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THE CHI CONCEPT IN IGBO GENDER NAMING

M. C. Ọnụkawa

GENDER IN IGBO NAMES

A substantial number of Igbo females bear names associated with *Chi*, 'the Igbo personal life force', while equally a substantial number of males bear names associated with *Chi*'s compound form, *Chukwu* (*Chi ukwu*) translated as 'big Chi'. We refer to all these as *Chi* names. (However, where essential distinctions are drawn between the two, we refer to them as *Chi* names or *Chukwu* names respectively).[1]

Chi/*Chukwu* names (discussed in this article) are, however, not distinctive in being gender-specific in Igbo. Most names in Igbo are gender-specific. In fact the gender of the bearer of a name is the one bit of information we usually get from hearing an Igbo name. Our sampling shows that gender-specific names constitute more than 90 per cent of Igbo names. Apart from *Chi*/*Chukwu* nominals like *Òko* ('male'), *Ṁgbo* ('female'), *Nwokē* (male, man), *Nwaànyị̀* (female, woman) also specify gender, especially in market-day names. For example, see Table 1.

TABLE 1.

Market day	*Male name*	*Gloss*	*Female name*
Èke	Ọ̀keēke	'Male/Female of Eke'	Ṁgbeēke
Ọrìè	Ọ̀koriè	'Male/Female of Orie'	Ṁgboriè
Àfọ̀	Ọ̀kaàfọ̀	'Male/Female of Afo'	Ṁgbaàfọ̀
Ǹkwọ	Ọ̀koñkwọ	'Male/Female of Nkwo'	Ṁgbọ̀kwọ̄

In Igbo culture males are usually associated in naming with issues such as: deities, e.g. *Àlà* (earth deity), *Kamalụ̄* (thunder deity), *Anyanwụ̀* (sun deity), etc.; religious objects, e.g. *Ọfọ*, *Ogù* (symbols of innocence); mysterious phenomena, e.g. *Ọn̰wụ* (death); concepts of greatness, e.g. *Durù* (Greatman of Utility), *Ọ̀su* (devotee), *Ezè* (king), *Ǹzè*/*Ọzọ* (revered titles), etc; natural physical objects, e.g. *Ugwu* (hill), *Mmirī* (water), *Ọkụ* (fire), etc.; animals, e.g. *Agụ̄* (leopard), *Ènwè* (monkey), *Ṁgbàdà* (antelope), etc.; significant social entities, *Ọhà* (the people), *Ibè* (peer group), *Ùkè* (age grade), *Mbà* (the people), etc.

Females are usually associated in naming with dainty issues, more virtuous qualities, and more positive phenomena and concepts. These include: *Ṁmā* (goodness/moral acceptability), *Urù* (usefulness), *Àkụ̀*

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[1] In this article low tones (`) and downstep tones (-) are marked while high tones are left unmarked.

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(wealth), *Ùju* (abundance), *Anụ̀rị* (happiness), *Urè* (conduct that deserves attention), *Ọlà* (ornament).

Only a tiny percentage of Igbo names (less than 10 per cent are gender-neutral, borne by both males and females. They include the following:

Nkasìobì	('Consolation')
Ǹkèmjìka	('What I have is greater')
Ò̀lileanya	('Expectation/Hope')
Ọ̀zọ̀emena	('May another not happen')
Ọ̀gụgùọ	('The consoler/Pacifier')
Ǹkemdìrim̄	('Mine should remain for me')

Some *Ọma* (good) names:

Uzọ̀ọma	('Prosperous access')
Ekèọma	('Good Eke')
Obìọma	('Benevolence')

THE RELIGIOUS CONCEPT OF *CHI* IN IGBO

Chi is an enigmatic concept in Igbo, and this has given rise to various interpretations and translations of its meaning by scholars. *Chi* has been interpreted as the Igbo personal life force, personal life, guardian angel, creator, companion, individual providence, portioned-out life principle. It is also interpreted as a person's deity—identity in the spirit land which complements his human identity.[2]

