

# Language, personal names and the Igbo culture: A cosmological appraisal of two Igbo names -- Ọfọ and Chi.

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## Abstract

The issue of language cannot be over-emphasised in any culture. This is because language houses culture and also plays a crucial role in personal names. The Igbo language portrays the culture of the Igbo people as it an integral part of it. Names are not just given to an individual in the Igbo setting purposelessly; there are always some significant traditional rituals that precede the coinage of the name/s. This study investigates the concept of language in giving personal names in the Igbo cultural milieu and the image that a name evokes on the bearer and the environment. The aim of the study is to highlight the nexus between the language and the culture as they relate to personal names in Igbo cosmology This study, therefore, considers as its limitation, Igbo names with two morphemes/affixes Ọfọ and Chi. The investigation shows that the two personal names tell stories of events or a life story that necessitated the naming. The study uses both quantitative and qualitative means of data collection. Written materials and oral interviews were employed in the course of this study. The study summarises that those personal names are rooted in the cultures

of anecdotes, satire, and innuendoes. In Igbo cosmology, the interpretation of any name is deciphered from the life experience of the person who christened the names or the general meaning of the name.

Keywords: language, personal names, Igbo Culture, *Ọfọ*, Chi

## Introduction

Language and culture are inseparable. Nobody talks about culture in isolation. Every culture is discussed with the indigenous language that houses it. Therefore, Igbo culture is expressed through the Igbo language. One of the ways to show the culture of the people is through the native names of the bearers of the culture. Because language and culture are interwoven, personal names are the direct expression of both the language and the culture. While language is part of the culture, the latter is expressed through the instrumentality of the former. The two cannot exist in isolation.

Personal names are given based on what transpired or what the giver of the name experienced prior to the birth of the child for which the name symbolised. For instance, a woman who was castigated as a result of delayed pregnancy could show her innocence of all the allegations

leveled against her by naming her child "Chinaagorom" meaning that her providence has silenced her oppressors. Once an Igbo personal name is mentioned, an articulate Igbo person will decipher the circumstances or the prevailing conditions that led to that name.

Igbo cosmology suggests that the Igbo people do things according to their own way of life. They see things in their way which has marked them off from others in the world. This cosmology is the primal current or force that reaches the level of consciousness which marks off the Igbo persons from every other in the world. This primal current or force of nature is handed down from one generation to the other, a world without end. This ensures that the race exists perpetually and remains interminable.

Igbo culture is displayed through Igbo personal names. Most of the times, personal names serves as a vehicle to

reply the critics or make statements of facts about what really happened in one's life before a child is welcomed. A name like "Ogechi" 'Chi's time' tells a story of waiting for the blessing of the fruit of the womb. Every Igbo name has an inherent meaning. The meaning is part of the belief of the giver and a demonstration of how s/he perceives the world around him/her.

The aim of this study is, therefore, to highlight the nexus between the language and the culture as they relate to personal names in the Igbo cosmology. The study also seeks to answer the question of why *Ọfọ* and *Chi* affixes in naming complement each other most of the time and tell the same stories using affixes of different nomenclatures. For instance, why should *Ọfọnaagorọ* be substituted by *Chinaagorọ* in this Christian-led era? The study adopts as its methodology both quantitative and qualitative approaches in data sourcing and gathering. Both primary and secondary means were used in data gathering. Questionnaires containing few questions on the subject matter were sent out through the social media platform (Whatsapp) to few Igbo opinion leaders who discussed the effects of the two names in the Igbo cosmology. This

method is favoured because the world is now a global community and information gathering is faster and smoother than in pristine times when hand-to-hand information delivery was the norm. With the social media breakthrough, information sharing and gathering move with the speed of light. Also, written materials of different categories were also consulted to beef up the study. Textbooks, journal articles, internet materials, and personal notes serve as the secondary sources of data. The opinions obtained from these various sources were sieved to get the author's best considered interpretation which was finally adopted for the study. The study depends more on interviews and oral interaction than written materials, which were mostly empirical data support to beef up the study.

The two names under investigation in this study are *Ọfọ* and *Chi*. These two names have significant importance in the Igbo cultural milieu. The former (*Ọfọ*) is attributed to justice, fair-play and uprightness in the culture whereas the latter (*Chi*) represents the personal destiny or personal god or providence as the case may be (see the concepts in the next section).

## Concepts

**Language:** Language is defined as a body of words and the systems for their use common to the people who are of the same community or nation (Elomba 2018). Language is a uniquely human characteristic which is indispensable in human activities. Language is innate in human beings. Emenanjo (as cited) in (Onukawa, 2012) sees language as essentially a human attribute that only distinguishes man from other animals. Obviously, man differs markedly from all other lower beings because of his ability to use and manipulate language to his advantages. Based on the aforementioned, language is seen as the sharper of experience because every sophisticated wisdom and knowledge in the world is through the instrumentality of language. As an essential human attribute, language certainly serves as the vehicle for the propagation of people's worldviews and core values. Language also finds expression in creativity and description of natural sequences.

