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## LIVING OUT AFRICAN VISION IN ASIAN MISSION

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*Indeed, there is something  
in a name!*

### PREAMBLE

I am Igbo, was born Igbo, and will surely die an Igbo of Southern Nigeria! At my birth I was given the name *Chibuike*, pronounced as *Chi-bu-ike*. My dad once told me how an expatriate parish priest 'refused' to baptize me because my name was a 'heathen name'; "a child of God," the priest said, "cannot bear the name of pagans." The priest thus literally ordered that a 'Christian name' like Peter, James, or John be given to me. No Christian name, no baptism! But, thank God, my Igbo parents vehemently insisted that I be baptized with the so-called heathen name; they knew the meaning of my name – '*God is strength*' – and it had been carefully chosen to reflect their life experience and their future hope for their baby boy. Indeed, there is something in a name!

As an African child, therefore, I grew up with the incredible conviction that anything called powerful (*ike*) is so called because of its indispensable connectedness to the divine (*Chi*). Whatever we are and could be derive their meaning from God. God is the strength of human life and any life adventure. Nothing is humanly possible unless it has the seal of the divine. This is my vision of life! The question then is: having been catapulted from Africa into Asia, how does this vision translate into mission? Has this vision remained mere vision or some kind of daydreaming? Or has my contact with the Asian world actually aided me to translate my vision into a mission that draws its energy from God? These are the questions around which I will explore my personal experience as a Nigerian Spiritan working in Asia and how this experience relates to the Spiritan charism.

I will begin, however, with a hermeneutical reflection on the *Chi* concept in both cultures, in the Igbo culture of my birth and in the Asian culture in which I now live and work. This is pertinent because it is in relation to the ontological concept of *Chi*, around which my vision of life revolves, that I will examine the indispensability of 'God's strength' in my years of missionary adventure in the Philippines.

### CHI IN IGBO CULTURE

My parents, like every traditional Igbo person, believe strongly that behind the entire spatio-temporal reality, visible and invisible, lies a *force* or *power* (*ike*) that sets reality in motion. This force is *Chi*. Since this, so to speak, is the *élan vital* of all there is, therefore it cannot but be supernatural. Hence, in the Igbo

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worldview, *Chi* stands for the supernatural or simply God. Thus, the name *Chibuike* presupposes that *Chi* is strength or power of life. There is no life without *Chi*. A *Chi*-less life is no life at all. At their most fundamental level, humanity and the world exist as the intangible energy of *Chi*. By connecting with that energy in a controlled and conscious way, you can impact every area of your life to fulfill your most deeply held and authentic needs. Indeed, the energy of *Chi* can carry you beyond the self-created boundaries that limit so many people. For the Igbo, each individual has a *Chi*, a ‘spirit being’ parallel to his physical being. Thus, the concept of *Chi* also entails a necessary duality in the world - “wherever something stands, something else will stand beside it” (*ihe kwuru, ihe akwudebe ya*). The importance of *Chi* is also demonstrated by the frequency with which it appears as an element in Igbo names, such as *Chibundu* (*Chi is life*), *Chibuzo* (*Chi is the way*), *Chinualumogu* (*Chi is my arbiter*), *Chikadibia* (*Chi is greater than the doctor*), and, of course, *Chibuike* (*Chi is strength*).

The *Chi* principle does not in any way demean the being of the human person in the shaping of his or her life. For the Igbo believe strongly that, while *Chi* is life and strength, human beings play a participatory role in the shaping of their lives to the effect that whatever befalls one is ‘what one settles with one’s *Chi*’ (*ihe ya na chi ya kpara*). In the Igbo culture, one operative principle in the shaping of a person’s life is human will power – determination to face the challenges of life. This shaping and re-shaping of one’s life or destiny is clearly expressed in the Igbo saying *onye kwe, chi ya ekwe* (“if one wills, one’s personal ‘Chi’ wills also”). It is a manifestation of the optimism and dynamism so evident in the Igbo attempt at self actualization and the orientation towards achievement. In other words, one’s determination to survive is backed up by the divine’s determination to support and strengthen. Thus, the element of fatalism, where one is left to the mercy of destiny, is mitigated by ascribing some will power and initiative to the human person. Yet, at the end of the day, *Chi* remains the ultimate ‘energy’ of existence.

