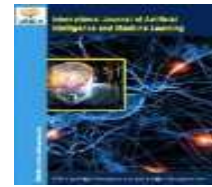




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Analysing Igbo Traditions through Oral History, Ethnolinguistic and Exploratory NLP: Names, Proverbs and Cultural Memory in South-East Nigeria

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Abstract

Oral tradition has remained one of the major sources of historical reconstruction in Igboland of Southeast Nigeria. This study therefore, examines it focusing on how Natural Language Processing (NLP) and computationally assisted lexical analysis can help to interpret the oral tradition, including persona names, and proverbs encoded in Igbo worldviews. Adopting an interdisciplinary design, the study combines oral history, ethnolinguistic analysis, and NLP-assisted lexical analysis. Data were purposively drawn from the five states of Southeast Nigeria with thirty participants (six each from the states) selected based on their knowledge of local history, oral traditions and patterns of naming practices. Interactions with the participants produced 45 Igbo personal names bearing socio-cultural, religious or customary significance. These names were manually transcribed, coded and analyzed to identify meanings and messages encoded in them. The interpretation of these data were grounded in the participants' explanations, contextual knowledge and researchers-led coding, while AI-assisted computational assistance was strictly on identifying recurring lexical forms. Findings show that Igbo proverbs offer evidence of social norms and moral reasoning, while personal names preserve memories of conflicts, survival, religion, kinship, wealth, social identity, morality, unity, bravery, ancestry, social class, authority, peace, and neighborhood. The study, therefore, concludes that computational analysis of oral traditions should remain context-sensitive and ethically governed, with attention to participants' consent, community participation, provenance, access and stewardship.

Keywords: Igbo traditions, Oral history, Ethnolinguistics, Natural Language Processing, Cultural memory.

Introduction

The reliance on oral tradition has remain one of the distinct features of African historiography. This has served as a means of preserving and transmitting knowledge of origin, migration, social institutions, identity, religion, politics, and the environment across diverse African societies, which are most times encoded in storytelling, naming, proverbs and related practices. While these sources are arguably not repositories of empirical information when compared to written records, they serve as important materials for the reconstruction of undocumented histories in Africa. Oral traditions therefore serve as transmitted, remembered, interpreted and performed knowledge within a social context with their socio-cultural and historical values dependent on attention to their forms, contexts, transmission and mutation over time (Vansina 1985). This is especially

relevant to the history of Igbo people of Southeastern Nigeria, where proverbs, personal names and oral narratives encode and preserve meanings attached to historical events, family and communal experiences, socio-cultural relations, religious beliefs and collective memories. For example, names of people and places can carry information about individual and collective experiences of death, war, worldviews and aspirations. For example, names like Aghaeri (Not consumed by war) and Onwuemenyi (death has no friend) may encode, preserve and transmit memories of war and premature death respectively. The pragmatic and semantic dimensions of Igbo names therefore make them more than labels as they serve as condensed repositories of socio-cultural and historical experiences (Nwankwo, 2024; Nkamigbo, 2019; Onumajuru, 2016; Udoe, 2018). Similarly, proverbs condense and preserve socio-cultural knowledge into memorable linguistic forms, containing meanings that partly depend on context (Achebe, 1958; Penfield, 1981). Like names, proverbs in Igboland communicate social norms, moral expectations, political wisdom, customary principles and ideas about human and spiritual relationships (Nwankwo, 2015; Monye, 1996; Okorie, 2013; Onyejekwe et al., 2019).

