

## ‘CHI/CHUKWU’ NAMES AMONG THE IGBO OF SOUTH EAST NIGERIA: A SOCIO-ONOMASTIC APPROACH

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### Abstract

Naming across cultures is an indication of the prevalent belief systems, orientations, mindsets, world views of a people. Through names, a people's social identity is revealed, and their accepted way of life is laid bare. This study aims at discovering what the preponderance of 'Chi/Chukwu' names among the Igbo suggests about their history, culture, social and religious life. 636 (six hundred and thirty-six) Chi/Chukwu name derivatives selected from the class lists of 100 – 400 levels students of the Department of English Language and Literature, Nnamdi Azikiwe University Awka, who are predominantly of Igbo origin and other randomly selected names from Igbo-speaking local sources form the data for the research. The research design is descriptive, qualitative and quantitative design, and anchors on socio-onomastics as the theoretical framework. It concludes that the names are an indication of the attachment, dependence and reliance of the people on supernatural beings to control and coordinate every area of their lives, and as such a mark of their commitment to the worship of these beings.

**Key words:** Chi/chukwu, names, Igbo worldview, Nigeria, socio-onomastics,

### Introduction

Just like in all cultures, the philosophy of the Igbo resonates in the names they give to their children and to places and things in their environment. The names reflect the way they interact with the world and their environment. They are expressive of their beliefs, norms, cultural values, social interactions, identity, and in fact their worldview. Some of the concepts which the Igbo attached significance to and which serve as derivatives to Igbo names include:

- i. 'Ndu' (life) as in Ndubisi (life is of utmost importance); Ndukaku (life is more valuable than wealth); 'Ndudimma (life is good)
- ii. 'Onwu' (death) as in Onwuegbuna (death should not kill); 'Onwubiko' (death please... (do not kill); 'Onwukwe' (if death allows); 'Onwudinjo' (death is evil)
- iii. Nne (mother) as in 'Nneka' (mother is supreme), 'Nneamaka' (mother is very sweet), 'Nneoma' (good mother)
- iv. Nna (father) as in 'Nnabike' (father is (my) strength); 'Nnamdi' (My father lives); 'Nnaemezie' (father has done everything well)
- v. 'Ani' (earth) as in "Aniemeka' (the earth has done well), 'Anigbogu' ( Let the earth settle the dispute)
- vi. 'Uba' (wealth) as in 'Ubabike' (wealth is power); 'Uabajindu' (life is anchored on wealth); 'Ubadimma' (wealth is good)
- vii. 'Nwa' (child) as in 'Nwamaka' (child(ren) is very sweet); 'nwakaego' (child(ren) is more valuable than money), 'Nwabundo' (child(ren) is a shield (to the family); 'Nwakonam' (may I not lack child(ren)); 'Nwabuoku (Child(ren) is priceless); 'Ifenyinwa' (There is nothing as good as child(ren).
- viii. 'Ilo' (enemy) as in 'Ilokanuno' (people of your own house are your greatest enemies), 'Ilomunya' (Enemies seize every opportunity to attack); 'Iloegbunam' (enemies do not kill me)
- ix. 'Ego' (money) as in 'Egodi' (Money is available);
- x. 'Agu' (tiger) as in 'Ogbuagu' (one, especially a hunter, who kills a tiger); 'Otagburuagu' (One who devours a tiger); 'Agunechemba' (The tiger that guides the nation)
- xi. 'Chi'/'Chukwu' (god /God) as in 'Chiemelie' (God/god has won); 'Chigozie (God/god bless); 'Chukwuemeka' (God/god has done well); 'Chukwuma' (God/god knows); 'Chukwuebuka' (God/god is very great). etc.

Though all these concepts hold important place in the lives of the Igbo, the 'Chi'/'Chukwu' concept has by far remained the most productive of the name derivatives among the Igbo in spite of Christianity. This excerpt from Achebe throws more light on the assertion: 'You say that there is one supreme God who made heaven and earth,' said Akunna on one of Mr Brown's visits. 'We also believe in Him and call him Chukwu. He made the entire world and the other gods'. (126)

To the Igbo traditional religion and Christian converts in Igbo land. Chukwu refers to both the Chukwu Okike of the Igbo Pantheon and the Almighty God of the Christian religion, and so Chi/Chukwu name derivatives are used by both the traditionalists and the Christians alike, orchestrating the proliferation of the name derivative among the Igbo.

