



Correcting Misrepresentation: Igala Names as Evidence Against External Narratives of Negative Meaning

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Abstract

Names are never neutral; they carry the weight of a people's culture, history, and self-understanding, yet unfamiliar names are routinely misread, diminished, or dismissed by those standing outside the culture that produced them. It is this problem that motivates this paper on "Correcting Misrepresentation: Igala Names as Evidence Against External Narratives of Negative Meaning." The paper examined the structural and semantic composition of Igala personal names, to identify and evaluate the external and internalised narratives that attribute negative or evil meanings to them, and to present verified documentary evidence as a corrective against these narratives. It adopted Afrocentricity theory as its theoretical framework, privileging indigenous self-testimony over externally imposed judgement in determining what Igala names actually mean. Methodologically, the paper adopted a systematic review, synthesising sociological, linguistic, and field-documentary sources on Igala naming alongside comparative literature on name-based discrimination and colonial misrepresentation. The paper showed that Igala names are deliberately constructed grammatical and ritual units encoding theological, historical, and moral instruction; that claims of negative meaning persist through both colonial-era mischaracterisation and internalised self-doubt within the Igala community; and that independently corroborated evidence overwhelmingly attributes courage, gratitude, faith, and honour to these names rather than the alleged negativity. The paper concluded that the prevailing negative narrative is factually unsustainable, and recommended formal documentation of name meanings, targeted community sensitisation, and further peer-reviewed compilation of verified Igala naming data.

Keywords:

Igala Names, Misrepresentation, Afrocentricity, Cultural Denial, Indigenous Naming, External Narratives.

Introduction

Naming constitutes one of the oldest and most universally practised acts of human culture, serving simultaneously as an instrument of identification and as a repository of a people's worldview. Across societies, from Asia to Europe and the Americas, a name is rarely arbitrary; it often encodes ancestry, aspiration, circumstance of birth, or communal belief. Within African societies, this practice assumes an even deeper dimension, as personal names function as

condensed statements, prayers, or philosophical declarations rather than mere labels (Omachonu, 2023). It is this understanding that has, over time, positioned African anthroponymy as a subject worthy of serious linguistic and sociological enquiry, particularly given the historical tendency of external observers to interpret African cultural expressions through unfamiliar and often dismissive frameworks.

The colonial encounter left behind enduring patterns of misreading African cultural forms, including personal names. Names that were phonologically unfamiliar to European ears, or that referenced indigenous cosmology, were frequently mistranslated, oversimplified, or dismissed as crude, superstitious, or negative in meaning. Mensah et al. (2021) demonstrate that this pattern of cultural denial persists in contemporary Nigerian society, where indigenous names continue to be abandoned in favour of European alternatives partly because of internalised stereotypes about their supposed inferiority or unpleasant connotations. Oladipupo and Tomoloju (2024) similarly argue that the reconstruction of African identity requires a deliberate confrontation of inherited misconceptions, since much of what passes for common knowledge about African cultural practices abroad was shaped by colonial description rather than indigenous testimony.

Among the Igala people of Kogi State, north-central Nigeria, this problem finds a specific and instructive expression. Igala personal names are, in structure, frequently full sentences, declaratives, or exclamations bearing theological and historical weight; a name may assert that God alone knows tomorrow, that death spares no one, or that a child's birth answers a family's long prayer (Egbunu, 2016; Omachonu, 2023). Egbunu (2016) documents how naming ceremonies among the Igala, conducted on the fourteenth day after birth, are treated as formal rites through which a child is inducted into personhood and community membership, with each name carrying spiritual, historical, or moral instruction for the bearer.

Despite this depth, certain names have circulated locally and among outsiders with claims that they denote wickedness, misfortune, or shameful circumstances. Ayegba (2019), an Igala cultural documenter, compiled over one hundred and sixty indigenous names precisely to refute what he identifies as recurring assertions, some attributed to outsiders and some internalised by Igala speakers themselves, that Igala names carry evil or degrading meanings. His compilation shows names widely believed to be negative instead denoting bravery, honesty, divine reward, or resilience.

This pattern of naming misrepresentation is not peculiar to the Igala or even to Nigeria; it mirrors a global phenomenon in which names associated with minority or non-Western identities attract negative judgement independent of their actual meaning. Bertrand and Mullainathan (2004), in a widely cited labour market audit, found that résumés bearing distinctly African American names received substantially fewer callbacks than identical résumés bearing White-sounding names, illustrating how a name alone can trigger prejudicial assumptions detached from linguistic content. Biernat et al. (2024) extend this observation, showing that ethnic minorities frequently alter or anglicise their names in anticipation of such bias, a psychological cost rooted in the same misrepresentation this study addresses locally.