#### **ON BEING *CHI* IN ASIA**

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I love Asia...the people, the language and culture. After almost a decade of lived experience in Asia, I have come to realize that Africa, particularly the Igbo world, has something in common with Asia when it comes to ultimate reality and meaning. Over these years, I have leisurely devoted time to studying the wisdom traditions of the Far East, including the philosophical teachings of Buddhism and Taoism and different forms of martial arts. I

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realize now that there is a ‘consensus point’ for a deep Afro-Asian reflection on life as a whole, for, interestingly, *Chi* means exactly the same thing (life-force), and is indeed pronounced exactly the same way (*Chi* as in *chief*), in both the Igbo and Oriental cultures.

Heavily influenced by Chinese culture, most Asians see in the *Chi* concept a clear-cut ‘program’ for getting everything one wants and deserves, with the basic energy (*Chi*) of the universe as one’s personal power source! Among the Chinese, *Chi* is ‘the natural energy of the Universe.’ This energy, though called ‘natural,’ is spiritual or supernatural, and is part of a metaphysical, not an empirical, belief system. *Chi* is thought to permeate all things. It is the primal energy underlying all matter; it is the vital energy that gives life to living beings.

Hence, in Buddhism, for instance, *Chi* is explained as *Kundalini Shakti* – our creative energy, the energy of our soul, the energy of consciousness, the awareness of the higher self, our emanation from infinity, and the energy of the cosmos within each individual. Buddhists believe that *Kundalini* makes it possible for us as humans with finite identities to relate to our infinite identities. We become aware of our creative capacities, the inherent radiance of our being, and can unfold our true creative purpose for being. In fact, life is so *Chi*-centered that we ‘inhale and exhale’ nothing but *Chi*, whose major component is harmony.<sup>1</sup> On this ground, my traditional Igbo culture agrees so well with the general understanding of *Chi* in Asia: *Chi is life!*

The crucial question now is: what has this *Chi* principle to do with my missionary experience?

#### **NIGERIAN MISSIONARY IN THE PHILIPPINES**

I was ordained to the priesthood in Nigeria on July 8, 2000. Before I could say ‘Eureka,’ God catapulted me out of Africa into Asia. Having to leave home a few weeks after ordination was quite a challenge. However, like the archetypal figure of Prometheus, who dared the world of the gods to bring fire to humanity, I landed in Mindanao in the Southern Philippines not sure of what lay ahead, but very confident that I would encounter everything with a Sisyphean spirit born out of the energy of life called *Chi*.

Though ultimately my encounter with the Filipino culture has been profoundly enriching, I must confess that initially it presented a herculean challenge in terms of adapting to a very different culture, language, socio-economic and political environment, and indeed mindset. It has been tough, but indeed necessarily

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tough, because this toughness has contributed immensely to my personal transformation, a transformation made possible through the power of *Chi* that continuously strengthens and fires me up.

One of the greatest challenges for me was to see mission in terms of transformational witnessing, rather than simply as a job to be done. My first appointment to the Philippines reminds me of the critical and crucial importance of liminality, or the border-stage of passage in the human life-cycle from one state to another. Mission in this part of Asia remains for me a process of identity-formation, as in the case of crossing the threshold of puberty to the world of adulthood. At this stage I am proud and happy to say that I was *born* a Nigerian, *called* a Spiritan, *re-born* a Filipino, but *remain* an Igbo – all because *Chi* has been my strength.

#### MISSION OF PRESENCE AND WITNESS

Language helped me to permeate the heart of the Filipinos. Having to ‘master’ in six months the local language – *Cebuano* (or *Bisay*) – was a daunting challenge for me but it left me with a sense of fulfillment, particularly when I saw how impressed the people were. And having then to learn the national language – *Tagalog* – all on my own gave me further joy and made me feel as if I had become a Filipino. *Spanish* came later and made me even more at home among the Filipino people and more accepted by them. With these three languages, difficult as they definitely were, I have been able to communicate and relate pretty well. When in the community of Southern and Central Filipinos, my ability to speak Cebuano breaks the ice. With the Filipinos from the North, or when it is time use the national language, my Tagalog does the magic. When in the midst of the ‘living ancestors,’ who cherish the three centuries of Spanish colonization, my little Spanish works wonders. I attribute all of this to the power of *Chi*.

