



GOMBE SAVANNAH

**JOURNAL OF LANGUAGE, LITERATURE AND
COMMUNICATION STUDIES (GOSAJOLLCOS)**



**DEPARTMENT OF LANGUAGES
AND LINGUISTICS
GOMBE STATE UNIVERSITY**

**Volume 6 Number 1
JUNE, 2025**



Savannah Journal of Language, Literature and Communication Studies (SAJOLLCOS)
Vol. 6 No. 1: June, 2025 — ISSN: 2787-0286 & 2811-2261 (Online & Print)

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VOLUME 6, NO. 1, JUNE 2025

ISSN: ONLINE: 2811-2261, PRINT: 2787-0286

**A Publication of Department of Languages and Linguistics
Gombe State University, Gombe State**

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(SAJOLLCOS) Gombe State University, Gombe State. Volume 6, No. 1 June, 2025.



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Gombe State University,
Tudun-wada Jauro Abare,
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ISSN: 2787-0286 Print & 2811-2261 Online

Printed in Nigeria @Six-Sweet Printers and Publishers

GSU, Gombe, Gombe State.

Phone No: +2348039511789

E-mail: alameenalfira@gmail.com

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Gombe Savannah Journal of Language, Literature and Communication Studies (GOSAJOLLCOS) is a peer-reviewed journal of the Department of English, Gombe State University. The journal is committed to the development of communication arts through researches in Language, Linguistics, Literature, Theatre Arts, Cultural Studies, Creative Arts, Media and Communication Studies. It has both print and online versions. The Editorial board hereby calls for thoroughly researched papers and articles on the subject areas already mentioned. Submissions of papers are accepted all year round but publication is expected to be done in May/June annually. All manuscripts should be accompanied with the sum of ten thousand (**₦10,000**) naira only. On acceptance of any manuscript, contributors will pay the sum of twenty five thousand (25,000) naira only as publication fee.



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For further enquiries, please contact: Editor-in-Chief

SAJOLLCOS, HOD's Office,

Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences Gombe State University, Gombe

sajollicos@gsu.edu.ng,

C/o: amgombe2@gsu.edu.ng



LIST OF CONTRIBUTORS

Mariam Titilope Olugbodi

Department of English and Linguistics, Faculty of Arts, Kwara State University, Malete, Nigeria.
mariam.gobir@kwasu.edu.ng

Olanike Olaleru

Department of English and Linguistics, Faculty of Arts, Kwara State University, Malete, Nigeria.
olanike.olaleru@kwasu.edu.ng

Anthonia Elejo Dugga

Department of Linguistics and Nigerian Languages, University of Jos, Jos, Plateau State

Maimuna Muhammad Kabir

Hausa Depaertment, Yusuf Maitama Sule, University of Education, Kano State.
maimunatukabirwali@gmail.com

Fauziyya Muhammad Hassan

Hausa Depaertment, Yusuf Maitama Sule, University of Education, Kano State.
Fauziyyahassan46@gmail.com

Dorcas Omaojo Idakwo

Department of English and Literary Studies, Federal University Lokoja, Nigeria.
dorcasogwo606@gmail.com

Ezekiel Olajimbiti Opeyemi

Department of English and Literary Studies, Federal University Lokoja, Nigeria.
opebukola56@gmail.com

Peter Ochefu Okpeh

Department of English and Literary Studies, Federal University Lokoja, Nigeria.
peter.okpeh@fulokoja.edu.ng

Seini Bello

Department of French, Federal College of Education, Yola.
Seinibello1559@gmail.com

Jibrilla Garba

Department of Hausa, Federal College of Education, Yola
garba.jibrilla@fceyola.edu.ng

Obidah Daniel

Department of French, Federal College of Education, Yola.
obidah0164@gmail.com

Atteh, Femi Yinka

Department of Performing Arts, Faculty of Arts, University of Ilorin, Nigeria
atteh.fy@unilorin.edu.ng

Yaouba Ousmanou

Department of French, Federal College of Education, Yola
usmanyauaba@gmail.com

Abubakar Muhammad Baba

Department Of French, Federal College of Education, Yola
auwalbappa746@gmail.com

Seini Bello

Department of French, Federal College of Education, Yola
seinibello1559@gmail.com



Shema'u Abubakar Umar

Department of General Studies, Isa
Mustapha Agwai I Polytechnic, Lafia -
Nasarawa State
shemauari@gmail.com

Muntari Babangida

Federal Polytechnic Daura, Katsina
State
muntaribabangida4@gmail.com

Bamidele Ibiyemi Lydia

Federal University of Transportation,
Daura, Katsina State, Department of
General Studies
lydiabamidele@ymail.com