Statement of the Problem

The central problem that this paper confronts is the persistence of unverified external and internalised claims that Igala personal names denote negative, evil, or shameful meanings,

despite documented linguistic and cultural evidence demonstrating the contrary. Existing anthroponymic studies on the Igala, including Egbunu (2016) and Omachonu (2023), have concentrated primarily on the philosophical, sociological, and grammatical dimensions of naming, establishing that Igala names encode culture, history, and moral instruction. However, these studies have not been deliberately organised as a direct rebuttal of the specific misrepresentations in circulation, whether these originate from colonial-era mistranslation, casual outsider commentary, or self-doubt cultivated within the community itself, as Ayegba (2019) suggests when he notes the need to counter "old statements" alleging that Igala names carry evil connotations.

This gap matters because naming misrepresentation carries consequences beyond linguistic curiosity. As Bertrand and Mullainathan (2004) and Biernat et al. (2024) demonstrate in broader contexts, negative perceptions attached to names can shape discrimination, self-presentation, and cultural retention, encouraging bearers to abandon indigenous names in favour of foreign alternatives, a trend Mensah et al. (2021) confirm is already occurring among Nigerian youth. Without a systematic, evidence-based correction grounded in verified sociolinguistic documentation, the Igala risk continued erosion of naming practices that carry centuries of accumulated cultural knowledge. This paper therefore attempted to assemble and evaluate documented evidence on Igala name meanings, in order to establish, with scholarly precision, that the prevailing negative narrative surrounding these names is factually unsustainable and culturally damaging.

Aim and Objectives of the Paper

The aim of this paper was to correct the misrepresentation of Igala personal names by employing documented linguistic and cultural evidence to demonstrate that these names carry positive, meaningful, and socially significant content, thereby refuting external narratives that portray them as bearers of negative or degrading meaning. The specific objectives includes the following:

- a. To examine the structural and semantic composition of Igala personal names in order to establish the range of meanings, whether theological, historical, or moral, that they encode.
- b. To identify and evaluate the specific external and internalised narratives that attribute negative or evil meanings to Igala names, tracing their origin and persistence within and outside the Igala community.
- c. To present verified evidence from indigenous naming documentation as a corrective against these narratives, demonstrating that Igala names predominantly express courage, gratitude, faith, and honour rather than the negative connotations alleged.

Conceptual Review

The key concepts as used in this paper are reviewed as follows:

Indigenous Igala Names

Indigenous Igala names refer to the traditional appellations bestowed upon members of the Igala community of Kogi State, Nigeria, in accordance with the circumstances, beliefs, and aspirations surrounding an individual's birth. Egbunu (2016) defines these names as socio-cultural instruments through which the Igala convey historical import, spiritual significance,

and moral instruction to the child and the wider community, arguing that a name is never assigned arbitrarily but is deliberately chosen to reflect destiny and communal memory.

Omachonu (2023) extends this position by demonstrating that Igala names are often full of grammatical statements, declaratives, or exclamations, thereby functioning simultaneously as linguistic units and as vessels of cosmology, a view that positions names as inseparable from the grammar and worldview of the people. Where Egbunu (2016) emphasises the sociological and theological content of names, Omachonu (2023) foregrounds their linguistic architecture; both positions nonetheless converge on the understanding that meaning is neither incidental nor obscure but embedded and recoverable through careful documentation.

For the purpose of this paper, indigenous Igala names are adopted as culturally sanctioned verbal expressions, structured as words, phrases, or sentences, that encode the historical, spiritual, and moral realities surrounding an individual's birth and that serve as a permanent record of the values of the Igala people.

Misrepresentation

Misrepresentation, within cultural studies, denotes the distorted or inaccurate portrayal of a people's practices, beliefs, or expressions in ways that depart from how the bearers of that culture understand themselves. Camara (2023) argues that misrepresentations of any African culture constitute misrepresentations of the wider civilisational identity of the continent, attributing such distortions to ignorance, prejudice, and self-interest on the part of foreign commentators, media, and academic writing.

Mensah et al. (2021) approach the concept from a more localised angle, showing how misrepresentation operates internally as well as externally, since Nigerian youth themselves have absorbed stereotyped judgements about indigenous names and consequently reject them in favour of foreign alternatives. This divergence is instructive: Camara (2023) locates the origin of misrepresentation outside the culture, while Mensah et al. (2021) reveal its capacity to be internalised and reproduced by the very community it concerns.

Reconciling both positions, this paper adopted misrepresentation as the inaccurate or distorted attribution of meaning to a cultural practice, whether originating from external observers or internalised by members of the culture itself, resulting in a departure from the practice's verifiable and documented significance.

External Narratives

External narratives are understood as accounts, descriptions, or judgements about a people or culture that originate from outside that culture and that often carry the authority of the observer rather than the testimony of the observed. Awa (2024) frames such narratives within the colonial process of "othering," whereby the colonised are described through categories of inferiority and strangeness devised by an external, dominant party, a process that persists in shaping perception long after formal colonial rule has ended.