According to Meek (1937), oral traditions in Igboland provide insight into customary institutions, marriage, authority, property, war, sanctions, obligations, conflict and peacebuilding, as well as religious cosmology and the relationship between the living and the dead. These features therefore, make their significances to extend beyond historical reconstruction. However, the contemporaneous mediums of circulating the oral tradition, including through radio, television, newspapers and digital platforms have not only created new possibilities for preservation, but also expose them to distortion (Nwankwo et al., 2022). For example, globalisation, media outlets, Pentecostalism, and Western education can alter the wording, context and meanings encoded in the oral traditions, observed Chukwu & Nwoye (2024). A proverb or personal name may therefore acquire new meanings when detached from the socio-cultural environment of their origin. Natural Language Processing (NLP) and machine learning therefore offer a methodological opportunity to study the oral tradition at a scale that cannot easily be done by merely reading them closely. Similarly, computational methods assist in the organisation and transcription of the materials, identifying recurring lexical, thematic and semantic patterns, grouping them, and investigating relationships across collections. This approach does not replace historical interpretation, linguistic knowledge and source criticism, rather, it serves as a complementary approach capable of preserving the original nature and meanings of the oral traditions. However, the comparatively limited resources for analyzing Igbo oral traditions remains one of the constraints to this approach. Onyenwe (2017) identifies the scarcity of basic linguistic resources as a significant challenge to automated Igbo-language processing, while subsequent studies have expanded work on areas such as embedding, named-entity recognition and language modelling (Ezeani et al., 2018; Chukwuneke, 2025). Extant literature on computational research has been largely on language processing, rather than using computational approaches to study Igbo oral tradition, socio-cultural knowledge, religious thoughts, customary institutions and historical memories. The question therefore, is not whether Igbo oral tradition can be computationally processed, rather, about the forms of indigenous knowledge that are visible for computational purposes. Comparatively, African languages are often classified as ‘low-resource’ following the limited availability of computational tools, digitised texts and annotated corpora. Notwithstanding the foregoing, Ògúnremí et al. (2023) highlight that marginalization also concerns African communities’ agency over the data, language resources and stories through which they are represented. The participatory orientation of Masakhane corroborated this, emphasizing African participation in NLP studies, while the CARE Principles (Collective Benefit, Authority to Control, Responsibility and Ethics) point to the regulation, community interest and the responsible application of culturally rooted data. Lacuna Fund offers further practical models, emphasizing the development of locally embedded dataset, active participation, accessibility and reliance on ethical standards (Lacuna Fund, 2020). The summation of these perspectives suggest that an Igbo oral corpus should not be treated merely as compendium of language data, rather, its development should consider historical background, cultural context, consent, community interests, access, reuse and long-term stewardship.

Scholars have studied computational African oral tradition. For example, computational folklorists, including Abello et al. (2012) Lauer (2023) demonstrated the application of computational methods in studying narrative structures, tale types, motifs and semantic patterns. Similarly, studies on African-language have explored computational modelling of Yorùbá folktales (Ninan et al., 2016), more recent resources for Yorùbá dialects and culturally grounded materials (Ahia et al., 2024), and historical and archival scholarship on Yorùbá oral genres such as oríkì (Abimbola, 2012). However, there is a limited application of NLP and machine-learning approaches to the study of Igbo oral historical accounts, personal names and their encoded meanings, and proverbs as interconnected sources of historical reconstruction, customary regulation, religious and cosmological beliefs, and changing cultural meanings. This gap warrants the current study. It therefore brings an established computational discourse into a comparatively underexplored area of Igbo historiography,

linguistics and socio-cultural study. The focus of the study is to place computational analysis in dialogue with oral history and historical criticism, rather than claiming to have invented computational folkloristics or serving as the first digitization of African oral materials. The study examined personal names, proverbs, and oral historical traditions as historically rooted socio-cultural materials, rather than merely linguistic units for automated classification. It adopted computational methods to identify patterns and relationships that facilitate interpretation, while historical context, linguistic competence and source criticism remain constant for assessing their significance.

Therefore, the study seeks answers to the following questions: How can NLP and machine-learning approaches assist in organizing and analysing Igbo oral historical accounts, personal names and proverbs as sources of historical knowledge? How do Igbo names, proverbs and oral accounts represent religious beliefs, cosmological assumptions and relationships between the human, moral and spiritual worlds? How are Igbo oral traditions disseminated, reinterpreted and adapted through contemporary mass-media and digital environments, and what implications does this have for their preservation and meaning? In addressing these questions, the study therefore advances a dynamic interdisciplinary approach whereby computational analysis complements, rather than displacing humanistic inquiry. The importance and preference of this approach is because machine-learning systems can reproduce biases in training data, neglect culturally specific meanings and encounter difficulties arising from dialectal variation, diacritics, orthography, morphology, translation and code-switching. The value of computational engagement with Igbo oral traditions therefore lies not in automated interpretation alone, but in combining computational pattern recognition with the contextual and source-critical practices through which oral historical evidence is understood.