Esther Nuhu Samuel

Federal Polytechnic Daura, Katsina
State
esthersamuelamba@gmail.com

Kwasau Blessing Shiyin

Federal Polytechnic Daura, Katsina
State
kwasau@fedpolydaura.edu.ng

Ngor, Cornelius Iko-awaji

Department of English and
Communication Arts
Ignatius Ajuru University of
Education, Rumuolumeni Port
Harcourt Nigeria.
ngorc89@gmail.com

Dorcas Chide Abdulsalam (PhD Student)

Department of English and Drama,
Kaduna State University, Kaduna
cdorcasabdulsami@gmail.com

Oladele John Toluhi

Department of English Literary
Studies, Federal University Lokoja
oladeletoluhi@gmail.com

Peter Ochefu Okpeh

Department of English Literary
Studies, Federal University Lokoja
Peter.okpeh@fulokoja.edu.ng

Muhammad Muhammad

Department of English and European
Languages, Kano State College of
Education and Preliminary Studies
muhd4muhd@gmail.com

TELLA Samson Adekunle

Department of English and
Linguistics, Kwara State University,
Malete
Samson.tella@kwasu.edu.ng

Ridwan Akinkunmi RABIU

Department of English and
Linguistics, Kwara State University,
Malete
ridwan.rabiu@kwasu.edu.ng

Nafisat Bolanle AIYELABEGAN

Department of English and
Linguistics, Kwara State University,
Malete
nafisat.aiyelabegan@kwasu.edu.ng

Mustapha Ibrahim Garba

Department of English & Linguistics,
Federal University Dutse
Igmustapha6@gmail.com

Abubakar Isa Abubakar

Ministry for Higher Education,
Science & Technology Dutse – Jigawa
abubakarabubakarb@gmail.com

Abdullahi Usman Garko

Department of English and
Linguistics Gombe State
augarko@gmail.com



Suku Hyellamada Kenan

Department of Languages and
Linguistics, Gombe State University,
hyellassuku@gsu.edu/hyellawilbe@gmail.com

Juilet Aluke

Department of Languages and
Linguistics, Gombe State University.

Taiwo Mary Akanmu

Department of English and Literary
Studies, Faculty of Arts, Kwara State
University, Malete, Nigeria.
taiwoakanmu155@gmail.com

Olanike Olaleru

Department of English and Literary
Studies, Faculty of Arts, Kwara State
University, Malete, Nigeria.
olanike.olaleru@kwasu.edu.ng

Mariam Titilope Olugbodi

Department of English and Literary
Studies, Faculty of Arts, Kwara State
University, Malete, Nigeria.
mariam.gobir@kwasu.edu.ng

Aliyu Haruna Muhammad

Directorate of General Studies,
Abubakar Tafawa Balewa University
P.M.B. 0248, Bauchi- Nigeria
aliyuharuna7@gmail.com

Felix Oluwabukola Oladeji

Department of English, Faculty of
Arts., University of Ilorin, Ilorin,
Nigeria.
Oladejifelix94@gmail.com

Rabi Bashir Ph.D

Department Of Nigerian Languages
And Linguistics, Kaduna State
University, Kaduna.
rabiubashi@kasu.edu.ng

Dr. David Mikailu

Department of English, University of
Abuja
davidmikailu@yahoo.com

Asana Kehinde Alemede

Department of English & Literary
Studies, Federal University Lokoja,
Kogi State, Nigeria
alemsjnr@gmail.com

Ifeyinwa Genevieve Okolo

Department of English & Literary
Studies, Federal University Lokoja,
Kogi State, Nigeria
ifeyinwaokolo@fulokoja.edu.ng

Oluwatoyin Barnabas

Department of English & Literary
Studies, Federal University Lokoja,
Kogi State, Nigeria
oluwabar@yahoo.com

Idowu, Stephen Olufemi

Department of English Education,
Lagos State University of Education,
Oto/Ijanikin, Lagos State, Nigeria.
idowuos@lasued.edu.ng

Azeez, Abimbola

Department of English Education,
Lagos State University of Education,
Oto/Ijanikin, Lagos State, Nigeria.
azeezas@lasued.edu.ng

Vivian Chukwu

Department of English and Literary
Studies at Federal University Lokoja

Ifeyinwa Genevieve Okolo

Department of English and Literary
Studies at Federal University Lokoja
ifeyinwaokolo@fulokoja.edu.ng



Abba Abba

Department of English and Literary
Studies at Federal University Lokoja
abba.abba@fulokoja.edu.ng

Okache C. Odey

Department of English & Literature,
Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka
okacheodey@yahoo.com

Peace Chinenye Chidolue

Department of Igbo, Federal College
of Education, Yola
Chidolue.pc@fceyola.edu.ng