Chi is a central point in the psychology, thought and belief of the Igbo. People recognise it as being responsible for their wealth and prosperity, life and health, success and failure, and for all their fortunes and misfortunes. In general, the Igbo consider *Chi* as the sole controller of their life affairs. The Igbo show the depth of their belief in *Chi* (among other religious entities) as the sole determining factor of the individual's fate by having numerous *Chi* names in their families. As Achebe (1975: 96) points out:

> If you want to know how life has treated an Igbo man, a good place to look is the names his children bear. His hopes, his fears, his joys and sorrows; his grievances against his fellows, or complaints about the way he has been used by fortune; even straight historical records are all there. And because *Chi* is so central to Igbo thought we will also find much about it in proper names—more, I think, than from any other single source.

Chi and its compound form *Chukwu* are not equivalent terms for the Christian God. As Echeruo (1979: 20) points out:

> God among the Igbo is certainly nothing like God of the Christians. This is to say . . . our god is not the ONE towards whom all creations aspire . . . He

[2] See, for example, Isichei (1976: 25), Achebe (1975: 93–103), Nwoga (1984: 33), Ebeogu (1983: 33), Nwala (1985: 46).

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> has no heaven and no troops of angels ministering to him. He has promulgated no decalogue, and he has not appointed a day when he will judge the living and death . . . what we have is CHI, probably one of the most complex theological concepts ever devised to explain the universe.

The term *Chukwu* was derived by the Aro Igbo as another name for their famous oracle (*Ibini Ukpabi*) with the intention of boosting their slave business. Nwoga (1984: 36) also observes this fact and states that:

> When the Aro went into the rest of Igboland to trade in slaves they took with them both for protection and as an additional business, the reputation of their Chiukwu (Big Chi) thereby elevating Ibini Ukpabi to the status of the last arbiter, the God beyond whom there could be no surer answer to problems.

Before the Aro hegemony could fully mature into social and political dominance in Igboland 'the Europeans (Christians) came and "baptized" Chukwu and turned him from an oracle into the supreme God. Chukwu names by reference to Arochukwu had to become mixed up with the tradition of Christian translations into Igbo of Christian theistic ideals' (Nwoga 1984: 37–8). Nwoga (1984: 37) argues that by this act of the Aro coupled with the Christian conversion of *Chukwu* from an oracle to a supreme God, the traditional *Chi* of the Igbo was reduced to a relatively low status evidenced by the descriptions of it by some other scholars. He states:

> It then became necessary for Chi of the Igbo man to be reduced to 'a God-toward tendency' (Obiego); 'guardian spirit' (Arinze); 'the divine essence in every human being' (Iwuagwu); 'that aspect of God in man which enables him to procreate himself' (Onwuejeogwu).

As Echeruo (1979: 20) points out, 'There is no gainsaying the fact that, for all its excesses, the oracle (*Chukwu*) gave the Igbo people a new name for God and a name which they are quite happy to accept.'

As most Igbo have become deep-rooted Christians, there is widespread denial of the traditional meaning of *Chi*. They now consider *Chi* as just a shortened form of *Chukwu*, since Christians recognise only the existence of the supreme God.

CHINEKÈ AND *CHUKWU* IN IGBO

Nwoga (1984: 56) interprets *Chinekè* as 'god in his duality as each person's deity and destiny'. He argues (p. 60) that *Chinekè* and *Chukwu* represent different concepts, and postulates that, while *Chinekè* is indigenous and traditional to the Igbo (not representing the supreme being), *Chukwu* is a descriptive phrase which has been transformed at some stage into the conceptual code of another culture. Nwoga (1984) has used extensive illustrations to show that *Chinekè* and *Chukwu* are never interchangeable appellations.

