

## The Supreme Being in the Igbo Traditional Religion in the South Eastern Nigeria: A Critical Analysis

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### ABSTRACT

*The Igbo are an ethnic group in the south eastern part of Nigeria. The Igbo people are said to be deeply religious. Before the advent of the Western missionaries in their midst, they were practicing their traditional religion. They had many gods in their pantheon. Some scholars, including Igbo scholars, however, believe that the Igbo people did not have the idea of God originally in their pantheon. This is to say that they did not have the idea of the Supreme Being before the arrival of the missionaries. In his own contribution to the debate J. O. Oguejiofor articulated an argument which casts doubt on the belief that the Igbo had the idea of the Supreme Being prior to their reception of the Christian message. This paper examines critically his argument. It points out the weaknesses of his argument. This paper maintains that the Igbo indeed had the idea of the Supreme Being before the missionaries arrived in their midst.*

**Keywords:** Supreme Being, chineke, Igbo

### INTRODUCTION

One who reads Oguejiofor's book, *The Influence of Igbo Traditional Religion on the Socio-political Character of the Igbo*, attentively, especially pages 47-64, cannot but observe the rigor and the tenor of his argument with which he attempted to cast doubt on the belief that the Igbo had an idea of the Supreme Being before the advent of the Christian religion. Since he published his book, there appears to be concerted silence that gives an impression of a general acceptance of the validity of his claim. And yet Oguejiofor himself was not expecting such silence. He had thought that his conclusion would upset many. He had believed that certain conclusions from his exposition, "may be shocking to those who have got accustomed to chanting the attributes of the traditional Supreme God" (J. O. Oguejiofor, 1996).

Oguejiofor was correct to expect that his position would be disconcerting to some people. Indeed, the dogged manner in which he pursued his argument and stated his conclusion might lead to this expectation. Nevertheless, I think the time is ripe enough to break the disquieting silence over his claim and point out the flabby aspects of his argument.

### HIS MAIN ARGUMENT

Before going to examine his argument, I would wish to point out things which I consider positive in his write up. The first is his attempt to present in a scholarly manner a synopsis of the debate over the idea of the Supreme Being among the Igbo thinkers. After this scintillating presentation, he moved on to articulate his own argument and to draw his own conclusion. Secondly, the premises leading to his conclusion are clearly presented. Indeed, I found him questioning and reasoning as someone who wants to muster arguments from all fronts to convince his audience of the veracity of his claim.

There are three areas from which Oguejiofor drew his conclusion that led to his doubt that the idea of the Supreme Being ever existed among the Igbo before the arrival of the missionaries in their midst. These are:

1. No altar and organised worship for the Supreme Being.
2. No function is assigned to him in the Igbo pantheon.
3. His designation as a creator is disputable.

All these claims led him not only to cast doubt on the existence of the Supreme Being among the Igbo but ultimately to boost his thesis, namely, that the Igbo man is “individualistic, egalitarian, and democratic”. In attempt to bring his doubt of the Supreme Being to fit in with these attributes with which he characterizes the Igbo man, he has this to say: “It is more reasonable and fits more into the picture that a people as individualistic, egalitarian, and democratic as the Igbo have no absolute Supreme God in the Pantheon. It seems more tenable that a people that do not recognize kings in their traditional political organization and who have always rejected political hegemony have no ontological Supreme God among their innumerable gods” (J. O. Oguejiofor, 1996).

### EVALUATION OF THE ARGUMENT

We shall evaluate the argument by examining the validity of the premises (nos. 1-3) that led him to his conclusion. N<sup>o</sup> 1 maintains that there was no altar and organised worship for the Supreme Being among the Igbo. The underlying assumption in this premise is that if the Igbo people had recognized such a Being, they would have built an altar, sacrificed to him on this altar and performed an organized worship in his honour. Now, there is no doubt that there is a sense in this. However, it must be pointed out that having an altar and performing an organised worship do not form part of the essential definitional requirements of the Supreme Being.

People can believe in God and yet fail to worship him. It is not uncommon to hear people say: “*Je suis un croyant mais pas un pratiquant*”(I am a believer but not a practicing one). This is difficult to comprehend. But it does happen. It is even difficult for People like Plato to accept. For him, one who believes in the gods must express this belief in words and action. Such a person is not supposed to utter impious words or behave irreligiously. But Plato acknowledges that there are individuals indeed who behave otherwise, that is, people who believe in the gods but are neither religious nor speak with reverence with regard to the gods. One of the reasons which Plato gave on why people behave in this manner is because they believe “that the gods exist, but have no care for men” (Plato, 1984).

