

## THE AMBIVALENCE OF THE CHI PRINCIPLE IN IGBO THOUGHT: A GROUND FOR RECONCILING THE IRRECONCILABLE

**Onah Oliver**

Department of philosophy  
University of Nigeria Nsukka  
[ozemoson@yahoo.com](mailto:ozemoson@yahoo.com)

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### **Abstract**

*This study argues that the concept of chi is pivotal to an understanding of the Igbo world. In this connection, an understanding of the place and role of chi in Igbo thought is basic to any exploration of the world of the Igbo. However, as basic as this concept is deemed in the Igbo ontology, it is an ambivalent and complex concept. The senses of chi range from a literal identification with divinity to a virtually mundane conception. As a principle of duality, the chi principle effects a harmony of seemingly contradictory perceptions of, and attitudes to, reality. Using mainly the analytic method, this study concludes that the ambivalence of the chi principle opens up possibilities for the individual such that whether you believe you can or that you cannot, you are right. Essentially, the chi principle apparently effects a reconciliation of freedom and determinism in the Igbo ontology.*

**Keywords:** Chi, Ambivalence, Igbo, Principle

### **Introduction**

One pervasive concept that has been deemed necessary in the understanding of the Igbo worldview is the concept of *chi*. *Chi* is arguably one of the most influential concepts in the Igbo ontology. It is believed to play a critical and central role in the life and fortunes of the individual among the Igbo. In this regard, many scholars of the Igbo world have attempted to make sense of this principle. As a result, various notions of *chi* have been presented by various scholars as representative of the Igbo conception of the *chi* principle. Some of them are apparently contradictory while some appear complementary. While some introduce a manifestly Christian outlook to the concept, others divest it of any Christian theological outlook, vesting it instead with the creative powers reserved by Christian theology to the Supreme God. Our interest in this study is to determine the role the Igbo conception of the *chi* principle plays in the life of the Igbo person as he strives to develop himself and his society. Does *chi* give the individual an absolute freehand to operate or is his relationship with his *chi* and

his environment determined? The answer to this question will lead this study to establish the developmental implications of the Igbo conception of *chi*.

### Conceptual Clarification

**Chi.** Generally speaking, *chi* is understood as a personal god with which each individual has a special relationship. While some scholars view *chi* as a person's double maintaining a separate existence in another realm (Achebe, 1975), others tend to present *chi* as a guardian angel or the divine spark in man (Adibe, 2009; Abanuka, 2004). People use a variety of words and phrases to translate *chi* because the concept plays multiple roles in people's thought and in their lives (Nwodo, 2004). Various divergent views about *chi* will be explored in this study.

**Ambivalence.** This refers to duality in the conception and operation of *chi*. The Merriam-Webster Collegiate Dictionary defines ambivalence as follows: (1) Simultaneous and contradictory attitudes or feelings (as attraction and repulsion) toward an object, person, or action (2a) Continual fluctuation (as between one thing and its opposite) (2b) Uncertainty as to which approach to follow. With regard to these definitions, the major operational word in the understanding of ambivalence as it relates to the Igbo conception of *chi* is fluctuation. The Igbo notion of *chi* fluctuates between fatalism and freedom.

**Self-actualization.** As used in this study, it refers to the realization of one's full potentials. This is possible through self-knowledge and knowledge of the operational principles of reality that enables a person relate more meaningfully with his environment.

**Development** simply implies improvement. Keita (2011) sees the term development as an "expansion by a process of growth' or 'growth and differentiation of some entity along lines natural to its kind.'" Development generally involves positive transformation or change often measured qualitatively as against simple growth understood as quantitative increase. Growth and development apply properly to living things. However, the ideas now have application in the study of social and other phenomena and entities. In this connection we talk of national development as the positive transformation in the social and physical infrastructure of a given nation.