It is the problem of this study to find out why the 'Chi' / 'Chukwu' name derivative is so common among the Igbo as well as discover the message they convey about the general worldview of the people as they interact with their environment and live in their world. Such a research will aid a better understanding of the people and their dispositions in a globalizing world. To address the research question the study provides answers to the following research questions:

- A. What does the 'Chi' / 'Chukwu' in the names symbolize for the name givers?
- B. Why has the 'Chi' / 'Chukwu' name derivatives remained more predominant among the people?
- C. What does the preponderance of 'Chi' / 'Chukwu' names symbolize about the people?

### **The Concept of 'Chi' / 'Chukwu'**

'Chukwu' is the supreme being of the traditional religion of the Igbo of South East Nigeria. In the pantheon of Igbo gods, Chukwu, coined by blending Chi' (god) with 'Ukwu' (big) is the greatest and most powerful. He is the creator of all as indicated by the names Chukwu Okike, Ezechiteoke, (God the Creator) who is so powerful and lives far beyond the reach of human beings. He is thus worshipped through lesser gods and deities whom the people could approach in their shrines. Obienyem (126) concurs that "they formulated the idea of deities in concrete figures, moldings, carvings, and other artifacts and made them their go-between and means of reaching the biggest, most powerful and all-knowing God (Chi-ukwu)"

'Chi' in addition to referring to the Almighty also means one's personal god who is responsible for his or her good or bad fortunes in life. It is this designation of Chi that Achebe spoke about Okonkwo in the excerpt:

At the most one could say that his chi or personal god was good. But the Igbo people have a proverb that when a man says yes his chi says yes also. Okonkwo says yes very strongly; so his chi agreed (19).

When Okonkwo's fortunes changed after he had shot his kinsman by mistake and was sent on exile to his mother's people at Mbanta, Uchendu, his mother's younger brother states that:

His life had been ruled by a great passion - to become one of the Lords of the clan... Clearly his personal god or chi was not made for great things. A man could not rise beyond the destiny of his chi. The saying of the elders was not true - that if a man said yea his chi affirmed. Here was a man whose chi said nay despite his own affirmation (92).

Also when Ekwefi, Okonkwo's second wife lost her third child consecutively, and Nwoye's mother was being celebrated for giving birth to her third son in a succession it was noted of Ekwefi that:

Ekwefi had nothing but good wishes for her. But she had grown so bitter about her own chi that she could not rejoice with others over their good fortune... Her husband's wife took this for malevolence, as husband's wives were wont to. How could she know that Ekwefi's bitterness did not flow outwards to others but inwards into her own soul; that she did not blame others for their good fortunes but her own evil chi who denied her any? (56).

Uwen and Ukaegbu (2023) citing Achebe assert that 'Chi' in Igbo traditional concept (before the advent of Christianity) is generally described as individual's personal god, guardian angel, individual's providence and companion. They note that this traditional notion portrays 'Chi' as a guiding invisible being that everyone needs and has in the duration of one's lifetime. They also cite Echeruo and Nwoga as observing that 'Chi' "is conceived as a religious identity and that the Christian God was not in the traditional Igbo religious conception but associated with contemporary Anglo-Christian beliefs" This position they note, affirms Achebe's assertion that 'Chi' within the traditional Igbo worldview, is deeply rooted in the people's socio-cultural beliefs.

### **Conceptualizations Chi/Chukwu in Igbo Naming System**

#### **God as Creator and Sovereign Head**

<b>Names</b>	<b>Meaning</b>
Chukwunaeke	God creates
Chikelu	God created
Chukwuka	God is the greatest
Chijindu	God owns life
Chukwujekwu	God will decide

### **God as All-powerful**

#### **Names**

Ifeanyichukwu  
Chukwujike  
Chikadibia  
Chikasi  
Ikedinachukwu  
Onyekachukwu

#### **Meaning**

Nothing is impossible with God  
God owns power  
God is more powerful than witch doctors  
God is supreme  
There is power in God  
Who is greater than God?