**Personal names:** A personal name is the name with which an individual is identified and recognised. In the English way of classification of names, there are three sequences – the first, the second and the last names. These sequences, in

other methods translate to the ways of recognition as the popular name, the middle name and the surname. In the English order of official documentary, the surname comes first, separated by a comma and then other names in particular peculiarity and recognition. Alternatively, the surname is written in all upper cases, followed by other names. If a title precedes the name, the first name is written first followed by the middle name and the surname comes last. However, the Igbos give just one personal name. That is the name given to the person due to the circumstances and experiences that heralded or preceded the birth of the child. This name is given the moment the child is born or on a special day dedicated to child-naming-ceremony. In my own case and in my family tradition, the name is given the same day the child is born. Igbo personal names, like most black African names, have high cultural value and content. They are not simply labels used for mere identification purposes or baggage tags. According to Onukawa (2012):

An indigenous Igbo name on the 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 value of the society into which the individual is born (p. 10).

Child naming practice (personal name) denotes activities that involve the act of giving a name to a child at birth. Murray (as cited in Kalu 2022) asserts that the process of selecting a name for children is a mixture of excitement and anxiety. According to him, "names not only serve as a legal purpose but also convey social, cultural and spiritual meaning for the family and its community" (p. 1).

Soroibe (2000) maintains that the Igbo would never adopt the attitude of 'what is in a name?' He believes that a person's name is carefully chosen for its meaning and significance. This is because the names of children in the family give vivid accounts of the family. The accounts, according to him, include but are not limited to its joys, sorrows, hopes, aspirations, fears etc. Therefore, personal names in the Igbo cultural milieu tell stories of joy, sorrow, perseverance, hope, persecution, aspiration and gratitude.

**Igbo culture:** Generally, culture encompasses the complex whole that defines a particular set of people. It

includes the knowledge, beliefs, arts, morals, laws, customs and many other innovations and habits that characterise a people over a period of time in history. It is the totality of people's way of life. Anichebe, (as cited in Obayi,2018) defines culture in areas of material and non-material perspectives. The material culture, according to him, is the physical objects while the nonmaterial culture includes the ideas, beliefs, feelings, values, norms etc. He maintains that culture is dynamic and changes with the trends of life. The dynamism of culture, in the views of Egonu (2001), implies that each succeeding generation may discover new norms and borrow from cultures in the process of adapting to changing times and circumstances thereby enriching or altering the cultural heritage.

On the other hand, culture can be seen to be static when the spirit of a culture guarantees its peculiarities while absorbing all adaptations and borrowings making sure that the integration and stability of the culture is not truncated.

Igbo culture is the culture of the Igbo people. It is the way of life of an Igbo person. It is the dynamism that portrays one as an Igbo person. Naming is part of

the culture of the Igbo people. This study is of the opinion that Igbo personal names have undergone some shifts in order to conform to modern-day religionism. This study opines that names with '*Chukwu/Chi*' morphemes outnumber and out-class those with *Ọfọ* morphemes either as prefixes or suffixes. But the interpretations of both names tell almost the same story in different guises. It is to be underscored that the concepts '*Chukwu*' and '*Chi*' do not connote the same interpretation in Igbo cosmology but modern-day Christian apologists tend to collapse them into one inseparable entity. *Chi Ukwu* popularly pronounced as *Chukwu* is known and appreciated as the God Almighty and the creator of all things. *Chi*, on the other hand, is attributed to personal destiny in the Igbo cosmology. So, the modern-day Christian mistakes *Chi* for *Chukwu* in naming a child. They erroneously attributed the *Chi* affix-names to the knowledge of the Almighty being.

### Concept of *Chi* in Igbo cosmology

In Igbo cosmology, the concepts of *Chi* and *Chi Ukwu* (*Chukwu*) were well-defined and acknowledged effectively. The Igbo people refer to God Almighty as *Chukwu Okike Abiama* literally translated

as "God, the creator who knows all things" Before the advent of Christianity, *Chi* used to be considered as one of those names that did not invoke any special significance in Igbo cosmology. *Chi* is personalised or individualised. Whatever *Chi* means in Igbo cosmology is personal to the entity bearing the name that is associated with the concept. It does not refer to either the knowledge of God Almighty or the attribute of God's presence. In my own case, my mother gave me the name, '*Onye bu Chi m*' which means "who is my creator or providence". The *Chi-affix* in this name refers to a personal god, NOT an idolatrous god which Christians mistake it for. With the first-person pronoun '*m*', it means personal deity to my mother. This attribute of personality gives credence to names like *Chi abụ otu* meaning 'There is no one *Chi*'. *Chimajụ* means 'my *Chi* has said no'. *Chi m ka dibịa* means 'my *Chi* is greater than a witch doctor or a native doctor'. However, there is a strong relationship between *Chukwu* and *Chi*. The former controls the affairs of whatever happens to mankind. In this instance, it does with the *Chi* as it pleases Him. This encapsulates the fact that even the providence that the *Chi* concept

represents is a gift from the almighty *Chukwu Okike Abiama*.

