

THE IGBO CONCEPT OF CHI: THE DESTINY SPIRIT

Nkem L. Emeghara♦

1. Introduction

Among the philosophical concepts of the Igbos of Nigeria, *Chi* is, perhaps, the most important and attractive one. This is because of the following reasons:

Firstly, it is a concept, which can hardly be neglected by any enlightened mind as it affects the totality of a human being.

Secondly, it appears to be a universal concept. Most, if not every race, has a counterpart of *Chi*, which readily suggests itself whenever the Igbo concept of *Chi* is expressed. For example, it has been likened to the Egyptian *Ka*, which is regarded as the image or genius of a person, an ancestral aspect, which acts as a guide and protector of people during their lifetime¹. It has also been likened to the Hebrew *ruach* which the Hebrews believed would enable the anointed servant to fulfil his destiny.² Igbo *Chi* can also be compared to the Chinese concept of *Ch'i*.³

♦ Dr. Nkem L. Emeghara, lecturer of History and Comparative Phenomenology at the University of Jos, Nigeria.

¹ See C.K. Meek, *Law and Authority in a Nigerian Tribe* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1937), p.55-57.

² Isaiah 61: See the writers Ph.D Thesis titled, "Death and the Afterlife among the Ancient Hebrews and the Ngor Opala Owerri Peoples of Nigeria", (University of Jos, 1994).

³ See the article by Peter Le, on "Dancing Chi. and the Holy Spirit" in Ching Feng, *A Journal on Christianity and Chinese Religion and Culture*, vol.34, no.3 (September 1991), pp.134-153, see also the present writer's article on this comparison soon to be published.

What the writer has done in this short article is to attempt a philosophical exposition of Igbo *Chi* as destiny spirit to which no attention has been drawn. Perhaps, following the contents of this paper, more efforts would be made towards further philosophical exposition of such Igbo concepts. This attempt will help redirect attention from bland descriptions of Igbo concepts to philosophical reflections very much needed to fit into the present *Zeitgeist*.

2. What is *Chi*?

Chi has been defined by Ezekwugo as "the Destiny-spirit" believed to be an emanation of the creator which is in man."⁴ According to Ezekwugo's thesis *Chi* is the true God in Igbo Religion. By his definition the true God in Igbo religion is "Destiny-spirit". He, however, does not seem to have made up his mind whether Chiukwu (God) is the same as *Chi*. Metuh seems to agree with Meek that *Chi* is a genius or spirit-double which is associated with a man's personality. He, however, failed to bring out clearly what his own definition of *Chi* is in his book *African Religions in Western Conceptual Schemes*, 1991.

In his article on "African Humanism..." Metuh regards *Chi* as Destiny-spirit thereby echoing Ezekwugo's opinion.⁵

It is the opinion of this article that philosophically speaking, *Chi* is a concept which embraces many things. *Chi* can be subjected to materialistic, idealistic, naturalistic, sociological and metaphysical ideas, yet it can function as a unifying factor, which at the same time manifests itself in other fundamental principles or aspects of man.

⁴ C. Ezekwugo, *Chi, The True God in Igbo Religion*, unpublished thesis, University of Innsbruck, 1973, p.234.

⁵ E.I. Metuh, *African Religions in Western Conceptual Schemes: The Problems of interpretation* (Jos, Nigeria: IMICO Press, 1991), pp. 11ff; Meek, *Law and Authority*, op.cit. p.57. See also E.I. Metuh, "African Humanism. A Cultural Factor in the Development of the Nigerian Personality" in *Nigerian Cultural Heritage*, E.I. Metuh and O. Ojoade (eds) (Jos, Nigeria: IMICO Press, 1990) p.116 of Ezekwugo, "Chi, The True God", 1973 p.234 Metuh repeats the same opinion in his book *Comparative Studies of African Traditional Religions* (Onitsha: Nigeria: IMICO Press, 1992), p.178f.

This makes it the most important and most attractive aspect of a human being. It could connote 'destiny' yet it is not to be understood in the sense of the English term 'predestination'. It could connote 'god'. Yet it is not to be equated with *Chiukwu*, God almighty, who gives it to man. It could connote energy, yet it is not physical energy. *Chi* could be regarded as 'Blood-spirit'. *Chi* could be regarded as a synonym for *Eke*, yet it is different from *Eke* which Igbo-scholars regard as an ancestral emanation. *Chi* is transcendent, yet immanent.

3. *Chi* as Metaphysical and Transcendent

Chi is associated with the great God (*Chiukwu*). It is conceived as an emanation of *Chiukwu* and therefore functions as such' and for achieving *Chiukwu's* purpose in creation. *Chi* is thus in existence in the created order, in the practical world. *Chi*, in this sense, could be said to maintain the orderliness to which the world is destined. Because *Chiukwu* (God almighty) is transcendent, *Chi*, which is an emanation, of him is also transcendent.

