'Kainene and Olanna. Her name is the lyrical *God's Gold*, and mine is the more practical *Let's watch and see what next God will bring*' (p. 59). Their father calls her, "'Ola m,' my gold,' (p. 443). I have stated these interpretations of Olanna's name to underscore how it is viewed by other characters. There is a consistency with reading *ola* as gold in this work, but gold in Igbo is *ola-edo*, and the suffix, *edo*, which means, 'yellow,' differentiates precious stones by color, like separating gold from silver, *ola-ocha* (the suffix means 'white' or 'light-colored').

Consequently, *ola* means "precious" and *nna* "father," which is a reference to God or to one's actual parent. Nnesinachi (mother is from God), Okeoma (goodly inheritance/fortune, literally "a good share"), and Arizendikwunnem (thanks to my mother's relatives) are astounding, especially the last of the three in their connotative references.⁵ Arizzechukwu, which means, "it is because of God", "thanks to God" also, is a more popular version and is often shortened to "Arinze." Adichie's version is not a common name. In Igboland, there is a great bond between children and their maternal relatives. It is always a second home where children receive greater acceptance and recognition. Achebe shows this relationship in *Things Fall Apart*, when Okonkwo went on *osọ-ochu* (the practice of banishment that comes when someone commits murder unwittingly) for seven years after fatally shooting someone by accident. Arizendikwunnem highlights this importance, a show of appreciation to one's maternal home as expressed by Auntie Ifeka who says to her daughter: "Your full name is Arizendikwunnem, isn't it? You come from your mother's people [...]" (p. 43). Furthermore, characters of other ethnic identities are easily identified by their names, such as Mohammed, Olanna's ex-lover, and Abdulmalik, her uncle's friend in Kano, who are Hausa and Muslim as well as Miss Adebayo, Odenigbo's colleague, who is Yoruba (p. 21).

Americanah and *Zikora* present a more international mix of characters and action which expands beyond Nigeria to locations in the United States and the United Kingdom. Apart from the inclusion of Americans and Britons in the narratives, there are two Ghanaian diasporic characters, Kweku and Kwame, in *Americanah* and *Zikora*, respectively, and a Senegalese hairdresser, Aisha, who works in the hairdressing salon alongside two Malian colleagues—the owner Mariama and her “sister” named Halima in *Americanah*. There is also a more varied representation of Nigerian ethnicities as shown in the names of Adesuwa, Bisi, Zemaye, Kayode, Ahmed, Emenike, and Osahon in *Americanah*. Some of the characters mentioned here are non-Igbo schoolmates of the two main characters in an unnamed secondary school in Lagos. From these names, it is evident that the school is multi-ethnic, with students from different parts of the country, save for Zemaye (Ifemelu’s work colleague at her firm in Lagos). Note that apart from their names, there is little to no reference to each of these characters’ ethnic identities in the narrative.

Adichie is more innovative when it comes to choosing Igbo names for her characters, unlike other ethnicities where she selects common names. Ifemelu, Obinze, Ranyinudo, Zikora, and Mmiliaku are outstanding yet infrequent Igbo personal names, for their deep meanings and beauty. Some of these names are explained in greater detail below save for Obinze and Zikora. Given that Igbo is a tonal language, the prefix “obi” has two meanings—*obi* (homestead) or *obi* (heart).⁶ The second part of the name, *nze*, is a title, often added before personal names to designate “royalty.” Hence, Obinze has a dual meaning—“homestead of royalty” or “heart of royalty.”⁷ I believe Adichie refers to the second meaning due to the numerous subtle and possibly subconscious references to “heart” and associated words by Ifemelu where Obinze is concerned: mentions of Graham Greene’s *The Heart of the Matter* (pp. 71, 258 & 441), the songs “Yori Yori” and “Obi mu o” (413), and reminiscences of how Obinze qualifies good people with *obi ocha* (pure heart) (pp. 145 & 335). Zikora is a less complicated but equally beautiful name, with a meaning that appears like an instruction: “show it to the people” or “let the people see”. Needless to say, this name aptly captures how the character bares her thoughts and experiences without holding anything back.