2.0 Literature and Conceptual Framework

The study's conceptual framing anchors on establishing a dual understanding of Igbo oral tradition as both a body of evidence for reconstructing history and a medium used by Igbo communities to preserve, transmit and reinterpret knowledge and worldviews. The study draws on Vansina's (1985) framing of oral tradition not as an unmediated record of the past but as remembered information shaped by transmission, performance, social context and cultural values. This perspective is significant to the current study because the historical relevance of Igbo oral narratives, names, and proverbs lies on identifying what historical and socio-cultural information they preserve, modes of transmission, and the process of remembering and interpreting them which may have altered their meaning, rather than drawing them from their contexts and treating them as empirical evidence comparable to documented archival records. Therefore, this study treats oral tradition in Igboland as socio-cultural data that require both computational investigation and conventional source criticism. The study adopts Onumajuru's (2016) observations that oral expression in Igboland, such as names constitute compressed bodies of socio-cultural historical memory. Their pragmatic and semantic elements are capable of underscoring the experiences and circumstances around origin, migration, death, war, belief, norms and a wider worldview of the people. The aforementioned features of Igbo names qualify them for computational investigation since their recurring semantic and lexical parts are possibly identified across sizable corpus. Additionally, their interpretation cannot be solely reduced to lexical meaning as the same linguistic element may acquire different significance according to dialect, context, family history, or circumstances behind naming. Therefore, a computational model can help to identify patterns, while cultural and historical interpretation help to determine what the patterns stand for. Furthermore, through their abridged linguistic forms, proverbs offer complementary body of evidence, allowing moral expectations, customary laws, and social values, among others to be transmitted across generations. It is therefore a core argument of this study that proverbs provide meeting points between historical memory, religious thoughts and customary laws, resonating Ikenga-Metuh's (1983) argument that Igbo proverbs must be taken into consideration for a proper understanding of traditional religious belief of the Igbo because they carry helpful and rich religious elements. They contain and preserve assumptions about the relationships between mortals and their ancestors, divinities, morality, obligation and the larger spiritual order. The everyday usage also make them rich in offering evidence of customary social regulation which can reinforce expectations concerning conducts, kinship, identity, responsibility, authority and communal relations. The present study therefore treats proverbs as cultural propositions whose recurring linguistic patterns may reveal broader structures of historical and social thought.

The computational dimension of the study is informed by Natural Language Processing and machine learning. The study presents them as analytical tools used for working large linguistically complex body of language data, and not as a replacement for historical interpretation. NLP can facilitate processes such as corpus construction, tokenization, tagging of part-of-speech, classification, identification patterns, and semantic representation; while machine learning techniques can assist in identifying relationships that may not be easily identify using

manual investigation. Adoption of this approach is suitable in studies where oral materials are transcribed and accumulated through oral interviews, digital platforms, broadcasts, and collections. This study therefore adopts computational approach to enhance the visibility of recurrent thematic and linguistic relationships to the researchers, rather than prompting computational models to decide historical facts. This study therefore extends the conceptual application of Igbo NLP from language technology to cultural and historical inquiry. Its concern is not simply whether a machine can process Igbo correctly, but whether computational processing can assist scholars in investigating what Igbo linguistic materials preserve about the past and how that knowledge changes over time. This requires a hybrid approach in which computational pattern recognition is checked against oral narratives, linguistic context, historical scholarship, and community knowledge. Such an approach is particularly important because low-resource computational systems may reproduce limitations in their underlying data, including dialectal differences, inconsistent orthography, missing diacritics, and uneven representation of particular varieties of Igbo (Ezeani et al., 2018; Onyenwe et al., 2018).

Media adaptation forms the final conceptual framing of the study. The importance of this framing is because of the modification of present-day oral traditions which have been diluted from their forms, audience, context, and interpretation through contemporary media outlets like radio, television, print, social media and communication environments. This study therefore argues that the digitization of oral tradition should be understood simultaneously as preservation and transformation. It describes the sequence of transformation of names, oral narratives and proverbs as media adaptation emanating from the mutation they undergo when removed from their original communicative environment and reproduced in modern media. NLP and machine learning are useful in this respect because they can facilitate comparison across different versions and contexts of circulation. These perspectives therefore offers a nuanced interdisciplinary framing that connects computational linguistics, Igbo cultural studies history, ethnolinguistics, religious studies to produces empirical Igbo historiography without reducing oral traditions from their contexts and forms. Therefore, while oral history methods and cultural studies provide the means of explanation, NLP and machine learning offers means of identifying lexical patterns within the collection. The approach therefore supports the use of technology in historiography, rather than determining indigenous knowledge.

3.0 Methodology

3.1. Research Design and Analytical Approach

To achieve the aim of combining oral history, ethnolinguistic analysis and computationally assisted lexical investigation, the study adopted a qualitative interdisciplinary research design. Being a study that primarily examines how historical experiences, customary expectations, social values and religious beliefs are preserved through Igbo personal names and related oral expressions, the approach is grounded in oral history. Historical and cultural interpretation of data remained grounded in participants' accounts and the researchers' contextual examination, while NLP was adopted as a supplementary analytical tool to identify recurring lexical patterns. Data were drawn from thirty participants (six from each of the five states of the Southeast Nigeria, including Abia, Anambra, Ebonyi, Enugu and Imo). These participants were purposively selected because of their knowledge of local history, naming practices, oral traditions and community life in Igboland.

