

CHI: IN SEARCH FOR AN EXPLANATORY PRINCIPLE FOR THE INTERRELATEDNESS OF IGWEBUIKE PHILOSOPHY

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Executive Summary

This work is a search for the basis of intersubjectivity in the African worldview conceptualized in Igwebuike philosophy. This piece found the basis of intersubjectivity of the African reality in Chi, which carries a variety of meanings among the Igbo-African people. However, the nuance of Chi that is employed here is that which understands it as the divinity in every human person or the spark of the divine in created things. It understands Chi as the thumb print or mark of Chukwu in each and every one of us that places the other in a special place in relation to the self. This piece revealed that although Chi is a religious reality, it is conservative of the social institutions of the Igbo-African people. If I and the other have the thumb print of the same Chukwu, the spark of the Supreme Being, it then means that we relate in a special way that goes deeper than our individualities. This work, therefore, argued that our rootedness in Chukwu through Chi is what makes the other a part of me. To treat the other in a way that is undeserving of the divine mark in him or her not only affects the person(s), but the ontological structure to which I also belong and, thus, myself. The importance of Chi in this study is that the belief in Chi is as universal to the Igbo-speaking people as the belief in Chukwu, and it

is a fundamental and outstanding characteristic of Igbo social structure and collective temperament. For the purpose of this study, the Igwebuiké holistic approach of inquiry was adopted. Chi provides a central and satisfying framework for the understanding of the interrelatedness and individuality of the Igbo-African reality.

Keywords: Chi, Igwebuiké, Philosophy, Intersubjectivity, Igbo-African, Explanatory Principle

Introduction

There are several spiritual and corporal elements in Igbo-African world that are central to the Igbo-African belief and actions. *Chi* is one of these elements, and occupies a very important place in the understanding of the Igbo-speaking African people. It remains one of those elements that the Igbo employ to explain or picture the world around them. No wonder, Chukwukere (1980) avers that:

The ideas, assumptions, beliefs and actions relating to the metaphysical conception point to its centrality in Igbo worldview and philosophy in general. Of particular interest here are the Igbo people's notions and expressions concerning human personality and the very broad theory of causation (p. 1).

Chi, therefore, is at the heart of the puzzle of human origin, social life and the principles of operations of social institutions that ensure continuity and group or individual identity. The operation of relations within the Igbo-African world, within the context of *Chi*, points to the reality that relationship in the Igbo world is both with and between the corporal and in-corporal worlds. It is this connection of *Chi* with relationships within the Igbo world that makes it a fundamental element in the understanding of the dynamics of inter-subjectivity in *Igwebuiké* philosophy, as *Igwebuiké* philosophy is a philosophy of interrelatedness, inter-subjectivity, complementarity and solidarity.

This work argues that *Chi* is the foundation or basis for the interaction or relationships in the Igbo-African universe. And its importance in this study is deepened by the fact that the belief in *Chi* is as universal to the Igbo-speaking people as the belief in *Chukwu*. This piece will, therefore, study the concept of *Chi* and its understandings in Igbo thought. This would be followed by a sociological interpretation of the concept, *Chi*, guided by the focal interest of this paper, which is the search for the fundamental and outstanding base of the Igbo social structure and collective temperament.

Theoretical Framework

Durkheim (1915) posits that: “The first systems of representations with which men have pictured to themselves the world and themselves were of religious origin. There is no religion that is not a cosmology at the same time that it is a speculation upon divine things”(p. 21). In this, Durkheim argues for a very strong relationship between religious truths or perspectives and social life of people, that is, for an eminently social character of religion.

The germ of Durkheim’s theory is that the religious beliefs and practices of people reflect their social structure. This perspective, notwithstanding, Evans-Pritchard (1956) and Goody (1961) have argued further on this theory that not all aspects of religion are tightly bound to social organizations. Some aspects can only be loosely linked and, thus, operate as semi-independent variables.