Craft of naming in Adichie

Beginning with *Purple Hibiscus*, the names “Kambili” and “Jaja” stand out for their uniqueness. Interestingly, unlike the elaborate explication on her brother Jaja’s name, Adichie does not explain Kambili’s, but leaves it to hang there, uncommon, unfamiliar, foreign, but querying and susceptible to myriad interpretations. Daria Tunca, however, gives more insight into Kambili’s name by averring that the meaning cannot be found within the covers of the book. For this reason, she enquired from the author, who responded: “In the back story that she had imagined for her characters before they stepped into the pages of the novel, Kambili’s mother had suffered several

miscarriages and had thus insisted on giving her daughter an Igbo name that evocatively meant ‘let me live’” (Tunca, *Stylistic Approaches to Nigerian Fiction* 26). Hence, the meaning of the name becomes clearer, because having had several miscarriages, “Kambili” (let me live) is a personal plea for her survival. Also, *i biri ka m biri* (live and let live), the title of an early 1990s song by late Igbo highlife singer Oliver de Coque, comes to mind regarding Kambili’s name, which tallies quite efficiently with this heroine’s character and personality. The interesting tie between Kambili’s name and her experiences in the novel comes in diverse ways, such as “‘curl[ing] around [her]self tighter’ [...], a position she associates with that of ‘a child in the uterus’ [...] indicative of her willingness to escape not only patriarchal violence, but trauma at large” (Tunca, “An Ambiguous ‘Freedom Song’: Mind-Style in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s *Purple Hibiscus*” 14). Kambili has a Christian name, Ruth, one given to her at confirmation, but that name is not used anywhere else in the narrative. It was Eugene that chose it for her, but owing to the narrative perspective of the novel, readers do not often get to hear Eugene call out her name. In places where he does, as when she came second in class and at the point of her infamous hot-water feet washing, he calls her “Kambili.” It is instructive that in contrast, her mother and Aunt Ifeoma call her “Nne” (mother), a highly regarded form of endearment, rather than just “Kambili”. Nevertheless, due to the oppressive nature of her household and her father’s abusiveness, the revolutionary zeal for rejecting foreign names is built into another character. Kambili’s cousin, Amaka, strongly insists on taking a native name at her confirmation despite the intervention of her mother (Adichie, *Purple Hibiscus* 194-195). Amaka insists on choosing a name she understands and can associate with easily, even though Father Amadi promised her that she can choose not to use the name ever after. She is adamant. Her recalcitrance exposes the pretentiousness of this priest, who wants to keep up appearances by keeping with the questionable colonial tradition of using only foreign names for baptisms and confirmations in the church. Her pointed query is that if the white missionaries insisted on solely using such names, why has the practice not been overturned now that Africans are in charge?

For Mmiliaku, Zikora’s cousin in the eponymous short story, it is different. Even with her loveless marriage, Adichie etches out this character’s personality in glowing terms while positing her as the heroine’s go-to-person in any circumstance irrespective of the fact that they live thousands of kilometers apart. Adichie writes, poetically,

And Mmiliaku laughed some more. Mmiliaku, my cousin with the beautiful names, water of wealth, wealth’s water, wealth like a river. The cousin that was like a sister, clever. Mmiliaku, who had advised me and taught me things, was now marrying a man who had asked her to stop working because he could afford to keep her at home. They had married only a few weeks when Emmanuel said he didn’t want her best friend to visit them anymore because married women shouldn’t keep single friends. (Adichie, *Zikora* 10)

