

## Igbo-African Traditional Rational Proofs of the Existence of God

By

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### Abstract

The Igbo-African is born into a religious atmosphere that makes the presence of God a living fact. He thus has not the least doubt that God exists. As such, he does not border about the proofs of the existence of God as we see scholars in the pages of the historical evolution of Western philosophy trying to proof, with much argument that God exists. This is not to say that there are no proofs of the existence of God among Igbo-Africans. However, they do not depend on proofs like the westerner in order to believe in the existence of God because God is so near to him that he needs no proof of his existence. But questions about the Supreme Being in Igbo-African ontology have led to the study of the traditional rational proofs for the existence of God among the Igbo-Africans. These proofs were drawn from, Pre-Christian names, analysis and deductions from Igbo proverbs, critical analysis, interpretations and deductions from Igbo myths and folklores, existence from art-forms and evidence from Interviews. This piece study discovers that the Supreme Being is not a stranger to the Igbo God-talk, and was not imported by the Western missionaries from the West to Igbo land. It establishes that the concept of Supreme Being is part and parcel of Igbo traditional ontology.

**Keywords:** Africa, Tradition, Religion, Rational, Proofs, Existence, God.

### Introduction

The idea of the proof of the existence of God is more of a Western than African issue. The African believes that God exists and does not need anyone to proof to him. God is part of his daily life. Edeh (1985, p. 118), while speaking of the Igbo's relationship with God, wrote,

... the Igbo is born in a religious atmosphere that makes the presence of God a living fact, he has not the least doubt that God exists. Consequently, the Igbo normally does not bother

about a proof of God's existence. God is so near to man, so involved in man's existence, that one does not question Chukwu's existence.

Corroborating Edeh, Mbaegbu (2012, p. 246) wrote,

It would be grossly baseless to suggest to an Igbo traditionalist that all his thoughts of the Supreme Being which are his own creations encapsulated in these names and attributes of Chukwu or God are false and misguided; worse still, if such natural creations are misappropriated to be the exclusive reserve property of the Christian missionaries. The earliest Igbo people possess the concept of the Supreme Being as a real existent being in their traditional ontology.

This observation by Mbeagbu questions the perspective that the idea of Supreme Being is a stranger to the Igbo God-talk, believed to be imported by the western missionaries from the west to Igbo land. It establishes that the concept of Supreme Being is part and parcel of Igbo traditional ontology. While discussing the concreteness of God among the Yoruba people, Jahn (1961, p. 97) wrote that,

God may be banished from Greek thought without any harm done to the logical architecture of it, but this cannot be done in the case of the Yoruba. In medieval thought, science could be dismissed at pleasure, but this is impossible in the case of Yoruba thought, since faith and reason are mutually dependent. In modern times, God even has no place in scientific thinking. This was impossible for the Yorubas since from the Olodumare an architectonic of knowledge was built in which the finger of God is manifest in the most rudimentary elements of nature. Philosophy, theology, politics, social theory, land law, medicine, psychology, birth and burial, all find themselves logically concatenated in a system so tight that to subtract one item from the whole is to paralyse the structure of the whole.

This is not to say that there are no proofs of the existence of God among Africans. However, they do not depend on proofs like the westerner in order to believe in the existence of God. The first attempt at providing Igbo-African proofs of the existence of God was done by Edeh (1985). This he was able to build from the responses he got from the questionnaire he gave Mr Ede Ani Onovo, a native of Nkanu and a man well known for his wisdom and knowledge. He refers to his proofs as five ways of coming

to know about Chukwu, which include: the existence of things in nature, Igbo nomenclature, the Igbo concept of Chi and the Igbo idea of life and death. Mbaegbu (2012), building on Edeh's, went further to develop the proofs of the existence of God in Igbo ontology. However, contrary to Edeh, he was motivated to develop these proofs to prove to missionaries that there was the idea of the Supreme Being in Igbo traditional ontology, and that the idea of Supreme Being was not influenced by missionary activities among the Igbos. While Edeh refers to his proofs as possible ways of arriving at the existence of God, in Mbaegbu the concept for describing the proofs attains systematization, he referred to them as: Traditional rational proofs for the existence of God, and by the use of the phrase "Traditional rational proofs" Mbaegbu (2012, p. 24) intends to emphasize that the Igbo concept of the Supreme Being,

... comes basically from the natural light of reason, in the sense that his reason leads him to wonder about the mysteries in the world and to recognize the maker of all things. But because there are neither sacred writings, nor formulated scientific, philosophic proofs or ways of demonstrating the existence of God as in Christianity and western philosophy, knowledge of God is contained in the indigenous or natural expressions of the people, popularly known as oral tradition which are easy to remember and pass on from generation to generation.