3.2 Data Selection, Preparation, Coding, and Thematic Analysis

The interviews generated a broader body of oral material, from which 45 personal names were purposively selected for detailed analysis because participants attached particularly clear historical, social, cultural, religious or customary meanings to them. The 45 names therefore constitute a selected analytical dataset rather than a complete corpus of names mentioned during the interviews. The study does not seek to establish the statistical prevalence of particular Igbo names but to examine names as contextually situated carriers of historical and cultural knowledge. The interviews and names were manually transcribed and organised by the researchers and their co-authors. The name dataset included the original names, English translations and the historical, social, cultural or religious significance attributed to them by participants. Attention was given to Igbo orthography and diacritical marks during transcription and analysis. Recurring lexical elements were identified and counted manually. The 45 names were manually coded by the researchers and their co-authors. The eleven thematic categories used in the analysis—peace and social harmony; war and courage; kinship and social support; life, death and continuity; wealth and prosperity; God and religious belief; authority, justice and social order; character and moral values; land, identity and social memory; joy and positive fortune; and poverty, hardship and social experience—were developed through close reading of the interview material.

3.3 NLP-Assisted Lexical Analysis, Triangulation and Ethics

The researchers manually compiled and coded the 45 names, and then used ChatGPT as a supplementary AI-assisted tool to identify recurring lexical patterns in the dataset. The machine output was further checked manually against the original names, initial coding, and participants' explanations before being incorporated

into the study's analysis. Consequently, lexical patterns were interpreted in relation to their linguistic form and interview context rather than solely on the basis of frequency. Interpretation was triangulated across the names, participants' explanations and related oral historical accounts. The researchers retained responsibility for all coding, interpretation and conclusions. Participation in the interviews was voluntary, and identifying information was handled with appropriate confidentiality. AI-assisted tools were used only as supplementary aids. ChatGPT was used for lexical-pattern identification and, where applicable, manuscript readability. It did not replace researchers' judgments or serve as an independent source of historical or cultural evidence.

4. 0 Analysis and Findings

4.1 Oral Traditions as Historical and Cultural Archives

The examination of participants' responses show that Igbo oral traditions preserve socio-cultural and historical information and release them through everyday expressions, proverbs and personal names. Participants often linked names and proverbs to historical familial and communal experiences, religious beliefs, worldviews, among others, therefore making oral tradition as not merely a means of transmitting historical and socio-cultural information, but also a means of preserving interpretations of past events. A participant, Nwodu C. (July 3, 2020) explained that names often "remind us of what happened before." Agwu O. (January 10, 2026) similarly observed that some names preserve family experiences that may otherwise not appear in written records. Ogbonna A. (April 19, 2025) noted that the meaning of a name may become clearer when considered alongside the circumstances surrounding its attribution. These accounts corroborate the view that oral historical knowledge is embedded in everyday social practices rather than to formal historical narratives, aligning with earlier scholarship on African oral traditions, including Nwankwo & Anozie (2014) and Vansina (1985).

4.2 Personal Names as Compressed Historical Narratives

Responses from participants demonstrate that Igbo oral traditions such as names and proverbs serve as reservoirs of the Igbo worldviews because instead of arbitrarily giving names, the Igbo prioritize doing so in relations to circumstances surrounding births and the events of the familial and communal events of the periods of naming. For example, participants gave the following responses: Onwuka B. (July 13, 2025), "names contain the stories of what happened in families." Ugwu O. (March 7, 2026) added "names serve as reminders of experiences that parents wanted subsequent generations to remember." Ekuma E. (August 11, 2026) "our names are associated with circumstances and expectations of our families, while Kalu U. (September 21, 2025) "We give names to show and preserve our identities and histories". These responses compelled the researchers to purposively select 45 names shown in the table below which the participants appeared to attach certain indigenous meanings and messages to.

Table 1: Selected Igbo Personal Names and Their Historical, Social and Cultural Significance

Name	Literal translation	Historical/social/cultural significance	Thematic category
Uwaezuoke	No one has it all in this world	Expresses contentment, sharing and recognition of human limitations	Peace and social harmony
Iroegbulam	Enmity should not destroy/kill me	Emphasises the destructive consequences of hostility	Peace and social harmony
Udoka	Peace is supreme	Presents peace as a highly valued social condition	Peace and social harmony
Udóamákà	Peace is beautiful/good	Associates peace with social wellbeing	Peace and social harmony
Udódìrì	Let there be peace	Emphasises the enduring value of peace	Peace and social harmony
Udóbùndù	Peace is life	Connects peace with the preservation of life	Peace and social harmony
Ozoemena	May the evil past not happen again	Expresses a desire to avoid the recurrence of adverse experiences	Peace and social harmony
Aghaeri	Not consumed by war	Connects identity with survival in the context of conflict	War, courage and survival
Dikeogu	Great/strong warrior	Associates identity with courage and strength	War, courage and survival