### **God as Owner**

#### **Names**

Chinwendu  
Chijindu  
Chukwubunna

#### **Meaning**

God owns life  
God upholds life  
God is a father

### **God as All-sufficient**

#### **Names**

Chukwuezugog  
Chukwuemezugo  
Chizurumoke  
Chizurum

#### **Meaning**

God is enough  
God has done it  
God is enough for me  
God is sufficient for me

### **God as All-Knowing**

#### **Names**

Chimazuru  
Chimamkpam  
Chidiomimi  
Chikamara

#### **Meaning**

God knows all  
God knows my needs  
God is mysterious  
God knows better

### **God as Provider/ Benefactor**

#### **Names**

Chiwetalagu  
Chiemeze  
Chinenyeaku  
Chinaecherem  
Chinadaobi  
Chibundo

#### **Meaning**

God provided a lion  
God has fulfilled it  
God gives wealth  
God cares for me  
God comforts  
God is a shelter

### **God as Defender**

#### **Names**

Chinualumogu  
Chikwuelum  
Chichebem  
Chigbata  
Chiamagu

#### **Meaning**

Let God fight for me  
Let God defend me  
Let God protect me  
Let God rescue  
God does not know defeat

### **God as Promise keeper**

#### **Names**

Chizaram  
Chiechetam  
Chimere  
Chiedozi  
Chinemerem  
Chimamanda  
Chiagoziem  
Chisimdi

#### **Meaning**

God answered me  
Let God remember me  
God did it  
God has perfected it  
God does it  
My God will never fail  
God has blessed me  
God said I should live

### God as Source of Wealth

#### Names

Chinenyeaku  
Chinweaku

#### Meaning

God gives wealth  
God owns wealth

### Exultation of God

#### Names

Chukwuemeka  
Chidiuto  
Kenechukwu  
Chiamaka

#### Meaning

God has done well  
God is sweet  
Thank God  
God is gracious

### God as Guide

#### Names

Chinedu  
Chisom

#### Meaning

God guides  
God is with me

### The Igbo People

The Igbo people according to Onwuatuegwu (2023) is the largest single ethnicity in Africa and have their concentration in the south-eastern part of Nigeria. According to him, BBC (2021) confirmed this claim when it stated that the ethnic group with a population of around 40 billion people is the most populous ethnic group in Nigeria and is known for their unique culture, rich history and a strong sense of identity. He stated that in Nigeria they are primarily found in Ebonyi, Enugu, Abia, Anambra, Imo, Rivers and Delta states with their major cities comprising Enugu, Umuahia, Nsukka, Nnewi, Asaba, Onitsha, Afikpo, Okigwe, Owerri, Abakaliki, Awka, Orlu, Ekwulobia and others. He adds that the people are renowned for their rich cultural heritage, unique worldview, and philosophical traditions. He noted that their customs, beliefs and practices are deeply rooted in their cultural identity that has been various historical factors. Further on the Igbo people, Aniakor is cited as stating that:

They have a distinct worldview that is founded on the world as a dynamic and interconnected system of beings. They believe that everything in the world, whether animate or inanimate is imbued with a life force or chi that gives it a unique identity and purpose. This worldview has profound implications for their philosophy, as it shapes their understanding of human nature, morality, and the purpose of existence.

### Igbo Cosmology

Igbo cosmology according to Eruka (2023) is “the agglomeration, and the account thereof, of the Igbo vision of the world. It is a regional corpus of comprehensive attempts at making meaning of the Igbo metaphysical, epistemological, phenomenological, existential and physical environment.” Onwuatuegwu (2023) asserts that *ndi igbo* (the Igbos) have a unitary concept of reality and as such existence in conceived as a unified whole – ‘Uwa di ogbu’ (reality is holistic). This unified wholeness according to him comprises three levels of existence: the spiritual or ontological level, Ancestral level and the Human level. He cites Oguagua’s allusion to that fact when he notes that for the Igbo people the world is populated by human beings, inanimate things and spirits though there is an order of supremacy that depends on the level of vital force in the said being.

