

“Cunning of Reason” and the Igbo concept of *Chi*: Towards a philosophical rapprochement with Hegel

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Abstract

The central argument of this article is that there is a remarkable conceptual parallel between Hegel’s famous notion of the “cunning of Reason” and the philosophically profound concept of *Chi* in Igbo metaphysics. By way of establishing this parallel, the article advances the following *subsidiary* but *complementary* points: *Chi* is also “cunning” in its dynamics; both principles (i.e. *Chi* and Reason/Spirit) are non-deterministic because they try to maintain a *dialectic balance* between destiny and individual responsibility; both possess divine attributes; and community serves as an invaluable medium of operation for both. The scholarly significance of the article lies in its attempt not only to systematize the Igbo thought on *Chi* by eliminating the vestiges of discredited “ethno-philosophy”, but also to open up a constructive dialogue between Hegel and elements of African philosophy, using Igbo metaphysics as a placeholder. This is against the backdrop of certain discontents generated by Hegel’s famous uncomplimentary and racist remarks on Africa. Seen in this light, the article may well be an exercise in “rapprochement.”

Introduction

In this article, I broach the task of constructing a substantially systematic philosophy from a scarcely explored substrate of Igbo¹ “folk philosophy”. This exercise, it is hoped, would not only help in systematizing the Igbo thought on *Chi* by eliminating the vestiges of discredited “ethno-philosophy” therein, but could also open up a constructive dialogue between Hegel and African philosophy, using Igbo metaphysics as an entry point. As is well known, that Hegel is quite “unpopular” if not downright infamous in African scholarship, due largely to certain uncomplimentary and racist remarks he made against Africa in his *The Philosophy of History* (2001a).

It is perhaps important to recall that Hegel had described Africa, inter alia, as “the land of childhood, which lying beyond the day of self-consciousness of history, is enveloped in the dark mantle of night” (Hegel 2001a, 109) and, therefore, “no historical part of the world” (ibid.,

¹ Igbo is one of the largest ethnic nationalities in Nigeria, with a population of about 35 million. Igboland covers the entire south-east and some significant parts of what is known today as the “South-South” (i.e. Niger Delta) parts of Nigeria. It is an enclave rich in both human and natural resources. More importantly – and for the purposes of this work – it is a culture with extant features that are of scholarly interest.

117). Such poor commentaries may have engendered a somewhat “anti-Hegel” atmosphere in African scholarship, a key consequence of which is a dearth of constructive Hegelian research among Africans. Available writings are defensive and rather reactionary; they generally come in the form of mere refutations. For instance, in “The Falsity of Hegel’s Theses on Africa”, published in the *Journal of Black Studies*, Babacar Camara (2005, 94) contends that Hegel’s remarks are “grotesque, defamatory and offensive”. Teshale Tibebu’s *Hegel and the Third World: The Making of Eurocentrism in World History* (2011) adopts a similar tenor. And these are only a few of such apologetic writings.

But this reactionary stance against Hegel – though understandable – must not degenerate into a blind thirst for vengeance, which can only make one throw the baby away with the bath water, as the saying goes. In order to build the much-needed bridge, I draw on Igbo metaphysics as a *modest instance* of how a constructive engagement with Hegel could be undertaken.

Therefore, my central argument is that a remarkable conceptual parallel exists between the all-important concept of *Chi* in Igbo metaphysics and the notion of “cunning of Reason/Spirit”² in Hegel’s philosophy of history. Because this *parallel* is not immediately obvious at the surface level, it will be painstakingly unraveled. By way of drawing this parallel, I shall establish the following: that *Chi* manifests a similar “cunning”; that both systems are non-deterministic, as they try to maintain a *dialectic balance* between destiny and personal responsibility; that *Chi* and Reason/Spirit possess divine attributes; and that community is their useful medium of operation. I emphasize here that the article has only *one* central thesis, and that the outlined points must be seen as mere methodological *steps* or *subsidiary arguments* that only help to buttress the key thesis that there is a conceptual parallel between *Chi* and the notion of the “cunning of Reason/Spirit”.

Having made these preliminary remarks, I start off with the idea of “cunning of Reason/Spirit” in Hegel’s philosophy of history.

World history and the “cunning” of Reason/Spirit in Hegel

My aim in this section is to analyze the idea of the “cunning of Reason/Spirit”, touching upon the cognate notions of “world-historical individuals” and “passion” – the two key notions with which Hegel develops his thesis. But this would make sense only in the wider context of Hegel’s general characterization of the historical process. On this methodological ground, therefore, I give attention to Hegel’s overall view of history.

Hegel holds that the historical process is not an aimless “Brownian motion”, as it were, but rather a process that is rationally and inexorably progressing towards the ultimate self-realization of the freedom of the Spirit/Reason (*Geist*): “The History of the world is none other than the progress of the consciousness of Freedom; a progress whose development according to the necessity of its nature, it is our business to investigate” (Hegel 2001a, 33). History is thus the unfolding realization of the Spirit’s self-consciousness of its freedom. This is the central idea, mantra or leitmotif of a sort, stated quite profusely in Hegel’s *The Philosophy of History* (2001b).