Undeniably, mission entails a ‘mutual exchange of energies,’ in which all have something to give and something to receive.<sup>2</sup> Filipinos have also touched my life and continue to inspire me every day. The Filipino hospitality I continue to enjoy delights me. The smile on the face of every Filipino I meet on the street is truly inspiring. The generosity of even the poorest Filipino person is simply amazing; I experience it in the gifts I regularly receive, in numerous invitations to meals for fiestas, birthdays, marriages, and other occasions, and in people’s readiness to hike with me for hours to visit an outstation. The simplicity of lifestyle of the people, their spirit of ‘don’t worry, be happy,’ has taught me a lot. The Filipino respect for the *‘pari’* (priest) challenges my sense of the sacred. In the midst of Muslim-Christian

tension in Mindanao, the friendliness of the Muslim community overwhelms me. Indeed, many Filipinos continue to touch the very core of my being. This again is surely the power of *Chi*.

#### MISSION OF DIVERSITY

One interesting and enriching aspect of my missionary experience in the Philippines is that it has been a ‘peripatetic’ mission. Over the past eight years I have worked in various ministries: I have been a pastor in a mountain parish, where I had to travel 14 km to get drinking water and hike for 7 good hours to reach an outstation; I have been a pastor in two different city parishes, where I felt that my homilies were more critically analyzed (and sometimes reinterpreted!); I worked in prison ministry, with crime victims as well as their families, which was always a demanding task; I have been vocation coordinator for the very young but promising Spiritan formation program, facing the difficult task of convincing the youth of today of the importance of religious vocation; and finally I have been involved in campus ministry, where accompanying 21<sup>st</sup> century Filipino college students can be a real challenge. At present, I am officially assigned (amazingly!) to the following ministries: *parish priest* of a rural parish located in a poor remote hinterland, *pastoral director* of prison ministry in both Iligan diocese and the entire ecclesiastical province, *campus ministry coordinator* and *part-time lecturer* of philosophy and Christian morality at St. Michael’s College, Iligan. In addition, I remain committed to my work as vocation coordinator of the Spiritans.

‘Outside the Church,’ I have also witnessed to Filipinos through my contact with *Kiwanis International*, a global organization of volunteers dedicated to changing the world - one child and one community at a time. I see in *Kiwanis* an ‘extension’ of my ‘Spiritanness,’ or vocation to missionary life. The *Kiwanis* motto – ‘*serving the children of the world*’ – remains for me a mission that the founders of the Spiritan Congregation, Libermann and Poullart des Places, would be proud to encourage. Since December 2001, I have been an active member of *Kiwanis* and have worked together with *Kiwanis* to bring life and hope to hundreds of Filipino *anawim* through different social projects, providing food, clothing, shelter, education, and healthcare to thousands of poor rural children and families.

But central to all these ministries, as diversified as they are, is a needy human condition - a human situation that is terribly in need of liberation and transformation. From rural parish to prison ministry, the experience remains one that brings me face to face with human beings hungering for the love of God. The

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cry for justice cannot but be heard in my rural parish in the mountains of Digkilaan. Covering an incredibly large area of 350 sq. km., and inhabited by people who cling to survival through subsistence farming on farmlands that, sad to say, do not belong to them, mission in this parish cannot but be holistic.

How I have been able to combine all these ministries and still have had time and energy to write two books remains a mystery to me. Without the power of *Chi*, all of this surely could not have been possible! Eight years on, mission among Filipinos remains a profoundly witness-filled experience. By simply being with the people, loving them, and, indispensably, learning from them, I have encountered them at the levels of their faith and culture. I have discovered how they experience God in their lives while sharing how I, as an African and a Spiritan missionary, experience the Lord in mine.