The Igbo believe that *Chi* (individualised deity or personal god '**Ikenga**') can manipulate human destiny. Hence, there is a name like '*Chi m ekwela ibe ka m*' "may my *Chi* never allow my contemporaries to outshine me.. This name embodies an important prayer among Igbo people given its emphases on the belief that one's *Chi* is equally affected by the supremacy of his fellows fellow's *Chi* over him/her. The Igbo also believe in the saying '*onye kwe Chi ya ekwe*' "if one says yes, his *Chi* affirms his yes" implying that personal *Chi* is ever ready to listen to our cries and help us whenever we make any efforts. Again, the expression '*onye ka mmadu ka Chi ya*' "someone who is superior to a person is also superior to his *Chi*. All these names and statements attest to the cosmology of *Chi* in the Igbo people. It is also believed that strong and wealthy people have strong *Chi*. That accounts for why people ridicule a lazy and cowardly child with despicable comments like "*Chi gi kegburu gi ekegbu*" meaning that the *Chi* of such a lazy and cowardly child was responsible for his/her indolence. No one would dare make statements as above in

relation/comparison to the supreme God Almighty, which the Igbo refer to as '**CHIUKWU' CHUKWU**', the *big God* (P. Ndiribe, personal communication, June, 15 2023)

With the advent of Christianity (religionism) in Igboland, most Igbo have become Christians, thereby transforming the traditional meaning of *Chi* in Igbo cosmology. They elevate/transform *Chi* to a new height by referring to it as the Christian God. With this new development, a name like Onye ka *Chi* becomes "becomes "Who who is greater than God?" (Onukawa 2012) This study, therefore focuses on the concept of *Chi* and its etymology without disputing the place of God Almighty (**Chukwu**) in the affairs of men.

### **The concept of *Ọfọ* in Igbo cosmology**

A lot of works have been published on the concept of *Ọfọ* by both indigenous Igbo scholars and foreigners. Scholars such as Ejizu (1986, 1999, 2002), Nwaorgu (2002), Ndukaihe (2006), Arinze (1970), Metuh (1981), Dalziel (1937), Jeffery (1956), Green (1964) have all written extensively on the concept of *Ọfọ* from their different perspectives (See empirical section for further highlights). *Ọfọ* is a piece of carved wood that is

obtained from *Ọfọ* tree. Every Igbo person knows the tree from which the *Ọfọ* symbol emanated but the knowledge of the source does not impinge on its effectiveness because there is a spirit backing the carved wood. In pristine times, *Ọfọ* is the guardian of the people in Igbo cosmology. *Ọfọ* is a powerful concept in Igbo spirituality. It was like the gavel with which the justices of the courts or leaders of the National Assembly announce their judgments or the passage of bills into law. Truly, *Ọfọ* is like the Bible of ancient Ndị Igbo. With *Ọfọ* the people got powers of *umummuo* (spirits of ancestors) or even the Almighty God of creation, known as '*Chukwu okike Abiaama*' in Igbo, to affirm their requests. The bearer of *Ọfọ* in Igbo culture is the eldest man of the village, clan or family. In some cases, the bearer is called "*Akaji Ọfọ*" meaning the bearer of *Ọfọ*. By the name alone, the bearer must be a respecter of truth, justice, purity and authority else the *umummuo* will strike him to death. That is why we have such names like '*Nso Ọfọ*' (dreading *Ọfọ*) and '*Ọfọ bụ ike*' (*Ọfọ* is supreme).

With *Ọfọ*, many exploits are possible because one must overcome corruption to be the bearer of *Ọfọ*. Corruption works in

antithesis with *Ọfọ*. *Ọfọ* is a two-edged sword. The bearer must be careful and mindful of his responsibility at all times, else the sword will strike him hence the word '*Ọfọ ama onye ukwu*' meaning that the *Ọfọ* has no special regard for a great person

*Ọfọ* is also a staff of authority. Every agreement is sealed by hitting the *Ọfọ* on the ground. It was a respected ordinance in the Igbo cosmology. The statement '*E jiri m gi Ọfọ* - I hold *Ọfọ* against you, shows the potency of the *Ọfọ* in justice and truth hence the name '*o ji Ọfọ ga-ala*' "he who has *Ọfọ* will prevail or be vindicated ((C. Nsoffor & Nzedike, personal communication personal on July, 4 2023.)

Unfortunately, the *Ọfọ* phenomenon has been eroded by the advent of Christianity which sees and holds the assertion that *Ọfọ* is a fetish and should be done away with. This is a place where the line between pristine Igbo cosmology and modern Igbo cosmology is drawn. In pristine Igbo cosmology, *Ọfọ* is supreme but in modern Igbo cosmology, the bible is supreme. The modern Igbo people majorly practice Christianity whereas the ancient Igbo people were African Traditional Religion- faith-based. In this



study, the concept of *Ọfọ* will be discussed from an intuitive perspective and not from symbolic or physical considerations. These aspects of intuitive persuasions are where language as a carrier of intuition comes into play.