This emphasizes that the Igbo concept of the Supreme Being was not born from cultural or missionary influence but rather from the light of reason. The traditional rational proofs are: a. demonstration from pre-Christian names, which corresponds to Edeh's 'through Igbo nomenclature'; b. Analysis and deductions from Igbo proverbs; c. Critical analysis, interpretations and deductions from Igbo myths and folklores; d. existence from art-forms and e. evidence from Interviews. While the first is based on Edeh's first proof, the second to the fifth are new, but in one way or the other related to other proofs of Edeh. However, after the study of the two perspectives, while collapsing some ideas into one and other African ideas on God, I have developed six African traditional proofs of the existence of God.

### **Based on the Presence of Contingent Being**

The African comes to the belief in the existence of God as a result of the presence of contingent beings in the world. Thus from the reality of thing which we see around us, we construct a demonstration of God's existence. Edeh (1985) articulated this position thus, "If there were no Chukwu, the source of beings, there would be no being. But beings are, that is, things are, since we perceive and experience them around us. In other words, the fact that beings are is a proof that Chukwu, the source of being, is" (p. 120). This explains why when Edeh asked Mr Ede Ani Onovo in his questionnaire if God exists and how we know that he exists, his answer was, "This is obvious even to goats and to fowls. If it is said that there is no God, then being would not be. Nothing would exist".

All the imperfect things in the world do not have the capacity to make themselves because (*nemo dat quod non habet*) a thing cannot give what it does not have, even though they could have the capacity to reproduce themselves. The fact that objects are generated, and that they degenerate shows that it is possible for them to exist and also to be nonexistent. The fact that they come into existence shows that it is possible for them to be and for them not to have been. Hence, the things that we see around us exist contingently. If everything cannot-be, then at one time there was nothing in existence. Assuming that the world has been going on for an indefinite length of time, there must have been a time before each object came into being, and hence a time when it was not. If each object is only possible, then there must have been a time when *none* of the objects existed. If this state of affairs had ever occurred, there would now be nothing in the world, because the things in the world would have had to be brought into existence by something else. Thus, the African believes that something in the world must have a necessary and not just a possible existence (otherwise everything would have been non-existent at some point in time). Its necessity must in turn be caused by something else that also exists necessarily. For the same reason that there cannot be an infinite regress of efficient causes, there cannot be an infinite regress of necessary causes of the necessary existence of certain things. Therefore, we have to admit that there must be some being which is the cause of its own necessary

existence, and which causes the necessary existence of other beings. This all men speak of as God. This is expressed in Igbo folklore thus:

Onye Kugbulu nwankelu? Who killed nwankelu?

Kerere Nwankelu (reframe)

Ukwa kugbulu nwankelu. The bread fruit killed nwankelu

Kerere Nwankelu

Gini mere ukwa ahu? What happened to the bread fruit?

Kerere Nwankelu

Obi mara ukwa ahu. A digger pierced the breadfruit

Kerere Nwankelu

Gini mere obi ahu? What happened to the digger?

Kerere Nwankelu

Akika kporo obi ahu. The digger was infested by a termite.

Kerere Nwankelu

Gini mere akika ahu? What happened to the termite?

Kerere Nwankelu

Okuko tuga akika ahu. A cock was eating the termite.

Kerere Nwankelu

Gini mere okuko ahu? What happened to the cock?

Kerere Nwankelu

Ufu chuga okuko ahu. A hyena was pursuing the cock

Kerere Nwankelu

Gini mere ufu ahu? What happened to the hyena?

Kerere Nwankelu

Mmadu chuga ufu ahu. A man was pursuing the hyena.

Kerere Nwankelu

Gini mere mmadu ahu? What happened to the man?

Kerere Nwankelu

Chukwu kere mmadu ahu. God created the man.

Kerere Nwankelu

Gini kere Chukwu ahu?

What made God?