#### THE POWER OF CHI IN SPIRITAN CHARISM

The *Chi* concept suits perfectly well all that the word ‘Spiritan’ stands for. From a Spiritan perspective, the power of *Chi* is the power of the Holy Spirit. At the core of any Spiritan mission is the Spirit of God without whom there is no life; for this Spirit is both the source of life as well as life itself. As a Spiritan, one remains an embodiment of the Spirit, so to speak. The Spiritan missionary cannot but be fired up, Spirit-charged. And being a Spirit-carrier challenges the Spiritan missionary to ‘enspirit’ the people among and with whom he lives and works. To be a Spiritan is to daringly let other people experience the wonderful presence of this Spirit that empowers, vivifies, and liberates.

It is against this backdrop that the Spiritan mission in the Philippines remains a mission that is in consonance with the charism of our founders. They understood quite well that mission cannot but be *Chi*-centered (Spirit-filled) and that authentic evangelization constitutes the integral liberation of people, action for justice and peace, and participation in development. The *Chi*-filled missionaries cannot but be “the advocates, the supporters, and the defenders of the weak and the little ones against all who oppress them.”<sup>3</sup>

The Philippines is among the countries in Asia that are characterized by massive poverty. Hence, compassion necessarily is at the core of mission, especially among the Filipino *anawim*. To say, “*The Lord be with you*,” without actually bringing the Lord to the people through social services would be tantamount to ignoring the essence of Christ’s message; this vision is at the heart of Spiritan mission. Working with prisoners who live in subhuman conditions, as well as trekking very long distances

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along rugged mountainous pathways to reach out to my poverty-stricken parishioners, reminds me that mission is simply about sharing God's love with God's strength. Our Spiritan ancestor, Francis Libermann, lived in accordance with this principle, as Cornelius van der Poel, our Dutch confrere, clearly states:

*The whole life of Francis Libermann was directed toward one point, namely, to establish and to strengthen God's love in the hearts of people. Whether we focus our attention on ...his ministry for the most abandoned souls, or on the foundation of a religious, missionary society and its discontinuance in order to be fused with the Congregation of the Holy Spirit, everywhere his deepest motivation is this urge to establish and to deepen God's love in the human community.... This urge was for him fulfilled in the experience of being consecrated to the service of God.<sup>4</sup>*

Thus, crucial to my "experience of being consecrated to the service of God" in the Philippines is the profound power of the Spirit (*Chi*) that humbles me, opens my eyes to see, and impels me to act in response to the reality on the ground – the reality of poverty, sickness, exploitation, political and armed conflicts, and natural calamities. And as the Filipino theologian, Rodrigo Tano, puts it, "sharing in the suffering of our people and meeting their needs could well be a point of entry for the gospel."<sup>5</sup>

#### **FRANCIS LIBERMANN AND THE SPIRITAN PHILIPPINES MISSION**

My mission in the Philippines is Spiritan Mission. This means, in the first place, that I came to the Philippines not just as *Chibuike* Ojilere but more importantly as a Spiritan missionary. Simply put, I was sent. Secondly and consequently, I accept and commit myself to the Spiritan Philippines mission, which is principally the evangelization of the poor. Thus, despite the difficulties involved, I continue to commit my whole being to this mission because I am convinced that mission is God's, and the will of God that brought me here is commensurate with the grace and strength of God that continues to sustain me. My personal lived experience has so far taught me that it is the grace of God that ultimately supplies the energy and strength needed for the missionary adventure. Simply put, God is my strength (*Chi-bu-ike*) in mission and "God's strength is enough for me." This, I believe, is what inspired Francis Libermann to say, without in any way demeaning the human person, that "God is all, man is nothing." The conviction that mission is "God's business,"<sup>6</sup> and that the strength for missionary encounter comes from God, empowers one to be resilient in the midst of hardships, be it terrorism, economic difficulties, culture shock, or even the gigantic challenge of language learning. This resiliency remains

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an evident ingredient in the Spiritan Philippines mission in the face of the ongoing threat of terrorism and natural disaster. In this context, the words of Libermann continue to be profoundly inspiring:

*The moment I see difficulties and trouble, the divine goodness seems to give me new strength. It seems to me that I am made for suffering, for being tried. My heart overflows with joy and hope, and I drag myself along to battle. It is not in me to flee. So never fear for me. God is my strength [Chi-bu-ike]; nothing in the world can unnerve me...<sup>7</sup>*

Libermann's missionary resiliency is well-described by Cornelius van der Poel:

*Who can ever describe his feelings when the Congregation of the Holy Heart of Mary...had to be dissolved and be absorbed into the Congregation of the Holy Spirit. Only the benefit for the poor that would result from this fusion could guide his decision. He never relinquished his purpose, not even when some of his own followers called him a traitor. His missionary ideal stood firm and remained active, even under the most difficult circumstances. No one can ever put into words the pain he felt when so many of his missionaries died in the merciless climate of Africa. Nothing could break his missionary vocation.<sup>8</sup>*

*Nothing could break his missionary vocation.*

*...it is imperative that one embraces one's mission with an indefatigable trust in God's strength.*

With years of immersion among the oppressed and poorest of the poor in the Philippines, I remain convinced that this God-powered diehard attitude in the face of difficulties remains indispensable for mission, for in it lies the heart of missionary availability. Since "an availability for the service of the gospel, a readiness to go where we are sent by the Congregation"<sup>9</sup> remains fundamental to the Spiritan calling, it is imperative that one embraces one's mission with an indefatigable trust in God's strength. To take adequate cognizance of the context in which mission has to be done, and, as Anthony Gittins puts it, to get immersed in the ongoing life of the poor from the point of view of the poor,<sup>10</sup> is a tremendous challenge. And when such a context is as challenging as the Philippines, then the necessity of the ultimate power of *Chi* in the missionary adventure becomes self-evident.

#### CONCLUSION

In all, my experience as a young African working in the Philippines remains a typical *rite de passage*. My *Chi*-centered vision of life thus continues to fire me up in my missionary adventure. This vision remains my compass and map. On the one hand, the compass keeps my primary calling primary, helps me to use my

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gifts to meet the needs of others, and directs me in my journey of finding God's purposes for my life. On the other hand, the map enables me to determine where I am, the location and distance of my destination, and the best route for getting there. It helps me to anticipate what I might encounter on the trip. Above all, this map also gives me a strong sense of confidence in the power of *Chi*.

I can therefore say with certainty that my mission in the Philippines has been enriching because I have a 'power-full' map called *Chi*. The Holy Spirit of God is and remains the missionary map that strengthens me and fires me up. *God is strength indeed!*

#### Footnotes

<sup>1</sup> See Li Ling, *A Study on Chinese Occult Arts, Zhongguo fangshu kao*, Beijing: Eastern Press, 2001.

<sup>2</sup> See James Chukwuma Okoye, "Mutual Exchange of Energies: Mission in Cross-Cultural Perspective. An African Point of View," *Missiology* 25/4 (October 1997), 467-497.

<sup>3</sup> *Spiritual Rule of Life*, No.14.

<sup>4</sup> Cornelius J. van der Poel, C.S.Sp., "Consecration to the Apostolate," a presentation given at Gemert, the Netherlands, February 2, 2008.

<sup>5</sup> Rodrigo D. Tano, "Towards an Evangelical Asian Theology," in *The Bible and Theology in Asian Contexts*, eds. Bong Rin Ro & Ruth Eshenaur (Taichung, Taiwan: Asia Theological Association, 1984), 107.

<sup>6</sup> Anthony Gittins, C.S.Sp., "Mission Today: Call and Response," in *Spiritual Anniversary Lectures 1703-2003*, The Anniversary Commission (Dublin: Paraclete Press, 2004), 84.

<sup>7</sup> Francis Libermann, *Notes and Documents*, XII, 316, as quoted in Alphonse Gilbert, C.S.Sp., *A Gentle Way to God: The Spiritual Teaching of Francis Libermann C.S.Sp.*, trans. Myles Fay, C.S.Sp. (Dublin: Paraclete Press, 1990), 64.

<sup>8</sup> Cornelius J. van der Poel, C.S.Sp., "Francis Libermann: The Confluence of Charisma and Personality," a presentation given at Gemert, the Netherlands, February 2, 2007.

<sup>9</sup> *Spiritual Rule of Life*, No.25

<sup>10</sup> Anthony Gittins, C.S.Sp., "Matter of Homelessness," in *Beyond Theological Tourism*, eds. Susan B. Thistlethwaite and George F. Cairns (Maryknoll: Orbis 1994), 113.