Name	Literal translation	Historical/social/cultural significance	Thematic category
Ochiagha	One who leads war/warrior	Associates identity with warfare and defence	War, courage and survival
Ogbuagu	Lion killer	Conveys courage and strength through the image of overcoming a powerful opponent	War, courage and survival
Dimogu	One who protects/fights for us	Expresses protection and collective responsibility	Family and social support
Dimgba	One who fights/struggles for others	Emphasises sacrifice and support for others	Family and social support
Nwanneka	A sibling/kinsman is greater	Emphasises the importance of brotherhood and kinship	Family and social support/harmony
Umunabuike	Kinsmen are sources of strength.	Presents relatives as a source of strength and support	Family and social support/harmony
Ahanna	Father's name	Connects personal identity with paternal lineage	Family and social support/harmony
Onwubiko	Death, please do not	Expresses resistance to or rejection of death	Life, survival and continuity
Onwukwe	Death, allow us	Expresses a plea for continued life	Life, survival and continuity
Lebechí	Look up to God	Associates survival or hope with divine reliance	Life, survival and continuity
Rapuruchí	Leave it to God	Expresses reliance on divine providence	Life, survival and continuity
Nnamdi	My father is alive	Connects personal identity with the survival of the father	Life, survival and continuity
Ubasinachi	Wealth comes from God	Associates material prosperity with divine provision	Wealth and prosperity
Ubazuoke	Let wealth reach all	Expresses a desire for shared prosperity	Wealth and prosperity
Ezeji	King of yam	Associates status and authority with the culturally important yam	Wealth and prosperity
Akuchi	God's wealth/wealth of God	Associates wealth with divine provision	Wealth and prosperity
Akunna	Wealth is the father's possession/Father's wealth	Connects wealth with paternal inheritance	Wealth and prosperity
Nkemdirim	May mine not be lost.	Associates possession with personal value and wellbeing	Wealth and prosperity
Daberechí	Lean on God.	Expresses reliance on divine providence	God and religious belief
Munachimso	I am with my God	Expresses a personal relationship with God	God and religious belief
Chibuzo	God leads	Places God at the centre of life and decision-making	God and religious belief
Amandianaeze	We do not know who to be wary of	Reflects uncertainty, caution and social relations	Authority, justice and social order
Uwadiogwu	The world is terrible	Expresses a critical perception of social experience	Authority, justice and social order

Name	Literal translation	Historical/social/cultural significance	Thematic category
Ejiọfọ	Holder of ọfọ	Associates identity with ọfọ and its social significance	Authority, justice and social order
Ejimọfọ	I hold ọfọ	Connects personal identity with the possession of ọfọ	Authority, justice and social order
Ezejiọfọ	King/leader who holds ọfọ	Links leadership with ọfọ and social authority	Authority, justice and social order
Ofobundu	Ọfọ is life	Associates ọfọ with life, social order and moral authority	Authority, justice and social order
Eziokwubundu	Truth is life	Presents truth as fundamental to social life	Authority, justice and social order
Eziahakaego	Good character is greater than money	Prioritises moral character over material wealth	Character and moral values
Ugwuona	Hill/honour of the land	Connects identity with land and place	Land, identity and social memory
Ahamefuna	May my name not be lost	Expresses concern with the preservation of personal and family identity	Land, identity and social memory
Ahamdirim	My name is my life	Directly associates name with identity and existence	Land, identity and social memory
Nwaogwugwu	Child of Ogwugwu	Connects identity with lineage and ancestral/place association	Land, identity and social memory
Eziafakaego	A good name is better than money	Emphasises lineage and family identity	Land, identity and social memory
Obianuju	One who came into joy or wealth/born into abundance.	Associates birth with happiness and positive fortune	Joy and positive fortune
Ogbenyealu	Not meant for the poor to marry	Reflects perceptions of poverty, marriage and social experience	Poverty and social experience

The table demonstrates the range of historical and cultural meanings attached to the selected names obtained during interactions with participants. Peace, kinship, survival, religious belief, wealth, authority, morality and social identity recur as major areas of concern. Although the thematic categories were developed manually, examination of the 45 names also revealed recurring lexical forms. These patterns provided the principal point at which computational assistance could complement the researchers' qualitative analysis. Several forms recur across the selected names. For example, forms associated with ọdọ/udo occur in four names, agha in two, onwu in two and ọfọ/ọfo in four. Other recurring forms include eze, aha, uba and aku/akụ. Their recurrence provides an observable lexical pattern within the selected dataset.