Kerere Nwankelu

*Anyi amaghi ihe kpuru Chukwu, Chukwu kpuru mmadu, mmadu chuga ufu, ufu chuga okuko, okuko chuga akika, akika turu obi, obi-mara ukwa, ukwa kughulu nwankelu- Kerere Nwankelu:* (we do not know what made God, who made man, man was in pursuit of the hyena, the hyena that was going after a cock, the cock that was eating termite, the termite that infested the digger, the digger that pierced the bread fruit, the bread fruit that eventually fell and killed *wankelu- Kerere Nwankelu*). This song speaks of the African philosophy that traces the existence of everything back to God.

### **Based on the Eternity of God**

The existence of God for the African is based on his eternity. When Edeh (1985) gave out a questionnaire enquiring about the existence of God, precisely how the people came to know about the existence of God, they replied "*Chukwu diri adi, odifu, oga na adilili*" (God was existing, he still exists, and he will continue to exist). This is to say that the eternity of God implies his continuous existence. For if God is eternal, why ask if he does exist, for a thing that is eternal cannot cease to exist again. Eternity is the total simultaneous and perfect possession of life without limits. This implies that God has no beginning or end. The sensible world expresses the reality of the eternity of God. He is always the self-same and His years do not fail. He is in fact eternal. Indeed, the very substance of God is eternity. God possesses His being all at ones, totally and perfectly. He transcends time and any type of succession or transition, since they imply change. Indeed, the very substance of God is eternity. It is in this regard that the Yoruba refer to him as *Oyigiyi Ota Aiku* (The mighty immovable, hard, ancient, durable rock that never dies).

### **Based on African Theophorous Names**

The names that Africans give themselves are a proof of the existence of God. One of the responses to the questionnaires of Edeh (1985) about the existence of God is "*Asina Chukwu adiro, ndi Igbo agaghi na aza Chukwudi*" (If it is said that God does not exist, the Igbos would not be answering God exists as a name). Thus the names

that the Igbos and other ethnic groups in Africa answer are themselves proofs of the existence of God. These names are proofs because as Anozie (1968) and Obieco (1971) have indicated, that Igbo-African names are not mere tags to distinguish one thing from another, say a plate and a spoon, but rather they express the nature and significance of what they stand for.

### Among the Igbos

- a. *Chukwu di*: There is God
- b. *Chi azor*: God saves
- c. *Chi jioke*: God holds the share
- d. *Chi amaka*: God is good
- e. *Chi wendu*: God owns life
- f. *Oge chi*: God's time
- g. *Chi nonye*: God stays with me
- h. *Chi merem*: God should do for me
- i. *Chi dera*: God has written
- j. *Chi naza ekpere*: God answers prayer
- k. *Chim dindu*: My God is alive
- l. *Chi nedum*: God leads me
- m. *Chi azokam*: God saved me
- n. *Chi di bere*: God is merciful
- o. *Amara chi*: Grace of God
- p. *IfeanyiChukwu*: Nothing is impossible with God
- q. *Onuchukwu*: The voice of God
- r. *Onyekachukwu*: Who is greater than God
- s. *Chukwuebuka*: God is great
- t. *Chukwudiegwu*: God is awesome
- u. *Udechukwu*: The glory of God
- v. *Uzochi*: The way of God
- w. *Ajuluchi*: Was God asked?
- x. *Nke chi yere*: The one given by Chi
- y. *Gwa chi*: Tell Chi
- z. *Kene chi*: Greet God
- aa. *Arinze chi*: Were it not for God
- bb. *Golibelu chi*: Rejoice unto God

### Among the Yorubas

- a. *Oluwa seun*: thank you God
- b. *Oluwa Tosin*: God is worthy to be praised
- c. *Oluwa segun*: God has conquered
- d. *Oluwa Gbemiga*: God has lifted me up
- e. *Oluwa kemi*: God has cared for me
- f. *Oluwa timileji*: God is protecting me

g. *Oluwa somili*: God has woken me up

In the contention of Arinze (1981), these names are key to the understanding of the African concept of God, and for Mbaegbu (2012), they are traditional rational proof of the existence of the Supreme Being in pre-Christian African life and culture. Even though these names are dogmatic and may not suffice in proving the existence of God, names like *Chukwudi* or *Chukwudifu*, according Obiego (1978) assert that he exists, and based on the African's observation of the mysteries and wonders of nature. When the Igbo-African observes all these, he ends his observation, as the finding of his observation, with *Chukwudi*. However, the absence of theophorous names in pre-Christian times in places like Mbaise in Imo State, and Uzo-Uwani and Iha Amufu of Enugu State stands against using this argument to proof the existence of God among before the advent of Christianity.