## Various Notions of Chi

In the Igbo worldview the concept of *chi* has a unique and central place. This concept also has dual meanings, namely "*chi*" variously translated as "god, guardian angel, personal spirit, soul, spirit-double, etc" and "*chi*" as day or daylight (Nwodo, 2004). In this study we are concerned with the first sense of *chi*. This notion of *chi* plays a central role in the life of the Igbo person and his conception of reality. In fact, for Abanuka (2004), "the Igbo belief system on *chi* principle touches on all that make Igbo human person what he/she is." The centrality of this concept seems to arise from the fact that the idea of *chi* is closely related to the idea of the Supreme Being. However, important and central as this concept may be, 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. This is probably because, as Achebe (1975) suggests, the concept of *chi* is as elusive as it is enigmatic. The elusiveness and enigma involved is attributable to the fact that the concept is metaphysical in the sense of being a non-material reality (Nwodo, 2004). Consequently, *chi* is different things to different people. Taken together, these various views combine to give a sense of *chi* in the Igbo cosmology. Let us explore some of these perceptions of *chi* among the Igbo.

### Chi as Reality

From the perspective of Abanuka (2004), one possible understanding of *chi* is *chi* as reality. *Chi* in this sense is a being as opposed to non-being. As a being, *chi* 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 stand out as itself and not another thing. Secondly, *chi* makes each thing unique. It goes without saying that if a thing is itself and not another thing, then it is unique. Hence, the first and the second aspects of *chi* are closely related. *Chi* in this sense is then thought to be a principle of authenticity (Abanuka, 2004). The third aspect of *chi* presented by Abanuka is *chi* as a principle of subsidiarity, according to which *chi* is a generative or causal principle, understood not narrowly in terms of procreation or regeneration but more in terms of exercising influence over things.

Chi as reality would also be the divine aspect of man. Abanuka (2004) appears to affirm this when he submits that "the reality (*chi*) of the individual is, in essence, divine." Ilogu (1974) is equally in agreement when he opines that Chi-ukwu, the great God is believed to be the author of life, but he assigns to each man at birth a portion of divinity referred to as *chi*. For him, it is from this fact that each

individual has a portion of the great God known as *chi* that the name *Chi-ukwu* (great God) is derived. In this line of thought, Nwodo (2004) affirms that "*chi* is a divine person possessed of intellect and will." Similarly, for Okere (1971), "it is the supreme God shared by each individual but more specifically in his aspect as giver and author of destiny." From the above we can confidently infer that for the Igbo, *chi* is a divine principle operating in the life of each individual person for good or for bad.

### **Chi as a Principle of Duality**

Achebe (1975) considers the notion of *chi* against the background of the Igbo worldview which operates on the principle of duality: *ife kwuru ife akwudebe ya* (nothing stands alone by itself). In this regard he maintains that "we may visualize a person's *chi* as his other identity in spirit-land - his spirit being complementing his terrestrial human being; for nothing can stand alone, there must be another thing standing beside it." In this connection, *chi* is a person's representative in the spirit world such that as a man lives in this physical world, his *chi* shadows him from the spirit world. Achebe would even consider the individual living in the physical as the weaker half of the duality, and the *chi* the more powerful half that has a decisive influence on the life of the individual. The principle of duality in Igbo thought is seen by Nwodo (2004) not as a principle of opposition as conceived of in philosophical dualism. It serves rather as "an antidote to absolutism and all forms of 'extremism, fanaticism and obsession.'" It represents a metaphysical fluidity. And this too is realized in the idea of *chi*. For among various attributes of *chi*, Adibe (2009) notes that *chi* is ambivalent, that is both good and bad. Hence, whatever lot that befalls a person could be attributed to his *chi*.

### **Chi as Guardian Spirit/angel**

The Igbo also visualize *chi* as a person's guardian angel who constantly watches over the individual. By a manner of speaking, they also seem to suggest that a person's *chi* can doze off in some instances. Achebe (1958) very well portrays the Igbo conception of *chi* as guardian angel. He presents a scenario where Okonkwo, the protagonist of *Things Fall Apart*, shot at one of his wives, Ekwefi and missed. The following words are put into Chielo's mouth: "your *chi* is very much awake my friend." And 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" (Achebe,

1958). One whose *chi* is thus wide awake and dutiful in protecting one from evil is deemed to have a good *chi*. His *chi* is also described as being at home (*chi ya no n'ulo*). The protective power and influence of a person's *chi* over him or her is attested by the Igbo proverb, *chi onye adighi n'izu onwu anaghi egbu ya* (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).