Oladipupo and Tomoloju (2024) similarly contend that much of what circulates globally as knowledge about African cultural practices was shaped by outsider description rather than indigenous self-representation, and that correcting this requires a deliberate return to African-centred sources of meaning. While Awa (2024) situates external narratives within a broad

political and historical framework of colonial domination, Oladipupo and Tomoloju (2024) apply the concept more directly to cultural self-understanding and identity reconstruction, making their position more immediately relevant to a study of naming.

Accordingly, this paper adopted external narratives as those accounts of Igala cultural practice, including naming, that originate from observers outside the culture and that have gained circulation independent of, and often contrary to, verified indigenous testimony.

The Structural and Semantic Composition of Igala Personal Names

Igala personal names present a distinctive grammatical architecture in which a name frequently constitutes a complete linguistic unit, ranging from single lexical items to full declarative, interrogative, or exclamatory sentences. Omachonu (2023) demonstrates, through a multi-level interface approach combining phonology, morphology, and syntax, that names such as “Ojochoo” derive from the statement “God is my person,” undergoing processes of de-lexicalisation, desententialisation, vowel elision, and tone replacement before settling into their final compact form. This grammatical compression does not diminish meaning; rather, it preserves an entire theological proposition within a single word that a bearer carries throughout life.

Similarly, the name “Amaonu”, glossed as “children are kingship,” expresses the conviction that abundant offspring confer authority and honour on a household, while “Manocha”, a rhetorical construction meaning “who knows tomorrow,” articulates the Igala recognition of divine omniscience as opposed to human limitation (Omachonu, 2023).

Beyond individual lexical items, Egbunu (2016) identifies naming as a formal rite conducted on the fourteenth day after birth, known as “ugwolo”, during which parents consult oracles to ascertain which ancestor has reincarnated in the child before a suitable name is settled upon. This practice situates naming within a historical and spiritual continuum rather than treating it as a spontaneous or superficial act. Names such as “Ukwuteino” (“death, leave this one”) and “Ikani”, associated with child mortality, encode a family's lived experience of loss and their hope for the survival of subsequent children, while “Enemona” (“who knows if this child will survive”) performs a similarly protective function. These death-related names, far from being macabre, operate as verbal shields, a pattern also documented among related Nigerian groups by Mensah and Offong (2013) in their study of Ibibio death-prevention names, suggesting a shared regional logic in which naming functions as a mechanism of psychological and spiritual reassurance rather than a marker of misfortune.

Theophoric names constitute a further substantial category. “Ojochogwu”, structurally derived from “God is the healer or solution,” reflects the Igala conception of the divine as the ultimate remedy to affliction, while “Onojah or Onuojah” (King or leader of the multitude, Kind, Head”) and “Atabo” (“father of the deity,” associated with chief priesthood) demonstrate how religious office and divine relationship are inscribed directly into personal identity (Omachonu, 2023). Opega (2017), as documented in Omachonu (2023), catalogues twenty-five distinct categories of Igala personal names, spanning theophoric, reincarnation, death-related, occupational, deity-oriented, war-oriented, chieftaincy, and proverbial types, indicating that the semantic range of Igala names is systematic rather than incidental. Occupational names such as “Anyaja” (“a female trader”) and descriptive names such as “Edogbanya” (“be courageous,” addressed to a

first son as a bearer of responsibility) further demonstrate that names carry practical, moral, and aspirational instruction alongside their spiritual content.

The moral dimension of Igala naming is perhaps most evident in proverbial constructions. "Ifitumi", meaning "if it puzzles me," carries the implicit continuation "it does not puzzle God," teaching humility before the limits of human understanding, while names built on conditional and negative clauses, such as those documented by Omachonu (2023) reflecting the sentiment that "one who gives birth does not necessarily enjoy the child," communicate cultural realism about the uncertainties of parenthood rather than despair. Ehusani (1997), as cited in Omachonu (2023), captures this cumulative function precisely, observing that an indigenous African name defines its bearer, narrates the family's story, carries parental aspiration, and points to the values of the society into which the bearer is born. Taken together, the structural evidence from Egbunu (2016) and the linguistic evidence from Omachonu (2023) establish that Igala names encode theological affirmation, historical memory, and moral instruction in equal measure, forming a coherent system in which grammar and belief are inseparable rather than a disorganised collection of curious labels.

External and Internalised Narratives Attributing Negative Meanings to Igala Names

The claim that indigenous Nigerian names, including Igala names, carry evil or degrading meanings is not a marginal rumour but a documented and recurring position within both public discourse and academic debate. Ayegba (2019) provides the most direct case study on this matter, compiling over one hundred and sixty Igala names explicitly to counter what he describes as persistent assertions, some originating from outsiders and some repeated by Igala speakers themselves, that Igala names carry unfavourable connotations. His compilation, drawn from field documentation within Kogi State, was produced specifically in response to what he terms recurring "old statements" alleging that Igala names denote wickedness, a framing that confirms the narrative under review is neither hypothetical nor isolated but an active concern requiring correction within the community.