On the ontological level according to him are the transcendent beings – God – ‘Chukwu’ (the Supreme Being) the deities; the *alusi* and the other spirits including the human spirits (*ndi mmuo*) The Igbo metaphysicians are said to insist that the supreme Being Chukwu is the ultimate in the hierarchy of supernatural forces and the spirit. Various other lower spirits and forces are subservient to this Supreme spiritual entity.

The human level of existence is the level of human beings which he notes ought to be understood from the view point of families and communities. Included also in this level are animals, trees and minerals. The third level according to him is the ancestral realm which is the level of the living dead seen as the heroes of the human societies – *ndiichie* (the saints). On this, he cites Metuh as pointing out that “ancestors are therefore, people who have made it to the spirit-land and are being venerated by their descendants.” Onwuatuegwu(2023) points out that the three levels of existence interact and interrelate with one another. Ekwunife according to him affirms this view when he opines that:

... Igbo world is principally a world of two interacting Realities- the spiritual and material each impinging on the other. It is both the world of spiritual beings and the world of man with other animate and inanimate beings. In this world, the material mirrors the sacred in different degrees. Though homo-centric (man- centered) in practice, yet it finds its ultimate meaning in Transcendence. (26)

The implication of this according to Onwuategwu (2023) is that an Igbo is religious by nature as he is intrinsically tilting towards the divine in all aspects. Njaka in affirmation is cited as observing that religion plays such a central role in Igbo life that it permeates every facet of the society. He notes further that the Igbo code of conduct are formulated in alliance with the demands of the gods as enshrined in the omenani (tradition). The ancestors are said to be the custodians of omenani and odinani (moral values). Onwuategwu (2023) cites Ogugua as stating that the reason for this position is that the ancestors though no longer alive and in physical communion with the living, they are connected and in constant touch with them. This, he explained is the reason behind the prayers, libations, sacrifices, supplications made to them every morning by the head of the traditional Igbo family.

### **Names/ Naming**

Name simply put is a mark of identification given to individuals. Ezechukwu in (2022) commenting on names with reference to Igbo people observes that a typical Igbo name is not just an emblem or compulsory badge tagged to everyone for purposes of identification, but that it is as important as the people's history. He points out that "names have political, professional and religious background of the person bearing it as well as the person giving the name." He goes further to state that names are not given arbitrarily but are socio-cultural tags that function as communication tools which carry a variety of meanings. Personal names he intones are not just empty labels but are interpretations that parents, the extended family as well as the society give to their people. In support of this view, Ubahakwe (1981, p27) asserts "that an indigenous African name as a whole personifies the individual, tells some story about the parents and or the family of the bearer and in a more general sense points to the values of the society into which the individual is born." Nnamdi-Eruchalu (2018) notes that Igbo names generally reflect the people's worldview. This according to her is "evidently derived from their beliefs system, philosophy, ideology, language, norms and values." Names reflect the deep and often unspoken longings, joy, struggles and overall life experiences of the name-giver, family and the society at large. In Ezenwa-Ohaeto (2021,p14) avers that:

Through names, Igbo people expose the state of their inner selves. Igbo names are characteristically contextual, ideological and historical. They represent significant elements of a person and/or family and serves as a perpetual mark in the history of the house.

Uwen and Ukaegbu (2024) assert that "personal names convey the people's fundamental nature of knowledge and existence, and maintain an intergenerational communication system in Igbo language through the name bearer." Admittedly, some names are not peculiar to the families that give them especially in Igbo land. Dadzie and Awonusi (2009, 300) however note that they have one thing in common which is record of events that happened within or around the family. The event according to them range from whether or not the mother was expected to have a baby in her life, whether or not the parents have been subjected to uncharitable gossip about anything; the posture in which the baby was born; the reincarnation history of the baby, the personal fortunes or misfortunes that have befallen the baby's parents, events including world events, that the parents feel should be commemorated. Names according to them "are simply commemorative of events in private, communal, national and international."