But *chi* could doze off as it were and fail to avert the impending doom for the ward. One who so experiences a disappointment or ill-luck is said to have a bad *chi* (*ajo chi*). This is because a good *chi* should be up and doing in averting calamities for the individual ward.

### **Chi as the Allocator of Destiny**

Closely related to the above conception of *chi* is also the notion of *chi* as allocator of destiny. Madu (1995) sees destiny as the belief that every individual has a unique life packed with a series of good and bad fortunes by *chi*. This package is supposedly prepared before the person comes into this world. The person's *chi* is meant then to monitor and oversee the unfolding of the package. Accordingly, "Chi in Igbo cosmology performs the function destiny. Chi enforces throughout an individual's life the spoken bond into which he willingly enters at his creation (Nwodo, 2004).

According to Okoro (2008), "the spectrum of Igbo application of the *chi* reveals that it is used to denote destiny. This is shown thus in *chi m* - my fate, my destiny, my portion; *chi ojo* - bad fate, bad destiny. Hence, *chi* is by implication both destiny and dispenser of destiny." In this connection, *onye ajo chi* may be understood not just as one whose *chi* as guardian spirit appears negligent on one occasion, but one whose *chi* has allocated a continuous stream of misfortune and failure. A bad *chi* creates bad fortunes for its ward such that no matter how hard the individual works at improving his lots, all his efforts come to nothing. Achebe (1958) also portrays this in *Things Fall Apart* when he describes Okonkwo as "a man whose *chi* said nay despite his own affirmation."

There are a number of proverbs that are used to describe the lot of the individual with a bad *chi*: *mmiri na-afanye onye ajo chi n'eze* (even water get stuck in-between the teeth of the person with a bad *chi*); *ubochi onye ajo chi jere nta ka mgbada ji ari elu* (the antelope learns to climb the day the person with a bad *chi* goes hunting); *o mewere ma chi ekweghi si onye uta atala ya* (a person whose efforts at improving his fortunes are frustrated by *chi* should be absolved from blame); *onye ajo chi gbulu oji okolu n'ata* (a person with bad *chi* cut down an iroko tree but it got

suspended on a spear grass), *agbataghi ajo chi n'uzo oru* (a bad fortune/luck is not evaded by being early to work), to mention a few.

With regard to *chi* as the allocator of destiny Nwoga (1984) submits: "the Igbo person's experience and consciousness of transcendent power operating in his personal affairs gave rise to and is subsumed in the concept of *chi*. Around this he consolidated his expectations of life and fortune." He further avers that each person at a stage in life sets up a shrine to his or her *chi* and offers sacrifice to maintain a smooth and cordial relationship with this spirit who is in charge of their destiny. It is pertinent to note that although this destiny is negotiated before one's birth, according to the Igbo people, they also believe that one can renegotiate one's destiny. Hence the need to maintain a cordial relationship with one's *chi*.

### ***Chi* as a Principle of Uniqueness**

Part of the aspects of *chi* as reality, as opined by Abanuka above, are the principles of identity and uniqueness. Ekennia (2003) presents *chi* as "a unique life force, which each person possesses. No two persons have the same *chi*. It is regarded as the Igbo principle of individualisation.... each person is unique and irreplaceable." According to Achebe (1975), "the idea of individualism is sometimes traced to the Christian principle that God created all men and consequently everyone of them is presumed worthy in His sight. The Igbo do better than that. They postulate the concept of every man as both a unique creation and the work of a unique creator." This creator cannot be the Supreme God (Chukwu) since the Igbo do not attribute the act of creation directly to God (Nwoga, 1984; Nwodo, 2004). The creator is rather the personal god (*chi*) of each individual. This is borne out in the proverb, *ofu nne na-amu ma ofu chi adighi eke*. To buttress this view, Nwoga (1984) asserts: "the truth of Igbo language is that the *-ke* root does not refer to creation because the concept of creation, making something out of nothing, does not exist in Igbo thought. In all its known uses, the *-ke* root refers to the act of dividing and sharing." In this connection *oke* is a share, *okike* refers to the act of creating, *eke* is one who shares or divides, and *kee* means divide.