### **Based on African Prayers**

African prayers are store houses of African worldview, aspiration, hopes and fears. In them are codified our belief in God and man's expression of this belief. Although none of the prayers and proverbs says categorically that God does exist, there is something about his attributes and these attributes point to his existence, for only that which exists has attributes.

#### **a. Prayer over Married Couple**

Prayer obtains among the spirits and among men  
 God treat me well, I am asking for goodness  
 My son in-law shall give me things that I shall eat  
 Love will exist between us  
 God that is what I ask for  
 Spirit of Ihe, God the creator  
 I thank you  
 I have finished  
 (Ekwunife 2007, p. 55)

#### **b. Morning Prayer**

God, the creator, eat kola.  
 Almighty God, take sweet white chalk  
 Lord of heaven, greetings!  
 Sun, King of heaven, greetings!  
 Earth deity of Nnewi, take kola, water spirit, take kola.

Great and small ancestors, eat kola.  
He who brings kola, brings life.  
God come and break this kola for us for we have no hands.  
If you tell a child to wash himself, he washes only his stomach.  
But the fire given to a child does not hurt it.  
We ask for life. Give us children, give us money.  
Whatever man does let him prosper.  
Let both the kite and the eagle perch together.  
Whoever tells the other not to perch let his wings break.

**c. Prayer Before Announcing the Decision of the Council of Elders**

Ala come and eat kola. Achichi come and eat kola.  
God the creator come and eat kola.  
Ancestors come and eat kola  
If what I am about to say is not then decision of the elders  
And it is contrary to our custom then,  
May the earth deity follow me. May Achichi follow me  
May God the creator of man follow.  
May Omeje and Ndichie follow me.

**d. Prayer During Sacrifice for Marriage Couple**

God created man  
behold this fowl  
God created man  
behold Ugwuaku my child  
protect her for me  
offspring is the main thing in the world  
God you act as you have designed  
give her children  
preserve this young man  
her husband to be  
give him the means  
of giving me wealth to eat  
if she gives birth to a female child  
it will live  
if a male, it will live  
may she not have difficulty at childbirth  
may her health be good  
may the health of her husband be good  
prayer obtains among the spirits  
and among men  
God treat me well  
I am asking for goodness

my son in-law shall give me  
things and I will eat  
love will exist between us  
God this is what I ask for  
Spirit of Ihe, God the creator  
I thank you  
I have finished.  
(Metuh 1985, p.132-133)

### **Based on Igbo-African Proverbs**

- a. When God means a creature to fly, he gives him wings.
- b. When God intervenes to resolve a problem (to stop and settle a fight) the
- c. dibia's powers cannot be gainsaid
- d. The god of a child is first put into consideration before assigning a particular job to him
- e. God swats flies for the animal (a cow) that has no tail
- f. The drum prepared by God does not break
- g. If you curse a barren woman you have cursed her God
- h. The gods scare the flies for the cow that has no tail
- i. If a person agrees, his god will agree
- j. if a person gets ready to go on a journey, his Chi gets ready too
- k. the person that God helps also helps himself

If God does not exist, Africans wouldn't be giving him a significant place in their proverbs and prayers. Moreover, drawing from the fact that African proverbs and prayers are born out of experience and deep reflection, they support the fact that God exists.

### **Based on Igbo-African Myths**

Myths contain traditions about Gods, minor gods, ancestors and their relationship with human beings. While the world casts myths into the bin of fables as a result of the developments in philosophy and later science, myths are not fables. Myths belong to an indispensable period in the development of human history. Myths belong to the realm of the forgotten or non-remembered, non-recorded history of humankind. Tikpor (1998) refers to this period as primeval age of humanity, when we walked about in paradise with uncovered nakedness and unadorned beauty with our creator, and with animals around us. Then we were nature's master. How are human beings able to recall these stories? We recall them because they are our stories, and although

they have gone back and far into the world of the non-remembered and unrecorded we have the wisdom and ability to bring them back in bits and pieces in the form of myths. There is a very wide lacuna between history and myths which can never be filled until the return of the primeval golden, when there will be a restoration of all that humanity has lost, including the non-remembered history.