² I hereby indicate that the terms “Reason” and “Spirit” (or sometimes “world Spirit”) are used to refer to *one and the same thing* – namely, the *Geist* (in German). In keeping with the best practices of Hegel scholarship, I, therefore, use them interchangeably all through the article. I further make clear that by “Reason” Hegel does not think in terms of the human faculty of rationality. Rather, it is primarily a *principle* that animates life and history.

Implicit in the above claim is the recognition of an “invisible hand” to use Ullmann-Margalit’s (1997, 184) expression, which directs a whole intelligible process to a determined *telos* – freedom. The philosophical tradition of seeing the “invisible hand” in history no doubt antedates Hegel. Versions of it are found in Herder, Fichte, Schelling, but especially in Kant, whose variant Hegel’s is a direct reaction to. For Kant, the “history of mankind can be seen, in the large, as the realization of nature’s secret plan” (Kant 1963, 21). Hegel’s point of difference is that, while Kant’s “nature” is something external to the historical process, dictating from afar, Hegel’s “Reason” is part of the process. Indeed, it is the very reality which unfolds itself, for, as Hegel maintains, “[w]hat is rational is real; and what is real is rational” (Hegel 2001a, 18).

There is, therefore, no place for chance or arbitrariness, since world history “is not the abstract and irrational necessity of a blind fate. It is self-caused and self-realized Reason...It is, therefore, an unfolding of the Spirit’s self-consciousness and freedom” (Hegel 2001b, 266). From the Hegelian perspective, chance merely appears to hold sway at the surface level, but in reality, world events have their ultimate explanation in what might properly be called the “grand plan” of the Spirit. Individuals, events and peoples play into the hands of this grand plan. The grand plan occupies the lofty position of the final purpose to which the monstrous sacrifice of “the happiness of peoples, the wisdom of States, and the virtues of individuals” (Hegel 2001a, 35) are victimized at the slaughter-bench of history.

Hegel would suggest later that the “State” is the concretization of the Spirit’s self-disclosure in history. For Hegel, the State is the only set-up best suited for the perfect realization of freedom. Indeed, he does not hesitate to confer on the State such a sublime status as “The Divine Idea as it exists on Earth” (ibid., 64). All preceding phases of social organization and civilization must stand in awe at the splendor of the State. He believes that there could be no better guarantee of freedom than that provided for by law, discipline and morality, as upheld by the State.

But if world history is the theatre for the progressive realization of freedom, humans must be the actors and actresses. They are, so to say, the catalyst. This point touches upon the idea of the “cunning of Reason/Spirit” to which I now turn.

It has been said that humans are the catalysts through which the Spirit/Reason realizes its ultimate purpose. But Reason achieves its aim with a ruse. In a rather indirect way, it works through human passion. World Spirit/Reason, says Hegel,

...keeps itself in the background, untouched and unharmed, and sends forth the particular interests of passion to fight and wear themselves out in its stead...It is what we call the *cunning of Reason* – that it sets the *passions* to work in its service, so that the agents by which it gives itself existence must pay the penalty and suffer the loss...for individuals are sacrificed and abandoned as a result. The Idea pays the tribute which existence and the transient world exact, but it pays it through the passions of individuals rather than out of its own resources (Hegel 1975, 89; emphasis added).

The above citation summarizes Hegel’s insights on the dialectic play of Reason and passion in the actualization of the teleological freedom. Reason is indeed cunning in its exploitation of the passions of individuals and peoples in order to achieve its goal. World history is nothing but the unfolding of the Reason-passion dialectic.

“Passion” is an important concept here. Passion, in this context, is nothing more than the human activity as resulting from private interest...that the whole energy of will and character is devoted to their attainment; that other interests...or rather all things else, are sacrificed to them (Hegel 2001a, 38).

Hegel insists that “nothing has been accomplished without interest on the part of the actor; and – if interest be called passion...we may affirm absolutely that nothing great in the world has been accomplished without passion” (ibid., 37). The above characterization of passion makes it a ready instrument in the hand of Reason/Spirit and places it at a constant risk of being exploited. This is probably why Hegel makes it a pawn in the chessboard of history, while recognizing at the same time that “nothing great in the world” has been accomplished without it.

Now, there are some “types” of humans whose passions are most readily utilized in the actualization of the grand design of history: “Such are all great historical men – whose own particular aims involve those large issues which are the will of the World-Spirit” (ibid., 44). Hegel refers to these as the “world-historical individuals”. These individuals, according to Löwith (1949, 56), “act historically by being acted upon by the power and cunning of Reason”. They are the people whose particular passions and actions Hegel reckons to be of a more “global” historical significance. Put simply, they are those whose particular actions make and drive history. Caesar, Alexander the Great and Napoleon belong, in Hegel’s opinion, to this category of people whose particular actions were historically significant vis-à-vis the realization of the *telos* of the World Spirit/Reason.