In the sections that follow, efforts will be made to outline and analyse the two Igbo personal names with *Chi* and *Ọfọ* affixes.

### Empirical review

Due to time and space, this study reviews two articles on Igbo personal names, namely Onukawa (2012) and Kalu (2022). Onukawa (2012) discusses the concepts of personal Igbo names, core values and the advent of religion in Igbo land. His research is of the view that language is indispensable as it relates to core values and personal names. The research is of the opinion that personal names are very important components of language and as such, propagate the core values. He maintains that, unfortunately, most current Igbo names like *Ikechukwu*, *Chinyere*, *Ikenna*, *Iheanyi*, *Ngọzi* etc are said to be Christian-related names and, hence do not express the core values, culture philosophy and thoughts of the Igbo people. This study differs sharply from Onukawa (2012) which argues that *Chi* in core Igbo cosmology is different

from the Christian version of *Chukwu*. *Chi*-related names had been in existence in Igbo cosmology long before the advent of Christianity in Igbo land around the eighteenth-century A.D. While Onukawa (2012) discussed extensively many versions of Igbo personal names, this current study focuses on only two Igbo personal names. So, this present study is specific in its scope unlike Onukawa (2012) which is broad in its coverage.

On the other hand, Kalu (2022) studied the *child naming practices in Ebem Ohafia Igbo*. She maintained that names serve a legal purpose and also convey social, cultural and spiritual meaning for the family and its community. She identified different cosmologies that could necessitate the type of name given to a child in the Ohafia community to include: surnames, namesakes, gender roles, market days, events, heroes, circumstances and religion. She asserts that with the introduction of Christianity and civilization, there came a shift in the belief, culture and practices of naming in Ohafia. She remarks that as a result of the intrusion of Christianity into the culture of the people, the adoption of Christian-related names and the recognition of Christian God as superior to traditional god led to a decline in

traditional names and an increase in Christian names. In as much as Kalu's (2022) study relates to this present study in the sense that it discussed names in Ọhafia-Igbo, it differs from the present study because the present study relies solely on what necessitates the given of two particular names in Igbo cosmology. The present study is not interested in the process of naming generally but is interested in the import of Igbo names with two related affixes, *Ọfọ* and *Chi*. The present study has a specific objective.

On the concepts of *Ọfọ*, some notable Igbo scholars have written extensively on the subject matter. *Ọfọ* is a staff carried by selected Igbo leaders notably patrilineal priests, kings, Onyishi and some masquerades that sometimes signify authority, the right to command administrative powers and/or the conferment of leadership and power bestowed by gods (Ndukaihe, 2006). The author is describing the symbol of or the presentation of a particular material known as *ọfọ* as a sign of personality upgrade in the Igbo cultural setup. However, the present study is about the general and intuitive connotation of *Ọfọ* as it is reflected in the naming of the people. Since the Igbo people give such names that have *ọfọ* affixes, the question

is what necessitated the concept and what interpretation can be deduced by the names. Again, how could the naming of *ọfọ* affix-names be compared with names with Chi affixes? This is where language plays a crucial role.

Ejizu (1999) documented how *Ọfọ* staff played a crucial role in installing the Igweship of the Nnewi-Chi kingdom. According to him, despite the fact that the town had a *Chi* suffix, it did not prevent the town from recognizing the *Ọfọ* shrine at the marketplace – Nkwo Nnewi by performing the ritual practices involved in the tradition of selecting their chief. Ejizu's treatise hinted at the importance of *Ọfọ* in the high performance of traditional attributes. But this present study hinges heavily on the cosmological theory of *Ọfọ* and the nexus between *Ọfọ* and names in the Igbo language. While the practices of *Ọfọ* might not be the same across Igboland, the cosmology of *Ọfọ* is the same across the Igbo language and culture and that is why an *Ọfọ* related names invoke the same semantic import within all Igbo land. In fact, *Ọfọ* affixes or morphemes do not have any variant.

Nwaorgu (2012) equated the *Ọfọ* of the Igbo people to the modern-day gavel

used by courts and legislative houses to give their verdicts and deliver their judgments. He attributed both the mace and the gavel as variants of the *Ọfọ* of the Igbo origin. He bemoaned the obscurity of the ancient *Ọfọ* symbol in the current Igbo cultural setting. He equally mentioned *Ọfọ* and *ogu* as the symbols of justice and impartiality in dispute resolution. He further traced the works of many authors among whom are Dalzel (1937), Jeffery (1956), Arinze (1970), and Metuh (1981) who saw *Ọfọ* as cultural practices and symbols. These authors were more concerned about a particular tree from which the *Ọfọ* staff was carved out. He went ahead in that treatise to discuss the differences in the nomenclatures of the trees which the *Ọfọ* was carved from. (See also Ejizu, 1986, 2002; Green, 1964). The current study has nothing to do with the role or the material that produced the *Ọfọ* staff. The focus is on the cosmological attributes of *Ọfọ* in the Igbo worldview and why the naming of a child with *Ọfọ* affix has something to do with faith and religion and whether the Chi version of *Ọfọ* does the same thing. This is where the current study differs from all others as encapsulated in their writings