Suwaiba Mohammed, Ph.D

Department of Languages and
Linguistics, Gombe State University

Fatima Muhammad

Department of Languages and
Linguistics, Gombe State University
fatimam@gsu.edu.ng

YOHANNA, Gilamdo Kwem

Department of English and Literary
Studies, Ahmadu Bello University,
Zaria
gilamdokwemyohanna@gmail.com

SAMUEL, Joy

Department of English and Literary
Studies, Ahmadu Bello University,
Zaria.
joysammy68@gmail.com

Joshua, Josephine

School of Languages, Department of
English, Adamawa State College of
Education, Hong
Josephinejoshua06@gmail.com

Dathini Yinasimma Bright

School of Languages, Department of
English, Adamawa State College of
Education, Hong
dathinibright@gmail.com

Ali Baba Dada

Department of English and Literary
Studies, University of Maiduguri.
alibdhadha@gmail.com

Ben Ita Odeba

Department of Mass Communication,
Bingham University, Karu, Nasarawa
State, Nigeria
benjamin.odeba@binghamuni.edu.ng

Jummai Mbuzi Waziri

Department of Mass Communication,
Bingham University, Karu, Nasarawa
State, Nigeria
jummaiwaziri74@gmail.com

Desmond Onyemechi Okocha, PhD

Department of Mass Communication,
Bingham University, Karu, Nasarawa
State, Nigeria.
desmondodoo@yahoo.com

Akuta Michelle Idialu

Department of Mass Communication,
Faculty of Communication and Media
Studies, Bingham University, Karu,
Nasarawa State
gamboakutamichelle@gmail.com

Farouk Umar Mohammed

Department of Mass Communication,
Faculty of Communication and Media
Studies, Bingham University, Karu,
Nasarawa State
faroukmohammmed@gmail.com



Ruth Barnabas

Department of Mass Communication,
Faculty of Communication and Media
Studies, Bingham University, Karu,
Nasarawa State, Nigeria

Bridget Azenda

Department of Mass Communication,
Faculty of Communication and Media
Studies, Bingham University, Karu,
Nasarawa State, Nigeria

Christopher Anyokwu, PhD

University of Lagos

SAKA, Idayat Oyenike

Department of Yoruba, Adeyemi
Federal University of Education,
Ondo, Ondo State, Nigeria
ridahtullahi@gmail.com

FARINDE, Muibat Abiola

Department of Yoruba, Adeyemi
Federal University of Education,
Ondo, Ondo State, Nigeria
farindemuibat@gmail.com

Prof. Nesther Nachafia Alu

Department of English, University of
Jos, Nigeria
nestherta@gmail.com

Sani, Sylvia

Department of English, University of
Jos, Nigeria
nyuyihyfsylvia@gmail.com

Melchizedec James Onobe, PhD

Department of Mass Communication,
Faculty of Communication and Media
Studies, Bingham University, Karu,
Nasarawa State, Nigeria

Fasehun Mercy Ayò

fasehunmercy@yahoo.com
Faculty Of Arts, Department Of
Yorùbá, Adéyemí Federal University
Of Education, Oñdó

Òjó Ìlúfóyè Fáwólé

ilufoye@gmail.com
Faculty Of Arts, Department Of
Yorùbá, Adéyemí Federal University
Of Education, Oñdó

Ibrahim Fatima Usman

Department of Languages and
Linguistics, Gombe State University
phartimarhibrahim@gmail.com

Emoruwa, Oluwatoyin Titilayo

Adeyemi Federal University of
Education, Ondo, Ondo State
tititoyin@gmail.com

Melchizedec James Onobe, PhD;

Department of Mass Communication,
Faculty of Communication and Media
Studies Bingham University, Karu,
Nasarawa State, Nigeria

Richard Okujeni, PhD

Department of Mass Communication,
Faculty of Communication and Media
Studies Bingham University, Karu,
Nasarawa State, Nigeria

Emoruwa, Oluwatoyin Titilayo

Adeyemi Federal University of
Education, Ondo, Ondo State
tititoyin@gmail.com

Aliyu Sambo Alhassan

Department of English and
Linguistics, Federal University Dutse,
Jigawa State.
asambo1010@gmail.com



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Variations in the Representations of the Igbo Belief in Chi in Chigozie Obioma's *An Orchestra of Minorities*

Vivian Chukwu

Department of English and Literary Studies, Federal University Lokoja
Viviangreat08@gmail.com