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Derivation of Chinekè

There are two variants of the derivation of *Chinekè*. One is based on Igbo cosmological belief while the other is Christian-oriented. Prominent scholars in Igbo studies (for example, Echeruo, 1979; Nwoga, 1984) believe that *Chinekè* is derived from the complementary duality[3] *Chi nà Ekè* (destiny and agency of destiny). *Ekè* is a concept closely related to *Chi*. Both *Chi* and *Ekè* appear to belong to one central underlying theme or concept which, on the surface, has dual manifestations, with *Chi* being more prominent (traditionally) than *Ekè*. According to Nwoga (1984: 56) *Ekè* has its standard meaning in Igbo tradition, referring to the share or lot each person is apportioned, the agency of destiny in each person's life. He further points out that in all *Ekè* names the concepts of destiny and fortune (share) adequately fit the expression. In this analysis, deriving *Chinekè* from *Chi nà Ekè*, *na* is a co-ordinating conjunction (linking *Chi* and *Ekè* together).

A Christian-oriented analysis is that *Chinekè* is derived from the 'relativised expression' *Chi nã-ekè* ('God who creates'). This interpretation, which has become popular among the (now deeply christianised) Igbo regards *Chi* as the 'Christian God', *na* as an 'auxiliary verb' and *Ekè* as a 'simple participle' (verbal).

We regard the first derivation as plausible, since it is based on concepts which are traditional to the Igbo. Again, Nwoga (1984: 55–6) has pointed out that the Igbo verb root *-kè* does not refer to 'creation'. He states:

> The truth of the Igbo language is that the -ke root does not refer to creation because the conception of creating—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: Oke = a share; Okike = the act of sharing; eke = one who shares; kee—divide.

Derivation of Chukwu

The compound nominal *Chukwu* is not a Christian derivative. As pointed out earlier, *Chukwu* is a phrasal derivative of the Aro Igbo, an itinerant Igbo group famed for their middleman control of the slave trade with the Europeans in the past. The Aro Igbo combined *Chi* and *Ukwu*,[4] 'bigness', to derive *Chukwu* (*Chi Ukwu*) 'Big Chi', and assigned the name to their oracle, *Ibini Ukpabi*, with the intention of elevating him to the status of a supreme deity.

Scholars in Igbo studies have a consensus belief on this (that *Chukwu* is a derivative from Igbo). For example, in his discussion of the derivation of *Chukwu* by the Aro Igbo, Echeruo (1979: 20–1) asserts:

> Whatever the exact history of the oracle [Chukwu] we cannot avoid noticing its name as a compound formed from Chi and Ukwu, a compound which,

[3] Complementary dualities refer to pairs of interconnected and interactive concepts, which may or may not be opposites.

[4] *Ukwu* has been treated as an adjective by some authors (e.g. Maduka Durunze, 1990; Welmers, 1970), and as a qualificative noun by others (e.g. Emenanjo, 1978).

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translated into English, would become the Big Chi. What the Aro cult of Chukwu did was to build on the thoroughly Igbo foundation (of chi) and to propose a universal Chi, parallel to (though more powerful than) the individual chi. That idea blended beautifully into the Igbo world view. Chi was separated from Chi Ukwu, which then became the standard Igbo name for the Almighty.

Azuonye (1987: 44) also points out that the concept of *Chukwu* is an indigenous creation of the Igbo which was later adopted and adapted by the Christian missionaries and ultimately fed back into the Igbo oral tradition in the bowdlerised, albeit syncretic, form in which it exists today.

GENDER IN *CHI* NAMES

Gender antonymy in Chi *names*

The nominals *Chi* and *Chukwu* combine with some other nominals to form dinominal phrasal names. The names so formed divide neatly into antonyms based on gender. Table 2 shows this. The gender specification of *Chi* names as shown in the table is true of most parts of Igboland, especially Inland East Igbo.[5] (See Fig. 1 for the Igbo dialect areas.)

TABLE 2.

