

Sociocultural underpinnings of toponyms in Nsukka, Southeastern Nigeria

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Abstract

This article focuses on toponyms with particular reference to the names of towns and villages in Nguru, a member of the quadripartite towns that make up Mkpinano' Nsukka, Idèkè, the host community of the University of Nigeria, Nsukka. The primary objective of this study is to identify the factors that determine the names given to places in Nsukka. The paper argues that Nsuka-Igbo toponyms are not arbitrarily awarded. Corpus was gathered through oral interview with the help of two research assistants that are indigenes of Nguru. The paper finds that Nsuka-Igbo toponyms are given in consideration of certain socio-cultural factors, including geographical landscape, ancestral/genealogical relationships, location of the place, past events and experiences. It was also observed that the Nsuka-Igbo have high regard for ancestry and reverence for the Supreme Being in the naming of places.

Keywords: Toponyms, Place names classification, Use theory of naming, Nsuka, Igbo.

Introduction

Semantics is generally conceived as the study of meaning, which seeks to communicate human experience through language. It is the level of linguistic investigation which borders around the meaning of words and expressions.

Meaning is primary in any communication process and is at the centre of the linguistic quest. Therefore, a semantic analysis seeks to study a particular concept from the angle of its meaning and meaning components. As an enquiry into meaning, semantics has two branches. According to Miller (1991:148), the first is philosophical semantics, whose goal is to formulate a general theory of meaning. The second is lexical semantics, whose goal is to record meanings that have been lexicalised in particular languages. However, the branch of semantics which this study investigates is onomastics which has to do with names and naming, be it of places or things.

This study aims to identify the sociocultural underpinnings of Igbo place names with particular reference to Nguru, a speech community in Nsukka, a town in Enugu State, Nigeria. The study of place names is very significant in linguistics, archaeological and historical

research. Being interdisciplinary, toponomy draws data from history, anthropology, philosophy, linguistics, geography and ethnology. In other words, place names do not just reflect the physical characteristics of a place but also those of its inhabitants.

According to Bennett and Agarwal (2007), 'place' is a fundamental notion in everyday communication and a key concept in geography that plays a crucial role in almost every human enquiry. Though fundamental to human essence, the semantics of 'place' is poorly understood and controversial. For instance, Massey (1994:22) claims that places do not mean the same thing to everybody and that "there is an increasing uncertainty about what we mean by place and how we relate to place."

Toponymy and anthroponomy are the principal branches of onomastics. Onomastics, on the other hand, is an integral part of lexicology, which is concerned with the origin, history, and use of proper names, either names of persons or places. While toponymy investigates the toponymic lexicon, through the study of motivation and origin of the proper names of places, anthroponomy deals with people's names

– proper names of individuals, either parental or last names and nicknames.

Ǹgùrú is one of the quadripartite towns that make up Ìkpùnánó in Nsukka, a town in Enugu State, Nigeria. Other components of Ìkpùnánó are Ísíákpú, Úmàkáshí and Èchàrà. Ìkpùnánó, together with Íhè and Ñrú makes up the ñsuká Idèkè. Ǹgùrú is divided into two – the first group 'Ndíúnó' represents those who live within Ǹgùrú town. They are altogether 10 villages, namely Úmúódéjù, Úmùèzèdíkó, Úmùèzògùdà, Úmùdimójómè, Úmùosé, Ámégú Idiké, Ámégú Úwáni, Úwáni Igbò, Líiké, and Ámófíá. Ndíágú, on the other hand, consists of nine villages viz – Ágbáni, Ìkwóká, Pòrákótù, Ìkém, Òbòdòágú, Òdùmégwù, Ájámáni, Ágbárú and Lééké.

Through naming, users of a language identify the entities around them, be they visible or not. Therefore, the primary aim of this study is to examine the morpho-semantic components underlying the meaning of important place names in Ǹgùrú-Nsuká and establish their interrelatedness. The need for this investigation is mainly because place names usually outlive the people that give them, hence, the need for us to preserve the original significance of these names. If not for such documentations as

this, the original motivation behind the names of places tends to disappear with time. This is mainly as the name ñsuká (anglicised as Nsukka) is gradually enveloped by developing and statutorily registered place names. Again, there is the need to establish the link between the names of places in Ǹgùrú and the events that led to those names. This is because names are not just given to places arbitrarily but are usually socio-culturally determined. Therefore, the specific objective of this study is to classify the names based on the description of their geographical landscape, progeny, location, past events and experiences. In the discussion of names and naming practices, it is also observed that literature is abundantly furnished in the area of personal names but scanty when it comes to place names, especially within the Igbo cultural setting.