A parallel debate is evident in the wider Nigerian naming discourse. Osimen et al. (2023), in a study involving one of its authors based at Kogi State University, Anyigba, situated within Igala territory, document the position of Ayantayo, who argued that names carry no logical connection to the bearer's destiny, illustrating this with the Yoruba name "Abiola" ("born into wealth"), whose bearers are not uniformly wealthy. This scepticism was directly challenged by Igboin, who countered that names can be given in admiration of a successful person or as a mark of friendship rather than as a literal prophecy, and who maintained that African names transmit intrinsic relevance for both the bearer and the community (Osimen et al., 2023). The persistence of this disagreement within a peer-reviewed forum as recent as 2023 demonstrates that questions over the legitimacy and meaning of indigenous names remain unsettled in contemporary Nigerian discourse, providing fertile ground for external mischaracterisation to take hold.

The internalisation of such narratives has tangible behavioural consequences. Mensah, Inyabri, and Nyong (2021) document how young Nigerians, particularly in Calabar, actively reject indigenous first names in favour of European alternatives, driven by a desire to escape ethnic stereotyping and to project a modern, less "foreign" identity. Although their study centres on Cross River State rather than Kogi State specifically, the mechanism identified, namely the internalisation of externally imposed judgement leading to voluntary abandonment of

indigenous names, mirrors precisely the dynamic that Ayegba (2019) sought to reverse among the Igala. This confirms that the negative narrative surrounding indigenous names operates as a regional pattern rather than a phenomenon confined to a single ethnic group, with the Igala case representing one instance within a broader Nigerian pattern of cultural denial.

The origin of such narratives is traceable, at least in part, to the colonial encounter and its aftermath. Camara (2023) argues that foreign media, literature, and academic writing have historically misrepresented African cultural practices out of ignorance, prejudice, and self-interested motivation, producing distortions that outlast the colonial period itself. Awa (2024) situates this more specifically within the process of "othering," whereby colonial discourse constructed the colonised as inherently strange, primitive, or threatening, a framework within which unfamiliar names, unlike their European counterparts, were liable to be received with suspicion rather than curiosity. This pattern is not confined to Africa.

Bertrand and Mullainathan (2004), in a labour market audit conducted in the United States, found that résumés bearing distinctly African-American names such as "Lakisha" and "Jamal" received markedly fewer callbacks than identical résumés bearing names such as "Emily" and "Greg," demonstrating that unfamiliar names attract prejudicial judgement independent of their actual meaning. Biernat et al. (2024) extend this finding, showing that members of ethnic minorities frequently anglicise or alter their names in anticipation of exactly this kind of bias. Read together, these sources establish that the negative narrative surrounding Igala names is neither unique nor accidental; it is a localised expression of a wider, well-documented pattern in which unfamiliar names are misjudged by outsiders and subsequently abandoned by insiders who have internalised that judgement.

Verified Evidence from Indigenous Naming Documentation as a Corrective

Direct documentation of Igala names offers substantial and specific evidence against the negative narratives discussed above. Ayegba (2019) presents his compilation explicitly as counter-evidence, stating his intention to "clear the doubts" surrounding Igala names and to discredit claims of evil meaning. Among the names he documented are, "Ocheje" (also Ocheja) is glossed as "one who would do something and would not deny," denoting truthfulness and trustworthiness, while "Idachaba" denotes a courageous man who follows through on his declared intentions. "Ameh" (also "Amueh") is defined as "powerful man, one who can defeat or capture you irrespective of your strength," a name expressing strength and resilience rather than aggression for its own sake. "Achimawo" is given to a daughter born when her parents have sufficient farming, fishing, or trading work to occupy them, honouring the industriousness of the family, while "Inikpi" denotes beauty and purity without any negative qualification, directly rebutting any suggestion of an ominous meaning (Ayegba, 2019).

Names with reference to divine providence feature prominently in Ayegba's (2019) documentation and reinforce the theological character established by Egbunu (2016) and Omachonu (2023). "Arome" is defined as "God will reward" or "the Rewarder," expressing gratitude and faith in divine recompense, while "Ojoma" is glossed simply as "God knows," an affirmation of trust in providence rather than resignation to fate. "Egbunu" itself, the name from which foundational academic documentation of Igala naming derives its authorial name, denotes a child born with the umbilical cord around the neck or hand, believed among the Igala to signify spiritual favour rather than misfortune, a meaning entirely at odds with any suggestion of an evil association (Ayegba, 2019). These examples are drawn from field

documentation involving direct engagement with Igala naming practice, lending them a level of verifiability that oral rumour and secondhand mistranslation cannot match.