Hegel further points out that these individuals are not aware of the force at work in them and are equally oblivious of the idea they are precipitating. Admittedly, they are often highly gifted, visionary people, and strong characters among their contemporaries. Yet they lack the slightest presentiment of the design they are helping to perfect. Rather, they are practical political men, obsessed with immediate interests and needs, usually power and personal security (Hegel 2001a). But in pursuing these private interests *passionately*, they obliquely help in actualizing the great idea of the Spirit.

In the *Philosophy of Right*, Hegel applies this principle not just to the so-called world-historical individuals, but also to “states, peoples and individuals”, for while they are “established upon their own particular definite principles...Yet are they the unconscious tools and organs of the World-Spirit, through whose inner activity the lower forms pass away” (Hegel 2001b, 267). It is even suggested that, just as the world-historical individuals come and go in succession, world-historic nations and national Spirit successively give way, heralding the dawning of the eschatological State (ibid.). The particular ideas of the national Spirit must, in turn, give way to the universal idea of the World Spirit “around whose throne stand the other spirits as perfecters of its actuality, and witnesses and ornaments of its splendour” (ibid., 269).

To clarify this idea further, it might be helpful to see how it resonates with Marx. In Engel and Marx’s *Communist Manifesto* (2018), a certain “cunning of production” is also at play. There is an eloquent defence of this position in Chryssis’ (1998, 98) point that the historical process is such that “the bourgeoisie, while promoting its particular interest, prepares – almost unconsciously and unwittingly – the final overthrow of capitalism and the transition to communism”. Here, the proletariat’s justifiable indignation about its pitiable condition and the consequent desire for a better life become the catalyst for the revolutionary overthrow of

capitalism. In this case, Hegel would have said that Reason has exploited the proletariat's discontents.

The thought-pattern underpinning the foregoing is that Reason/Spirit tries to have its way through immediate passion. The particular ends of actions are usually desired, but the overall result of these actions play into the hands of Reason/Spirit. This, indeed, is the "cunning" of Reason, the ruse of the spirit.

An interesting Igbo cognate to this sophisticated idea of "cunning of Reason" is found in the concept of *Chi* in Igbo metaphysics, which equally demands a painstaking and delicate analysis. What follows is such an attempt.

The concept and dynamics of *Chi* in Igbo metaphysics

In this section, I analyze the concept of *Chi*, drawing largely on Igbo scholarship, especially those of Chinua Achebe and C. I. Ejizu. Since this has to do with a people's worldview, I may judiciously deploy elements of the people's language, "folk philosophy", religion and culture. For, the employment of these "folk" elements is not at variance with the overall goal of philosophy as an enterprise, defined by D. D. Raphael (1970, 4) as "the critical evaluation of beliefs which are normally taken for granted without thinking of any grounds for justification". At the same time, I shall attempt to systematize these "folk" materials so as to not slide back to what has been discredited and pejoratively referred to as "ethno-philosophy" by a number of African philosophers (most notably Hountondji 1983; see Okere 1983). The discussion that follows will, therefore, distil and philosophically engage insights from Igbo worldviews, sometimes taken for granted in the people's daily lives.

Since *Chi* is quite a technical concept, it would be helpful to begin by indicating that *Chi* has a number of senses. The concept is so complex that researchers, both foreign and indigenous, have quite mishandled its nuances and shades of meaning (Edeh 1985). Not all of its many senses and shades of meaning are relevant for the present purposes. However, the most important for our purposes are: i) the sense in which *Chi* represents a sort of supernatural force, divine being or spirit (*mmuo*); and ii) that in which *Chi* takes on the status of destiny. The two are indeed inseparable and will be discussed as such in this section.

Beyond the rather quotidian use of the word to refer to "day" or "daybreak", Achebe points to a more significant usage in which *Chi* stands for a spirit (*mmuo*) or a divine being that directs the lives of individuals (Achebe 1976). As Spirit, *Chi* is sometimes seen as a "kind of group self or multiplex-ego able to manifest itself in several individuals at the same moment" (Talbot 1926, 280). Though *Chi* is Spirit, Achebe tries to distinguish it from such spirits as ancestral spirits, who are of a "very different order" and are much more "describable" than *Chi* in terms of place of abode and modus operandi (Achebe 1976). *Chi* is also distinguished from such deities as *Amadioha* (the god of thunder) and *Ala* (the Earth goddess). So, the least that may be said at this point is that *Chi is divine; it is a supernatural force/power* and is distinguishable from other deities and spirits.

But more could be said. *Chi* represents destiny in the Igbo thought pattern. The basic idea here is that *Chi*, as a divine force, determines the fate of humans. *Chi*, as destiny, has an "unprecedented veto", to use Achebe's expression, over a man's fortunes (Achebe 1976, 135). *Chi* not only plays a creative role (ibid.) but is also central to man's whole existence. The centrality of *Chi* in Igbo life finds expression in the pervasive prefixing and suffixing of "Chi" in Igbo names. And Achebe suggests in this respect that if one wanted to know how fair or

unfair life has treated a man – “his hopes, his fears, his joys and sorrows, his grievances” – one need only look at the names his children bear (ibid., 135–136). This again points back to the idea of *Chi* as the embodiment of fortune.