### **Empirical Studies**

Itesieh (1983) studied Chi-names as a reflection of Igbo proverbs that reconstruct the socio-cultural milieu of the people. The researcher concluded that proverbs that proverbs are aspects of people's language practices using artistic utterances that explore that explore traditional currency of the Igbo culture and its philosophical contents that convey situated connotative meanings. Onukawa (2000) in her study posits that Chi-personal names in the Igbo naming practices are used to index gender and gendering. Personal names placed in this order are categorized on the basis of gender that clearly construct gender distinctions in a way that that the name-givers and bearers could rely on the names to know males and females. Udoye (2019) still on the same subject matter focused on the perspectives of Igbo anthropolinguistics and suggests that some aspects of Igbo personal names enact the people's belief in the Christian God. Chi and Chi- personal names in the reviewed studies suggest that such names were originated from and were originally rooted and construed within the traditional system. The researcher stated that colonialism which introduced Christianity as one of its legacies however appeared to have generated a paradigm shift and contemporaneity in the conceptualization of Chi by Christians of Igbo extraction. The implication, it is noted, is that Christian religion brought by White missionaries altered the beliefs system of the Igbo society and its traditional practices.

Uwen and Ukaegbu (2024) focused on the sociolinguistic and ethnopragmatic conceptualization of Chi in Igbo naming practices with their lens on God is Life. They posit that personal naming culture among the Igbos is ethnopragmatically conceived to contextualize their collective worldview which communicates their religious and sociocultural connections. The implication of their study is that while the non-Christians might still hold on to the traditional pattern of personal names, the Christians are immersed in bestowing personal names that communicate

a transgenerational flow of their new belief system that propagate godliness. Although much has been done on Chi personal names, there is need for more researches on the approaches. This study is an attempt on the concept of Chi in Igbo personal names adopting the socio-onomastic approach.

### Methodology

The study adopts the descriptive, qualitative and quantitative. Chi-related personal names were sifted from the class lists of 100 – 400 levels students of the Department of English Language and Literature, Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka located in an Igbo-speaking state and who are predominantly of Igbo origin. Year 1 had 183 out of 207 Igbo personal names; Year 2 had 166 out of 182; Year 3 had 164 out of 186 while Year 4 had 123 out of 148. A total number of 636 (Six hundred and thirty-six) names out of 723 names were Chi-related using simple percentage and approximation to establish the rate of occurrence in Igbo personal names. Other locally sourced Igbo personal names were also added for purposes of variety. The names based on their meanings were categorized based on themes that are relevant to the beliefs and socio-cultural tenets of the Igbo people and described. Analysis was done based on the purpose of the study and the theoretical framework.

### Theoretical Framework

This study hinges on Socio-onomastic theory which examines names within their social, cultural, and situational contexts, exploring how they communicate socio-cultural information and influence social positioning. It goes beyond a simple identification function, studying the why and how behind name variations, usage patterns and the consequences names have on their bearers. It views names as active linguistic products, influenced by and influencing societal structures rather than just abstract signs. Socio-onomastics establishes that personal naming culture is a universal event and cross cultural practice that conveys socio-cultural meaning and performs ethnopragmatic functions. These concerns are often explained within the perceptions and situated experiences of the name bearers, users and givers.

### Data Analysis

‘Chukwu’ as noted is the supreme being of the Igbo people. He is the creator of everything that existed including other gods, He is all powerful and lives beyond human reach. Chi to the traditional person means one’s personal god in addition to referring to the Almighty and is responsible for the good or bad fortunes in the life of an individual. Apart from being an individual’s personal god, he is guardian angel; and his providence and companion. He is the guiding invisible being that everyone needs and has all through life’s sojourn on earth and is held in deep awe and reverence. This position is deeply entrenched in the people’s socio-cultural beliefs. The Igbo world is principally a world of interjecting realities. It is both the world of spiritual beings and the world of man where the material is a reflection of the sacred in varying degrees. The Igbo man is religious by nature and in essence tilts toward the divine of all aspects.