This inquiry is novel because the authors are unaware of any existing research that has focused attention on the sociocultural factors behind the names of places in Ǹgùrú-Nsuká of Enugu State. In other words, the inquiry is hoped to contribute significantly to knowledge since it will complement available literature on naming practices in Nigeria, especially place names, about which

there is a dearth of literature. In other words, it fills a gap in the literature on naming in Nigeria.

Theoretical background to the study

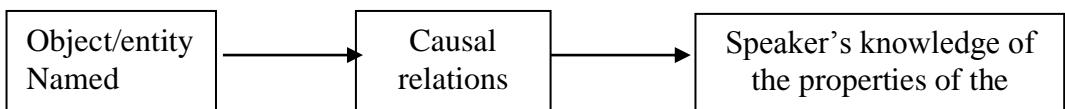
According to Duranti (1997:2), "linguistic anthropology is the study of language as a cultural resource and speaking as a cultural practice." It studies the links between language and culture, and how language relates to thought, social action, identity, and power relations.

Explaining the tenets of linguistic anthropology, Duranti explains the three functions of language in culture to include performance, indexicality and participation.

Another theory is the descriptivist theory of naming (often called descriptivism). This theory is usually associated with the postulations of Russell (1905), which were modified by Saul Kripke in 1972. There is a widespread practice in the onomastic literature to refer to Kripke's (1972) iteration of descriptivism as the causal theory of reference. According to

the causal theory, it would be better to say that 'water' is 'water' than 'water is a liquid with specific chemical composition and physical properties. In other words, the causal theory sees definition as a mere tautology. Nevertheless, in a true sense, saying that 'water is water' has not defined what water is hence, the problem with Kripke's argument.

Evans (1973) came up with a proposal to address the shortcoming in Kripke's argument. He argues that there are reasons for the name given to a particular entity and that the native speakers of a language have intuitive knowledge of these reasons. In his words, "For S to believe that *a* is F (where *a* is a name) there has to be some causal relation involving '*a*' the name' and S's use of the name," (Evans, (1973:197). For example, that item *x* is called *x* implies that the meaning of *x* is inherent and that users of the language *y* are conversant with the meaning associated with the components of *x*.



Therefore, the causal theory of naming, as modified by Evans (1973), forms the framework for this study. According to this theory, there are reasons for the name an entity bears. Unlike Russell's descriptivist theory and Kripke's causal theory of reference, Evans leaves the inherent property of a name to the people who make use of the name. He, however, combines the tenets of Russellian descriptivism and Kripkean causal theory of reference in the sense that the meaning of a name is determined by the information available about the name and that determining the meaning of a name is by causal origin. In other words, Evans (1973) anchors his definition of a name on the common knowledge that a community of speakers has about the name. The tenets of the causal theory of naming can be summarized thus:

Xy is the name of Z iff

There is a speech community in which people

- i) use Xy to refer to Z
- ii) know that Xy is used for Z
- iii) rely on (ii) to define Z

What the above implies is that:

speakers of the language use Xy to refer to Z only when Z is the dominant source of information associated with Xy,

users of the language possess a common intuitive knowledge behind the name Xy associated with Z, and

users of the language rely solely on this shared knowledge and not on the knowledge that Z satisfies some predicates embedded in Z. This framework is appropriate for this study because place names in Nsukka satisfy these three stages. It offers a prospect for the analysis of the data gathered for the study.

Overview of related studies

The study of place names has attracted the attention of researchers in the past. Wright (1929), for instance, is one of the earliest of such studies and centres primarily on American place or geographical names.

According to Nakhanova (2013), place names have a long history of their formation and are closely related to the

social life, traditions and world view of the inhabitants of respective locations. In his analysis of the ancient Turkic place names, Nakhanova used the classification method to establish the general and nomination principles of place-name formation among the ancient Turks: the origin of the names, and their functional features connected with psychological, socio-economic and historical factors. He goes further to say that since ancient times, people have given names to geographical objects and have, in the process, made use of appellatives, which reflect the physical and geographical peculiarities of landscapes, the names of ethnic groups and nations, social groups and class titles of people who inhabit these places.