Female name	*Gloss*	*Male name*
Àkụchī	'Wealth of Chi'	Àkùchukwu
Àmàrachī	'Favour of Chi'	Àmàràchukwu
Èberēchī	'Mercy of Chi'	Èberèchukwu
Nkachī	'Skill of Chi'	Nkàchukwu
Nwachī	'Child of Chi'	Nwachukwu
Ọgechī	'Time of Chi'	Ọgèchukwu
Ọkechī	'Lot of Chi'	Ọkèchukwu
Ọlụchī	'Work of Chi'	Ọlụchukwu
Ụchechī	'Wish of Chi'	Ụchèchukwu
Ùgochī	'Honour of Chi'	Ùgòchukwu

Syntactic and semantic differences between related Chi names

The *Chi* names in Table 2 are associative constructions—'a nominal phrase that is made up of two nominals in which the meaning is roughly N_1 of the type associated with N_2—This is shown in its structure (Noun + Noun) as well as in its tonal behaviour' (Emenanjo, 1978: 35–7).

There are *Chi* names which are related to those in Table 2 but which are derived from relative clauses. For example, *Ùgochī* (in Table 2) is not a short form of *Ùgòchinyèrèm*, 'Honour which *Chi* bestowed on me'.

[5] This is Ikekeonwu's (1982) classification of the Igbo dialect clusters.

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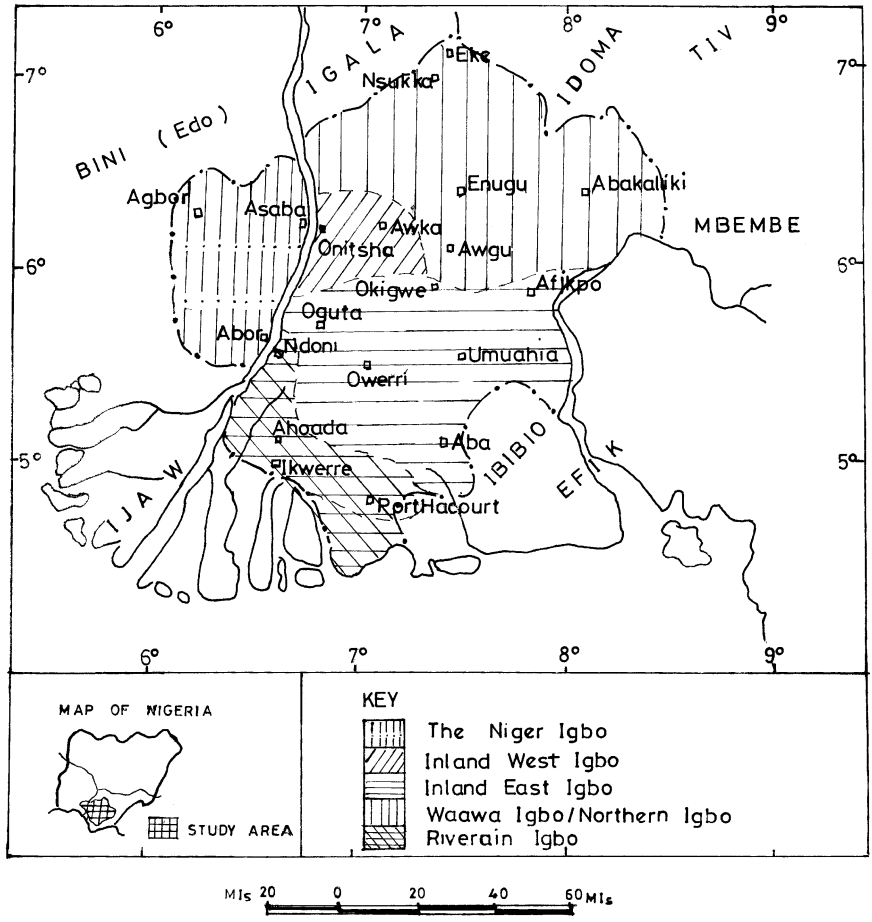