#### a. Myth of Separation

Mbaegbu (2012) avers that there was a time the sky lay just above the earth. Thus, human beings could reach *Chukwu* (God) through a rope which hung down from the sky. There was no death at the time God created the world and human beings. Human beings never lacked anything, as God was involved in their affairs: associated with them and provided for all their needs. In that world, the spirits and human beings were one. However, it happened one day that a woman spat into the eyes of God. He picked offence and thus withdrew into the sky where he now dwells. The result is that human beings were punished and could now die. Since then suffering came into the world, and evil and sin spread throughout the world. The association of God with the sky has earned Him names in this direction. He is called *Eze Igwe* (King of the Sky) or *Igwe ka Ala* (the sky greater than the earth). It is from this perspective that they can be referred to as evidence for the existence of God.

#### b. Myth of Origin

The Nri hegemony and its influence on Igbo history cannot be over emphasized. It is in this regard that Madubuko (1994) observes that the story of the Igbo people, no matter how briefly considered, would be incomplete if one omits the Eri-Nri contribution. Afigbo (1981) shows Eri clan as originating from the regions of Anambra River, at Aguleri; from there they fanned eastward and established various communities. According to Uzuoku (1988), Eri is the father of all Nri; and tradition says that he came from Chukwu. It is reported that the earth was not firm when he came to the world. To solve the problem of flood, he employed blacksmiths from Awka to use their bellows to dry the flooded land. There was no food as well for the people. To provide food, he prayed to God and He demanded that he should sacrifice

his first son and daughter to him. After the sacrifice and burial of his son and daughter, as though all were lost, yam and palm tree began to grow out of the place where he buried his first son while vegetables and cocoyam grew out of the place where he buried his daughter. If yam germinated from where Eri's first son was buried, it means that yam is the resurrected son of Eri, and since it was given to man to sustain life, it is regarded as life itself.

Madu (2004) observes a cosmological drama in the whole myth. It reveals the dynamics of the cosmic drama between god, man, land and crops. Eri, the civilization hero enjoys a special relationship with Chukwu, and through Eri's sacrifice, humanity now enjoy a special relationship with the land which offers food for his sustenance. The ritual act performed by Eri established a covenant between Eri, his descendants and Chukwu. From the sacrifice of Eri, we come to discover why yam is very prominent in Igbo sacrifice and life, a situation which warrants its annual elaborate festival throughout Igbo land. The growing of yam from the spot where Eri's first son was buried accounts for the respect given to *okpara* (first son) in Igbo life, he is in fact considered to be closer to the ancestors.

### c. Myth of the Origin of Death

Obiego (1978: p. 30) gives a beautiful cosmogonic myth about the origin of death among the Igbo people:

At the beginning of things, when there was nothing, neither man nor animals or plants nor heaven nor earth, nothing indeed, nothing was, only one very powerful person was and his name was Chukwu. Then he came and created both water below, animals and everything as we see it today. Afterwards, Chineke created man, man was the head of all things, but Chineke and Ala own man. After a long time, death entered the world and began killing men. Men sent a messenger to him asking whether the dead could be restored to life and sent back to their homes. They chose a dog as their messenger. The dog however, did not go straight to him; rather he dallied on the way. The toad had however, overheard the message and he wanted (wished) to punish mankind. He overtook the dog and reached Chineke first. He said that he had been sent by men to say that after death, they had no desire at all to return to the world. Chineke declared that he would respect

men's wishes and when the dog arrived to Chineke with the true message, Chineke refused to alter his decision. Thus human beings might be born again but cannot return with the same body and the same personality.

## **Conclusion**

From the foregoing, we can draw out what we can regard as the 'Six Ways' of the Igbo-African traditional rational proofs of the existence of God. The first is based on the Presence of contingent beings in African ontology; the second is based on the eternity of God; the third is based on African names; the fourth is based on Igbo-African proverbs, the fifth is based on Igbo-African prayers and the sixth on Igbo-African myths. The idea of Igbo-African myths emphasizes that the Igbo concept of the Supreme Being emerges from the natural light of reason, in the sense that his reason leads him to wonder about the mysteries in the world and to recognize the maker of all things. The knowledge of God is contained in the indigenous or natural expressions of the Igbo-African people. Since it was borne from the natural light of reason, it further emphasizes that it was never an imported concept of image, imported by the western missionaries.

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