### **Naming and value system in Igbo cosmology**

Cosmology in its simplest definition, is the study of origin, development, structure, history and future of the entire universe. Therefore, Igbo cosmology represents the origin of the Igbo people, their history, development and future. A value system represents what is expected or hoped for, what is required or forbidden. It is not a report of actual conduct, but it is the system of criteria by which conduct is judged and sanctions applied (see Ogbodo, 2001).

In Igbo cosmology, names are carefully selected to tell a story of an event. The event could be anything but by merely hearing the name, a real Igbo person may make a rightful conjecture or guess at what necessitated the christening of the name.

The remaining parts of this section will see to the presentation of a few selected names and their analysis. The study will provide literal transliteration of all the names followed by their standard English interpretations.

### **Data presentation and analysis**

In this section, efforts will be made to outline some of the names under the two names chosen for investigation. The names will be broken down according to

the syllabi and participles that make them up. Efforts will also be made to give a syntactic breakdown of the syllabi to enhance comprehension. Then a general English gloss will be given to reflect fairly the concept of the name as much as possible. The first subsection will outline the names while the second subsection will analyse the names.

## Names and analysis

### Names with *Ọfọ* morphemes

1. *Ọfọ* -ma

*Ọfọ* know

'*Ọfọ* knows'

2. *Ọ* - ji - *Ọfọ*

Agentive hold *Ọfọ*

'One who holds *Ọfọ* (*Ọfọ* holder)'

3. *Ọfọ*- é - fule/a

*Ọfọ* Modal lost

'May *Ọfọ* never get lost'

4. *Ọfọ* - ka - nsi

*Ọfọ* greater poison

'*Ọfọ* is greater than poison'

5. *Ọfọ* - bu - ike

*Ọfọ* Be strength

'*Ọfọ* is strength/power'

6. *Ọfọ* - du - m

*Ọfọ* lead me

'*Ọfọ* is my leader / *Ọfọ* is my supporter'

7. *Ọfọ* - na - a - goro

*Ọfọ* Aux/Be Agentive advocate

'*Ọfọ* is advocate/avenger'

8. *Ọfọ* - di - iré

*Ọfọ* Aux/Be potent

'*Ọfọ* is potent'

9. *Í* - só - *Ọfọ*

Agentive fear *Ọfọ*

'One who fears *Ọfọ*

(Dread/respect/fear of *Ọfọ*)'

10. *Ọfọ* - so - m

*Ọfọ* follow me

'*Ọfọ* follows/backs me (*Ọfọ* is my guide.)'

11. *Ọfọ* - é - gbu

*Ọfọ* Neg. kill

'*Ọfọ* does not kill (in vain)'

12. *Ọfọ* - e - bu - ka

*Ọfọ* Part big pass

'*Ọfọ* is too big'

13. *Ọfọ* - me - re

*Ọfọ* do Past

'*Ọfọ* has done'

14. *Ọfọ* - na - a - jụ  
*Ọfọ* Aux/Be Agentive ask  
 'Ọfọ is asking'

## Analysis

### a) *Oji Ọfọ* (2) 'One who holds *Ọfọ*'

In the Igbo setting, *Ọfọ* does not necessarily mean holding the staff of office as the eldest man in the village or kindred or clan or the eldest person in the family. In the Igbo setting, one who holds *Ọfọ* holds the truth, justice, purity and authority. Such can swear to any oath placed before him against any crime he was accused of. If eventually the gods of the oath he swore to spare his life because of his innocence, he would show it by giving him a male *Child* that was born to him immediately after that incident. *Oji Ọfọ* means that his innocence has vindicated him. The full version of the name is "*O ji Ọfọ ga ala*" meaning that one who holds *Ọfọ* will always triumph or prevail in any circumstance. Another variety of *Oji Ọfọ* is *Eji Ọfọ* -- meaning one who practices living by *Ọfọ*'s dictates – that is, living by the truth.

### b) *Ọfọma* (1) '*Ọfọ* knows'

The full import of the name is '*Ọfọ ma onye ji ya*'. That is, *Ọfọ* knows who is bearing it. *Ọfọ* knows those who are practising it indeed. That is to say that not all that are claiming to be righteous are righteous but the *Ọfọ* knows those that are righteous. This is in conformity with the biblical verse of 2 Timothy 2:19 which states *that the lord knows those that are his*. So if anyone is being accused falsely, the *Ọfọ* knows whether or not the person committed the crime. And whenever the *Ọfọ* vindicates the accused of all accusations, the person would show it by the name '*Ọfọma*'. Since the *Ọfọ* will not fight the fight of blame, it is the belief of the Igbo person that the *Ọfọ* vindicates the just and punishes the offender/ unjust.