Relatedly, *Chi* as destiny finds expression in the cognate concept of *Akaraka* (literally rendered as “marks on the palm of the hand”) which is a *divine force*. The notion of *Akaraka* underscores the point that one’s destiny is ontologically linked to one’s palm marks. The fortune allotted to each person is “inscribed” as it were on the palm of the hand. Each individual has a unique *Akaraka*, to the effect that what he or she encounters in life differs from those of others. The uniqueness and nuances at play in *Akaraka* are such that it may somewhat be considered a locus of personal identity. To all intents and purposes, *Chi* as *Akaraka* is, ipso facto, the determiner of fortunes.

Having identified *Chi* with *Akaraka* (destiny), the parallel with Hegel’s idea of “cunning” of Reason may soon begin to take shape. However, I must first advance the analysis of *Chi* by further proposing that, as *Akaraka* (destiny) has a divine force, life/history is nothing but the unfolding of *Chi*. As Innes (1990, 6) remarks, “[a] significant aspect of Igbo theology is the belief that at birth, each person acquires a *Chi*”. *Chi* is like a “package” that gradually unwraps itself in the course of life. The actual content of this “package” is not always pleasant – hence the climaxes and anti-climaxes that attend life. Yet in all the twists and turns of life, the divine *Chi* factor may be discernible.

Undeniably, some may have more joys, riches and blessings than others. Put more bluntly, some lives have been marked by many more sorrows than others. This brute fact of wide fortune margins is often a source of philosophical perplexity among the Igbo. As I shall shortly demonstrate, there is a substantially developed notion of individual responsibility as embodied in both the concept and institution of *Ikenga*. Be that as it may, fortune varies from person to person – and all is a function of *Chi*. The package that is *Chi* gradually unwraps itself in the course of life with the active cooperation of the individual.

Like Hegel’s Reason/Spirit, the Igbo metaphysics of *Chi* could be said to manifest a similar “cunning” in that it often unfolds itself through the passions, interests and temperaments of individuals. In fact, it could not be otherwise, for *Chi* always works with available resources. On the one hand, such vices as anger, arrogance, power-hunger, greed, impetuosity, etc. are ready tools exploited for destructive ends, as many Igbo wise sayings admonish. On the other hand, virtues such as altruism, solidarity, generosity, honesty, wisdom, etc. are resources tapped by *Chi* for more positive ends.

The above point is beautifully illustrated in Achebe’s novels, but I must right away motivate the use of the novel genre by re-affirming its scholarly merit. So far, I have drawn largely on his other writing genres, but not his novels. Achebe’s novels are not like such fictional works as the *Harry Potter* series or similar stories that narrate fantastic stories of a non-existent world. On the contrary, Achebe’s novels mirror (and *are intended* to mirror) the Igbo life and society, belief-system and values. Achebe himself is a product of his society, a veritable spokesperson who shrewdly uses characters in his novels to drive home vital points about Igbo life and society. Moreover, his claims are verifiable. Therefore, I believe that, so long as the claims are not fetishized or essentialized – and I do not intend to fetishize them – they are of scholarly importance. They are and have actually been used as a raw material for philosophizing (Obi 2006; Agbakoba 2019). If we cast doubt on Achebe’s novels, we might as well cast doubt on

the likes of Dostoyevsky, Albert Camus and a host of others, who also communicated existentialist thought through novels.

In his best-selling novel, *Things Fall Apart*,³ Okonkwo, the protagonist of the story, is a typical example of a man whose passions are exploited by *Chi* for noble as well as for disastrous ends. Okonkwo's entire life is ruled by one phobia – the phobia of being called weak or being called a failure. His father, Unoka, had been a renowned ne'er-do-well, who left only a legacy of humiliating debts to his son, Okonkwo. Okonkwo vows to be the exact opposite of his father. By sheer diligence and cooperation with *Chi*, he paves his way to stardom, taking highly privileged titles at a relatively young age (Achebe 2017). Okonkwo's life exemplifies the Igbo saying that if a child washes his hands well, he would be allowed to dine with elders. Indeed, Okonkwo washes his hands well through hard work and is consequently given a place among the elders.

Now, Okonkwo's obsessive phobia of failure or weakness becomes an available tool used by *Chi* to accomplish historic exploits that puts not only him but the entire community into a respectable status among neighboring peoples. His beating the hitherto unbeaten veteran wrestler, Amalinze, in a wrestling match; his becoming the richest farmer in his time; and the various community missions he undertakes, etc. are all invariably driven by this phobia. But this same phobia makes him a misogynist and hater of anything that appears to him "weak" or "unmanly"; he is quick-tempered and impatient with ostensibly weaker and less successful mortals; his impetuosity escalates; he becomes arrogant and confrontational, like the little bird, *nza*, who so forgot himself after a heavy meal that he "challenged his chi" to a wrestling match (Achebe 2017, 31). And a combination of these factors leads to his disastrous end in suicide.