Thus *Chi* participates in the ground of existence and the production of all things. This is, perhaps, one of the reasons why Ezekwugo regarded it as "the true God in Igbo Religion". It is also the unifying ground for all that exists in the universe, notably plants, animals, birds, humans; and also all the visible and invisible realms of life. The Igbo say that by the word *Chikere*, meaning, "it is *Chi* that created/creates", and *Chidomara*, meaning, "It is *Chi* that has preserved (it or me or him or us etc)"; The *nine shi na chi*: "Everything depends, or, is made, or is arranged by *Chi*". The *onye Ka Chi*, means "who is greater than *Chi*".

The Igbo used such expressions which present *Chi* as transcendent and metaphysical not because *Chi* is equal to *Chiukwu*, but because *Chi*, as an emanation of *Chiukwu*, possesses the same characteristics as its source. The Igbo still distinguishes *Chiukwu* (The Great God) from *Chi*, which is his 'emanation'.

4. *Chi* as Productive Force

Everything in the world has its own *Chi* so long as it has a purpose to achieve for which it exists. *Chi* is, therefore, the dynamic power behind all things and everything works towards the purpose for which its *Chi* directs it. *Chi* is thus self-directing, self-sufficient, and self-productive. It is the dynamic power that produces life, and liveliness in all things. It is *Chi* that produces talents in man. It is *Chi* that provides wealth, wisdom, giftedness, intelligence, productivity of crops and fertility in man. It is *Chi* that makes a man handsome or ugly, short or tall, big or small. A tall, handsome, intelligent, and progressive man would be described as: *Onye Chiya Keziri ekezi*: The one whose *Chi* created him very well (highly endowed with good qualities). (A person is described as *onye Chiloma*, if he/she is successful in all fields. A person could be described as *onye chi ojoo*, if he/she is a failure. Whichever is the case, *Chi* is involved because *Chi* is regarded as the productive force in all this life.

5. *Chi* as the Agent of Morality

It is, perhaps, especially in the human person that morality, emotions, desires are expressed. Obedience, disobedience, volition and faith are also associated with the human person only. That *Chi* controls these is expressed when a person fails to live up to expectations continually in the community, as if they were destined to be bad. In such a situation the critics of the person are often asked: "Iwu chi ya?" Are you his *Chi*? This question is usually used to show that the ultimate responsible factor in their behaviour is the *Chi* of that person. This statement does not mean that *Chi* encourages an evil life. It is rather a way the Igbo expresses his empathy with his fellow brother. It is presumed that such a miscreant must have tried to be better, but for one reason or the other keeps failing. Nobody is useless so long as the person has made visible efforts. Nobody is naturally a miscreant or nuisance unless some evil forces are involved in misdirecting the person. When such is the case, the person should be encouraged and not discarded. Such a person may need to appease his *Chi* by setting up his *Chi's* shrine where

offerings are made. A medicine man may be invited or visited to intervene.

Failure in a life situation (e.g. business, marriage etc) is easily regarded to be sometimes due to direct consequences of an evil deed the concerned person has committed, and which gave room for the person's enemies to infiltrate into their life and achievements. Sometimes it is ascribed to the *Chi* of the person, which fails to operate in favour of him/her. Each case may require offering of sacrifices to the person's *Chi* appropriately to make it intervene in the matter. Sometimes the larger community assists in seeking for a solution to a person's predicament. And when all efforts fail to change the situation, everyone concludes that the person's *Chi* has such a failure as the person's package in life. The evil life could even be regarded as a person's package. This does not mean that a person should resign their fate to their *Chi*. They are expected to keep making efforts to change the situation of things, because, it is possible that the *Chi* might have allowed such failures for a season in order to convey some lessons to them. In fact, the community believes that the *Chi* of a person can always respond positively to change a bad situation if the person concerned exercises strong faith in their *Chi*. This is why Igbo people say: *Onye Kwe Chi ya e kwe*: "If a person says Yes! That person's *Chi* will say Yes!" It is necessary to note that the above statement is a statement of faith and not an absolute command, for the Igbo still believes that *Chi Ka*: "*Chi* is the greatest". And so *Chi* has the final say in all matters. Whenever *Chi* eventually responds to the cry of the penitent positively, the Igbo express their gratitude by saying *Onye di ka chi*: "who is like unto *Chi*". This statement is not to be understood as saying the same thing as *Chika*; rather, it expresses the joy and gratefulness associated with *Chi*'s mercy, love, compassion and providential care. It expresses the fact that *Chi* has no rival on earth in such matters, as rescuing the oppressed and providing help for the helpless in spite of all odds. *Chika* expresses the transcendence of *Chi* above all things, above all of creation.

Thus, we see that *Chi* is involved in an Igbo world-affirming attitude. It is involved in their morality, business, individual and

community prosperity. The Igbo say that 'where a person falls is where his *Chi* pulls him down'.

6. *Chi* and the Afterlife

It is commonly said by Igbo scholars that when a person dies their *Chi* go before *Chuikwu* for judgment. However, interviews conducted by the writer seem to point to something different. Most of the writer-interviewees indicated that the judgement of an individual is taken for granted. It begins while the person is alive. The totality of a person's actions, deeds and thoughts determine how old he or she lives and how successful a person's *Chi* operates. All these involve faith in one's *Chi* and the desire to live well, to please the gods and live at peace with other members of the community and keeping to the *Omenala*, i.e. traditions of the land.