Knezovic and Alujevic (2017) took their cue from Nakhanova's (2013) to study old toponyms of Split, a city in the centre of the Croatian region of Dalmatia. They gathered their data from three primary sources – oral tradition, written records and old charts. From their study, old toponyms of Split are preserved in street names, and in the names of museums, parks and amusement centres, schools etc. Their study concentrates on revitalising the old toponyms of Split, but the present study centres on the toponyms in use in Ñgùrú.

Letsoela (2015), on the other hand, conducted a semantic analysis of bus stop names in Lesotho. In the study, she observes that the naming of bus stops in Lesotho is mainly done on an ad hoc basis by anybody who is a member of the community. The total number of bus stop names gathered was 62, and she groups them into categories such as descriptive (38), experiential (16), mythological (5) and metaphorical (3). She concludes that bus stops in Lesotho are not named arbitrarily. Serious considerations for the appropriateness of the names (for example, her four classifications above) are made. The study demonstrates that through the names of bus stops, the people of Lesotho narrate their experiences, emotions and belief systems.

Agyekum (2006) undertook a sociolinguistic study of personal names in Akan of Ghana. In the study, he discusses the typology of Akan names, which according to him; include day names, family names, circumstantial names, theophoric names, flora and fauna names, weird and reincarnate names, and achievement names. Achievement names include stool names, religious names, occupational names, insinuating and proverbial names, body structure and kinship names etc. He collected his primary data from school registers and

payrolls of teachers at various education offices. He claims that names are not just arbitrary and meaningless and concludes that Akan personal names have elements of human experience and ways of life.

Oha, Kumar, Anyanwu and Osakue (2017) studied Nigerian and Indian toponyms to find out their socio-cultural divergence and development. Being British colonies, English is one of the official languages of business and politics in both countries. However, the wide-ranging influence of English on Nigeria's linguistic landscape seen in the names of cities, towns, villages, and streets, as in 'Douglas Road', 'Wetheral Road', 'Owerri' instead of Owere, 'Awka' instead of Ọka, 'Warri' instead of Wọṛi etc. The reverse is the case in India since Hindi, being one of their numerous indigenous languages is promoted as their official national language. Indian names are more indigenised, as in 'Tilak Nagar', 'Majavir Nagar', 'Rajiv Chowk' etc. There is a comparative study of toponyms in Nigeria and India. The present research is on factors that determine the place names in a section of Nsukka, Enugu State, Nigeria.

Nwoye (2014) conducted an ethnolinguistic exploration of the Igbo naming ceremony and identifies some ritual objects used in Igbo naming,

including kola nuts, alligator pepper, cock, bottles of dry gin, and gallons of palm wine. According to Nwoye, the quantity of each item depends on the family's financial strength, and each has its symbolic significance. She concludes that the cultural practice of Igbo naming is done using a six-stage process of the announcement, preparation, presentation, naming, feasting and departure.

Similarly, Anyachonkeya (2014) conducted a linguistic and cultural survey of naming in Igbo land. In the study, he agrees with Nwoye (2014), Agyekum (2006) and Achebe (1982) that personal names are a reflection of people's cultural norms and practices. He says that naming among the Igbo showcases their fears and aspirations, joys and hates, ideals and values, and cultural and spiritual values. From the study, it is clear that Igbo names have social, eschatological, and religious implications.

The dynamics of onomastics in Afikpo-Igbo have also been studied by, for instance, Emeka-Nwobia (2016) who distinguishes naming a male child and a female child after eight days of birth. According to Emeka-Nwobia, a child is placed at the edge of a thatched roof during the ceremony and water is poured on the roof, which then runs onto the

child. She calls this 'a kind of baptism'; in fact, a rite of passage that every child in the traditional Afikpo society must undergo to prepare him/her for the task ahead. She groups the names using specific categorisations, some of which are as follows: birthday names, physical appearance, and circumstantial names.