Was Okonkwo aware of the *Chi*-principle at work in him? If he were aware, could he have prevented his disastrous end? Did he choose this end? Would his fate have been better or worse if he had acted differently? These and many more questions would surely besiege the reader's minds, perhaps filled with sorrows at the unfortunate end of an otherwise illustrious Igbo son. Hegel likewise sympathizes with such fellows whose passions lead to disastrous ends: "When we look at this display of passions and the consequences of their violence...we can scarce avoid being filled with sorrow" (Hegel 2001a, 20).

The Igbo have made robust, though not conclusive, attempts to address the knotty tension between *Chi* (destiny) and individual responsibility. One of the most remarkable of such attempts is encapsulated in the idea and institution of *Ikenga*. *Ikenga*, as described by C. I. Ejizu, is a ritual symbol of personal struggle and diligence. Individual enterprise is among the greatest ideals in the Igbo society. *Ikenga* celebrates, or better put, ritualizes the strength of arm and industriousness (Ejizu 1991). As Ejizu further explains,

[s]pecifically, the physical ritual object called *Ikenga* stands for a supersensible being of the same name. And it manifests itself as a dynamic cosmic force essentially connected with success and achievement in any and all life's pursuits leading to enhanced status and distinction in one's society and a sure hope of a blissful existence in the afterlife as a glorified ancestor. This is the primary thrust and signal import of *Ikenga* symbolism, the

³Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* (first published in 1958) is the single most read piece of literature by an African novelist, translated into over 60 languages. This pioneering work renders an eloquent account of Igbo (and to a large extent African) life and culture in literary form.

preeminent motif underlying its cult and a central theme of its major iconographic adornments (Ejizu 1991, 243).

The very title of Ejizu's work is indeed telling – “Ritual enactment of achievement: ‘Ikenga’ symbol in Igboland.” *Ikenga* is invaluable for the present analysis of *Chi*, since “*Ikenga* is believed to liaise with and co-opt the active support of...Chi” (ibid.). Perhaps more importantly, it represents, in my opinion, a significant Igbo attempt to maintain what I call a *dialectic balance* between *Chi* (destiny) and human responsibility by fusing the divine and the human in one ritual object – the *Ikenga*. While, on the one hand, *Ikenga* “co-opts” the active support of *Chi*, as Ejizu succinctly puts it, it emphasizes the active cooperation of the individual, on the other hand. Corroborating Ejizu, as it were, Achebe (2017) refers to this famous Igbo adage: *Onye kwe chi ya ekwe* (which literally translates – if a man says “yes” his *Chi* will also say “yes”).

In Okonkwo's case, he cooperated with his *Chi* to rise to stardom in the community. It could be recalled that he developed a habit of staying on the farm much longer than others. He also organized his large family and his entire life into what could not but produce the most successful man of his time (Achebe 2017). With regard to his successes, then, he said “yes”, and his *Chi* concurred. The same goes for his failures. In the next section, I shall take up this attempt to maintain the *dialectic balance* between destiny and human responsibility, but this will be done in the context of the parallel I draw between *Chi* and Hegel's Reason/Spirit.

The present section would remain incomplete if the question of community in the analysis of *Chi* is left out. The aim is to show the place of community in the dynamics of *Chi*, such that, the community factor may rightly be seen as a *Chi* factor. It is an established fact that the African community is powerful and exercises a great influence and control over the individual. As Achebe notes, “[n]o man however great was greater than his people...no one ever won a judgment against his clan” (Achebe 2016, 230). This, as Innes (1990, 78) remarks regarding the strength of the African community, “represents the spirit of the community, and the power of the community”. No doubt, there is still ample space for individual differences, eccentricity and creativity. The community factor is a *Chi* factor insofar as *Chi* exerts its influence on the individual in and through the community. In other words, community is *Chi*'s ideal medium of operation, given the mediating role community plays between *Chi* and the individual.

The foregoing discussion on the concept and dynamics of Reason/Spirit and those of *Chi* has been conducted in a way that already points to significant commonalities. In what follows, I explore the relationship between the two principles on the basis of identifiable parallels.

Reason/Spirit and *Chi*: Drawing a parallel

The first point to explore in drawing the parallel is to make clear that a *certain “cunning” principle* is at work in both concepts. This “cunning” entails the exploitation of *passion* in the unfolding and realization of a much wider process. In Hegel, the passions of individuals and peoples become “expendable instruments”, to use Taylor's (1979, 99) words, through which Spirit/Reason realizes its ultimate goal in history. In Igbo metaphysics, *Chi* likewise finds the passions, drives and interests of individuals a ready tool. Seen in this light, one may rightly speak of the “cunning of *Chi*” as a way of underscoring the exploitation of passion in the unfolding of *Chi* (destiny).