Ifeyinwa Genevieve Okolo

ifeyinwaokolo@fulokoja.edu.ng

Department of English and Literary Studies, Federal University Lokoja

And

Abba Abba

abba.abba@fulokoja.edu.ng

Department of English and Literary Studies, Federal University Lokoja

Abstract

*The representation of Igbo beliefs in literature often aligns with established sociological interpretations, yet contemporary writers frequently reimagine these beliefs, introducing variations that diverge from traditional depictions. Chigozie Obioma's *An Orchestra of Minorities* exemplifies such reinterpretations, offering innovative portrayals of the Igbo belief in chi. The study adopts a close reading of the novel, a sociological approach and postcolonial cultural theory in its analysis of the variations of Igbo beliefs in the novel. In Chigozie Obioma's *An Orchestra of Minorities*, the chi assumes an active role as it is the narrator that speaks to the readers and it also takes part in the reincarnation process by retrieving an ancestral spirit from the land of the dead before conception, a significant departure from established beliefs. These reimaginings challenge rigid conceptual boundaries, fostering creativity, enhancing the relatability of indigenous spirituality, and offering an Afrocentric perspective on metaphysical structures. In conclusion, such reimaginings contribute to a more distinct and dynamic understanding of Igbo cosmology within contemporary literature.*

Keywords: Variations, hybridity, indigenous Igbo spirituality, reimaginings

Introduction

There is an unconscious understanding of what people from a particular geographical location know something to be and that is where Ferdinand De Saussure's concept of "signifier and the signified" comes in, as people consciously and unconsciously know

that "book" is a signifier of an actual book which is the signified. But, when someone uses the sign "booktred" to signify an actual book, therein lies the variation because it is different from what a people know a book to be. Variation refers to a change, difference, or deviation from a norm or standard, often



emphasizing the process or degree of difference. Variations have been studied for a long time in literature; that is why in 1969, Geoffrey Leach discovered nine types of variations in his study of literary work. In world literature, variations in literary representations have been observed and that brought about the concept of variation theory, developed by Cao Shunqing. It explores how literary texts undergo transformations when translated into different languages.

The alterations and deviations that give rise to variation may be regarded as intentional, as literary writers are entitled to exercise poetic license. At the beginning of *An Orchestra of Minorities*, Obioma outlines the Igbo cosmological system as articulated by Achebe and other authoritative figures; however, he consciously departs from these established representations, a choice facilitated by the creative liberties afforded by poetic license.

Literature Review

Stuart Hall opines that representation means using language to say something meaningfully or to represent the world meaningfully to other people (1). He further states that language expresses what the writer wants to say (2). This underscores the fact that language can be used to express the intention, and imaginations of the writer. Language is magical as it can create something new from the old. An example is afrofuturism and Africanfuturism where history is represented differently.

Belief refers to the conviction or acceptance that a concept or

phenomenon is true or exists, often without the need for empirical evidence. Beliefs can be religious, philosophical, or cultural in nature and they represent the principles or ideas that individuals or communities hold firmly, even in the absence of verifiable proof. Igbo beliefs are those beliefs peculiar to Igbo people. Some of their beliefs include beliefs in reincarnation, Ala the earth goddess, ogbanje, ancestor worship and chi. This discourse focuses on the belief in chi.

The chi in Igbo cosmology is an individual's personal god. That means that the chi in Igbo cosmology is distinct to each individual. However, Achebe claims that chi has two meanings in Igbo cosmology as he states:

There are two clearly distinct meanings of the word chi in Igbo cosmology, First is often translated as God, guardian angel, personal spirit, soul etc. while the second meaning is day but it is mostly commonly used for those transitional period between day and night or night and day(131).

This assertion means that chi in Igbo cosmology means two different things. The major emphasis in this discourse will be that of chi as a guardian spirit.

Achebe also asserts that a chi in a more general way may visualize a person's other identity in the spirit land, his spirit being complementing his terrestrial human being: for



nothing can stand alone, there must always be another thing standing beside it" (131). He went further to state that "a person's chi resides within the sun or at least passes through it to visit the world" (135). His assertion means that a person's chi (everybody has a chi in Igbo cosmology) is a person's representative in the spiritual world and that the chi comes through the sun to earth. The high regard that the Igbo people have for the chi reflect in the kind of names they give their children like "Munachimso" meaning "my chi is with me on the journey," "Chiamaka" meaning "my chi is good", and "Chidimma" which means "chi is good". The meaning of "Chinonso" is "my chi is very close" and it is ironic that the chi represented in Obioma's *An Orchestra of Minorities* remains ever close yet, life remains unjust to the very individual whose chi is near. The portrayals of the chi will be analyzed to highlight points of divergence and variations in its representations.

Achebe expands on this idea with a proverb that states "no matter how many divinities sit together to plot a man's ruin, it will come to nothing unless his chi is there among them. Clearly, a man's chi has unprecedented veto powers over a man's destiny" (135). The Igbo proverb (no matter how many divinities sit together to plot a man's ruin, it will come to nothing unless his chi is there among them. Clearly, a man's chi has unprecedented veto powers over a man's destiny) reiterated by Achebe alludes to the chi as possessing distinct powers, suggesting that the chi in its spiritual

significance, holds the ability to influence and shape individual destinies. Moreso, the following names show that the chi in Igbo cosmology has powers, "chikadibiaagwondioria" which means that "chi heals better than native doctors", then "Chisom" which means "chi is beside me". It is when a powerful person stands with another that the latter finds a sense of peace, able to confidently declare, "Someone is beside me." The name reflects the trust placed in the chi's strength and the belief that his presence offers protection and security.