This explanation is pertinent to our present discussion. If one believes in the gods and believes as well that they are indifferent or negligent to human needs it is most likely that such a person will neither have interest in them nor worship them. For Plato, this is not simply a speculation. Such people exist, that is, people who behave irreligiously and impiously just because they believe that the gods do not care for human beings. Plato spends some time to refute this point of view which he considers erroneous (Plato, 1984). He even recommends penalties for anyone who maintains this position (Plato, 1984). All that shows that belief in God is one thing sacrifice to or worship of this being on or without an altar is another. Sacrifice, therefore, is not a defining feature of the Supreme Being.

Having said this, it must be admitted that the idea of associating sacrifice with the Ultimate Being (even when this is not in itself a necessary or sufficient condition in the concept of the Supreme Being) is not totally inane. Sacrifice can serve as a sign of man’s recognition of the

awesomeness of this Being. But whether this sacrifice is made on an altar or in an organised way is irrelevant.

Be that as it may, the Igbo did offer sacrifice to the Supreme Being. They offered him only white animals (G. T. Basden, 1966). But they did not offer such sacrifices on any altar. Uzukwu reports that the Igbo directed their sacrifices to God while facing the sun, for they did not know where to locate him. He confirms his report from what an elder from his village said in this regard: “*Chukwu* (God) receives the offering through the sun since nobody knows where *Chukwu* is” (E. E. Uzukwu, 1982). This fact is also confirmed by Nwaokoye Odenigbo in his response to an interview granted to M.A. Onwuejeogwu. According to him, “We do not have a special place for calling upon *Chukwu* because we believe that it is everywhere and anyone could approach it, the *Okike* (Creator)” (E. Isichei, 1977). These answers explain why the Igbo did not have an altar for the Supreme Being. Even Christ did not emphasize location as being important in worship. For him, the true believers are those who worship in spirit and in truth (John 4:23).

And with regard to Oguejiofor’s doubt about an organized worship for the Supreme Being among the Igbo, one must be leery of such a position. If he means by an organized worship an accepted way of relating to this Great Being, then the Igbo could be credited as having one. The fact that it was only white animals that the Igbo used in offering sacrifice to the Supreme Being, and the fact also that they faced the Sun while doing so, shows some kind of organization in their worship of this Great Being.

In N<sup>o</sup> 2, Oguejiofor wonders why the Supreme Being has no function in the Igbo pantheon. For him, it is curious that the minor deities have their designated functions and yet the Supreme Being has none. He argues further (N<sup>o</sup> 3) that the function of creation generally attributed to Him is disputable.

Now, the above remarks are not conclusive in them and so may not serve as veritable premises in an argument. The fact that the designation of God as creator (*Chineke*) is being disputed cannot gratuitously lead to a conclusion that he has no function. Even if it is being disputed, it has not yet been decided in favour of or against *Chineke* as a creator. Hence, it cannot be said with all certainty that He has no function. And so this cannot logically form part of the premises that lead to any genuine doubt of the idea of the Supreme Being among the Igbo.

Be that as it may, while Oguejiofor and many other scholars may continue in their analysis of the word *Chineke* (God that creates or *Chi* and *Eke*) in their attempt to determine whether God is a creator or not, certain parts of Igbo land celebrate annually the festivals of God as the creator. The Nri people, for example, celebrate what they call *Onwa Okike* (month of creation) every year. And besides they call upon God as a creator while breaking the kola nuts (E. Isichei, 1977). Among the Ibagwa, there is a myth that narrates how God created the universe. In this myth it is said that “*Chukwu* is *Oke Abiama* – maker of everything. He made the universe in two parts, the Earth (*Ani*) and Sky (*Igwe*), after which he created two messengers – Sun (*Anyanwu*) and Moon (*Onwa*) to travel across the sky bringing back news to him on what happens on earth” (E.I. Metuh, 1985). All these are pointers to the fact that the Supreme Being has a function among the Igbo and that he is designated as a creator.

Oguejiofor believes that Nwoga made a strong case when he says that the root word *-ke* in *Chineke* has nothing to do with creation because there is no creation out of nothing among the Igbo (J. O. Oguejiofor, 1996). A reason for this position is that there is no evidence found in Igbo myth and language to buttress the interpretation that *-ke* means creation. That apart from the word, *Chineke*, where it is interpreted to mean, creation, *-ke* does not have this kind of meaning in any other context.