In this short paragraph, Adichie summarizes the whole essence of Mmiliakū as a name and the character bearing it. She starts by eulogizing it, rhythmically repeating it at the beginning of each sentence as she burrows the beauty of the name into the consciousness of readers before continuing to the antithesis, the unsalutary aspect of her existence: being married to a rich man who has no regard for her liberties and development, and as such being cut out of having a career and friends. This latter part is like a stain on the beauty of the name and person of Mmiliakū, “water of wealth, wealth’s water, wealth like a river,” leaving us to question why she married this man. Could it be that, as her name sounds, she married for money or some other malignant reason? Though Adichie gives English equivalents to this name, she does it in a subtle, non-intrusive manner. That is the craft, the ability to weave the meaning of an Igbo language expression into an English-language narrative without impeding or distorting the flow of the story.⁸ She neither provides a glossary of Igbo words nor includes names such as Mmiliakū in them. She lets Zikōra tell us that Mmiliakū has “grace,” which she herself lacks (Adichie, *Zikora* 14). Moreover, in line with the lyrical way in which Mmiliakū’s whole essence is delivered, Zikōra calls her “Water” (Adichie, *Zikora* 13), while Mmiliakū calls her “Zikky,” in turn (Adichie, *Zikora* 16); this is different from “Ziko,” that her father’s other wife, Nwanneka, uses (Adichie, *Zikora* 23). Calling her “Water” is a direct translation of “Mmili,” which is the first part of her name. Shortening her name in this form is a form of endearment, something that only close friends and family can do. In English, calling someone “Water” appears comic, but in the fictional authenticity created by Adichie, it flows naturally like pet names peculiar to close friends and relations.

Another name that stands out in Adichie’s *oeuvre* is Ranyinudo. This name is unique for its uncommonness and the dual meaning it portends. Ranyinudo has been described, albeit coyly, as “meaning, leave us in peace, but also capable of a lewd interpretation in Igbo” (Agozino 145). This assertion is valid given that the Igbo verb “raa” could either mean “let someone be” or (for lack of a better English term) to *fuck* someone. It is the closest English equivalent because ra(a) or ì ra mmadu (fucking someone) is equally offensive, unlike other more frequently used Igbo words such as mmadu na mmadu ì rahù, “sleeping with someone” or i dina mmadu, “making love to/with someone”. The first variant is a shortened form of *rapu* or the *rapuba* that Ojigbo used when telling Obinze not to worry too much about getting a job in the UK (Adichie, *Americanah* 230), along with its other variant *hapu*, with all of them meaning to “leave someone or something alone”. The implication is that the two words are deliberately differentiated by saying *rapu* or *hapu*, thus leaving the version in use open to vulgar interpretations by peers. Adichie is equally circumspect about the understanding she prefers, as seen in the excerpt below. I believe this is deliberate, as it adds to the interrogatory capabilities of this name:

In secondary school she had been the bubbly tomboy, very tall and skinny and straightforward, not armed with the mysteriousness of girls. The boys

had all liked her but never chased her, and they fondly called her Leave Me in Peace, because of how often she would say, whenever asked about her unusual name, “Yes, it is an Igbo name and it means ‘leave us in peace,’ so you leave me in peace!” (Adichie, *Americanah* 36)

There is no definitiveness as to which of the two meanings of Ranyị’s name readers could choose here. This is evident in the way that Adichie plays with the definition. She hinges on how boys react to the “tomboy” they liked but prefer to stay away from. Ranyị’s response appears to be a derivative of how others construe her disposition and personality like one already resigned to the fates of not being “chased” by the boys and not equipped with the “mysteriousness” other girls appear to have had. For this purpose, I suppose that the two possible meanings—“leave us in peace” and “*fuck* us in peace”—are at play here. Though unspoken and never alluded to, there is an effervescent presence of the second meaning at the invocation of that name for Igbo-speakers, chiefly because the verb *ra* is more universally used for “having sex” across different areas and dialects than for “to leave alone”, in which case the other variant *hapu* is equally used. This second meaning may not have filtered into the discussion, especially in line with the form of mischief that secondary school students can invoke because their school is in Lagos, a cosmopolitan city. Therefore, the student population is ethnically diverse, as seen from some of the names Adichie mentions in the novel, and they are more likely to understand and speak English, pidgin English, or Yoruba in their interactions.