However, it is believed that someone can have a bad "chi" as Achebe asserts "A man of good character can have a bad chi" (137). In this context, being bad is in regards to failure and success as Achebe clarifies thus "It is concerned with success or failures than righteousness and wickedness" (137). Bartholomew Abanuka posits that,

Chi stands for the principle of identity and by this performs a metaphysical but more precisely ontological function. Second, chi stands for the principle of uniqueness and by this it becomes "the ground of epistemology" Third, chi in subsidiary principle in the sense of being a subordinating or casual principle (9).

This connotes that the chi makes people who they are and it makes



each person distinct and unique which helps one to recognize and know oneself and others, shapes and affect other principles. "Chi is the spirit force behind individuals" (Christian O. Ole, 75). He also asserts that the chi is responsible for a person's everyday activities and takes over the guardianship of a person from the day of a person's conception in the womb (Ole, 78). This suggests that from birth, a person's chi guides and protects him till the person's last breath.

"Chi", according to Kingsley Ugwu, "is an individual's guiding god" (n.p). A chi is meant to guide, protect and help a host in every way possible. A chi can guide but not force a host to do things against their will. Moreso, Princewill Uzochukwu also asserts that "chi is the mediator and messenger of the Supreme God Chukwu..." (4). This denotes that the chi is the intermediary between Chukwu and man. The chi is the spokesman of man. This study will explore the variations in the representation of the Igbo belief in chi in Obioma's *An Orchestra of Minorities*.

This study examines the representation of the Igbo belief in chi and how the representation has been expanded and notes the difference in the portrayals of the belief in Obioma's *An Orchestra of Minorities*.

Methodology

The study adopts a close reading of the novel and a sociological approach in its analysis of the variations of Igbo beliefs. Chigozie Obioma's *An Orchestra of Minorities* is read

against the backdrop of cultural beliefs and practices of the Igbo people as established in socio-anthropological texts and older novels that focus on the Igbo people and their beliefs.

Theoretical Framework

Postcolonial literary theory emphasizes the cultural identity of colonized people. It studies how culture influences power dynamics. Postcolonial cultural theory attacks oppression and resists dominating cultures and allows every culture to express themselves. It emphasizes how cultures uphold power structure and identities. Cultural theories make room for literary works to be read from cultural perspective just like Chigozie Obioma's *An Orchestra of Minorities* is read from a cultural perspective. It also helps to salvage and revive the culture of the colonized through documentation of their cultures in literary works.

A central concern of postcolonial theory is the refusal to cast non-Western cultures as the "Other." This study foregrounds how the novels challenge dominant cultural assumptions by presenting Igbo beliefs. Through this lens, this study will explore how Obioma engages with the complexities of cultural hybridity and liminality as discussed by Homi K. Bhabha not as a site of loss, but as a dynamic space where tradition and modernity interacts.



The Representation of Chi in *An Orchestra of Minorities*

The chi in Igbo cosmology is a person's guiding spirit and personal deity. In Chigozie Obioma's *An Orchestra of Minorities*, the chi is uniquely portrayed as the first person narrator as the use of the pronoun "I" is evident:

I stand before you here in the magnificent court of Bechukwu, in Eluigwe, the land of eternal, luminous light, where the perpetual song of the flute serenades the air like other guardian spirits, I have gone to uwa in many cycles of reincarnations, inhabiting a freshly created body each time (13).

Through the unique narrative perspective of the chi, the chi functions as both narrator and witness. Obioma's use of the chi is not just a stylistic choice but an act of Eurocentric resistance, reclaiming and legitimizing indigenous Igbo worldviews. In the excerpt above, the chi is before Chukwu and is about to narrate the ordeals of its host since it is his representative in the spirit world as Chinua Achebe rightly alludes to when he posits that "A person's chi is his identity in the spirit land (31). It portrays a non Western cosmological order that believes in individuality but in Afro centrism that believes in duality and

projecting the culture of the post colonial other.