This display of “cunning” is such that passion is always the one that pays the “tribute”, if need be, from its own resources on behalf of *Chi* or Hegel's Reason/Spirit. In Hegel, as in Igbo

metaphysics, there is a “cunning” at play in the idea that immediate passions and ends are unconsciously subjected to the service of the universal: “While these limited sentiments are still unconscious of the purpose they are fulfilling, the universal principle is implicit in them, and is realizing itself through them” (Hegel 2001a, 40).

This was the case with Hegel’s world-historical individuals (Caesar, Napoleon, and Alexander the Great) whose immediate obsession with conquest and political expansion was being exploited to make watershed historical leaps. Their particular actions, driven by obsessive passions, became world-historic actions, i.e. epoch-making undertakings, which only served to facilitate the realization of much bigger objectives. In the *Chi* system, similarly, a combination of Okonkwo’s passions become a vehicle that transport his community, Umuofia, to the highpoint of its fame. But these same passions invariably lead to his untimely death in suicide, probably to give full play to the emerging Christian culture which Okonkwo himself vehemently opposed.

In all this, the unseen hand of Reason/*Chi* is supposedly in the background playing the trick on individual actors. Its ultimate designs must be realized, even at the expense of the instruments utilized for this purpose. Herein lies the “cunning”.

The second parallel that could be drawn between *Chi* and Reason/Spirit is that both possess divine attributes. Though they operate in and through humans, they cannot be defined exclusively in human terms. Their precise form may not be entirely comprehensible to the human mind, but the least that could be asserted is that they are divine forces; indeed, there is an element of transcendence in them.

In Hegel, the divine essence of reason/spirit is seen in the attempt to identify Reason/Spirit with God. Hence, he bursts out, as it were, with this submission in *The Philosophy of History*: “This *Good*, this *Reason*, in its most concrete form, is God. God governs the world; the actual working of his government – the carrying out of his plan – is the History of the world” (Hegel 2001a, 51; emphasis added). Moreover, he had announced beforehand that his philosophy was “a *Theodicaea*...a justification of the ways of God...with the fact of the existence of Evil” (Hegel 2001a, 15). Etymologically, all “theodicy” (especially Hegel’s) points to God – and God is a divine being.

Similarly, *Chi* is Spirit (*mmuo*). *Mmuo*, being Spirit, is transcendent. In Igbo metaphysics, *Chi* is considered a supernatural force, a divine factor. Hence, *Chi* cannot be reduced to a human agent, nor could its dynamic be explained only in human terms. Igbo lore and tradition are shot through with this notion of *Chi*’s transcendence. Even in the absence of the notion of a “Supreme God,” as D. I. Nwoga (1984) has convincingly argued, there is unanimity in Igbo scholarship that *Chi* is at least a divine force, a transcendent being.

Having established that both *Chi* and Hegel’s Reason/Spirit possess divine attributes, I move on to the third site on which to found the parallel, namely that the two principles try to maintain a dialectic balance between destiny and human responsibility. The debate as to the essential mode of interaction between human responsibility and destiny (sometimes framed as “freedom versus necessity”) might remain a perennial philosophical problem – and I make no pretensions to resolve it in this article. However, I shall try to show that both principles make a remarkable attempt to strike a dialectic balance between destiny and responsibility.

Let us first turn to the *Chi* concept. Here, I wish to take up and advance the argument already begun in the previous section to the effect that the Igbo have quite a robust notion of personal responsibility.

To explore this, the notion of duality in Igbo thought pattern must be seriously considered, for dialectic balance is enshrined in the notion of duality. As Obi (2017) contends, duality is entrenched in Igbo thought pattern. This duality guarantees that nothing is ever considered absolute, not even divine forces. For as the saying goes, “*Ihe kwuru, ihe akwudebe ya*” (literally rendered: “For anything that stands, something else must stand beside it”). This is used to highlight the fact that to every argument there must be a counterargument; there is an opposite side to every idea or thing that must be recognized and accorded its full right. Of particular interest to us in this article is that the Igbo use this concept of duality to keep the “supernatural” in check, as it were. Even *Chi* has to be restrained so that it does not exercise an overbearing influence on humans nor undermine human efforts. The Igbo do not want to take the risk of leaving the polarity between *Chi* and human responsibility unbalanced. As Achebe succinctly puts it:

...power so complete, even in the hands of *Chi*, is abhorrent to the Igbo imagination. Therefore, the makers of proverbs went to work again, as it were, to create others that would set a limit to its exercise. Hence, the well-known *Onye kwe Chie ekwe*. (If a man agrees, his *Chi* agrees.) And so, the initiative, or some of it at least, is returned to man (Achebe 1976, 135).

Having quite successfully checked any potential excesses of *Chi*, on the one hand, the Igbo would also secure that there is a limit to man’s aspirations and powers, on the other hand. The human individual would not be “supreme, totally free, and existentially alone”. For, how could the Igbo “concede to the individual an absolutism they deny even to *Chi*” (Achebe 1976, 139)? What is unmistakably evident in the above notion of duality is this idea of a dialectic balance that I have been developing.