The two parts of Ranyinudo’s meaning also relate to her character traits in the novel. In her early life, she did not have many romantic relations with the boys. She was left alone “in peace” while the Ifemelụ and the Gịnịkas got all the attention from the opposite sex. We know nothing about her in detail as Ifemelu is traversing her two major relationships in the US with Curt and Blaine. But as soon as Ifemelu returns to Lagos, we become aware of Ranyị’s development from a tomboy with no romantic stories to a socialite of sorts, now described at the end of Chapter 44 thus:

Ranyinudo got up. There was a luxurious, womanly slowness to her gait, a lift, a roll, a toggle of her buttocks with each step. A Nigerian walk. A walk, too, that hinted at excess, as though it spoke of something in need of toning down. [...] Ranyinudo, working for an advertising company, living in a one-bedroom flat whose rent her salary could not pay, attending a Pentecostal church where she was an usher, and dating a married chief executive who bought her business-class tickets to London. (Adichie, *Americanah*)

She is desirous of getting married, and she prays earnestly for it, as seen in her religiosity and eagerness to experiment with Ndudi, whom she met at a wedding (Adichie, *Americanah* 361). Yet, she is strategic in maintaining Don, her sugar daddy, gaining all the monetary benefits while plotting how to land a man she can keep as hers. Her status reminds Ifemelu of Aunt Uju’s experience with the General, which did not end well. But Ranyị would hear none of it. Her recalcitrance

posits the two Igbo meanings of her name. On the one hand, there is the “leave me in peace” she will tell people like Ifemelu who would want her to give up on the benefits of dating married men for money. On the other, there is the “*fuck* me in peace” that people like Don, her sugar daddy, would hear and see as they foot the bill for her expensive lifestyle while remaining married and keeping her as a lover.

Unlike Ranyinudo, Adichie is more precise about what she means by Ifemelu. There are a variety of meanings derivable from Ifemelu—“something happened” (something great, it could be tragic or celebratory)—depending on how it is pronounced. But Adichie is emphatic about the intended meaning here. First, she allows Obinze’s mother to use the full name, Ifemelunamma, and gives a couple of alternate translations: “Made-in-Good-Times or Beautifully Made”, as she gushes over how beautiful the name is (Adichie, *Americanah* 70). Two people use the full name throughout the narrative: Obinze’s mum, who used it throughout their interaction, and Ranyinudo, who deployed it at the point she reprimanded Ifemelu for using her life story to write a self-effacing blog, in Chapter 50: “Ifemelunamma, your problem is frustration. Go and find Obinze, please” (Adichie, *Americanah* 395). Though every other character referred to her as Ifemelu, Obinze’s mother’s translation of her name is used early in the story to imprint desired meaning in the minds of readers who may be conversant with alternative readings of the name. As an older woman, Ifemelu is more careful about whom she tells the meaning of her name in the US. Kimberley, the sympathetic woman who later gives her a babysitting job, does not get a favorable response when she wants to know what her name meant (Adichie, *Americanah* 144).

Politics of naming in Adichie

In “chim-a-ma-nda” (my God cannot fail), the “m” underscores ownership, personalization of this infallible God. Coming from a society where individuals own deities, it is not surprising that the Christian God has also become easily personalized in this way. Even though we find this form of Christianization of Igbo names in Adichie’s name, she does not use such names for her fictional characters. The personae of her narratives bear names that have been shown in the preceding section to be creative. Aside from using some of these invented names, she takes up others such as Ukamaka (Adichie, “The Shivering”), Kambili, Ifemelu, Obinze, and Zikora, which have either fallen out of use or are invented for her main characters. Adichie is instituting a naming revolution that started with her transition from “Amanda” to “Chimamanda.” What prompted her to indigenize Amanda is the fact she didn’t want a European name, and since she had been using the name already, she needed to render it the way she did, making “Amanda” look like a shortening, not the other way round. She did succeed with this work.⁹ From my reckoning, Adichie deliberately implants Igbo names within global intercultural encounters, wherein non-Igbo speakers are compelled to take notice and research these names and, in the process, gain more understanding