In discussing the sociolinguistic cum pedagogic implications of anglicising Igbo toponyms on the Igbo language and culture, Obiube and Okeke (2019) studied more than fifty (50) Igbo place names and argue that anglicisation has powerful adverse effects on the language. They group the different forms of anglicisation observed into seven, namely; 1) letter doubling, as in *Owerri*, instead of *Owere*; 2) the introduction of the alveolar roll 'r' as in *Orba* instead of *Qba*; the introduction of the glottal fricative 'h' at word-initial, medial or final positions, as in *Okoh* instead of *Oko*; 3) the introduction of 'aw' in place of the long /ɔ/ and the short /ɒ/ vowels, as in *Awka* instead of *Qka*; 4) the use of 'n' in place of 'm', as in *Nkpor* instead of *Mkpoo*; 5) the use of 'g' in place of 'gw' as in *Enugu* instead of *Enugwu*; 6) omission of letters as in *Anambra* instead of *Anambara*; 7) wrong spelling evidenced in *Onitsha* instead of *Onitcha*

etc. Their study finds, among other things, that the anglicisation of Igbo place names alters their proper pronunciation, genealogy and meaning.

In a study of the semantic connotations of 'onzu' in Igbo onomastics, Okeke, Okeke and Mbah (2019) analyse 82 personal names bearing *onzu* - 'death', and finds that names among the Igbo of Nigeria are an instrument used in representing the people's experiences about death and their conception of death as an animate entity. From their study also, only the male members of the Igbo society bear *onzu* names for different reasons, which include pleading with death, recognising the audacity of death, holding death responsible for the demise of their loved ones etc. Based on their findings, they conclude that the Igbo no longer give names that suggest their experience(s) with death at present, rather they focused more on *Chi* (God) names.

There are studies on other aspects of naming in Igbo by, for example, Onukawa (1998) who carried out an anthropolinguistic study of Igbo market-day names focusing on the significance of the verb 'kwe' (agree, consent) and 'chi' (Onukawa 1999a/b) in Igbo personal names.

The above empirical studies reviewed show that they differ from the present study in the sense that this study focuses on the description of place names in Ñgùrú, a component member of the quadripartite that makeup Íkpùnánó in Nsukka Local Government Area of Enugu State, Nigeria to identify the socio-cultural factors that determine the names given to places in the area.

Research methodology

This study is qualitative and adopts the emergent research design; the analysis is descriptive. The aim of the study, is the classification of toponyms.

Geographically, the research work is conducted in Nguru-Nsukka, Enugu State, in the southeastern part of Nigeria. With regard to sampling, the researchers selected, using purposive sampling, six elders (three men and three women) from Ñgùrú to participate in the study. Older people were chosen because they have more information than the younger people regarding how places in their community got their names. Three respondents represent Ndíúnó-Ñgùrú

and Ndíágú-Ñgùrú apeice. The instrument for the collection of the corpus is unstructured interview. The data gathered were subjected to qualitative analysis by pointing out that names of places in Ñgùrú are categorised based on landscape properties, ancestral/genealogical relationships, location, and past events.

Classification and interpretation of corpus

The corpus was collated and classified into the description, ancestry, past events, location and borrowing, and then interpreted.

Descriptive toponyms

The term 'descriptive toponyms' refers to names of places in Ñgùrú, which are based on the physical appearance of such places, for example, landscape features. Descriptive toponyms are indicators of unique characteristics of the geographical landscape of a particular place. Table 1 shows the places whose names are informed by their geographical landscape.

Table 1: Classification of toponyms based on the geographical landscape

S/N	Names of villages	Morpholexical segmentation	Description
1.	Ágbáànì/àlì	agba + anì/alì plain + land	Located down the valley as against its mother town Nguru, which is on the hill. In other words, Ágbáànì is plain land.
2.	Mbérúúgwū	m- + be + re + ugwu nom + pre + lean +infix+ hill	Positioned at the side of a hill.
3.	Òbákààlì	ò + ba + ka + alì nom + pre +vast+more +land	Vast area of arable land.
4.	Ámóshwā	ama + óshwa field + bush	Vast area of arable land.