### c) *Ọfọnagorọ* (7) '*Ọfọ* is an advocate'.

Ágó in Igbo means denying evil doing. When a man is accused of any crime or evil doing, he may deny the accusation and then plead/appeal to *Ọfọ* to advocate for him. If eventually, the *Ọfọ* advocates for him, he may decide to make a statement of victory. A woman who has had a delay in conception and was being accused of infidelity would resort to naming her male child *Ọfọnagorọ* when eventually she conceived and bore a

child. The *Ọfọ* has finally advocated for her by vindicating her. The same is applicable when people swear by *Ọfọ* based on any accusation and *Ọfọ* spares the life of the accused.

d) *Nsọ Ọfọ* (9)

**'Dreading/respecting/fearing Ọfọ'.**

In the pristine Igbo cosmology, *Ọfọ* was a two-edge sword that could kill both the bearer and the consuler. *Ọfọ* was not a respecter of anyone. So, people respect and fear *Ọfọ* that they would not want to approach it in a reckless manner. Nobody dared toy with *Ọfọ*. A man that committed abomination or any crime would rather confess to his crime than dare to swear by *Ọfọ*. Nobody would dare swear with *Ọfọ* if such a person knew within him that he committed the crime for which he was being accused. For the fear of *Ọfọ*, people would do anything to avoid being dragged before *Ọfọ* justice because the outcome could be disastrous. So, the fear of *Ọfọ* is the beginning of life and fulfilment.

e) *Ọfọnaajụ* (14) **'Ọfọ is asking'**

*Ọfọ* is like a deity in Igbo culture. In Igbo cosmology, it is believed that *Ọfọ* will continue to ask questions through awful

events. For instance, if one accuses another falsely and swears before *Ọfọ*, it will be a bad omen to that person because the *Ọfọ* would not only vindicate the accused but would let the accuser realise that he has sworn falsely. The *Ọfọ* cannot be intimidated and it must punish anyone who dared it. So, when a series of bad omens that showed that *Ọfọ* had reacted angrily to false accusation begins to manifest, the one accused falsely would notice it and acknowledge it by confessing to the crime. This can be demonstrated through the personal name he gives to his newly born son. The name *Ọfọnaajụ* is a subtle reminder to the accuser that the punishment is not yet over until he makes a statement of confession that he accused someone falsely.

f) *Ọfọegbu* (11) **'Ọfọ does not kill'**

The name suggests that the *Ọfọ* does not kill recklessly. For one to be killed by the *Ọfọ*, such a person must have defied the earth goddess and the custom of the people. On the other hand, if one was accused falsely and was forced to swear with the *Ọfọ*, one can also give his child the name *Ọfọegbu* to show his innocence in the accusation levelled against him. *Ọfọegbu* does not imply that the *Ọfọ*

cannot kill but that the *Ọfọ* can never kill the innocent.

g) *Ọfọbụike* (5) '*Ọfọ* is strength'

In the pristine Igbo era, some strong men display their charms and other protective amulets. They attribute their power and strength to these relics. Some also believe that righteousness alone is a bigger protection. These people always made their defence with their *Ọfọ* which was not symbolised by any physical ornaments but by their righteousness, purity and truth. So, if any were threatened with their medicine or other physical ornaments, they would challenge them with their faith in their wholesome righteous lives. When finally, they survive the trap of evil people, they would show it with the name *Ọfọbụike* meaning that their strength came from their inner purity, justice and righteousness.

**Names with *Chi* morphemes**

As we have mentioned in Section 2.2. above, the term *Chi* has been misconstrued due to religionism (Christianity). The Christian faith has taken over the pristine Igbo belief system. The implication of the above is that there are numerous names around the *Chi* concept that have departed from the

original concept as enumerated in section 2.2. Names with *Chi* morphemes have increased exponentially so it will be impossible to compile all in this study. In this study, we will select a few for our analysis.

15. *Chi* –na – a- gọrọ

*Chi* Aux Agentive advocate

'*Chi* is an advocate/ avenger'

16. *Chi* – ka – dibia

*Chi* greater than a doctor

'*Chi* is greater / stronger than a native doctor'

17. *Ọlụ* – *Chi*

Work *Chi*

'Work of *Chi*'

18. Onyinye – *Chi*

Gift *Chi*

'Gift of *Chi*'

19. *Chi* – ga – e – me – zu

*Chi* Aux Part do complete

'*Chi* will do all'

20. *Chi* – ma

*Chi* know

'*Chi* knows'

21. Onye – bụ – *Chi*

Interrog. Be *Chi*

'Who is *Chi*'

22. *Chi* - na - a - sa  
*Chi* Aux Part answer  
 'Chi answers/ responds'