More so, In *An Orchestra of Minorities*, Chigozie Obioma depicts the chi as an intercessor deeply concerned about its host, Chinonso. The chi tirelessly presents Chinonso's case before Chukwu, seeking to elicit divine pity. One way it does this is by recounting the transformative power of music on Chinonso's consciousness, particularly when he is angry: "Egbunu, the power of music on the consciousness of man cannot be lightly observed... How true Oseburuwa! For a man could be in a state of profound sadness" (249). Here, the chi acts as an intermediary between Chukwu and Chinonso, narrating his struggles and emotions to Chukwu. As part of this narration, the chi highlights a pivotal moment in Chinonso's love story with Ndali when, after much persuasion, she finally sings for him. This moment is significant because it marks the beginning of Chinonso's deep emotional attachment to Ndali, leading him to sacrifice everything for their relationship. Music in Igbo culture is deeply intertwined with communal life, serving both therapeutic and ritualistic purposes. Through this, Obioma invokes the postcolonial concept of otherness, asserting Igbo cultural identity in contrast to Western perspectives. The chi, an integral part of Igbo cosmology, embodies a belief system where a spiritual guide looks out for an individual's best interests, even when the host is unaware or physically absent. By centering the role of the chi, Obioma reclaims and



reinforces Igbo spirituality, offering a counter-narrative to Western rationalism.

Furthermore, the chi is depicted as an intrinsic and inseparable aspect of human existence. As Ebony Uchenna Ananambu asserts that “every individual is assigned a chi at birth by the supreme deity, and this spiritual entity remains with them throughout their lifetime” (86). The absence of the chi renders the host vulnerable, projecting its indispensable role in Igbo cosmology as a vital force necessary for both physical and spiritual well-being. The chi in *An Orchestra of Minorities* explains further:

That is why it is considered ill advised for a chi to leave the body of its host or step faraway from a host who is at sleep or in an unconscious state. some of these discarnate beings especially the evil spirits even sometimes try to over power a present chi or ones who have gone out on a consultation on behalf of their host. That is why you, Chukwu, warn us against such journeys (17).

The excerpt above suggests that an individual's well-being, both physically and spiritually, is dependent upon the constant presence and protection of their chi. The warning against the chi abandoning its host underscores the belief that without it, a person becomes vulnerable to external

spiritual forces, particularly hostile and evil entities. This portrayal positions the chi not merely as a guiding force but as an essential presence that ensures stability and protection. In Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, Okonkwo is believed to have a good chi, despite his relentless hard work, while Ekwefi is thought to possess a bad chi due to the loss of her children. Unoka, though impoverished, is still depicted as having a good chi because, as Achebe states, “onyekwe, chi ya ekwe” meaning that when a person agrees to act, their chi aligns with them. However, Achebe's narrative also highlights that the chi does not bear sole responsibility for one's fate; Unoka's refusal to work hard demonstrates that personal effort is crucial in shaping one's destiny. Thus, the chi emerges as a non-negotiable element in Igbo cosmology, as represented in Chigozie Obioma's novel. This aligns with postcolonial cultural theory, which challenges Eurocentric perspectives by emphasizing the need to engage with Igbo epistemologies in understanding the world, its operations, structures, and fundamental nature.

Also, the chi is portrayed as both a griot and a compassionate advocate who carefully preserves the history of its host. As a dedicated advocate, it maintains this record to defend its host whenever necessary, drawing upon it when the situation calls for it:

Chukwu to intercede on behalf of my host, I suggest that we trace the beginning



of everything to the harsh years preceding that night on the bridge, his father had died only nine months earlier (23).

The chi in this passage functions as a custodian of the host's life history, meticulously documenting past events and their significance. By tracing "the beginning of everything" to the hardships preceding the protagonist's defining moment, the chi preserves a chronological and spiritual account of his journey. This suggests that the chi is not only a guiding force but also an archival presence, ensuring that the host's experiences both personal and ancestral are acknowledged and remembered and brought to bear when the need arises. The chi as a record keeper aligns with postcolonial cultural theory, particularly in its challenge to Eurocentric historiography and its affirmation of indigenous epistemologies. The chi, as a record keeper in *An Orchestra of Minorities*, embodies this perspective by preserving personal and ancestral histories outside Western archival systems.

Lastly, the chi is portrayed as a diligent protector and guardian, constantly overseeing the well-being of its host. Rather than being a passive presence, the chi actively intervenes in the host's life. This diligence is evident in its unwavering watchfulness, even when the host is unaware, reinforcing its role as a spiritual custodian as presented in the excerpt: "While he slept that

night, I stepped out of him as I often did, so I could watch over him, because the inhabitants of Bemuo often become more active in the earth at night while mankind sleeps" (33). The chi's unwavering diligence reflects its fundamental role in Igbo cosmology, where it serves as a constant guide and protector throughout an individual's life, especially during moments of vulnerability such as sleep. This steadfast commitment emphasizes the chi's responsibility in maintaining spiritual balance. Within a postcolonial framework, this diligence takes on added significance through the concept of hybridity. Here, the devoted service of a diligent and compassionate employee merges with the Igbo belief in the chi, illustrating the fusion of indigenous spirituality with contemporary notions of duty and care.