This means that a person's *Chi* does not undergo judgement for reward or punishment before *Chuikwu*. Rather, it goes to report to *Chi Ukwu* all that had transpired in the life of the person. A person joins the ancestral realm because they co-operated with their *Chi* rather than being disruptive of its plans for them.

The thinking is perhaps that, since *Chi* came from heaven, it seeks to appropriate the way of heaven in the life of the person in whom it has materialized, and for the benefit of that person. If this is disrupted by the person's carelessness, the *Chi* will not be held responsible. Rather, the person would need another opportunity, either with the same *Chi* or with another *Chi*. A person may be given as many chances as possible until the person works in complete harmony with their *Chi*. At this stage, such a person may enter into the divine realm, thereby scaling above the status of an ancestor. This is, perhaps, why the Igbo says, *Uwa ma uwa Asa*: "Oh my life to the seventh stage" which could be understood to express the innate desire of every person to be perfected. "Seven" in Igbo connotes completeness or perfection. When the divine stage is attained reincarnation ends. This shows that the Igbo sees all of life to be geared towards that divine status. It is *Chi* that works a person's life towards attaining such a status.

7. The Importance of Igbo Concept of *Chi* to the Understanding of Man

The Igbo concept of *Chi* contributes to the view that humans are beings, who operate through the aid of a force outside them, which is, yet, part of him. It is outside a person in that its origin is not the material man. It is outside man in that its origin is not the material man. It occupies and energises him to enable him, to achieve the will of his maker. All that man is required to do is to co-operate with his *Chi*, if he/she must fulfil his/her maker's wish for him.

Since the wish of man's maker is all good for the existence and success of man on earth, it behoves man to accept this wish as the best for him, rather than all the striving and fightings that go on within and without of him. A situation that has put man into greater bondage to the material allurements of this life and its regrettable consequences.

The Igbo concept of *Chi* is not altogether contrary to the Christian philosophy of the Spirit, which, though Christian in nature and essence, has its origin outside the Christian milieu. The origin of the Holy Spirit is the almighty creator (God). It is the function of the Holy Spirit to enable the Christian to live out his destiny on earth as one chosen by God. All a Christian is required to do is to co-operate with the dictates of the Holy Spirit who counsels, "Peace be still". And this gives the assurance of God's mercy and providence, just as the Igbo *Chi* does.

BOOK REVIEW

Amaladoss, Michael, S.J., *Life in Freedom: Liberation Theologies from Asia*, Anand, Gujarat: Gujarat Sahitya Prakash, 1997, pp. 274, Rs.90; \$ 10.

Michael Amaladoss SJ is well known for his valuable and scholarly contributions in missiological and interreligious studies. *Life in Freedom* is his latest book, which is a survey of Liberation Theologies from Asia. The chapters of this book were originally lectures he delivered at *Lumen Vitae*, the International Catechetical Institute in Brussels, Belgium in 1993.

The book is divided into two parts. The first part introduces the various Liberation Movements and theologies in Asia, such as, the Minjung Theology of Korea, the Theology of Struggle in the Philippines, the Dalit Theology of India, and the Feminist and Ecological Movements and corresponding theological reflections. Minjung Theology emerged in Korea in the 1970s quite independent of the Latin American Liberation Theology. Minjung means the oppressed people. In South Korea during the dictatorship of Park Chong-hee, who was supported by the military and the secret service, the oppressed Christian masses led by their pastors and teachers of Universities, started a movement of resistance and liberation. They found theological resources in Christian faith, in the Scriptures and in their own history and tribal traditions to support their struggles for justice. Their reflections gave birth to Minjung Theology. A similar movement and theological reflections took place in the Philippines during the reign of President Marcos. It was the theological reflections of people who were actually struggling and it is known as "Theology of Struggle" which was in fact influenced by the Latin American Liberation Theology.

The Dalit Theology of India is another version of Liberation Theology. Strictly speaking the "Dalits" are not included among the traditional four castes; they are outcasts, the fifth caste. The Dalit population in India is about 125 million. They are oppressed, segregated and discriminated by the higher castes. Today they are organized and they have started a movement of liberation, and the Christian Dalits are developing a Dalit Theology. For them the Christian God is a Dalit God as seen in the Old Testament and in the New Testament, and Jesus also was a Dalit who lived with the poor and the marginalized and who was crucified like a slave outside the gates of Jerusalem. The Church has to be a counter-cultural movement and the sign of a new humanity.

The first part is concluded with introducing the different Feminist and Ecological Movements in Asia, which are also liberation movements. In today's world both women and nature, which are really the sources of life, are similarly exploited by men as objects of their greed and lust. We need a new society where the complementarity of men and women, and humans and nature, must be the guiding principle.

In the second part of the book the author examines the liberative sources of Asian religions like Hinduism, Buddhism, Christianity and Islam by way of introducing the thoughts and liberation projects of some theologians who belong to these religions. From Hinduism, Mahatma Gandhi, Swami Agnivesh, and Periyar or E.V.Ramaswamy are