Table 2: Recurring Lexical Forms in the Selected 45-Name Dataset

Lexical form	Names containing the form	Frequency	Observed contextual association
udo/udo	Udoka; Udóamákà; Udódìrì; Udóbùndù	4	Peace and social harmony
agha	Aghaeri; Ochiagha	2	War and conflict
onwu	Onwubiko; Onwukwe	2	Death, survival and continuity
ọfọ/ọfo	Ejiọfọ; Ejimọfọ; Ezejiọfọ; Ofobundu	4	Authority, justice and social order
eze	Ezeji; Ezejiọfọ	2	Authority and status
aha	Ahanna; Ahamefuna; Ahamdirim	3	Identity and name
uba	Ubasinachi; Ubazuoke	2	Wealth and prosperity
aku/akụ	Akuchi; Akunna	2	Wealth and material value

The frequencies in Table 2 refer to occurrences of the identified lexical strings in the selected 45-name dataset. They should not be interpreted automatically as frequencies of equivalent morphemes or as evidence that

every occurrence carries precisely the same meaning. Igbo words can contain similar orthographic sequences that perform different linguistic or semantic functions. The table therefore identifies recurrence, not meaning. This distinction is important to the study's computational-humanistic approach. Lexical frequency can indicate that particular forms recur, but frequency alone cannot establish why those forms occur or what they mean in a particular name. Their historical and cultural significance was determined from participants' explanations and the contexts in which the names were discussed. Computational assistance therefore served as a means of identifying possible patterns, while interpretation remained dependent on oral historical evidence and researcher-led contextual analysis.

4.3 Thematic Patterns in the Selected Names

Thematically, the table shows seven categories of naming practices and the Igbo socio-cultural practices and worldviews they preserve. These themes include peace and conflict prevention as seen in names like Udoka, Udóamákà, Udódìrì, Udóbùndù, Iroegbu and Ozoemena. Critical examination of these names demonstrate that they did not merely represent a belief in the absence of conflicts in Igboland, but messages of peacebuilding in order not to relapse to conflicts. Similarly, names like Aghaeri, Dikeogu, Ochiagha and Ogbuagu are encoded with themes of war, courage and survival in the traditional Igbo worldview, connecting personal identity with courage, struggle and the experience of conflict. Their meanings demonstrate how historical experiences can become incorporated into personal identity through naming. The recurrence of agha in Aghaeri and Ochiagha provides a clear lexical example of this pattern. However, the cultural significance of war-related naming cannot be inferred from the recurrence of agha alone; it derives from the explanations provided by participants. Another thematic cluster is Kinship, Protection and Social Support. These can be seen in names like Dìmogù, Dìngbà, Nwanneka, Umunnabuike and Ahanna which emphasize protection, collective responsibility, kinship and lineage. These names present the individual as connected to a wider network of family and community relationships. Also, there are themes of Life, Death and Continuity which are seen in names such as Onwubiko, Onwukwe, Lebechí, Rapuruchí and Nnamdi. They reflect concerns with survival, death, divine reliance and continuity. The recurrence of onwu in Onwubiko and Onwukwe is therefore both a visible lexical pattern and a point of entry into a broader cultural discussion of mortality. The significance of these names, however, comes from their contextual meanings rather than from lexical frequency itself. Themes of Wealth and Prosperity also surfaced. They are present in names like Ubasinachi, Ubazuoke, Ezeji, Akuchi, Akunna and Nkemdirim which connect naming with wealth, inheritance, prosperity and material wellbeing. Their meanings also demonstrate that economic values may be expressed alongside religious and familial beliefs. God and Religious Belief form another thematic cluster. Names such as Daberechí, Munachimso and Chibuzo explicitly foreground relationships with God. Religious belief also appears in other names in which prosperity, survival or life is associated with divine agency. This suggests that religious ideas are not confined to explicitly theological names but can intersect with other dimensions of social experience. Also, there are themes of Authority, Justice and Social Order which are present in names like Ejiòfò, Ejimòfò, Ezejiòfò, Ofobundu and Eziokwubundu which associate identity with òfò, truth, leadership and social order. These names indicate the importance of moral authority and social responsibility in naming practices. The findings nevertheless do not establish that names themselves constitute a complete system of Igbo customary law. Rather, they provide evidence of concepts associated with authority, truth, justice and social order. Proverbs and other oral materials provide a further source for examining these concepts. Character and Moral Values are themes present in names like Eziahakaego which explicitly prioritizes character over material wealth. The name illustrates how moral expectations can be embedded in personal identity and transmitted through naming. Another obvious themes revolve around Land, Identity and Social Memory as seen in names like Ugwuona, Ahamefuna, Ahamdirim, Nwaogwugwu and Eziafa. These names connect personal identity with land, lineage, ancestry, family and the preservation of names. They demonstrate how naming can function as a mechanism for maintaining social memory across generations. There is also the themes of Joy and Positive Fortune present in names like Obianuju which connects naming with joy and the circumstances surrounding birth. It illustrates the use of names to preserve positive family experiences and aspirations. Poverty and Social Experience form the last themes presented in the table. They are present in names like Ogbenyealu which provides a contrasting example by connecting naming with poverty and marriage. Its meaning demonstrates that names can preserve not only positive aspirations but also difficult social experiences and perceptions of social inequality.