23. A - bu - m - *Chi*  
 Part Interrog. me *Chi*  
 'Am I *Chi*'

24. *Chi* - zu - ru - òkè  
*Chi* complete perfect share  
 'Chi is perfectly complete/enough'

25. *Chi* - ji - ndụ  
*Chi* hold life  
 'Chi holds life / Life is in the hands of *Chi*'

26. *Chi*- bu - ike  
*Chi* Be strnght  
*Chi* is strong

27. *chi* - e - gbu  
*Chi* affix/Neg kill  
*Chi* does not kill

28. *Chi* - na - a - jụ  
*Chi* Aux Part ask  
*Chi* is asking

## Analysis

### h) *Chinaagọrọ* (15) '*Chi* is advocate/avenger'

Like *Ọfọnaagọrọ* above, *Chinaagọrọ* shows that the personal *Chi* of the individual had avenged him/her of some accusations levelled against him/her in the past. In fact, these days of religionism, the name depicts 'God's intervention' in the life of anyone who needs a child to show that the insinuation around his/her life is not true. That is, my *Chi* has shown that I am innocent of their accusation since there is nothing to swear about.

### i) *AbụmChi* (23) '*Am I Chi*'?

This is a direct question of a woman who had been producing a particular sex of children. In Igbo traditional society, a woman is expected to bear both female and male children for her husband. When she could not give birth to one of these genders she would become frustrated, especially after much effort. In her frustration and disgust, she names the child which she had wanted to be a different gender *AbụmChi* inferring that the decision of the sex of any child is exclusively a prerequisite for her *Chi* to determine. She had wished for a female child but her *Chi* decided otherwise. The



issue of "choose the sex of your baby" is not popular among Igbo people, educated elite inclusive.

j) *Chinaasa* (22) '**Chi answers**'

'*Chinaasa okwu*' means that *Chi* responds to the words of men. In other words, *Chi* hears whatever we say to our fellow neighbours. When one is ridiculed for one misfortune or the other, such one in most cases would respond through the names given to one's child. It is common in a polygamous family where a co-wife taunts the other because of some hardship she experiences or a relative taunts someone because of the hardship he is going through. The victim may have borne a negative reproach, more especially that of childlessness, for a long time before coming out of it. By naming the child *Chinaasa* (for the case of childlessness), s/he has made a statement that her *Chi* has indeed responded and answered his mockers. The name *Chinaasa* is a direct lampoon to somebody somewhere.

k.) *OnyebuChi* (21) '**Who is Chi?**'

The name is a question of who will determine what *Chi* did not determine for one. It is a kind of lampoon where a

woman is indirectly telling her adversaries that they can never decide her fate in life. In my own case, my mother added '*m*' (me) to the name making it *OnyebuChim* 'who is my *Chi*?'. She told a story of the hardship she experienced when she was pregnant and how people who are related to her husband and whom her husband helped when they were economically buoyant abandoned her in her critical time of need. By the name, she made a definite statement that only her *Chi* or providence decides her destiny and not those people who thought that she could not survive. *OnyebuChi* implies that it is only your *Chi* who is in the position to determine your fate and not a mortal being.

l.) *Chizuruoke* (24) '**Chi is complete/enough**'

The name suggests absolute faith in one's *Chi*. My little interview with people bearing the name revealed that they experienced some uneasiness in childbearing. There were some forms of misfortune and sometimes prolonged delay in conception. Some women may have the misfortune of *stillbirth* that rendered them hopeless. If eventually fate smiles on her and she bears a child the name she gives to the child will likely

reflect her experiences. This name will tell the world that the birth of the child was preceded as it were, by miscarriages, still-birth and barrenness. My personal investigation showed that people who gave this name are hardly bothered about not having more children; they are very well pleased with the ones they have. My investigation also reveals that this name is common among families that have only one child or few children – two at most.

**m.) Chijindu (25) 'Chi holds life / Life is in the hands of Chi'**

In the Igbo cosmology, nothing happens without one's *Chi* endorsing it. *Chijindu* means that it is only *Chi* that can give or take life. By implication, some who did not have children believed that their *Chi* refused them children. Those who experience childlessness attributed them to what their *Chi* had decided for them. Many whose children died after birth believed that their *Chi* took the children away. If anything suggested otherwise as to why they were experiencing some unpleasant misfortunes, they would jettison the opinion and rely completely on the belief that no one else could have powers over them if their *Chi* did not accede to that. When eventually they have a child, they would like to make a

statement that confirms their faith in their *Chi*. To these people, everything starts and ends with their *Chi* as it concerns life and living.

**n.) Chibuike (26) Chi is strong**

In the modern Igbo era, Chibuike has replaced the ancient *Ofọbuike* only in nomenclature but the deep-rooted story that necessitates the naming remains unchanged. Instead of boasting about the strength that emanates from loyalty to *Ofọ*, the attention has shifted to the unseen being, *Chi* who is seen as very powerful. In summary, they see their strength as coming from their *Chi*, either as their providence or erroneously to the almightiness of God.