The theological and moral names documented independently by Egbunu (2016) and analysed linguistically by Omachonu (2023) corroborate this pattern from a different methodological angle. “Ojochogwu”, meaning “God is the healer or solution to problems,” expresses faith rather than despair; “Enemona”, “who knows if this child will survive,” expresses parental hope rather than fatalism; and “Edogbanya”, an instruction to “be courageous,” addressed to a firstborn son, expresses honour and responsibility rather than burden alone. Because these names were independently documented through structural linguistic analysis (Omachonu, 2023) and separately through sociological and historical investigation (Egbunu, 2016), and are further corroborated by Ayegba's (2019) field-based compilation compiled specifically to counter allegations of negative meaning, the convergence of these three independent sources on the same interpretive conclusion, namely that Igala names predominantly encode courage, gratitude, faith, and honour, constitutes verified rather than merely asserted evidence.

The weight of this documented evidence stands in clear contrast to the unverified and largely undocumented claims discussed in the preceding section. Where allegations of evil or negative meaning circulate without named sources, verifiable field data, or linguistic substantiation, the corrective evidence assembled here derives from field interviews conducted in Kogi State (Ayegba, 2019), structural linguistic analysis of naming ceremonies (Omachonu, 2023), and documented sociological investigation of naming practice (Egbunu, 2016). The cumulative effect of this evidence is to demonstrate, with named examples and traceable sources, that the overwhelming proportion of documented Igala names express positive values, thereby providing a factual basis upon which the external and internalised narratives of negative meaning can be systematically and conclusively refuted.

Empirical Review

Egbunu (2016) carried out a study on the socio-cultural import of Igala names, focusing on Igala land in Kogi State, north-central Nigeria, as the study area. The work is not anchored on a single named theory but proceeds from a socio-cultural and historical standpoint that treats naming as a practice shaped by spiritual belief, communal history, and parental circumstance. The research design is qualitative and descriptive, employing sociological and historical methods of enquiry rather than a structured survey instrument. In place of a fixed statistical sample, the study drew purposively on Igala names in circulation within the community, together with the naming ceremony known as *ugwolo*, conducted on the fourteenth day after birth, as its unit of analysis. Data were gathered through observation of naming practice, engagement with oral tradition, and reference to existing historical accounts of Igala custom. The major finding is that Igala names are deliberately chosen rather than arbitrarily assigned, and that they encode spiritual, historical, and moral instruction tied to the circumstance of a child's birth, with the naming rite itself serving as a formal induction into community membership.

The study concluded that Igala names embody the destiny of the individual and the collective memory of the people. This work is commendable for laying a firm sociological and historical foundation for understanding how meaning is structured into Igala names, which supports the current study's first objective on the structural and semantic composition of Igala names. However, it does not engage with the specific allegation that Igala names carry negative or evil

meanings, nor does it attempt any corrective or rebuttal exercise, which leaves a gap that the current paper filled by moving beyond structural description to a direct confrontation of the misrepresentation surrounding these names.

Mensah et al. (2021) examined names, naming, and the pattern of cultural denial in contemporary Nigerian society from an Afrocentric perspective, with Calabar metropolis in Cross River State, south-eastern Nigeria, serving as the study area. The work is grounded in the Afrocentric paradigm, which is rooted in the historical and cultural realities of the African experience and privileges cultural assertion, self-pride, and an Africa-centred sense of identity. A qualitative research design was adopted, and the sample comprised Nigerian youths who had been involved in the practice of replacing their indigenous first names with European or westernised alternatives within the preceding five years, selected through a purposive sampling technique rather than a fixed numerical quota. Data were collected through participant observation, semi-structured interviews, and metalinguistic conversations with the selected participants. The major finding is that indigenous names are increasingly rejected by young Nigerians owing to internalised ethnic stereotyping and a desire to project a modern, less parochial identity, with both personal and social motivations underlying the shift towards foreign names.

The study concluded that this pattern amounts to a code of cultural denial through which negative external judgement of indigenous names becomes internalised and reproduced by the very community the names belong to. This study is valuable for the current paper because it provides empirical grounding for the second objective, namely the identification and evaluation of internalised narratives that attribute negative connotations to indigenous names. Its limitation, however, lies in its geographical and ethnic focus on Cross River State, which leaves the Igala experience specifically unaddressed, a gap the current study closed by locating the same phenomenon of internalised denial within the Igala context.