But it is also reinforced in the concept of *mbo* (or sometimes called, *igba-mbo*), which means “struggle” or “effort”. In the previous section, I have already argued, drawing on Ejizu, that the idea and institution of *Ikenga* is a celebration and ritualization of human achievement. This is one of the greatest ideals and virtues of the Igbo man. I only wish to add here that *Ikenga*, which could be literally translated as “strength of movement”, underlines the point that one’s achievement is a function of this movement – namely the physical and mental effort applied to the achievement of set objectives, the physical jolting of one’s entire self *in pursuit of* a goal. The symbolic representation of the right hand in *Ikenga* carvings is likewise instructive, since the right hand stands for physical strength, and it is by the movement of the hand that one succeeds not only in the agricultural enterprise but also in just about anything in life. From this standpoint, it is perhaps right to say that one’s *Chi* is only as strong as one’s *movement*, i.e. effort. Ejizu (1991, 245) renders an eloquent testimony to the effect of the *Ikenga* symbolism:

The concept together with the key ideas, values and some other features closely associated with *Ikenga* symbolism have persisted in Igbo consciousness. These continue to pervade and foster certain fundamental attitudes of the people towards life, as well as underlie certain significant development in contemporary Igbo society. The notions of individual enterprise, determination, and achievement are still the hallmarks of the Igbo personality...Children are socialized to be independent and industrious. They are discouraged from begging or hanging on others.

The “strength of movement” symbolized in *Ikenga* is thus a dynamic force that prompts the Igbo person to apply effort (*mbo*). Nothing is left to chance. Through this movement, the individual cooperates with his or her *Chi*. Like *Chi*, Hegel’s Spirit/Reason is a dynamic force that moves through the passions and actions of humans.

In Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart*, Okonkwo’s lazy father, Unoka, had gone to the oracle to inquire why he always had poor harvests despite his being in good standing with the gods, demonstrated in his fidelity to all ritual stipulations aimed at securing bountiful harvests. The oracle acknowledges that he is ritually in good standing with the gods, prompt in offering the necessary agricultural sacrifices. It is unmistakably pointed out to him, however, that he had not worked hard enough. In other words, the ritual aspect should have been complemented with actual physical labor and serious commitment to the agricultural enterprise. To refer back to the *mbo* analogy, it must be said that Unoka had simply not moved his hands enough. His complaints are thus dismissed, and he is asked to go home and work harder (Achebe 2017). Okonkwo is his father’s opposite. He achieves success by cooperating with his *Chi* through the strength of his arms, being more committed than anyone else to the agricultural enterprise. But he also “cooperates” in his tragic death through exuberance, arrogance and intemperance – self-destructive character traits traditionally viewed by the Igbo as “fighting” one’s *Chi*.

The point that is being stressed in the forgoing is that active personal cooperation is always needed to realize a destiny. Given this human cooperation, the Igbo hold that humans have always had some share of the glory or blame for their fortunes. The Igbo world is replete with cautionary proverbs urging a positive cooperation with *Chi*. However, what remains rather difficult to determine is the *precise* amount of personal cooperation needed to realize a destiny and, ipso facto, the extent of glory or culpability to be assigned to the individual. There lies the tension. But lodged in this tension is a dialectic. It is indeed a dialectic tension between *Chi* (destiny) and human responsibility.

Let us now turn to Hegel. The choice of the word “cunning” provides the initial hint. Hegel rightly chooses the word to highlight the point that the Spirit/Reason does not work with supposedly passive, irrational beings; rather, he *moves through* active, rational and perhaps equally “cunning” individuals who have set goals and objectives. The “trick” that Spirit/Reason only has to play is probably to utilize this movement, or channel it properly. As with *Chi*, there is always a collaboration between the divine principle and human passion (passion being also a type of “movement”) and efforts. Here again, nothing is left to blind fate, for, as Hegel asserts, history “is not the abstract and irrational necessity of a blind fate” (Hegel 2001b, 266).

Moreover, Hegel holds that history does not just posit one principle but two – the principle of freedom, on the one hand, and the principle of necessity, on the other:

The question also assumes the form of the union of Freedom and Necessity; the latent abstract process of Spirit being regarded as Necessity, while that which exhibits itself in the conscious will of men, as their interest belongs to the domain of Freedom (Hegel 2001a, 40).

Here, the “domain of Freedom” refers to the human domain, where passion directs the human volition towards certain goals and foreseeable results. This human domain must be accorded its full right. Being free, man is also a subject of moral responsibility. Destiny/necessity does not destroy moral responsibility but rather affirms it. “Destiny”, says Hegel, is man’s “very ability to will either good or evil – in other words, that he is the subject of moral imputableness,

imputation not only of evil, but also of good” (ibid., 49). From this perspective, it becomes easy to see that any wholesale deterministic interpretation of Hegel might only arise from an unwarranted assumption that destiny precludes moral imputability.

Martin Buber (1976, 53) lends an authoritative voice to this whole discussion in the following words:

Destiny and freedom are solemnly promised to one another. Only the man who makes freedom real to himself meets destiny...Destiny confronts him as the counterpart of his freedom. It is not his boundary, but his fulfilment; freedom and destiny are linked together in meaning.