It is within this context that *Chi*, which is a religious reality or element, is employed to understand the foundations of the Igbo-African social or relational character of reality. In this sense, *Chi* becomes a religious symbol with accumulated meanings or intentions which sometimes contradict one another. And as a symbol, within the context of hermeneutics, it expresses a meaning or meanings, however, with a basic meaning always connected. It is in this regard that etymologically, an understanding of hermeneutics suggests a sacred origin, being derived from the Greek word “hermeneia,” which is related to the name of the god, Hermes, and the verb,

“hermeneuein”, which means: to express/expression; to explain/explanation and to translate/ translation. All the three shades of meaning are rendered in English by - to interpret/interpretation, which, in general, means “bring to understanding” (Kanu, 2015). Thus, Oguejiofor (2009) holds that:

Hermeneutics involves bringing an inner meaning into the open. It entails making explicit what is implicit. It is thus a quest for meaning, one’s own meaning in one’s life, society and milieu- in short, in the totality of one’s universe, which could be said to be constituted by one’s cultural symbols. (p. 80).

As a theory of interpretation, it goes back to ancient Greek philosophy, when Plato employed the term to differentiate between religious knowledge, that which has been revealed, and *Sophia*, which is knowledge of truth-value of utterance. During the Medieval and Renaissance ages, it emerged in relation to the scriptures, precisely, its interpretation. During this period, Gadamer (1976), Heidegger (1978) and Dilthey (1996) observe that Saint Augustine introduced the universal claim of hermeneutics and argue that interpretation of Scripture involves a deeper, existential level of self-understanding. These, notwithstanding, within the context of this study, *Chi* as a religious symbol expresses profound meanings about the spiritual world which helps in the interpretation of realities in the human world.

***Chi* in Igbo-African Worldview**

There are various dimensions to the use of the concept of *Chi* by the Igbo. It is in this regard that Green (1947) writes that: “It is difficult to know what the real Igbo significance of the word is” (p. 30). Achebe (1975), recognizing the subtle analytical possibilities of the concept of *Chi* which is thrown open by the fundamental abstract notions of Igbo cosmology and theology, avers that its real meaning might never be revealed, and thus, he raises questions about the concept of *Chi* without proffering answers to them, knowing full well the implications of such a response.

The exact relationship between the Supreme God (*Chukwu*), the sun and *Chi* in Igbo cosmology will probably never be (and perhaps was intended not to be) revealed. But if *Chukwu* means literally Great *Chi*, one is tempted to borrow the words of Christian dogma and speak of *Chi* as being of the same ‘substance’ and ‘proceedings’ from *Chukwu*. Or is *Chi* an infinitesimal manifestation of *Chukwu*’s infinite essence given to each of us separately... or does *Chukwu* have a separate existence as ruler over a community of *Chi*...? (p. 11)

Achebe’s position points to the fact that the concept of *Chi* is as elusive as it is enigmatic. Thus, Nwodo (2004) avers that the elusiveness and enigma involved is attributable to the fact that the concept is metaphysical in the sense of being a non-material reality. From the foregoing, it is obvious that scholars are yet unable to reach a consensus on what *Chi* actually means for the Igbo people and what its relationship with the Supreme Being exactly is. It is in this regard that this piece would discuss the different understandings of *Chi* in Igbo ontology.

a. *Chi* as the Divine Aspect of Man

Some African thinkers have interpreted *Chi* as the divine aspect of man or a spark of *Chukwu* in man. It is a spiritual being or force that every Igbo-African is believed to possess within or outside of himself/herself. This explains why it is spoken of in the possessive sense like: *Chim* (my *Chi*), *Chigi* (your *Chi*), *Chiya* (his/her *Chi*), *Chi anyi* (our *Chi*), an Igbo interjection for surprise *Chim o* (My God), etc. This also explains why every Igbo who gets married, in most instances, establishes their own *Chi* symbol for the simple reason that it is personal. It is within this context that Ilogu (1974) avers that *Chukwu* has assigned to each human person at birth a portion of divinity referred to as *Chi*. This implies that each individual has a portion of the great God. It is also within this context that Nwodo (2004) argues that *Chi* is a divine person possessed of intellect and will.

b. *Chi* as Being

Abanuka (2004) understands *Chi* as being, as opposed to non-being. He argues that as being, it has three different aspects that are nonetheless related. *Chi* is first of all the principle of identity. In this regard, *Chi* performs the metaphysical function of making a particular thing what it is other than other things, that is, one with itself and consistent with itself. Second, *Chi* makes each thing unique. Thus, Ojike (1955) and Ekennia (2003) present *Chi* as a unique life force, which each person possesses as a principle of individuation. This implies that no two persons have the same *Chi* and that no person is replaceable. This can be spoken of in terms of the principle of authenticity. Third, *Chi* as a principle of subsidiarity, meaning that *Chi* is a generative or causal principle; this is understood in terms of exercising influence over things.