about the people and their culture. Furthermore, she also prompts Igbo people to check out the names that are gradually being abandoned in favor of Christianized versions. Even when she has it in her name, Adichie does not name her characters with the “chi” or “Chukwu” suffix or prefix. This preference shows two things. Firstly, she seeks a deviation from the profuse use of anglicized and Christianized names among Igbo in recent times. Secondly, Adichie seeks to contribute Igbo words, expressions, and names to the growing intercultural encounters her works are now expressing extensively. It is no longer about Kambili, the 15-year-old secluded in her abusive father's house in Enugu, who can only travel to Nsukka. We are now acquainted with Ifemelu, Ukamaka, and Zikora, full-fledged Nigeropolitans, with Zikora dating a diaspora Ghanaian, Kwame, and Auntie Uju's Kweku, with whom she had a meaningful relationship.

Adichie queries quite rhetorically through Ifemelu's stream of consciousness as a way of establishing naming as a cognitive vehicle: “Did things only begin to exist only when they have names?” (Adichie, *Americanah* 155) Through her fictional creations, she shows the contrast between Western and African naming practices. Here, I consider how the two cultures express condolences to people who lost a loved one. For instance, Ifemelu is made to compare how Igbo people say *ndo* (sorry) to the way Americans ask, “‘Are you okay,’ though it is obvious that you are not” (Adichie, *Americanah* 132). She further pursues this contrast with her personal experience, expressing a clearer understanding of why the wife of a deceased person is not left by herself in Igboland based on her knowledge of loss. Her encounter with grief immediately made her conscious of why the Igbo handle bereavement the way they do. She writes explicitly that all English language condolence terms became problematic for her when she lost her father, and only the Igbo *ndo* made sense to her at the time. Adichie writes that there is value in the Igbo way, an assertion of her conviction on the usefulness of our traditional ways of dealing with grief (*Notes on Grief* Chp. 10). This is also true about naming her characters, which speaks volumes about who we Igbo are and what we do as a people.

About Adichie's “The Shivering”, for instance, it has been observed that she occasionally “tethers her narrative to street names or recognizable buildings,” and in this case, the reference is to Princeton, wherein it is supposed that the town has “little to do with the story” (Harris 30). There is, however, a tingling of discomfort with this assumption that Adichie has little or no justification for placing this story in the environment where it is set and the suggestion that the characters do not belong there either. But of course, this is hardly Harris's intention because she points out, quite rightly, that the story is exemplary of the “high cultural pluralism” of the environment in which it is set (Harris 31). Adichie deliberately elicits the interconnectedness of African, diasporic, and western cultures in her works to create opportunities for political engagements. To achieve this, she builds entire stories just on names, drawing references and allusions to other historical events and personalities to comment on the

present situations of the characters involved. She does this without drawing real attention but still making them significantly engaging and well incorporated into the entire story. See the following exchange at Aunty Ifeoma's Nsukka's home where the discussion is about Kambili's brother's name:

"My name is actually Chukwuka. Jaja is a childhood nickname that stuck." Jaja was on his knees. [...]

"When he was a baby, all he could say was Ja-Ja. So everybody called him Jaja," Aunty Ifeoma said. She turned to Jaja and added, "I told your mother that it was an appropriate nickname, that you would take after Jaja of Opobo."

"Jaja of Opobo? The stubborn king?" Obiora asked.

"Defiant," Aunt Ifeoma said. "He was a defiant king."

[...]