**Implication**

Igbo cosmology means how the Igbo people perceive, conceive and contemplate their universe. It is the lens through which they see their reality, which affects their worldview and core value system. The implication of this is that the Igbo people give names according to their core values. In the pristine Igbo world, names are given to make a statement about life experiences. It is no longer so in this era of religionism

where names are given to show religious commitment or fulfill a religious duty.

The two names chosen for this study have close semantic affinities in the Igbo pristine era as the study has already established. The etymology of the two names shows that they bear semantic semblances. Take for instance names like: *Ọfonaagorọ* -- *Chinaagorọ*; *Ọfoma* – *Chima*; *Ọfonaaza* – *Chinaaza*; *Ọfoka* – *Chika*; *Ọfonaedu* – *Chinaedu*; *Ọfodum* – *Chidum*; *Ọfọsom* – *Chisom*; *Ọfọbuka* – *Chiebuka*; *Ọfodebere* – *Chidebere*; *Ọfọbuike* – *Chibuike*; *Ọfonaenye* -- *Chinaenye* etc tell similar stories employing different nomenclatures. There is, however, a slight shift in the modern Igbo worldview where *Chi* is presently mistaken for **Chukwu** (Almighty GOD) instead of the personal providence that our ancestors had identified it to be.

The result is that people who give the same names as others had similar experiences. The experience of our non-Christian ancestors who christened their children *Ọfọ*-related names is almost exactly the same as Igbo Christians who christened their children *Chi*-prefixed or *Chi*-related names. The implication is that *Ọfọ*-related names are on the decline whereas the *Chi*-related names are on a

steady rise. For a modern Igbo man who is a Christian to christen his/her child any *Ọfọ*-related name would suggest that the faith of the parents in God is weak. In fact, a parent cannot stand boldly before a priest or a pastor during baptism or dedication to announce any *Ọfọ*-related name as the name of his/her child to the priest or pastor in charge. If the parents of the child, for instance, tell the priest that the name of the child is **Ọfobuike** the priest or the pastor will, out of his own power and volition, change the name to either **Chibuike** or **Chukwubuike**. In the pristine Igbo era, *Ọfọ* signified righteousness and purity, but in the modern Igbo world *Ọfọ* represents *idol worship* and no Christian would have anything to do with *Ọfọ*-related names (Ndubuisi Ahamefula personal communication on August, 7 2023).

*Chi*, on the other hand, is seen as a means of proclaiming one's faith in God. The Igbo Christian faithful are happy to be associated with *Chi*-related names. So, a name like *Chimdindu*, would be interpreted as 'my God (Almighty) is alive instead of 'my *Chi* is alive'. This is religious hypocrisy because God Almighty cannot be personalised. He is the God of the whole universe. One of those names

that have gained universal currency is *Chimamanda*, meaning "my *Chi* will never fail". Since the name is associated with a literary icon, many people have adopted it and Christianised it to mean "My God (Almighty) will never fail" which is not the meaning in Igbo culture. *My* in that name is personal and should be an attribute to one's personal providence and not God Almighty (see 2.2. above).

### Conclusion

The study investigated the intricate relationship existing among language, personal names and Igbo cultural beliefs. The study is of the opinion that language is a powerful tool of expression and communication. It is the view of the paper that without language, the existence of humans will be no different from other lower animals. The paper posits that language expresses the thoughts, impulses and intents of man on earth. Culture, on the other hand, is the totality of people's way of life and their total worldview. Culture is also reflected through personal names. Therefore, there are intertwined relationships existing among language, culture and personal names in Igbo.

Personal names are tags by which an individual is known and identified. In the

Igbo cosmology, personal names are the expressive vehicles that show what really necessitated the particular name.

Personal name tells stories that the giver of the name wanted all to hear. It could be a story of events like accusation, hardship, victory, success, misfortune, joy, pain, depression etc. Personal name in Igbo expresses lots of concepts like virtue, core value, aesthetics, hard work, moral acceptability, life, worldview creation and even the essence of life (see Onukawa, 2012)

The study focuses on the etymology of the two personal names in Igbo cosmology -- *Ọfọ* and *Chi*-related names. The study also establishes that the two names represent the two most powerful cosmic influences in the Igbo people's worldview. The study also establishes that the two names are mutually exclusive. Etymologically, the two names highlight belief in the Igbo pristine system. Sometimes the two names tell the same stories using different nomenclatures. The study also found that the *Ọfọ* related names are on the decline due to the effect of Christianity whereas the *Chi*-related names are on the steady rise as a result of the same phenomenon of religionism (Christianity).

Finally, the study concludes that *Ọfọ* was a symbol of righteousness, purity and justice and had nothing to do with idolatry. *Chi*, on the other hand, is not the God Almighty but the personal god (providence, personal spirit '**Ikenga**') like the guardian angel that God Almighty gives to every individual and it should not be religionised or demonised.

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