FIG. 1. The Igbo dialect areas

The names are not (exactly) the same syntactically and semantically. *Ùgochī* actually means 'honour associated with Chi', i.e. 'honour of *Chi*', which the bearer of the name is a symbol of. The 'honour' is not ascribed to anyone. *Ùgòchinyèrèm* is a short form of a relative construction: (1) *Ùgò Chi nyèrè m dị mmā*, 'honour which Chi bestowed on me is good'. The underlying sentences in (1) are (2) *Ùgò dị mmā*, 'honour is good', and (3) *Chi nyèrè m Ùgò*, 'Chi bestowed honour on me'. Sentences (2) and (3) show that *Ùgò* and *Chi* are subjects of different constructions (underlyingly). In the same way *Ùgochī* can function as the dinominal phrasal subject of a sentence, e.g. (4) *Ùgochī bì ebe à*, 'Ugochi lives here'.

The differences between these names can be made clearer by considering differences of structure and meaning between (5)(a) *Òkpu Ezè*, 'crown', and (b) *Òkpu Ezē nyèrè m*, 'the hat which the king gave to

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me'. The same explanation can be given for other names like (6) (a) *Àmàrachī* and (b) *Àmàrà Chi mèèrè m*, 'favour which Chi did to me'; (7)(a) *Nwachī* and (b) *Nwachinàèmere*, 'child whom Chi assists'.

Gender neutrality in Chi *names*

Some of the *Chi* names are gender-neutral, borne by both males and females. This is the case if *Chi* is the subject or complement of desentential (derived from sentences) names. If *Chi* occurs as the second nominal in dinominal phrasal names as in Table 2, the names are borne by females and they usually have male antonyms which contain *Chukwu*. If a male bears a dinominal phrasal name where *Chi* is the second nominal, it is likely that *Chukwu* has been simplified to *Chi*. It could also mean that the parents of the child have gone thoroughly Christian and so deny the traditional Igbo meaning of *Chi*.

Igbo names which contain *Chukwu* either as 'subject' or 'complement' (desentential) or as the second nominal (dinominal) are usually borne by males. Table 3 shows the gender-neutral *Chi* names and their male antonyms (*Chukwu* names).

TABLE 3.

Gender-neutral names	*Gloss*	*Male names*
Chidị̀	'Chi exists'	Chukwudị̀
Chijìndù	'Chi controls life'	Chukwujindụ̀
Chikà	'Chi surpasses'	Chukwukà
Chimà	'Chi knows'	Chukwumà
Chinọ̀nso	'Chi is closer'	Chukwunọ̀nso
Chinweike	'Chi owns strength'	Chukwunweike
Chinyèrè	'Chi gave'	Chukwunyèrè
Chinwendụ̀	'Chi owns life'	Chukwunwendụ̀
Kèlechì	'Thank Chi'	Kèlechukwu
Tòochī	'Praise Chi'	Tòochukwu

Some of the factative (affirmative)[6] desentential names are short forms of complete sentences, e.g. *Chimà* (*Chi mà*), '*Chi* knows', is a short form of say *Chimàobì* (*Chi mà Obì*), 'Chi knows the mind'. In dialects (e.g. Inland East Igbo) where the verbal of a factative (affirmative) sentence must be preceded by a low tone we have forms like *Chìidị̀*, *Chìikà*, *Chìimà*, *Chìinyèrè* (gender-neutral) and *Chukwuùdị̀*, *Chukwuùkà*, *Chukwuùmà*, *Chukwuùnyèrè* (male).

Gender neutrality: the case of Niger Igbo and Inland West Igbo

We are aware that in the Niger Igbo and Inland West Igbo areas (e.g. Onitsha) the gender distinction between *Chi* and *Chukwu* seems to be

[6] We owe this term to Emenanjo (1978). It refers to indicative or assertive (affirmative) sentences.