"He was king of the Opobo people," Aunty Ifeoma said, "and when the British came, he refused to let them control all the trade. He did not sell his soul for a bit of gunpowder like the other kings did, so the British exiled him to the West Indies. He never returned to Opobo." (Adichie, *Purple Hibiscus* 106)

Here, Adichie transcends the description of a young boy's name to broach the issue of correcting colonial narratives. Jaja of Opobo was a defiant king, not a stubborn one, or a rebel, for insisting on the rights of his people against the mercantilist prospecting of the British, which led to his being summarily dethroned and exiled. Aunty Ifeoma is quick to redefine this reality for her wards to avoid any confusion about who King Jaja truly was in the face of the misrepresentations of British colonial history. As such, naming this character Jaja may have been hinged on a nickname he received while he was younger, as stated in the excerpt, but Adichie also uses the opportunity to address one outstanding misrepresentation of African history. Similarly, in another work, Odenigbo's instruction to Ugwu is used to redress the claim that Mungo Park discovered the River Niger, when in fact locals have been living there generations before Park's forebears were even born (Adichie, *Half of a Yellow Sun* 13).

As observed above, titles are very important due to their position as praise names and manner of greeting. According to Oha (104), every Igbo adult has "aha ntutu" (title or praise names) thanks to which they "reconstruct their social identities with their abilities and philosophies" while people who do not take these names are "normally regarded in their groups as being incapable of reflecting on life and perceiving their roles in life". It is in the light of this assertion that I see Odenigbo's name. The most respectable Igbo child in traditional Igbo societies is the one that remembers and uses the title names of all adults he or she meets. Children hail their parents by their title names in the morning as a form of greeting just in the same way that other people do. People feel offended when people do not use their title names in addressing them. This form of greeting distinguishes the Igbo from other major ethnic groups in Nigeria. This is, for instance, how Eugene Achike is hailed by people in his Abba community as "Omelora" (which generally means one who is generous, especially towards the entire community) even as he drove past and may not even

hear them (Adichie, *Purple Hibiscus* 42-45). Obinze calls his wife “Omalicha”, which means “the beautiful one” (Adichie, *Americanah* 351). Both “Omelora” and “Omalicha” are examples of descriptive title and pet names given to individuals.

The exchange between Odenigbo and Ugwu about how he should be addressed is instructive in understanding the Igbo manner of using titles for greeting elders:

“Odenigbo. Call me Odenigbo.”

Ugwu stared at him doubtfully. “Sah?”

“My name is not Sah. Call me Odenigbo.”

“Yes, sah.”

“Odenigbo will always be my name. Sir is arbitrary. You could be the sir tomorrow.”

“Yes, sah—Odenigbo.”

Ugwu really preferred sah, the crisp power behind the word, and when two men from the Works Department came a few days later to install shelves in the corridor, he told them that they would have to wait for Sah to come home; he himself could not sign the white paper with typewritten words. He said Sah proudly. (Adichie, *Half of a Yellow Sun* 14)

There is a contrast between “call me Odenigbo,” and “my name is Odenigbo.” The first suggests *aha otutu* (title name), with which Igbo people can greet or show respect to a person older or higher in rank. This is the intent here because if Odenigbo had asked Ugwu, his ward, to call him by his personal name, he would have clearly taught the child how to be disrespectful. Elsewhere, by contrast, Odenigbo introduces himself to Olanna as follows: “My name is Odenigbo” (Adichie, *Half of a Yellow Sun* 30). The first time I travelled abroad, I was still a doctoral student at the time. I remember my own discomfort when a well-respected professor asked me to call her by her first name, to the point that she threatened not to respond if I called her “Prof” which, in my view, is more respectful. For a young Igbo teenager, straight from the village, it is inconceivable that he would ever feel comfortable to call his “master” by his first name; hence, “call me Odenigbo”, and not, “my name is Odenigbo” to Olanna, who was qualified to call him by his personal name at that time. Odenigbo could have been doing with Ugwu what the well-respected professor did to me, being educated and a revolutionary who did not subscribe to the status quo of things in the novel (at least, before the Biafran war swallowed up Nsukka). Hence, asking Ugwu to call him by his first name could also be seen as his way of creating equality between master and servant (in the Marxist mode). In this case, “Call me Odenigbo” will simply be an instruction/permission to use the first name. Furthermore, the name “Odenigbo” sounds more like *aha otutu* (praise or nickname) than a personal name. Adichie does not make a distinction or show a preference regarding how it should be read. However, it is pertinent to note that unlike yet another name, Obinze, that slightly sounds like a title, and for whom Adichie provides a surname, “Obinze Maduewesi” (Adichie, *Americanah* 69 & 267), none is given Odenigbo.