c. *Chi* as our Other Identity

This perspective is linked to the understanding of *Chi* as a spark of the divine in man. This position is noticed in Achebe (1975) who understands a person's *Chi* as his other identity in spirit-land - his spirit being complementing his terrestrial human being; this is based on the perspective that nothing can stand alone, there must be another thing standing beside it. In this case, the *Chi* shadows the physical aspect of our being on earth and in fact remains a more powerful aspect of us as its influence is high. This other part of us in the spirit-land is not in opposition with our identity here in the world but complements it. *Chi* as the source of identity could be understood better from the practice of the Igbo who plant a special tree in their compound like the *ogilisi* or *oha* or make a small clay pot, filled with sand with three sticks cut from a special plant thrust jointly into the sand, and preserved as the personal *Chi* of individuals which cannot be a symbol of the *Chi* of any other person. No wonder, once the person dies, his/her *Chi* is removed. These representations are usually kept in a special place, with an altar built around it for the offering of sacrifice.

d. *Chi* as Guardian Angel

In *Things Fall Apart*, Achebe (1958) presents the Igbo *Chi* as guardian angel. When Okonkwo, the protagonist of the novel, shot at Ekwefi (one of his wives) and missed, Chielo said: “Your *Chi* is very much awake my friend”. In another scene, when Abame was attacked by the avenging band of white men, Obierika described the incident, thus: “Everybody was killed, except the old and the sick who were at home and a handful of men and women whose *Chi* were wide awake and brought them out of that market”. As such, a person’s *Chi* could be asleep or awake, expressed in the particular event in a person’s life. When a bad thing happens, it is said that the person’s *Chi* is asleep, and when something good happens, it is said that a person’s *Chi* is awake. There were other times that a *Chi* was considered good or bad. When a good thing happens to a person, it is said that he has a good *Chi* and when something bad happens, it is said that the person has a bad *Chi*.

e. *Chi* as the Determiner of Destiny

Describing *Chi* as a spark of the divine in man, Okere (1971) posits that it is through the gift of the *Chi* that the Supreme God determines the destiny of each person. Once the Supreme has determined a person’s destiny through his *Chi*, it cannot be changed. In *Things Fall Apart*, Achebe (1958) describes Okonkwo as “a man whose *Chi* said nay despite his own affirmation”. It is in this regard that one can understand Okonkwo’s tragic fate as the result of a problematic *chi*—a thought that occurs to Okonkwo at several points in the novel. It was the belief at the time, as Achebe narrates in Chapter 14, a “man could not rise beyond the destiny of his *chi*.” However, there is another understanding of *Chi* that conflicts with this definition. In Chapter 4, the narrator relates, according to an Igbo proverb, that “when a man says yes his *chi* says yes also.” According to this understanding, individuals can alter their destinies. In this case, Okonkwo seems either more or less responsible for his own tragic death. This, notwithstanding, the first definition explains why the Igbo would say that:

- a. No matter how many divinities sit to plot a man's ruin, if his *Chi* does not affirm it, their plans will come to nothing.

- b. Even water gets stuck inbetween the teeth of the person with a bad *Chi*.
- c. The antelope learns to climb the day the person with a bad *Chi* goes hunting.
- d. A person whose efforts at improving his fortunes are frustrated by his *Chi* should be absolved from blame.
- e. A person with a bad *Chi* cut down an Iroko tree, but it got suspended on a spear grass.

It is in this regard that Nwodo (2004) avers that the *Chi* in Igbo cosmology enforces throughout an individual's life the spoken bond into which he willingly enters at his creation. For instance, Unoka, the Father of Okonkwo in *Things Fall Apart*, is said to have a bad *chi* because evil fortune followed him to his death. Ekwefi, Okonkwo's second wife, is also said to have a bad *chi* because she has given birth to many children, but only one has survived. Also, Okonkwo, exiled from the clan and disappointed that his son has joined forces with the white missionaries, also blames his *Chi*, believing that his *Chi* is not made for great things.

Okoro (2008) explains this further through the spectrum of Igbo application of *Chi*. When the Igbo says: *Chi m*, it mean 'my fate', 'my destiny', 'my portion'. In another case, *Chi ojo*, mean 'bad fate', 'bad destiny'. In this latter sense, *Chi* becomes destiny itself, rather than just the determiner of destiny.