Ayegba (2019) produced a compilation on Igala native names and their meanings, with Igala communities across Kogi State constituting the study area. The work is not framed within a named academic theory but is best situated within a cultural documentation and advocacy tradition that seeks to preserve and defend indigenous knowledge from outside distortion. Its design is documentary and ethnographic, consisting of a field-based compilation rather than an experimental or survey design. The sample comprises more than one hundred and sixty Igala names gathered through direct engagement with Igala communities and native speaker knowledge, obtained through a purposive and convenience approach rather than a probability sampling technique. Data were collected through field documentation, drawing on community consultation and first-hand familiarity with the circumstances and etymology behind each name. The major finding is that the overwhelming majority of documented Igala names denote positive qualities such as truthfulness, courage, strength, industriousness, beauty, and gratitude to the divine, standing in direct contradiction to recurring claims that Igala names carry evil or degrading meanings. The study concludes that such claims, which the compiler describes as persistent "old statements" attributed to outsiders and internalised by some Igala speakers, are factually unsustainable once the documented meanings are examined.

This work is of central relevance to the current study, as it supplies much of the raw evidentiary material required for the third objective, namely the presentation of verified evidence as a corrective against negative narratives. Its shortcoming, however, is that it was produced as an informal cultural advocacy piece rather than a peer-reviewed academic study, with no explicit

theoretical framing, no systematic sampling procedure, and no scholarly analysis linking the documented names to the broader discourse on colonial misrepresentation, a gap the current paper addressed by embedding this evidentiary base within a properly theorised, academically structured corrective argument.

In summary, the three empirical works reviewed established a progression that the current paper builds upon rather than duplicates. Egbunu (2016) confirms that Igala names are structurally and semantically meaningful, Mensah et al. (2021) confirm that indigenous names elsewhere in Nigeria are vulnerable to internalised denial arising from external judgement, and Ayegba (2019) supplies direct evidence that specific Igala names carry positive rather than negative meanings. None of the three, however, combines structural evidence, an account of the origin and persistence of the negative narrative, and a systematic corrective within a single, academically theorised argument focused squarely on the Igala. It is this combined gap, namely the absence of a scholarly work that unites documented linguistic evidence with a deliberate rebuttal of both external and internalised misrepresentation of Igala names, that the current study filled.

Theoretical Review

The paper was anchored on Afrocentricity Theory as reviewed below:

Afrocentricity Theory

Afrocentricity was propounded by Molefi Kete Asante, whose foundational articulation appeared in 1980 and was more fully developed in his 1988 work, “Afrocentricity: The Theory of Social Change”. The central assumption of the theory is that African people and their cultural practices ought to be understood as subjects at the centre of their own experience rather than as objects interpreted from a European vantage point placed at the periphery of Western civilisation.

Asante contends that any authentic understanding of African phenomena, whether social, linguistic, or spiritual, must proceed from African cosmology, values, and self-testimony rather than from categories imposed by outside observers, since centuries of colonial description have habitually located African meaning within a Eurocentric frame that renders it strange, deficient, or inferior. The theory further assumes that cultural agency and self-definition are recoverable through a deliberate return to indigenous sources of knowledge, and that this return functions simultaneously as an intellectual corrective and a form of cultural restoration for peoples whose practices have been misread or devalued by external narrators.

The strength of Afrocentricity lies in its capacity to reposition the bearers of a culture as the rightful authorities over the meaning of their own practices, which makes it particularly suited to a study concerned with correcting outsider mistranslation and internalised self-doubt surrounding Igala names, and its established application within Nigerian naming scholarship, evident in works such as Mensah et al. (2021), lends it both contemporary standing and disciplinary precedent. The theory also usefully accounts for the psychological dimension of the problem, explaining how a community may absorb and reproduce externally imposed judgement long after the coloniser has departed. Its principal weakness, however, is a tendency toward essentialism, treating the African experience as a broadly unified standpoint even though specific ethnic groups such as the Igala possess distinct linguistic and cultural particularities that a generalised Afrocentric lens may flatten.

The theory has also been criticised for being more ideological than methodological, offering a philosophical orientation rather than precise analytical tools, and for occasionally risking an uncritical romanticism that dismisses legitimate scrutiny along with unfounded prejudice; this weakness is, in the present study, offset by pairing the theory with the documented linguistic and field evidence supplied by Egbunu (2016), Omachonu (2023), and Ayegba (2019).

Applied to this paper, Afrocentricity supplies the interpretive standpoint from which Igala names are read as self-defined units of theological, historical, and moral meaning rather than as curiosities awaiting external validation, and it justifies the study's method of privileging indigenous documentation over colonial-era mistranslation or casual outsider commentary when adjudicating what a given name actually means.

The theory equally explains, from within the same framework, why some Igala speakers themselves have internalised negative judgement about their own names, treating this as a predictable consequence of prolonged exposure to externally centred narratives rather than as evidence that the judgement is accurate. In assembling verified evidence from Ayegba (2019), Egbunu (2016), and Omachonu (2023) as a direct corrective to both the external and internalised narratives identified in the second objective, the study enacts the Afrocentric principle of restoring African self-testimony to its rightful place at the centre of interpretation, thereby giving the theory concrete methodological expression rather than leaving it as an abstract philosophical backdrop.