For Ojike (1955), "No one *chi* is like another because no two persons are identical. A rich man's *chi* is rich and a poor man's *chi* is poor. A man's *chi* is masculine and a woman's *chi* is feminine. A man's *chi* is equal to that man."

## Chi and Self-actualization

The idea of self actualization brings to the fore the question of ends, or the goal of life. It brings to mind such questions as, "what is the goal of life? What is the purpose for which the human being is created? Do human beings as members of a species have a common goal or does each individual have a definite goal? It is when we are able to address these questions that we can determine what self-actualization implies. Abanuka (2004) identifies the goal of life with destiny, in the sense of "the purpose or end to which anything is appointed." This destiny, the Igbo people believe, is assigned to each person or, better still, negotiated by each person before he or she is born into this world. In this connection, a person's life involves basically the unfolding of this destiny towards its full realization. Accordingly, Achebe (1975) maintains that "the Igbo believe that a man receives his gifts or talents, his character - indeed his portion in life generally - before he comes into the world. It seems there is an element of choice available to him at that point; and that his chi presides over the bargaining." Expanding on this elsewhere, he opines: "the proto-individual chooses the kind of life he will live in the world. His chi fulfils it, ... That choice and fulfilment constitute the act of creation. *Chukwu* is in the background while His agent *chi* conducts the transaction. Therefore *chi* will stay close to the individual to ensure that his life is lived in obedience to his chosen destiny (Nwodo, 2004).

Achebe believes that the choice made by the individual during that process that passes for negotiation of destiny constitutes the act of creation. And Nwodo (2004) agrees with him that it is not a once-and-for-all act but a continuous process which spans throughout the life of the individual. The individual all through life is then struggling to fulfil his destiny. Sometimes there has to be a renegotiation. This fact is attested by the expression *onye kwe chi ya ekwe* (if a person says yes his chi affirms it), which, Abanuka (2004) argues, is an acknowledgement of the difficulties involved in the quest for self-actualization. This is equally another testament to the Igbo preference for fluidity over fixity. In this sense, this preference "supersedes both the concept of destiny itself and the function of chi as it relates to destiny" (Nwodo, 2004). In essence, therefore, the goal of the individual in the Igbo thought is self-actualization achieved when a person lives out to the full the destiny assigned to him or her. The common goal of humanity comes into play when we bring in the idea of intersubjectivity involved in the Igbo Communalism. No one can live out his destiny in isolation.

## Chi and the Idea of Fatalism

Fatalism is an etymological derivative of the word "fate." It evokes an attitude of resignation to a course of event. One who thus resigns to fate is said to believe in fatalism; that what will be will be. Philosophers tend to imply by the word/concept that we are powerless to change the course of our actions or events. Fatalism can come as logical or metaphysical fatalism when it appeals to the laws of logic and metaphysics. It becomes theological fatalism when the appeal is to the existence and nature and God (Rice, 2018). The idea of fatalism presents the individual as a helpless, programmed robot, who is out in the world just to carry out the programmed task without actually applying his will and intellect. Fatalism in this sense is synonymous with determinism and opposed to freedom. In religious parlance, it is also synonymous with the notion of predestination.

The Igbo tend to present *chi*, understood as destiny, as fatalistic. The individual negotiates his destiny before birth and is driven in life solely to the fulfilment of this destiny which he is oblivious of having been involved in the negotiation. The negotiation is believed to be made prior to a person's birth, with or without his involvement, but, certainly, with the full involvement of his *chi*. According to Nwodo (2004), "Achebe tells us, 'The authority of *chi* over his protégée is unparalleled.' This, we assume, arises from the fact that '*chi* in Igbo cosmology performs the function of destiny.' ... Destiny is the stage at which the individual makes a choice of his or her life course."