Ágbáànì is one of the eight villages that make up Ngùrú-Égū, which the Ngùrú people commonly call Ndíágú. Two factors are responsible for this name – the influence of migration and topography. According to one of the research respondents, the name Ágbáànì was borrowed from Ágbáànì Ñkánú (in Enugu urban, also in Enugu State, Nigeria) when people who migrated from Ngùrú returned home. What took them to Ñkánú were menial jobs like mason, carpentry, farming, and harvesting of grasses for thatch roofs. Then, in terms of topography, Ágbáànì is situated on plain land. It is neither on a hill nor in the valley. Mbérúúgwú, on the other hand, is situated at the edge of a hill, hence the name. The verb 'be-' selects the -rV applicative 're', which functions as a benefactive marker. Aniagor (2019:182) observes that "verbs like many other concepts of language have its own problem of definition." The derivative here takes the nominalising prefix 'm-' so

that a noun is formed. It is believed that the verb root selects the -rV applicative before the nominalising prefix. If the order were to be reversed, the -rV applicative would be blocked as the nominal 'mbe' cannot take the -rV applicative further.

In Òbákààlì, the compound verb 'baka' merges with the nominalising prefix 'o' for a noun to be formed. Òbákààlì is an expression of the vast expanse of land at Ngùrú. Festus Obayi, [oral interview 2021], explains that the first people that came to settle there from Ngùrú-Únò saw how vast the land was and described it as 'Òbákààlì'.

Genealogical/paternal toponyms

Some places derive their names from paternal relationships. This term is used here to refer to places whose names are easily traceable to their ancestors. In other words, progenitors maintain these names in order to preserve their ancestry. Table 2 presents such names.

Table 2: Classification based on ancestry

S/N	Names of villages	Morphological segmentation	Names of ancestors
1.	Úmŷèzògùdà	úmù + ézògùdà children + ezeoguda	Ezoguda
2.	Úmýōdējū	úmù + ódékù children + odeju	Odeju
3.	Úmýèzèdíkō	úmù + ézèdíkó children + ezediko	Ezediko
4.	Úmŷòsè	úmù + ósé children + ose	Ose
5.	Úmŷdímójòmè	úmù + dìmòjòmè children + dimojome	Dimojome
6.	Úmŷímóró	úmù + ímóró children + imorø	Imorø
7.	Úmŷdímónyènù	úmù + dìmónyénú children + dimonyenu	Dimonyenu
8.	Úmŷògìrī	úmù + ògírí chidren + ogiri	Ogiri
9.	Úmŷúgwúóchá	úmù + úgwúóchá children + ugwuocha	Ugwuocha
10.	Úmŷúgwúóbìà	úmù + úgwúóbìà children + ugwuobia	Ugwuobia

Table 2 displays the names of places in Ngurú, which are as a result of their ancestry. These places are named after the names of five out of the ten sons of Ngurú. Items 1-5 represent Ngurú's direct biological sons with Ézogùdà as the eldest, while 6-10 are the five sons of

Ézogùdà and are presented in their order of age. These ten sons make up the ten major villages in Ndíúnò-Ngurú today. The morpheme 'úmù' prefixed to the names indicates offspring meaning 'children of....' The reason is to preserve the genealogy and paternity of the people

according to Festus Obayi, [oral interview 2021].

positions. Items in Table 3 represent such names.

Location toponyms

This term is used here to refer to names of places in Ngurú in relation to their

Table 3: Classification based on location

S/N	Names of places	Morphological segmentation	Gloss
1.	Òbòdòágú-Ájúónà	Obodo + agu + ajuona village + bush + ajuona	bush/village of Ajuona
2.	Ámégú-Úwánì	ama + agu + ụwanị field + bush + ụwanị	bush/village of Ụwanị
3.	Ámégú-Ìdìké	ama + agu + idike field + bush + idike	bush/village of Idike
4.	Úgwú Íyí Ádịrị	ugwu + iyi + adịrị hill + stream + adịrị	Adịrị's stream
5.	Úgwú Íyí Ọbayị	ugwu + iyi + ọbayị hill + stream + ọbayị	Ọbayị's stream
6.	Úgwú Íyí Ùdùámá	ugwu + iyi + uduama hill + stream + uduama	Uduama's stream

Items 1-3 of Table 3 represent the places in Ngurú that are located in vast/reserved areas and farm settlements. The recurrence of the morpheme *águ* - 'farmland in the bush that is far from home' in the names is a precursor to these villages. Items 4, 5 and 6 are names of streams encountered during the study and are situated at Ámágú-Úwánì,

Ámófíá, and Líiké respectively. These streams have close links with hills and plateaus because they are sourced at the foot of a hill, which is evidenced by the word *úgwú* - 'hill' - that is prefixed to each of the names.