Methodology

This paper adopted a systematic review methodology, which was considered most appropriate because it sought to synthesise and critically evaluate existing scholarly and documentary evidence on the meanings of Igala personal names rather than generate primary data. The review followed a structured and transparent procedure involving the identification of relevant literature from peer-reviewed journal articles, books, documentary sources, and indigenous publications addressing Igala naming traditions, linguistic structures, cultural identity, and colonial misrepresentation. Studies were purposively selected based on their relevance, credibility, authenticity, and direct alignment with the study objectives, while duplicate and unrelated materials were excluded. The selected sources were subjected to critical appraisal and thematic synthesis, allowing evidence from independent studies to be compared, corroborated, and integrated into coherent themes relating to the structural and semantic composition of Igala names, external and internalised narratives of negative meanings, and documentary evidence correcting such misconceptions. The systematic review approach enhanced the transparency, rigour, and reproducibility of the study by ensuring that conclusions were derived from verifiable evidence rather than subjective opinions (Page et al., 2021; Snyder, 2019).

The adoption of a systematic review was justified because the central aim of the study was to assemble, evaluate, and synthesise documented evidence capable of correcting widespread misconceptions surrounding Igala personal names. Since substantial evidence already existed in linguistic, sociological, anthropological, and indigenous documentary sources, a systematic review provided an appropriate framework for integrating these diverse bodies of knowledge into a comprehensive scholarly account. The method enabled the triangulation of findings from independent sources such as Egbunu (2016), Omachonu (2023), Ayegba (2019), Mensah et al. (2021), and other relevant studies, thereby strengthening the credibility of the conclusions regarding the positive theological, historical, and moral meanings embedded in Igala names.

Furthermore, systematic reviews are widely recognised for producing robust evidence by reducing selection bias through predefined procedures for literature identification, screening, appraisal, and synthesis (Aromataris & Munn, 2020; Page et al., 2021).

Despite its strengths, the systematic review approach has certain limitations. The paper depended entirely on existing published and documentary materials, making its findings contingent upon the quality, availability, and completeness of previously documented evidence. Some indigenous knowledge on Igala names remains undocumented or exists primarily in oral traditions, which may have limited the comprehensiveness of the review. In addition, variations in methodological approaches, scope, and interpretations across the reviewed studies may have introduced some degree of heterogeneity into the synthesis. Nevertheless, these limitations were minimised through the use of credible, traceable, and independently corroborated sources, as well as critical comparison of evidence across multiple publications before drawing conclusions (Aromataris & Munn, 2020; Page et al., 2021).

Discussion

The findings of this paper relating to the first objective, which sought to examine the structural and semantic composition of Igala personal names, lend strong support to the position that these names are neither arbitrary nor incidental but are deliberately constructed vessels of culture, history, and moral instruction. Omachonu's (2023) demonstration that a name such as Ojochoo derives, through processes of de-lexicalisation and tone replacement, from the full declarative "God is my person" reveals a grammatical economy in which an entire theological proposition is compressed into a single word a bearer carries for life, while names such as Manocha, meaning "who knows tomorrow," and Amaonu, glossed as "children are kingship," extend this pattern into philosophical and social commentary on divine omniscience and communal honour respectively.

Egbunu's (2016) sociological account, which situates naming within the fourteenth-day ugwolo ceremony and its accompanying oracular consultation, corroborates Omachonu's linguistic findings from a different disciplinary angle, and the convergence between a purely structural analysis and a purely sociological one is itself significant: where Omachonu isolates the grammar of meaning, Egbunu isolates its ritual enactment, yet both arrive at the same conclusion that meaning is embedded rather than superficial. This convergence interrogates and ultimately unsettles any assumption, of the kind implicit in colonial-era commentary, that African naming is a matter of superstition rather than considered linguistic and cultural design.

The findings of this paper addressing the second objective, concerning the identification of external and internalised narratives that attribute negative meaning to Igala names, expose a more contested and layered picture than a simple coloniser-versus-colonised binary would suggest. Ayegba (2019) frames his compilation explicitly as a response to recurring "old statements," some attributed to outsiders and some repeated by Igala speakers themselves, a framing that is corroborated by Mensah, Inyabri and Nyong (2021), whose empirical study of Calabar youth demonstrates that internalisation, and not merely external imposition, is what ultimately drives the abandonment of indigenous names.

The unresolved scholarly disagreement documented by Osimen et al. (2023), in which Ayantayo dismisses any logical connection between a name and its bearer's destiny while Igboin insists on the intrinsic relevance of African names to both bearer and community,

illustrates that this is not a settled matter even within contemporary Nigerian academic discourse, which strengthens rather than weakens the case for a study of this kind, since a live and unresolved debate is precisely the condition under which misrepresentation persists unchecked. Camara (2023) and Awa (2024) trace the deeper origin of such judgement to colonial "othering," a process in which the unfamiliar was routinely received with suspicion, and this local pattern finds a striking global parallel in Bertrand and Mullainathan's (2004) finding that résumés bearing names such as Lakisha and Jamal received markedly fewer callbacks than those bearing Emily and Greg, and in Biernat et al's. (2024) subsequent finding that ethnic minorities anglicise their names in anticipation of exactly this bias; read together, these sources confirm that the Igala experience is a localised instance of a well-documented, transnational phenomenon rather than an isolated cultural anxiety.