For Ezekwugo (1987), *eke* plays an active part in the birth of a child. Note that *eke* has either being identified with *chi* or at least acknowledged by various Igbo scholars as a complementary principle to *chi* which is also involved in the assignment of destiny. *Eke*, according to Ezekwugo (1987), is involved in the fixing of the child's destiny which includes everything that the child will achieve in life, its sex, lifespan, status, occupation, and what have you. These choices are made by *eke* on behalf of the child. These choices are then outlined and fixed. These choices become inscribed on the child's palms as *akala-aka* which are indelible and unalterable. The saying *akala-aka enweghi nhicha* (destiny cannot be obliterated) is an affirmation of this belief. Achebe (1958) further affirms this belief when he declares about Okonkwo thus: "Clearly his personal god or *chi* was not made for great things. A man could not rise beyond the destiny of his *chi*." Achebe seems to suggest here that not only the individual, but also his *chi*, has a destiny.



It would also seem that the Igbo belief that a person can never overcome or outwit his *chi* is the moral of the folklore about the presumptuous and proud wrestler who went to wrestle his *chi*. The story is used to buttress the fact that a person's *chi* has a special and unique hold on him (Achebe, 1975).

### **Fatalism and Self-actualization**

The implication of a fatalistic conception of *chi* is quite enormous. Achebe (1975) notes in his essay on *chi* that sometimes all the efforts a person puts in his life struggle comes to nothing, thus negating the widely accepted axiom of *onye kwe chi ya ekwe*. His submission: "Quite simply the Igbo say of such a man: *Chie ekwero*, his *chi* does not agree." This, in Achebe's (1975) view is attributable to either of two causes. Either the person has a intransigent *chi* (*ajo chi*) or he is attempting too late to change an unalterable primordial bargain. What then do the Igbo expect of such a person? The fatalistic outlook will lead them to the conclusion, *omewere ma chi ekweghi, onye uta atala ya* (a person is to be absolved of any blame if his efforts are rendered fruitless by his *chi*). The person can thus resign to fate. The person may begin to float in life without any direction, especially when he does not perceive any clear justification for his misfortunes or lack of success. This disposition to *chi* and what it brings has dire consequences. It leads to the attitude of defeatism which can neither lead to self-actualization nor stir development. It should be noted that the possession of a good *chi* alone is not sufficient in the change of an individual's fortunes. Nothing changes if he folds his hands and whiles away his time. Apparently, his *chi* cannot save him from a worthless life if he refuses to struggle. This lends credence to the axiom, *onye chi na-azo na-azo onwe ya* (one has to cooperate with his *chi* for a change of fortunes).

The principle of duality in Igbo thought provides a way out of this fatalistic alley in the conception of *chi*. According to Obi (2017), "becoming interpreted as duality operational in things is articulated in the concept of *chi*... Of all forces that enhance self affirmation, *chi* stands out as principal but ambivalent determinant because it provides the unity of what appears as contrasting ends of success and failure." This then is how the principle of duality balances the Igbo conception of *chi*. For it "invalidates the popular assumption that the person with good *chi* succeeds in life while the person with bad *chi* remains a failure. What appears as ambivalence in *chi* becomes the ontological basis for personal identity because *chi* is interpreted as the metaphysical explanation for self affirmation and its contrary" (Obi, 2017). In this regard, Achebe (1975) argues that the Igbo thought

does not bestow on *chi* absolute power but moderates the hold of *chi* on the individual with the idea of *onye kwere chi ya ekwere*. Man therefore can still take some level of initiative with regard to his destiny.