Realizing that destiny is not a “boundary” but rather a “fulfilment” no doubt reinforces my line of interpretation which sees more of a *dialectic balance*.

The final site I wish to explore in drawing this parallel is that, for both systems, community (which Hegel calls “State”) is an invaluable medium of operation for the two principles, *Chi* and Reason/Spirit. It has already been hinted that, for Hegel as for the Igbo, community (State) occupies an exalted place. It only needs to be emphasized here that it furnishes at the same time the optimal environment for the dynamics of the two principles, Reason/Spirit and *Chi*. For instance, individuals in the Igbo (African) community see themselves as bound up in a nexus of interconnectedness. Interestingly, Hegel’s State, also shares this vision. For, as in the Igbo community, individuals in Hegel’s community-State are portrayed as closely knit in an inextricable set-up of interdependence (Hegel 1991). This is such that the pursuance of private ends invariably counts for the advancement of collective ends. Hegel envisions a state where “the subsistence and welfare of the individual...are interwoven with, and grounded on, the subsistence and welfare...of all, and have actuality...only in this context (ibid., 221).

But the most important feature of the community (State) that makes it the optimal medium for the dynamics of *Chi* and Hegel’s Reason/Spirit is the enforcement of law and order. In Hegel, the constitution is an essential element of the State which defines the code of conduct of individuals. Similarly, the unwritten “constitution” of the Igbo community is the established laws and customs which stipulate the conduct of members. The limits that community imposes through its laws and customs is a *Chi* factor and plays a stabilizing role. Achebe (1976, 39) attests to this stabilizing role of the community, saying that

...the Igbo are unlikely to concede to the individual an absolutism they deny even to *Chi*. The obvious curtailment of a man’s power to walk alone and do as he will is provided by another potent force – the will of his community...No man, however great, can win judgment against all the people.

Community is here referred to as a “potent force” that plays the role of “curtailment”. Community ensures that the whims and caprices of individuals are kept under check, and this further guarantees that mortals do not overstep their boundaries.

Community (State) plays an analogous role in Hegel through the enforcement of law and order. Paradoxically, this apparent placement of “limit” is the only guarantee for the freedom and happiness of all (Hegel 2001a). A contrary scenario could verge on the “state of Nature”, to

use a well-known Hobbesian metaphor. Hegel (2001a, 56) (like Hobbes) rebukes such a scenario vehemently:

The “state of Nature” is, therefore, predominantly that of injustice and violence, of untamed natural impulses, of inhuman deeds and feelings. Limitation is certainly produced by Society and the State, but it is a limitation of the mere brute emotions and rude instincts...We should on the contrary look upon such limitation as the indispensable proviso of emancipation. Society and the State are the very conditions in which Freedom is realized.

Therefore, true freedom is not unrestrained freedom but such that possesses “boundaries” and “limitations”. Unrestrained freedom breeds savagery and recklessness. As he further notes, “[t]o the Ideal of Freedom, Law and Morality are indispensable requisites” (Hegel 2001a, 56). Kant indeed lends his voice when he proposes “a perfectly constituted state as the only condition in which the capacities of mankind can be fully developed” (Kant 1963, 21).

The above points may then be summed up thus: for Hegel, as for the Igbo, community (State) is a stabilizing factor, which is readily mobilized in the dynamics of the two principles – *Chi* and Reason/Spirit. And this is yet another site at which the parallel between the two has been explored.

Conclusion

In conclusion, I wish to restate the *key thesis*, namely that there is a remarkable *conceptual parallel* between the concept of *Chi* in Igbo metaphysics and the notion of “cunning of Reason” in Hegel’s philosophy of history. In order to draw this parallel, the following subsidiary but complementary arguments have been developed in the foregoing discourse: that, like Hegel’s Reason/Spirit, *Chi* is also “cunning” in its dynamics; that both principles are non-deterministic, as each tries to maintain a *dialectic balance* between destiny and individual responsibility; that both share divine attributes; and that community is an invaluable medium of operation for both principles. I take these four points to be “subsidiary” because they flow from and must be seen in the light of the central thesis; they are “complementary” because they reinforce each other. The article makes no pretensions to have rendered an exhaustive or conclusive treatment of the issues at stake. Though an attempt has been made, some of the issues, like the tension between destiny and personal responsibility, may indeed remain perennial philosophical questions. However, I believe that the scholarly significance of the article lies in the fact that it represents a modest but genuine attempt at a constructive engagement with Hegel (something quite rare in African scholarly circles) – an engagement I have fashionably called a “rapprochement”, given its conciliatory overtures. Perhaps, too, the article represents a “home-grown” attempt to systematize an element of Igbo metaphysics in a manner that continues to destroy the vestiges of simplistic ethnophilosophical descriptions. I do hope that this article lays the much-needed foundation for further systematic philosophizing on *Chi* and more creative engagement with Hegel in African scholarship.

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