The findings of this paper concerning the third objective, which sought verified evidence as a corrective against these narratives, are best appreciated through the cumulative weight of independently produced sources rather than through any single study in isolation. Ayegba's (2019) field-based documentation shows that names widely rumoured to carry sinister meaning instead denote qualities such as truthfulness, in the case of Ocheje, courage, in the case of Idachaba, and strength, in the case of Ameh, while Inikpi is shown to signify beauty and purity and Arome to signify divine reward, directly rebutting any suggestion of an ominous or degrading connotation; even the name Egbunu, borne by the scholar whose sociological documentation underpins much of this study, is shown to denote spiritual favour rather than misfortune. What lends this evidence its persuasive force is not the compilation alone, since Ayegba's work was produced informally rather than through peer-reviewed methodology, but its independent corroboration by Egbunu's (2016) sociological findings and Omachonu's (2023) linguistic analysis, each arrived at through a distinct method yet converging on the same interpretive conclusion. This triangulation across method and discipline is what elevates the evidence from anecdotal assertion to verified corrective, and it exposes the comparative weakness of the negative narratives under review, which circulate without named sources, field data, or linguistic substantiation of any kind.

The Afrocentric theoretical framework adopted in this paper, lends coherent support to these findings by insisting that African cultural phenomena be interpreted from within African cosmology and self-testimony rather than through categories supplied by external observers, a principle that is vindicated at every stage of the discussion above. The theory explains why Omachonu's and Egbunu's indigenous, methodologically grounded accounts of Igala names carry greater interpretive authority than the undocumented "old statements" that Ayegba (2019) sets out to discredit, since the former proceed from within the culture's own linguistic and ritual logic while the latter originate, as Camara (2023) and Awa (2024) demonstrate, from a history of externally imposed othering.

The theory equally accounts for the internalisation documented by Mensah, Inyabri and Nyong (2021), treating it not as evidence that the negative narrative is accurate but as a predictable psychological consequence of prolonged exposure to a Eurocentric frame that positions African expression at the periphery of legitimacy. By privileging indigenous documentation as the standard against which the negative narrative is tested, and by treating the convergence of Ayegba, Egbunu, and Omachonu as the recovery of African self-definition that Afrocentricity calls for, the theoretical framework does not merely sit alongside the findings but actively structures the logic by which this study distinguishes verified cultural meaning from inherited misrepresentation.

Conclusion

This paper corrected the misrepresentation of Igala personal names by examining their structural and semantic composition, identifying the external and internalised narratives that attribute negative meaning to them, and assembling verified indigenous evidence as a corrective, and the findings discussed above sustain this aim comprehensively. The evidence drawn from Omachonu (2023) and Egbunu (2016) establishes that Igala names are deliberately constructed grammatical and ritual units carrying theological, historical, and moral weight rather than arbitrary or superstitious labels, while the accounts offered by Ayegba (2019), Mensah et al. (2021), and the unresolved scholarly disagreement documented by Osimen et al. (2023) confirm that the negative narrative surrounding such names is real, persistent, and sustained both by external colonial-era mischaracterisation and by internalised self-doubt within the Igala community itself, a pattern situated within a wider global phenomenon evidenced by Bertrand and Mullainathan (2004) and Biernat et al. (2024). Against this narrative, the triangulated evidence supplied independently by Ayegba's field documentation, Egbunu's sociological findings, and Omachonu's linguistic analysis converges decisively on the conclusion that Igala names predominantly encode courage, gratitude, faith, and honour, thereby rendering the prevailing allegation of evil or degrading meaning factually unsustainable.

Recommendations

1. Cultural and educational bodies within Igala communities should formally document and disseminate the structural and semantic meanings of indigenous names, through school curricula, community publications, or digital archives, so that the theological and historical content Omachonu (2023) and Egbunu (2016) identify becomes common knowledge rather than specialist findings.
2. They should be deliberate public sensitisation campaigns, led by traditional institutions, religious bodies, and the media, directly confronting the internalised stereotypes that drive the abandonment of indigenous names, so that Igala youth encounter the corrective evidence before internalised denial takes root.
3. Scholars and cultural documenters should build on Ayegba's (2019) compilation by producing a peer-reviewed, systematically sampled dictionary of Igala names and verified meanings, ensuring that future corrective evidence carries the same academic rigour recommended by the Afrocentric framework this study applies.

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