4.4 Proverbs and Informal Social Norms

Corroborating Achebe (1958) Unaegbu (2020) and Ugochukwu (1994) who observed the importance of proverbs in the everyday Igbo societies, responses from participants underscore the moral reasoning and social expectations encoded in Igbo proverbial expressions. For example, a participant, Igwe (June 8, 2026), stated that "Igbo proverbs reservoirs of beliefs and practices, while Umeofo (November 13, 2023) added that "our proverbs are more like unwritten social expectations". These observations suggest that proverbs can illuminate

how communities articulate acceptable conduct, obligations and moral values. The evidence, however, does not justify treating proverbs as equivalent to a complete body of customary law. Rather, they should be understood as one form of oral evidence through which social norms and moral expectations can be examined. A systematic analysis of particular proverbs used in dispute settlement would be necessary to make stronger claims about their relationship to Igbo customary law.

5.0 Discussion

The findings of this study demonstrate that the historical significance of Igbo oral traditions, including naming and proverbs does not only lie in their words, but also convey the experiences of historical facts that define the meanings of the words. The finding corroborate Onumajuru's (2016) position that meanings attached to Igbo names stem from the circumstances surrounding their origin and use. Mensah et al. (2025) also demonstrate that memories of the Nigerian-Biafran war (1967-1970) are preserved in Igbo names. The present study extends this insight by showing that such mnemonic functions are not restricted to war-related names, as they preserve a wider range of everyday historical experiences, including family relationships, aspirations, moral expectations and religious interpretations. The significance of a name, therefore, is relational, covering their historical meaning which emerge from their connections between linguistic expression, circumstances surrounding the naming and the community knowledge through which the meanings are remembered. This contextual character also helps explain why the findings should not be read as evidence of a fixed or unchanging Igbo naming system. Naming practices respond to social circumstances, and recent research has documented changes associated with media exposure, global communication and changing religious and cultural orientations among Igbo communities (Ukaegbu & Okon, 2024). The names examined here consequently provide evidence of cultural memory at particular moments rather than a complete representation of Igbo naming practice. This is consistent with Vansina's (1985) understanding of oral tradition as transmitted and mediated knowledge rather than an unaltered record of the past. What is preserved in a name is therefore not simply an event itself but a remembered interpretation of that event. This distinction is particularly important for historians because it requires attention to who gave the name, why it was given, what circumstances informed it, and how subsequent generations understood it.

The findings also point to a more limited but useful role for exploratory NLP in historical research. Looking at recurring lexical forms can help identify patterns that might not be obvious when names are considered one at a time. At the same time, recurrence alone does not establish meaning. Differences in orthography and diacritics, as well as the way words are combined within Igbo names, mean that similar-looking strings may have different linguistic or cultural functions. The lexical analysis is therefore most useful for drawing attention to patterns that can then be examined through oral testimony, linguistic knowledge and historical context. In this respect, the study builds on earlier Igbo NLP research on areas such as diacritic restoration, word embedding and part-of-speech tagging (Ezeani et al., 2017, 2018; Onyenwe et al., 2018, 2019), but applies computational assistance to a different kind of material. Rather than treating computational processing as an end in itself, the analysis uses it alongside the interpretive work required to understand names as historically and culturally situated expressions. The value of the computational approach lies in this combination: it can help organize and identify recurring forms, while questions of meaning remain dependent on the language, experiences and contexts in which those names are used. The analysis of proverbs similarly points to the importance of context. Earlier studies have shown that Igbo proverbs can provide evidence of religious ideas, moral reasoning and expectations about social conduct (Ikenga-Metuh, 1983; Ugochukwu, 1994). The findings here are consistent with that understanding, particularly in the ways proverbial expressions relate to ideas about behaviour, obligation and social relationships. They should not, however, be treated automatically as evidence of customary law. A proverb may indicate what a community considers appropriate or desirable without showing how that expectation was applied in a particular dispute, or whether it was recognized as a rule within a specific institution. For historical research, therefore, proverbs are valuable partly because they reveal ideas about social order and acceptable behaviour, but their interpretation requires attention to the circumstances in which they were spoken and the people who used them. Stronger claims about customary practice would require evidence from proverbs used in actual disputes, together with oral accounts of how such disputes were handled. The stronger contribution of the present study is therefore to identify proverbs as a source for examining the moral and social reasoning through which communities articulated expectations.