This section demonstrates the portrayal of the Igbo belief in chi as reflected in Chigozie Obioma's *An Orchestra of Minorities*, thereby offering a rich representation of the cultural and spiritual heritage of Igbo people. Through this representation, Obioma not only preserves but also celebrates the vibrancy of indigenous Igbo belief in chi, asserting their significance in the face of historical marginalization.

Reimagining the Igbo Belief in Chi in Chigozie Obioma's *An Orchestra of Minorities*

One of the variations in the representation of the Igbo belief in the chi is its ability to reside within its host and depart at will. While the



traditional Igbo belief holds that the chi exists beside its individual, Chigozie Obioma reimagines the chi as an internal presence, capable of leaving its host when necessary. This reflects in the passage: "While he slept, I stepped out" (33). In Igbo cosmology, the chi is understood as a person's guiding deity and representative in the spirit realm (Achebe, 131). Traditionally, the chi is believed to remain constantly by the side of its host, never departing. In *Things Fall Apart*, The old man that reprimands Okonkwo for calling Osugo a woman said that a benevolent spirit (chi) cracked his kernel for him but never stated that the chi left at any point, moreso, Okonkwo's chi is described as good (28) but it never leaves Okonkwo at any point in the novel. Hence, the representation in Obioma's work introduces a variation to the Igbo belief in chi. As cultural theory suggests, culture is dynamic and ever evolving, and through this reimagining, Obioma reflects how the Igbo belief system in chi can be adapted, illustrating the possibility of cultural transformation.

In addition, the representation of the chi as having the ability to select a reincarnating body from the spirit realm before its journey to earth represents a significant departure from traditional portrayals, constituting a variation. As previously discussed, the chi is regarded as a person's guiding deity and representative in the spirit world. Kingsley Ugwu describes the chi as a person's guiding god (n.p.), while Buchi Emecheta, in *The Joys of Motherhood*,

depicts it as a guardian that intervenes in its subject's ordeals (18). However, Chigozie Obioma introduces a novel interpretation, as reflected on page fifteen: "As the guardian spirit descends with the reincarnating body of the new host" (15). This depiction reimagines the role of the chi in Igbo cosmology, presenting it as an entity that retrieves a body from the spiritual realm before returning to earth for rebirth an innovation that diverges from conventional Igbo beliefs about the chi. Homi K. Bhabha's concept of liminality, which creates an in-between space for ideas that diverge from both colonized and indigenous worldviews can account for this reimagining of the chi's role.

Another variation in the representation of the chi is its portrayal as having inhabited multiple hosts before its current one, Chinonso. This depiction introduces a new dimension, marking a departure from the traditional Igbo belief in the chi. The chi's acknowledgment of its past lives is evident in the following passage: "Even though I have lived in many cycles of reincarnation" (13). According to Chinua Achebe, the chi is a personal deity (131), while Christian Ole argues that it assumes the role of a guardian spirit (28). And Princewill Uzochukwu further asserts that the chi functions as a mediator between Chukwu and the host (4). None of these definitions describe the chi as possessing the capacity to inhabit multiple hosts upon the death of its current one. Thus, Obioma's representation of the chi as transferring to another host



after its present host's death signifies a shift in the conceptualization of the chi, emphasizing its continuity across different reincarnations an idea that diverges from conventional understandings within Igbo cosmology. Traditionally, Igbo cosmology holds that each individual possesses a unique chi. However, the fate of the chi after the death of its host is rarely explored or documented. Obioma introduces a variation by suggesting that a particular chi can inhabit multiple hosts across different lifetimes. This reimagining aligns with Van Klinken Adriaan's assertion that states that "writers, as social thinkers, are open to new possibilities of religious imagination" (7). Obioma thus expands the role of the chi by attributing to it the ability to traverse multiple existences. Furthermore, his work reinforces the postcolonial concept of othering by ensuring that Igbo beliefs are not marginalized, instead positioning the chi as a central framework for understanding the universe.

The active role assigned to the chi in *An Orchestra of Minorities* represents a significant variation within Igbo cosmology. Traditionally, the chi is perceived as a fundamental presence, likened to the wind but not as active as Obioma presents it. However, Obioma reimagines the chi as a first-person narrator, a shift exemplified in the following excerpt: "I stand before you here in the magnificent court of Bechukwu in Eluigwe, the land of eternal luminous light" (13). Through this narrative voice, the chi recounts not only the experiences of its current host but