There are three responses that can be made to this interpretation. First, the word creation does not necessarily involve creating out of nothing. There are two accounts of creation in the Bible. In one account (Genesis 1:1-2:4a), God created out of nothing and in the other (Genesis 2:4b-25) he created out of something. In either case the idea of God as a Supreme Being among the Jews is not diminished. They have a monotheistic religion. There is no other God superior to the One they worship even though he might have created out of something. Secondly, if the word *-ke* does not mean creation in any other context apart from *Chineke*, that does not prove anything. The Hebrew word, *bara'* means to create. But "as a special theological term, *bara'* is used to express clearly the incomparability of the creative work of God in contrast to all secondary products and likenesses made from already existing material by man" (Johannes Botterweck, G. and Helmer Ringgren, 1999). It is "a word used in the OT only with the deity as the subject; hence it indicates a work which is distinctively divine, which no agent less than God can accomplish" (J. L. McKENZIE, 1978). In the same vein *-ke* is used to underscore the distinctive feature of the divine action as different from that of man with regard to bringing something into existence. Thirdly, there are a number of myths of creation among the Igbo (T. U. Nwala, 1985). There is nothing that shows that they were not in use before the missionaries arrived on Igbo soil.

Oguejiofor mentioned Christopher Ezekwugo as maintaining that the true God of the Igbo is *Chi* and that this God is neither Chukwu nor *Chineke* (God the creator) (J. O. Oguejiofor, 1996). Ezekwugo, like Nwoga, was mentioned in order to shore up the view that the Igbo did not have the idea of the Supreme Being in the absolute sense before the missionaries came to Igboland. In his own work, Ezekwugo indeed subscribes to this opinion. There he tries to explain away how the word *Chineke* came to assume the meaning of God – the creator. For him, *Chineke* was originally a pagan name with a pagan meaning. It did not refer to God as the creator. However, according to him, "It is not certain when that word became adopted by the Protestants." (C. Ezekwugo, 1987). And not being sure of the time he conjectured it was probably used first by Bishop Crowther in his Book *Vocabulary of the Igbo Language*. For him, it was the bishop who gave it a new meaning (*Chineke*, God that creates). Ezekwugo's argument moved from probability to certainty. It moved from it seems the word *Chineke* was first used by Bishop Crowther to stating a fact that it was him who gave it a new meaning – God, the creator. Ezekwugo did not see that it was also possible the so called "new meaning" could have been introduced to Bishop Crowther by the pagans; that it was possible the new meaning could have been in use before the missionaries arrived. It did not occur to him that it was possible the expression "*Chi and Eke*" and the word "*Chineke*" (God, the creator) had been used concurrently with their respective meanings before the advent of the missionaries. And that none of them received any new meaning. However, it is superfluous to proceed in this analysis which is based on probability.

On another note, it is interesting to examine one of Ezekwugo's reactions to the idea of God as the creator before the arrival of the missionaries. I will quote at length the evidence of Mr Amanze and summarise Ezekwugo's argument against it. According to Amanze:

Before the advent of the missionaries who eventually brought Christianity, the people of Ezinihite of Mbaise believed in and worshipped a Supreme God whom they called *Chineke* – God that creates. They believe that he was the creator not only of themselves but of the whole world...The people further hold that this Creator chose a particular place and spot where he stayed and carried out his work of creation. This chosen place is the very family of Ezinihite people. Initially these people lived together before their population increased and the need for separate existence arose. Eventually each village was given a large area of land and asked to live there leaving the head of these villages to

cater for the shrine of this Chineke. Up to the present, it is generally and historically believed among the people of Ezinihite (nineteen villages altogether) and some other people outside Ezinihite that the very place in question was the seat of Chineke when he carried out his work of creation. Sacrifices are being offered to Chineke by the entire people of Ezinihite till this present day... (C. Ezekwugo, 1987)

Ezekwugo refuses to accept that what Ezinihite people of Mbaise worship is the Supreme Being, *Chineke*. His refusal is based on the following (C. Ezekwugo, 1987):

1. There is no special priest for Chineke. It is the priest of a village god, Arukwu that performs the annual festival.
2. That the wording of the prayer being addressed to Chineke does not express God in the absolute sense, that is, God as the creator of the world but rather the creator of Ezinihite world.

It is important to point out that there is no need to expect the logical necessity that is valid in the sciences to apply strictly to religion or ethics. "It is the mark of an educated mind to expect that amount of exactness in each kind which the nature of the particular subject admits" (Aristotle, 1994). To argue in the following fashion is not necessary:

A deity must have a priest.

God, who is a Deity and the Supreme Being among the Igbo does not have a priest.

Therefore, he does not exist.

This type of syllogism does not apply strictly to religion. This is because religious ideas are configured in mysteries. So, it is not proper to hold that the Ezinihite people are not worshipping the Supreme Being but a minor deity simply because he has no particular priest. The people are aware that what they worship is the Supreme Being and a creator. Even though he has no particular priest like other minor deities, still they feel that they should worship him. It is because of this fact that they call upon the priest of Arukwu (a minor deity) to preside over their annual celebration.