These findings have implications for the development of computational resources for Igbo and other African languages. If oral materials are converted into datasets without retaining the circumstances in which they were produced, computational accessibility may come at the cost of historical meaning. The concern is not merely technical. Work on decolonial NLP has emphasized questions of community agency and the relationships through which language data are produced, while the CARE Principles place collective benefit, authority to

control, responsibility and ethics alongside technical considerations (Carroll et al., 2020; Ògúnremí et al., 2023). For an Igbo oral corpus, this means that provenance, contextual metadata, consent, access and community participation should be treated as part of the research infrastructure rather than as issues added after digitization. The study consequently points towards a form of computational humanities in which the preservation of linguistic data does not require separating those data from the people and histories that give them meaning.

The interpretation of these findings should nevertheless remain within the boundaries of the study design. The 45 names were purposively selected for their analytical richness and cannot establish the prevalence of particular naming practices across Igbo communities. Likewise, the exploratory NLP component was not a trained or evaluated machine-learning system, and the thematic categories were developed through researcher-led interpretation. These features limit claims about statistical representativeness and computational performance but do not diminish the study's qualitative purpose. Rather, they indicate what a subsequent corpus-based study would need to add: a larger and more systematically documented dataset, comparison across dialects and generations, independent coding, and computational evaluation against clearly defined linguistic tasks. Similarly, systematic collections of proverbs in actual dispute-settlement contexts would be required before stronger claims could be made about their relationship to customary law. The principal contribution of the present study is thus not a completed computational model, but an empirically grounded demonstration of how exploratory computational analysis can be brought into conversation with oral history and ethnolinguistic interpretation without severing cultural expressions from the contexts in which they acquire meaning.

6.0 Conclusion

This study has examined Igbo oral traditions as sources of historical, social, religious and cultural knowledge embedded in everyday language and social interaction. By bringing oral history, ethnolinguistic interpretation and exploratory NLP-assisted lexical analysis together, the study showed how personal names, proverbs and oral accounts can preserve memories of conflict, migration, family experience, religious belief and social relationships. The analysis of 45 names indicates that names can carry forms of social and historical memory, although their significance cannot be established from literal translation or the recurrence of particular lexical forms alone. The circumstances in which a name was given, the experiences of the people involved and the cultural knowledge associated with it remain important to its interpretation. Proverbs likewise provide evidence of moral expectations and ideas about social conduct, but they should not automatically be treated as evidence of a complete system of customary law. Their historical value is stronger when the circumstances of their use are also considered.

The use of NLP in the study was deliberately exploratory. The analysis helped identify recurring lexical forms in the selected names, but those occurrences did not by themselves establish linguistic or cultural meaning. This limitation is especially relevant to Igbo, where orthographic variation, diacritics, dialectal differences and translation can affect computational analysis. The study therefore did not train or evaluate a machine-learning model. Instead, computational assistance was used alongside oral evidence, linguistic knowledge and historical interpretation. This approach suggests that computational methods can have a useful place in the study of Igbo oral traditions without taking the place of the interpretive work required to understand them. The study also points to questions that will become increasingly important as larger Igbo digital resources are developed. A useful corpus should retain information about the circumstances in which oral materials were produced and collected rather than separating linguistic forms from their social and historical settings. Information on speakers, location, date, language variety, context of recording and relevant cultural background would make such materials more useful for both historical research and computational work. Decisions about transcription, translation, annotation and access should also involve speakers, local researchers and appropriate knowledge holders. Some materials may be suitable for open access, while others may require restrictions because of their cultural or community significance. These considerations are consistent with the concerns raised in decolonial NLP scholarship, the CARE Principles and participatory African-language research.

The contribution of the study is therefore modest but specific. It shows how a small, purposively selected body of Igbo names and oral materials can be examined historically while making limited use of computational assistance. A larger corpus, with greater linguistic and dialectal coverage and more detailed contextual information, would allow these possibilities to be examined further. Future research could also investigate proverbs in the contexts in which they are actually used, including disputes and other forms of social interaction. Such work would provide stronger evidence for understanding the relationship between oral expression, social practice and customary norms. More broadly, the findings suggest that preserving Igbo oral traditions involves preserving the contexts and histories that give words, names and proverbs their meaning.

Computational methods can assist this process, but their usefulness depends on keeping those contexts within the analysis rather than treating oral traditions simply as collections of words.

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