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neutralised to *Chukwu* when they occur as the second nominals in the dinominal phrasal names. In the said dialect areas only *Chukwu* can occur in that position in the dinominal phrasal names. This, in effect, means that the male names in Table 2 and similar names are gender-neutral in these dialect areas. These dialect areas are, however, equally affected by the gender neutrality and male specificity of the *Chi* names in Table 3, especially where *Chi* and *Chukwu* are 'subjects' of disentential names.

THE PREDOMINANCE OF *CHUKWU* NAMES

We observe (from random sampling) that in contemporary Igbo society *Chukwu* names predominate over *Chi* names. Indeed, most of the present *Chi* names are fundamentally *Chukwu* names in which *Chukwu* has been simplified to *Chi*. This suggests that there are 'original' *Chi* names which are different from those (*Chi* names) that are simplified forms of *Chukwu* names.

'Original' Chi *names*

We classify here as 'original' those *Chi* names that have extant *Chukwu* name counterparts. These *Chi* names refer basically to the Igbo 'personalised providence' (*Chi*), while their *Chukwu* counterparts refer fundamentally to '*Ibini Ukpabi*' (*Chukwu*). They are pre-Christianity *Chi* names and have been associated with females, while their *Chukwu* counterparts are associated with males on the basis of the issues discussed under the heading 'Why . . . ?' Christianity in Igboland has eroded the traditional meaning of *Chi*/*Chukwu* in these names, resulting in a drastic reduction in their number. Some of the 'original' *Chi* names are given in Tables 2 and 3.

Chi *names simplified from* Chukwu

As pointed out earlier, when Christianity extended to Igboland, the Christian missionaries changed *Chukwu* as a term for an oracle to that of the supreme God. The Christian dogma and theism have, since then, permeated and blended beautifully with the Igbo system. The names through which the Igbo express the centrality of their traditional *Chi* to their lives have become overshadowed by the Christian religion. Indeed, the Christian Igbo, nowadays, recognise only *Chukwu* (Supreme God), owe their allegiance to him and give names which express the same—they now give only *Chukwu* names.

Majority of the 'post-Christianity' *Chukwu* names are desententials with *Chukwu* as either 'subject' or 'complement'. The *Chukwu* content of the names has been simplified to *Chi* and the names are gender-neutral. The *Chi* names (as borne by the contemporary Igbo) have no *Chukwu* counterparts—an acid test that they were fundamentally *Chukwu* names.

Deep-rooted Igbo Christians (as most now are) rationalise this simplification of *Chukwu* to *Chi* by asserting that *Chi* is the appellation of the one and only supreme God. For them *Chukwu* (*Chi ukwu*) creates

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the impression of the existence of an antonym, *Chi ntà* (small God), a notion which they abhor. *Chi* names in this class include the following:

Chizọ̀rọ̀m	'God rescued me'
Chiderà	'If God sanctions'
Chidị̀ebere	'God is merciful'
Chinàzaekpere	'God responds to prayers'
Chisòm	'God is my companion'
Ad̀m̀chimmā	'I am God's favourite'
Ànàm̀èlechī	'I look up to God'
Dàberechī	'Rely on God'
Sọ̀pụ̀ruchī	'Respect God'
Kàsarachī	'Tell (it to) God'

Chukwu *names not simplified to* Chi

There are 'post-Christianity' *Chukwu* names which have not undergone the simplification to *Chi*. They are more of the dinominal dephrasal *Chukwu* names. They have no extant *Chi*-name counterpart—a proof that they actually belong to this class and that *Chukwu* names outnumber *Chi* names in contemporary Igbo society. Among such names are:

Elòchukwu	'Thought of God'
Ezèchukwu	'King of (Ordained by) God'
Ìlèchukwu	'Efficacy of God'
Nkwàchukwu	'Promise of God'
Ọ̀bìchukwu	'Will of God'
Ọ̀dìbòchukwu	'Servant of God'
Ọ̀gọ̀chukwu	'Favour of God'
Ọ̀yị̀chukwu	'Friend of God'
Chukwudalụ	'Thank (you) God'

The simplification of *Chukwu* to *Chi* in dinominal dephrasal names seems to be quite gradual, since there are very few dinominal dephrasal *Chi* names which do not have any *Chukwu*-name counterparts, suggesting that they are simplified *Chukwu* names. They include the following:

Ònyìnyechī	'Gift of God'
Ịhụnanyachī	'Love of God'
Odochī	'Favour of God'

WHY THE GENDER DISTINCTION IN *CHI* NAMES?

The gender distinction of female and male marked by *Chi* and *Chukwu* respectively in the *Chi* names grew out of the Igbo traditional consideration of the *Ibini Ukpabi* oracle of the Aro Igbo.

From the seventeenth century *Ibini Ukpabi* (*Chukwu*) of the Aro Igbo pervaded Igboland. It was the biggest oracle of the time and had extensive powers which the people believed in. Mysteries were invented around the oracle, and people were advised to consult it whenever there

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were serious problems. As Nwoga (1984: 86) puts it, 'going to consult Chukwu in Arochukwu became the highest act of the judicial process and of other problems and situations that required ultimate and drastic solution'.

The mysterious, dreadful and very powerful qualities of *Ibini Ukpabi* (*Chukwu*) compelled the Igbo to conceptualise it as patriarchal. For this reason when the concept (*Chukwu*) was extended to naming it was associated with males. *Chi*, on the other hand, being a vaguer or more complex theological concept, was not initially (before the introduction of *Ibini Ukpabi* and the change of its name to *Chukwu*) thought of as either male or female. It was only later, when *Chukwu* was definitely viewed as male, that *Chi* was viewed as female and associated with females in naming.

SUMMARY

Our examination of the issue of gender in *Chi* names in Igbo shows that *Chi* names divide into gender-based antonyms of female and male. The female names contain *Chi* while the male ones contain *Chukwu*, a compound form of *Chi*.

Some *Chi* names are dephrasals derived through associative construction while the others are desententials with *Chi*/*Chukwu* as 'subject' or 'complement'. Sentence-derived names which have *Chi* as the 'subject' are usually gender-neutral. In the dephrasal *Chi* names of some dialect areas the gender distinction between *Chi* and *Chukwu* is neutralised to *Chukwu*.

Christianity in Igboland changed *Chukwu* from the term for an oracle to the appellation of the supreme God. The Igbo imbibed Christianity and accepted *Chukwu* as the supreme God, thereby denying all they knew about their traditional *Chi*. They resorted to bestowing only *Chukwu* names, and this has resulted in the predominance of *Chukwu* names over the traditional *Chi* names. The gender distinction between *Chi* and *Chukwu* names stemmed from the fact that the Igbo had conceptualised *Ibini Ukpabi* as male and also extended the same to its alternative name, *Chukwu*. This development also led to the conceptualisation of *Chi* as female.

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ABSTRACT

Gender distinctions in personal names are quite remarkable in African naming traditions. Such names are attractive to linguists and anthropologists alike, especially as they reflect preferences in semantic hierarchy and deeply ingrained gender biases. This article studies the gender naming in Igbo personal names that contain a key religious concept: *Chi*.

RÉSUMÉ

Les distinctions de sexe des noms personnels sont assez remarquables dans les traditions africaines de choix du nom. Ces noms présentent un intérêt tant pour les linguistes que pour les anthropologistes, notamment parce qu'ils sont le reflet de préférences en matière de hiérarchie sémantique et de discriminations sexuelles profondément enracinées. Cet article étudie le choix du nom des filles et des garçons à travers les noms personnels Igbo contenant un concept religieux clé : *Chi*.

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