

Chi Symbolism as a Potent Mirror of Igbo Indigenous Worldview

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Abstract. – This paper attempts to draw attention to the relevance of the complex network of rituals connected with *Chi*, a key concept of the Igbo-speaking people of Nigeria, in the systematic understanding of its rich symbolism and significance in the indigenous cosmology and life. It traces the provenance as well as highlights the ceremonies associated with the enshrining, the routine cult and the annual festival, known as *Ilo Chi*. Insight accruing from the ethnographic survey enables the author to conclude that *Chi*, as a central concept of Igbo religious thought, reveals an indigenous cosmology that is at once highly dynamic, essentially dualistic and fluid in nature. *Chi* is primarily a personal guiding spirit, not the Supreme Being, but rather the most powerful invisible force which the traditional Igbo believe to be acting on each individual human being. [*Nigeria, Igbo, Chi, Ritual, Symbolism*]

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Without an understanding of the nature of *Chi* one would not begin to make sense of the Igbo world-view.
(Chinua Achebe 1981: 93)

1. Introduction

The world of the traditional Igbo-speaking people of south-eastern Nigeria is remarkable for its wealth of ritual symbolism. There exists a rich variety of concepts as well as verbal, gestural, and material object forms. Whether one recalls the picture of a typical traditional compound in a rural Igbo village-setting with its sizeable collection of family shrines and array of ritual paraphernalia,

or the daily routine of a full-fledged traditional male elder punctuated intermittently with the manipulation of one ritual form or another, the general impression is clearly one of prevalence of symbolism in Igbo life. I shall be concerned in this paper with one of the most dominant of such ritual symbols, known as *Chi*.

The monosyllabic word *Chi* (pronounced as in the first part of the English word *Chi-ef*) primarily denotes a prominent spirit being closely associated with individual personality and fortune. It also refers to daylight (as in the expression *Chi ofufo* – twilight). The two meanings of the term may not be unrelated. But my main concern in this essay is with *Chi* as a spirit being or force which occupies a pivotal place in Igbo traditional cosmology and ritual life.

No other concept has provoked as much debate among scholars of Igbo traditional religious culture as *Chi*. The controversy arises mainly over the determination of the precise meaning of the symbol. From ethnographers of the colonial era to contemporary scholars of traditional Igbo culture opinions have been divided mainly along two lines. Some writers with D. I. Nwoga (1984) and C. U. M. Ezekwugo (1987) as their most professed spokesmen, maintain that *Chi* is the Supreme Being (God, the provident creator and father in the Judeo-Christian sense) of the indigenous Igbo. Some others, in fact the majority, Thomas (1913), Basden (1921), Meek (1937), Arinze (1970), Metuh (1973), Achebe (1981), Uzukwu (1982) argue that *Chi* is conceived by the Igbo as a spiritual-double and a personal guiding spirit of every individual human being. Even among this latter group, there is a considerable divergence of views over the definite role of the concept in Igbo traditional thought and psychology.

The debate is far from ended. Discussions on this important ritual symbol continues to get published by scholars of Igbo indigenous culture (e.g., Chukwukere 1983: 519–534; Anyika 1988: 40–50; Edwards and Shaw 1989: 146–156). And in a