In Igboland, a priest is a priest of a particular deity (F. Arinze, 1970). No priest ministers to two deities. And so, by presiding over the festival of God as the creator, the priest of the god, Arukwu, is presiding not over the festival of another minor deity, but rather over the celebration of the Supreme Being for which he has been detailed by the people to perform. This, of course, ultimately demonstrates that having a priest is not an important element that is necessary in the definition of the Supreme Being.

Now we address the second point upon which Ezekwugo refused to accept that what the Ezinihite people worship is the Supreme Being in the absolute sense. For him, the wording of the prayer addressed to *Chineke* portrays that he is not a Supreme Being. Now, to respond to this it is necessary to point out that the Igbo have no particular formula for prayer. "There is no set formula for prayer as far as the words are concerned" (F. Arinze, 1970). So it is superfluous to talk of wording of prayer. The presiding priest says the prayer as the occasion demands. In his prayer, he can call God different names depending on how he feels. When he says: "Eke kere uwa, umu gi abia = Eke, you who created the world your children have come", *Eke* here does not mean a minor deity. Among the Igbo *Eke* is not taken to be the creator of the world. He is simply responsible for the qualities that a child receives at birth. The world is larger and bigger than the human qualities. In his interpretation of the above saying Ezekwugo understands *Eke* as referring to a minor deity. That is not in order. *Eke* in the *Eke kere uwa* is the short form of saying *Chineke kere uwa* (God who created the world). Indeed, *Eke* there underscores *Chineke* as the creator of the world.

## EVIDENCE OF THE IGBO IDEA OF THE SUPREME BEING

To know whether the Igbo had the idea of the Supreme Being, it is not necessary to dissipate much time and energy in the etymological analysis of *Chineke*. It is important rather to determine whether the Igbo had used, in their day to day language, those qualities that are usually attributed to the Supreme Being. Such attributes include: transcendence, infinity, omnipotence, omnipresence, omniscience, immutability, etc. The Igbo certainly do not refer to God with all the divine attributes. But the many they make use of in their language are enough to qualify them as people who had the idea of the Supreme Being before the arrival of the Christian missionaries. These attributes are expressed, however, in anthropological ways. But then to speak of God anthropologically does not reduce the quality of their belief in the Supreme Being. Aristotle says: “as men imagine the gods in human form, so also they suppose their manner of life to be like their own” (Aristotle, 1990). The Bible is full of human images of God.

Some of the ways in which the Igbo express the attributes of God as a Supreme Being in their language include:

1. Onye no n’enu ogodo ya n’akpu n’ala (He who is in the sky but whose cloth touches the earth). This manifests two divine attributes. It shows the transcendence of God, which accords with Aristotle’s tenet that “God is remote from man” (Aristotle, 1994). It shows as well the immanence of God. It is similar to the description of Thomas Aquinas who says that: “God is in all things; not, indeed, as part of their essence, nor as accident, but as an agent is present to that upon which it acts” (Thomas Aquinas, 1948).
2. Ama ama amasi amasi (Known but unknown in infinite number of ways). This corresponds to what Aquinas says of God, namely, that “by its immensity, the divine substance surpasses every form that our intellect reaches” (Thomas Aquinas, 1957).
3. Nwoko oghoro anya (a man with open and big eyes) is yet another expression that brings out the attribute that the Igbo attach to the Supreme Being. It manifests the omnipresence and the omniscience of God. It means that God is everywhere and sees everything. “He is by His presence in all things, as all things are bare and open to his eyes”, says Thomas Aquinas (Thomas Aquinas, 1948)
4. God is referred to equally as Okaka (all powerful). This denotes the omnipotence of God.

## CONCLUSION

All the attributes: transcendence, immanence, infinity, omnipresence, omniscience and omnipotence found in Igbo expressions vis-à-vis their relationship with God are eloquent and sufficient evidence that shows that the Igbo had the idea of the Supreme Being before the coming of the Christian faith.

Oguejiodor therefore need not cast doubt on the idea of the existence of the Supreme Being among the Igbo before the arrival of the missionaries just to support his thesis that the Igbo are individualistic, egalitarian and democratic (J. O. Oguejiodor, 1996). He should not argue like the Pythagoreans of whom Aristotle says that in their theory of numbers “if there was any deficiency anywhere, they made haste to supply it, in order to make their system a connected whole” (Aristotle, 1996). The Igbo can be individualistic, egalitarian and democratic and yet believe in the Supreme Being. There is no contradiction or confusion on this.

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