***Chi* as a Basis for *Igwebuiké* Philosophy of Interrelatedness**

Igwebuiké is a unifying concept of African thought, especially that aspect concerning the human person's conception of the spiritual and material universe in which he/she lives. It is an explanatory theory or principle that interprets the puzzle of our complex relationship with the non-corporal world and the human social life, that is, major social institutions that ensure social continuity and group identity, and further underpins the epistemological manifestations of the human person's universe (Kanu, 2016a;2017a). Taken from its etymology from the Igbo words (*Igwe*: number; *bu*: is; *Ike*: power), literally

meaning that ‘number is power’, it points to a philosophical nuance of ‘one heart and one mind’, a spirit of complementarity, solidarity and interrelatedness that characterizes the African reality (Kanu, 2014;2015;2016b; 2017b). The basic question being attended to in this section of this work is: what is the basis of this inter-subjectivity, interrelatedness, solidarity or complementarity of reality within the African universe? It is within this context that this piece argues that *Chi* is the basis of this complementarity or inter-subjectivity or interrelatedness of reality in the African universe.

Igwebuike, as a perspective, holds that, in spite of the contrariety of reality, there is something common to everything. It understands every individual reality as part and completion of the whole, and thus, there is a unity in the midst of diversity (Kanu, 2017c; 2018; 2019). Although *Chi* provides for the individuation, identity and contrariety of being, it is also the basis for the unity of being. How is this possible? *Chi*, being a ‘thumb print’ of *Chukwu* in all that He has made, provides a reason for the unity of being, and a basis for interaction and collaboration. Thus, the strong individualistic strain, which *Chi* provides in the theory of personality, does not contradict the emphasis on the overriding value of unity in diverse human situations. *Chi*, therefore, is not only a basis for identity in Igbo ontology; it is also a basis for unity - a common gift or platform for communal relations. This is evident in the way that the Igbo greet one another within the context of the word, *Chi: Ibo Chi*, a greeting that reflects a rhetorical, informative and questioning expectancy reports from the individuals that are in this relational (greetings) exchange; *Isa Chi*, a greeting that reflects also the same rhetorical, informative and questioning expectancy reports from both individuals engaged in the same relational exchange; *Ifo Chi*, a greeting that reflects the same rhetorical, informative and questioning expectancy from the dialoguing individuals.

The nuance of *Chi*, employed in this work to drive the understanding of the unity of reality, is that which understands it as the divinity in every human person or the spark of the divine in created things. It is

this *Chi*, which is a thumb print or mark of *Chukwu* in each and every one of us that places the other in a special place in relation to the self. If I and the other have the thumb print of the same *Chukwu*, the spark of the Supreme being, it then means that we relate in a special way that goes deeper than our individualities. Our rootedness in *Chukwu* is what makes the other a part of me. To treat the other in a way that is undeserving of the divine mark in him/her not only affects the persons but the ontological structure to which I also belong, and, therefore, myself as well.

Conclusion

This work has studied the concept of *Chi* and its implications for inter-subjectivity in the African universe. The concept of *Chi* has been used in various capacities by the Igbo; first, in the capacity of the Supreme Being, and as a guardian angel or a spiritual being or force which every person possess, among other perspectives. Its essence lies in the commonest everyday expression of the word, *Chi*; verbally, in possessive singular adjectival form: *Chim* (my *Chi*), *Chigi* (your *Chi*), *Chiya* (his/her *Chi*), *Chi anyi* (our *Chi*), an Igbo interjection for surprise *Chim o* (My God) or a common curse among the Igbo *Chi ne'ke kpo gi oku* (May God burn you). However, the concept of *Chi* that has helped in determining the basis of inter-subjectivity in the African universe is the understanding of *Chi* as a spark or portion of the Supreme Being in each and every human person. This creates a ground for relationships or connection between beings, and explains the necessity of solidarity and complementarity in the African universe.

Worthy of note is that, while the concept of *Chi* helps in explaining the basis of relationships or inter-subjectivity in the African universe, it also serves as a foundation of the Igbo-African philosopher's intellectual effort to make sense of the bewildering diversities of the human personality, experiences and cosmic phenomena, and, thus, an explanation for the dominant individualizing principle in the Igbo social order. While *Chi* provides an explanation for the interrelatedness of reality and the individuation of reality at the same time, it can be said to be a theory both of causation and human

personality in the wider context of the Igbo-African cosmology. Thus, it serves as a framework within which the Igbo-Africans can boldly speculate, interpret or understand the world around them.

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