Igbo names generally reflect the people’s world view and so are not given arbitrarily. They are derived from their beliefs system, philosophy, ideology, language, norms and values. (Nnamdi Eruchalu, 2018) Chi/Chukwu in Igbo personal names is not just a means of identification but is a reflection of the religious and socio – cultural beliefs of the name giver, Ubakwe (1981) confirms this when he poses that ... it tells some stories about the parents and/or the family of the bearer ... Instances of such names are:

Names	Meaning
Chinaedum	God guides me;
Chimeremeze	God made me king
Chiadikauche	God’s thoughts are different from mans
Chinagorom	God vindicates me
Chiagoziem	God has blessed me

### The Chi/Chukwu name derivatives remain more predominant among the people

Igbo people have been noted to be highly religious. This applies to both the traditional religious worshippers and their Christian counterparts. Both believe in a Supreme Being – Chukwu Okike (God the Creator) of the Igbo and Almighty God of the Christian religion. The traditional worshippers also pay allegiance to smaller gods or deities who they say are the go – between. The entire of life of the people are closely with these spiritual beings and inform their religious, cultural, political, social and economic life. The Igbo people have a peculiar worldview that is established on the world as a dynamic and interconnected system of beings. They are noted to believe that everything in the world is imbued with a life force or Chi that gives it a unique identity and purpose. This worldview is said to have profound implications for their philosophy because it shapes their general disposition about human nature, morality, and the purpose of existence. Their general philosophy is reflected in the different themes under which the Chi/Chukwu personal names are categorized with their examples:

### **God as Creator and Sovereign Head**

#### **Names**

Chukwunaeke  
Chijindu  
Chukwujekwu  
Chukwuka  
Ikedinachukwu

#### **Meaning**

God creates  
God sustains life  
God decides  
God is the greatest  
There is power in God

### **God as All – Powerful**

#### **Names**

Ifeanyichukwu  
Chukwujike  
Chikadibia  
Onyekachukwu

#### **Meaning**

God is able to do all things  
God has all power  
God is greater than native doctor  
Who is greater than God?

### **God as Owner**

#### **Names**

Chinwendu  
Chukwubunna

#### **Meaning**

God owns life  
God is Father

### **God as All – Sufficient**

#### **Names**

Chukwuezugo  
Chizurumoke  
Chukwuemezugo

#### **Meaning**

God is enough  
God is sufficient for me  
God has done it

### **God as All – Knowing**

#### **Names**

Chimazuru  
Chikamara  
Chimamkpam  
Chidiomimi

#### **Meaning**

God knows everything  
God knows better  
God knows my need  
God is deep

### **God as Provider/Benefactor**

#### **Names**

Chiwetalu  
Chinenyeaku  
Chinadaobi  
Chibundo

#### **Meaning**

God provides the lion  
God gives wealth  
God satisfies my longings  
God is a shelter

### **God as Defender**

#### **Names**

Chinualumogu  
Chikwuelum  
Chichebem  
Chimaogu  
Chigbata

#### **Meaning**

Let God fight for me  
Let God speak for me  
Let God protect me  
God knows no defeat  
Let God come to my defense

### **God as Source of wealth**

#### **Names**

Chinenyeaku  
Chinweaku

#### **Meaning**

God gives wealth  
God owns wealth

### **God as Guide**

#### **Names**

Chinedu  
Chisom

#### **Meaning**

God guides  
God is with me

## Exaltation of God

Names	Meaning
Chukwuemeka	God has done well
Chidiuto	God is sweet
Chiamaka	God is good

### The preponderance of Chi/Chukwu personal names symbolize

The preponderance of Chi/Chukwu personal names among the Igbo people is indicative of their religious, socio – cultural and philosophical disposition towards the spiritual beings. It shows their entire existence is hinged and is intertwined with the supernatural that they depend on for their life and sustenance. The different themes on the names again reflect the level of subservience of humans to the supernatural.

### Conclusion

In conclusion, Igbo people have a unitary concept of reality and so life for them is conceived as a unified whole. The unified wholeness consists of three levels of existence – the spiritual or ontological, the ancestral and the human levels. The world to them is populated by human beings, inanimate things and spirits. At the apex of this hierarchy are the transcendent beings – God – Chukwu (the Supreme Being, the deities, the *alusi* and the other spirits including the human spirits (ndi mmuo). To them, the three levels interrelate with one another. This implies that the Igbo by nature is intrinsically religious. In Igbo cosmology, God is at the center of every human activity. This is evident in the preponderance of ‘Chi/Chukwu’ in their personal names. A name to them is not merely a mark of identification but a mark that portrays the high level of their interaction with and dependence on the spiritual beings which cuts across every facet of their existence.

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