In summary, Adichie's naming choices portend a conscious political act aimed at reclaiming some of the beautiful Igbo names that are increasingly becoming extinct and embedding them into her narratives as a way of saving them for posterity. Also, as cultures merge and newer, more globalized patterns emerge, there is a need to have these Igbo names become available for those who may wish to take up African names for themselves or their children. What better way to make them available and sellable than through weaving them into fictional narratives to enliven and reactivate them. Also, with the absence of the "chi" and "Chukwu" prefixes or suffixes in her preferred character names, Adichie counteracts the continued Judeo-Christian influence in contemporary traditions of naming in Igboland. As has been shown here, her naming pattern stands out for its rarity, particularly in its break from prevailing Christianized naming traditions and its revision of more indigenized patterns.

Notes

1. Papa-Nnukwu and perhaps Jaja, are not honorific names, and as such may not qualify as title names, but I use the term "title" here in a generic manner to capture forms of naming that are not the personal names of the characters being referred to. They thus include aliases, nicknames, actual titles like "Omelora," and pet names.
2. There are many other full names shortened to Amaka in the corpus of Igbo naming—Nneamaka (Mother is beautiful), Ukamaka (interacting with others is beautiful), Uzoamaka (the way is beautiful), Egoamaka (money/wealth is beautiful). It is noteworthy also that "beautiful" here is generic and denotes other meanings like "satisfactory," "healthy," "recommendable," and the like.
3. Some clarification is needed here: "Big father" and "aged father" are literal meanings of *papa-nnukwu* and *nna-ochie*, respectively, while we have *mama-nnukwu* (big mother) and *nne-ochie*. Yet it is noteworthy that the suffixes "papa" and "mama" are not originally Igbo. Rather, *nna* and *nne* were used for one's father and mother, and also as suffixes for grandparents and great-grandparents. It is also important to bear in mind that *nna ochie* does not always mean maternal grandfather. In fact, it is extended to refer to male relations from one's maternal family irrespective of their age, where a "nwadiana" (literally, "child of the husband of the earth", the name given to every child in their mother's place) kneels/genuflects for *nna-ochie* and *nne-ochie* who are expected to say "nwadiana, binie" (rise up) while bearing some kind of gift.
4. Igbo people traditionally did not have "surnames", which came with Christianity and colonialism, when people naturally assumed the names of their fathers and/or grandparents (Anyachonkeya; Cookey and Ijioma; Isichei).
5. The term "chi" in Nnesinachi could have been defined in the contemporary Christianized sense but could refer to the concept of "chi" in traditional Igbo belief which relates to "destiny" (Achebe; Chukwukere).
6. The first has no direct equivalent in English. It is the name for the main hut in a compound where the head of the house receives guests. It is also the main compound, which the oldest male son inherits while the younger ones move elsewhere. It is the meeting point for everyone born into a family; even in modern times where people live in several cities, everyone returns to the *obi* for social gatherings, family celebrations, reunions, and funerals.

7. I have used quotation marks for royalty here to signpost the problematic history between Igbo people and the idea of royalty, which was an obvious colonial imposition (Afigbo; Chuku).
8. On the various methods used by Igbo writers prior to Adichie, see Zabus 2007.
9. I was among the people who erroneously pronounced the name as the English “aman-DA” instead of the Igbo “a-Ma-nda” before someone (who chose this name for his daughter) corrected me.

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