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Mgbeke:

Origin and Etymology and the Derogatory Reputation in Pop Culture

By Maduagwu Nzubechi

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FEATURE
IMAGE

Igbo people attend compulsory registration in Lagos, Nigeria, 29th August 1967. The Federal Government has ordered the compulsory registration of Igbo people in an effort to ensure the

safety of the people of the Lagos State of Nigeria. (Photo by Central Photo Agency)

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MGBEKE

Mgbeke: Origin and Etymology and the Derogatory Reputation in Pop Culture

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Mgbeke is a widely known name across alaigbo that translates to a girl child born on eke market day (one of the 4 Igbo market days). But in the modern day parlance Mgbeke translates to an unrefined or local girl today which is a derogatory translation to such a full rich name. The name Mgbeke was prevalent in precolonial Igboland because of the significance of the name. Beyond its literal meaning Mgbeke often translated to mean wealthy or prosperous woman.



This picture taken c. 1889, by G. F. Packer credited with other photos from the Niger and Onitsha (and of Onitsha trading women), is annotated as 'Trader from Timbuctou' on the left and 'Rich Trading Woman' on the right.

Names in Igbo culture are an integral part of identity and heritage. The use of Mgbeké can be traced back through generations, often used by families who seek to express their hopes for a daughter's future. In traditional Igbo society, wealth was critical for social standing, and a name like Mgbeké would signify a positive lineage and aspirations for not just material prosperity but also success in various aspects of life. The name has connections to women who played pivotal roles in their communities, often providing for their families and influencing local economies.

A titled Igbo woman, Ndoni, Igboland [present day northern Rivers State, Nigeria]. Postcard from the turn of the 20th century.

Etymology:

- Origin: Mgbeké originates from Igbo people of Southeastern Nigeria.
- Meaning: Mgbeké is a compound word: Mgbé: Means time, period,

or “when”.

- Eke: One of the four market days, it is the first day among the four igbo market days (Eke, Orie, Afor, Nkwo) in the Igbo calendar.
- Combined: It directly translates to “Time of Eke” or “When Eke (born)”. Igbo people attend compulsory registration in Lagos, Nigeria, 29th August 1967. The Federal Government has ordered the compulsory registration of Igbo people in an effort to ensure the safety of the people of the Lagos State of Nigeria. (Photo by Central Photo News, Lagos, Nigeria/Keystone/Hulton Archive/Getty Images)

While colonization was ongoing and there was a flux of identity crisis, between people becoming increasingly westernized and a lot of people choosing to cling onto their roots, names just like any other idiosyncrasies of any culture, Mgbeke got caught up in the clash. The name “mgbeke “ became a victim of the face off between the influence of westernization and the struggling defence of a challenged culture, those who felt they were westernized upon having interaction both playful (njakiri) and heated (iko onu) with people whom they perceived less exposed, made Mgbeke a cultural scapegoat to show classlessness of the individual they were addressing. From the use of Mgbeke in this context in intra-tribal/ethnic conversation among umunne, umunna, umuada and even cultural meetings outside alaigbo, Mgbeke made its way into the daily parlance of Nigeria but for the wrong reasons. Mgbeke came to mean an unrefined girl from alaigbo and while it has contributed to the anti-igbo rhetorics in Nigeria lingua that describes everything Igbotic as local and aspirational, it goes on to show the influence of igbo language on nigerian lingua, not just enriching it but telling stories of everyday people and giving life to our everyday interactions.

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Nzubechi is a history, political enthusiast who dabbles into social commentary once in a while



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