also those of its past hosts, including Ezike Nkeoye, who died at the age of twenty-two after reading and making love the previous night. Achebe asserts that "nothing stands alone; there must be another standing beside it" (131). The "another" inferred here is the chi, yet the chi is seldom heard in traditional Igbo narratives. The hosts are more active, and the distinct character of the chi is not well developed beyond its role as a guiding and mediating force. For example, in *The Joys of Motherhood*, Nnu Ego's chi is present but not as visibly active as Nnuego is, and similarly, in *Things Fall Apart*, Okonkwo's chi is fundamental yet passive. Thus, Obioma's reconfiguration of the chi's role foregrounds its agency, marking a departure from its traditionally foundational yet passive function in Igbo narratives. Consequently, the chi's active role in *An Orchestra of Minorities* constitutes a reimagining of Igbo cosmological beliefs. As Shuaidong Zhang observes, "narratives are ... reshaped and absorbed, producing something new and rooted in prior traditions not rejections of the past, but variations" (1). Zhang's variation theory affirms that the reimagining of old beliefs is a common phenomenon when narratives cross linguistic borders. Accordingly, Obioma's adaptation of the chi's role reflects this process, contributing to the projection of Afrocentric indigenous culture within the framework of postcolonial cultural theory.

The representation of the interaction between Chinonso's chi and Tobe's chi represents a



significant variation in the representation of the Igbo belief in chi. Traditionally, the chi is understood as a deeply personal spiritual entity, guiding and influencing its individual host. However, Obioma departs from this conception by portraying the chi as capable of direct communication with one another, a dynamic not explicitly documented in Igbo cosmology. This reimagining introduces a new dimension to the traditional understanding of the chi, it is illustrated in the following excerpt.

That night, I saw as my host slept, the guardian spirit of Tobe loitering around the place. I thanked it for the help its host had rendered mine, and we sat down talking about the Ezemuo of the strange country and all that our hosts have been through (289).

The excerpt above illustrates the anthropomorphization (giving human qualities) of the chi within Igbo cosmology, marking a significant variation in its representation. While spiritual entities are believed to communicate, their interactions do not traditionally resemble human conversation. Thus, this portrayal departs from conventional Igbo belief in chi, which do not ascribe a voice to the chi, let alone the ability to engage in casual dialogue or discourse with other chi. This reimagining can be understood

through the postcolonial concepts of liminality and hybridity, which account for the space between traditional cosmological structures and their evolving representations in contemporary narratives.

Obioma further expands the representation of the chi by introducing a designated dwelling place for departed chi, from which they are summoned into service, as illustrated in the following excerpt: “when Chukwu called me from Ogbunike cave where guardian spirits wait to be called into service” (326). Traditionally, the chi is understood as a personal spiritual force, uniquely tied to an individual from birth, without a predetermined communal dwelling or structured system of service. Obioma’s portrayal, which situates the chi in a designated waiting place (Ogbunike cave) until it is summoned into service, introduces an organized framework that diverges from conventional Igbo belief in chi. This structured model reflects an influence from Western conceptualizations of vocation and service, where individuals are called to specific roles whether in religious, military, or professional contexts. By integrating this notion into the Igbo spiritual system, Obioma reimagines the chi’s function, presenting it within an organized, service-based structure rather than as an inherently assigned spiritual counterpart to a person at birth. This adaptation aligns with postcolonial theories of hybridity, illustrating how indigenous beliefs can be reshaped through encounters with other cultural frameworks.



Conclusion

In Summary, Obioma's *An Orchestra of Minorities* presents the chi as a supernatural entity capable of leaving its host and journeying to places such as Bechukwu, Alandichie, and have conversations like men do with other chis. However, despite its ability to traverse these realms, the chi is unable to provide solutions to Chinonso's struggles. The chi is also depicted as carrying with it a reincarnating body that it will inhabit, claiming to have resided in numerous hosts prior to Chinonso. These representations reflect variations of the Igbo belief in the chi.

Reimagining Igbo beliefs should be encouraged as it allows for a more distinct understanding of indigenous spirituality. By engaging with Igbo cosmology, scholars and creatives can challenge dominant Eurocentric narratives while preserving and revitalizing indigenous knowledge. Lastly, reimagining Igbo beliefs should be encouraged because it gives room for inimitability, uniqueness, and seeing indigenous beliefs from other perspectives and not just following the Eurocentric view of the cosmological order.

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Authors' Biodata

Vivian Chukwu is a Master's student of Literature at the Federal University Lokoja, with a keen research interest in African Folkloric Studies. Her academic focus is on the rich African beliefs and cultural narratives as they are reimagined in African literary studies, especially the variations in these beliefs that address contemporary issues.

Ifeyinwa Genevieve Okolo is a Professor in the Department of English and Literary Studies, Federal University Lokoja. Her research interest is in Gender Studies.

Dr. Abba Abba is a Senior Lecturer in the Department of English and Literary Studies, Federal University Lokoja. His research interest focuses on Ecocritical Studies.