Nwala (1985) affirms that the Igbo have a fatalistic conception of *chi* when he asserts that "the idea of *chi* explains the elements of luck and fortune, destiny and other unique and individual characteristics... Whatever befalls a man is '*ihe ya na chi ya kpara*' - what he settled with his *chi*, but '*onye kwe chi ya ekwe*' if a man wills, his personal *chi* wills also." *Onye kwe chi ya ekwe*, for him, is the exercise of will power and initiative which mitigates the fatalistic bent of the Igbo conception of *chi*: "one can influence one's *chi* 'by brave or good conduct ' and this knocks the horn out of fatalism in Igbo philosophy" (Nwala, 1985). Nwodo (2004) agrees with this view expressed by Nwala when, having established that the notion of *chi* in Igbo thought does not end up as an abstract idea but is a principle operative in their practical lives, he wonders how a "people can live by such an ambivalent principle." For him, it definitely affects the people's psyche with the result that the lazy ones resign to fate while the courageous take bold steps to say yes. He thus believes that destiny is renegotiable for the courageous. To this end he (2004) opines that "the Igbo are bound to think and feel that a whole lot depends on the individual. This affects considerably their attitude to life, instilling in them a sense of self-confidence and the spirit of defiance of any form of determinism except of course their own self-determination."

Abanuka (2004) quite well agrees with the position that one can improve one's lot on the journey to self-actualization by courageous action. According to him, contingent beings can realize the fullness of destiny by means of "extreme" hard work. This is the implication of *onye kwe chi ya ekwe*. Extreme hard work as remedy is seen by him to be potent even in the event of a late discovery of one's talents.

### **Implication of the Igbo Notion of *Chi* for National Development**

If it has been established that *chi* is the spark or portion of divinity in a person, then Abanuka's view that the possession of theoretical and practical intellect makes him share the divine nature is instructive. When this portion of the divine in man reaches its perfection the person is said to be self-actualized. Development is a function of a people's worldview borne out in practical life. In other words, a people's worldview can either drive or hinder development. Individuals, as parts of the whole (a nation in this case), are agents of development. The implication is that a nation would develop in proportion to the intellectual development of her people. And intellectual here must not be

confused with academics. Now only one who has theoretical and practical intellect can attain an appreciable level of self-actualization. It also appeals to reason that no one can master his environment who has not mastered himself. Thus Abanuka (2004) asserts that it is intelligence that empowers man to master his environment. This mastery of environment is development as a process and as a goal. A fatalistic outlook on life is a pointer to low intellectual development which is insufficient for self-mastery and, consequently, a hindrance to development. For any society to develop then, her affairs have to be piloted by people who have achieved high levels of self-mastery. A person who has not actualized self to an appreciable level is akin to a baby who stills clings to the back of the mother. Such a person cannot be put in charge of others for the Igbo hold that *onye akwo n'azu anaghi akwota onye ozo* (a person on another's back cannot carry someone else). Little wonder the Igbo valued titled men and entrusted to them great responsibility for the community since titles were testaments to individuals' achievement on the path to self-actualization. It then means that if any nation is to achieve substantial and sustainable development, she has to choose her leaders carefully based on their records of achievements.

## Conclusion

In the above study we have been able to establish that the Igbo conception of, and attitude to, the chi principle is ambivalent. This ambivalence calls to mind the saying, "whether you believe that you can or that you cannot, you are right." It implies then that development of oneself and one's environment, from the perspective of the Igbo, is a function of an interplay of destiny and human dogged effort. The Igbo worldview abhors absolutism even with regard to the conception of *chi*. This is affirmed by Nwodo (2004) thus: "The unmitigated singularity of absolutism in any form contradicts the fundamental principles of Igbo ontology, namely duality and movement." The thoroughbred Igbo believes that there has to be another way. In this line of thought Nwodo (2004) submits that "the Igbo love the concept of flow and dislike the idea of fixity because the latter constrains and limits their movement while the former allows them free movement in a free and yet undetermined universe." The abhorrence of the Igbo worldview for fixity always pushes the typical Igbo man to try the alternative. And a positive attitude, backed up by positive action, is a key to success.

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