Experiential/Mythological toponyms

Some names of places in Ngurú are as a result of past experiences and events.

Therefore, experiential toponyms are used here to refer to such names, such as Úmụ Ògírí, Úmụ Ụgbàlà, and Ñzùtìgbò. In ñgùrú, Ògírí is a deity that is domiciled at Úmụézögùda. Inhabitants of this place in the past dedicated themselves to Ògírí for protection against external aggressions and provision. In line with this, they called themselves Úmụ Ògírí (children of Ogiri), and that is the name they bear to date.

In the case of Úmụ Ụgbàlà, úgbàlà (cattle egret) lived in ñgùrú, particularly in Úmụódéjù. People among whom this bird lived revered it so much; similar to what happens in other Igbo communities where pythons or other totemic animals like tortoise are highly respected. In ñgùrú, úgbàlà is a totem just like pythons are in Uke and Nnobi in Idemili-North and Umuchi in Aguata, and tortoise in Nise, all in Anambra State, Nigeria. Today, this bird is no more in ñgùrú, but its influence is still felt since the people named themselves after the bird. The Igbo belief system in a Supreme Being is also reflected in this naming pattern because ñgùrú people believe that they have found favour in the sight of the gods for the bird to have come to live among them.

Another such name is Ñzùtìgbò. The name has two parts: *nzute* – 'meeting point' and *Igbo* – 'the people'. Ñzùtìgbò was the first place of settlement for migrants from ñgùrú, who came to Ágbáñi for the sole purpose of agriculture. As such, it became a venue for general meetings even to date. In May 2017, when an election to select a traditional ruler for Ágbáñi was conducted, it was at Ñzùtìgbò that it took place. The relevance of this place to the people of ñgùrú gave rise to its name.

Borrowed toponyms

Some names of places, especially in Ágbáñi, are borrowed and Igbonised (that is to adopt the orthography of Igbo) because they want to be associated with significant and civilized cities and countries. These names include Légóósù (Lagos, Nigerian's commercial city), Pórákòtù (Port Harcourt, Nigerian's oil city), and Ájámáñi/Jámìnì (Germany). There is no connection whatsoever between Lagos, Port Harcourt and Germany with these places in Ágbáñi-ñgùrú. One thing is observable in these borrowed names – they are of non-Igbo origin but are Igbonised to conform to the phonetic rules and writing system of the Igbo language.

Summary of the findings

The data for the study were collected from the indigenes of Ngürú and analysed under the headings of description, ancestry/genealogy, location, past events/experiences, and borrowed toponyms. From the study, it is found that Nsukka-Igbo toponyms are not given arbitrarily. However, serious considerations around each of the above classifications are made before names are given to places. Ngürú people name their towns/villages after their ancestors in order to preserve their paternity and ancestry. The location of a place or river and also past events and experiences equally influence the name it bears. The Ngürú people's belief in the Supreme Being is also evidenced in the names of their towns and villages, as is the case with Úmụ Ụgbàlà. In a bid to associate with important cities within Nigeria and other parts of the world, some toponyms in Ngürú are borrowed and Igbonized.

Conclusion

It has been an age-long debate whether names are arbitrarily assigned or whether there are other considerations that underpin place naming. Place names in Ngürú are not arbitrary; specific and significant socio-cultural considerations are made before names are given. This finding became clear in our classification of the names of places in Ngürú according to the description of the place, genealogical/paternal relationships, location of the place, experiences/events that took place in the past, location of the place and borrowing.

In sum, this work has provided additional material on Igbo place names. However, further studies are welcome in this area to explore other Igbo or Nigerian place names, which will present openings for students in linguistics and anthropology. Researchers may also look at other aspects of place names in Igbo for a more conclusive statement on the structural patterns of Igbo place names.

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List of interviewees

S/N	Name of respondents	Occupation	Age	Date of interview
1.	Anthony Agbo	Farmer	85	17/8/20
2.	Festus Obayi	Retired civil servant	74	22/8/20
3.	Clement Onah	Farmer	83	23/11/21
4.	Felix Ugwoke-Obayi	Farmer	75	17/10/21
5.	Michael Ugwu	Retired civil servant	71	21/11/20