



**'THE SUPREME BEING' IN IGBO-AFRICAN ONTOLOGY: A BORROWED
OR INDIGENOUS CONCEPT?**

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Abstract

The multiplicity of deities in Igbo ontology has led to the West's misunderstanding of the Igbo religious climate as being empty of the Supreme Being. For some Western scholars, the African's relationship with the gods was due to his inability to conceive the Supreme Being. Thus, the idea of the Supreme Being was understood as a moral principle reserved to major religions such as Judaism, Islam and Christianity. For many Western thinkers, access to the idea of the Supreme Being would presuppose education and civilization, and therefore, belongs to culture in this 17th century sense of being cultivated (cultured) and demands a high degree of abstraction. Since the African was uneducated and uncivilized, from the Western perspective, he/she was understood as being superstitious and, thus, the need to educate him/her, civilize him/her and lead him/her to a religion of the Supreme Being. This was the climate in which modern Christian and Moslem missionaries were born and thus invaded Africa, South of the Sahara to propagate either the Christian gospel message or Islam. This piece challenges the argument that the idea of Supreme Being is a foreign idea. With evidence from the study of Igbo Traditional Religion, it argues that the idea of Supreme Being has been among the Igbos long before the advent of the missionaries, and in fact, submits that the idea of a Supreme Being in Igbo religion is as old as Igbo Traditional Religion.

Keywords: *Supreme, Being, Igbo, African, Ontology, Borrowed, Indigenous, Concept.*

Introduction

The racial classification of Africa by the West affected perceptions of about the different capabilities of the African: social, economic, political, and even religious. Economically, Linnaeus (1758) categorizes the African as cunning, slow, negligent and ruled by caprice. Socially, Gobineau (1915) places the African within the parameters of lower animals. Politically, Lugard (cited in Nigeria Village Square 2009) avers that the African is irresponsible. Intellectually, Levy-Bruhl (1923) thinks that Africans are incapable of speculation and logical thinking. These perceptions did not exempt the religious hemisphere of the African. Baker (cited in Njoku 2002) writes:

The Negro is still at the rude dawn of faith-fetishism and has barely advanced in idolatry.... he has never grasped the idea of a personal deity, a duty in life, a moral code, or a shame of lying. He rarely believes in a future state of reward and punishment, which whether true or not are infallible indices of human progress. (p. 199).

Baker understands the religion of the African as mere fetishism, and thinks that the African as incapable of conceiving God. The idea of fetishism reflects the Western understanding of African Traditional Religion as a religion of the gods and spirits. African Traditional Religion was described in various derogatory terms, as primitive, pagan, heathen, magic, ancestor worshippers, juju, animists, Fetish, etc. The gods or deities worshipped by the African brought about a misconception of the idea of the Supreme Being in African ontology. For some Western scholars, the African's relationship with the gods was due to his inability to conceive the Supreme Being. Thus, the idea of the Supreme Being was a moral principle reserved to major religions such as Judaism, Islam and Christianity. For many Western thinkers, access to the idea of the Supreme Being would presuppose education and civilization, and therefore, belongs to culture in this 17th century sense of being cultivated (cultured) and demands a high degree of abstraction. Since the African was uneducated and uncivilized, from the Western perspective, he/she was understood as being superstitious and, thus, the need to educate him/her, civilize him/her and lead him/her to a religion of the Supreme Being. This was the climate in which modern Christian and Moslem missionaries were born and thus invaded Africa, South of the Sahara to propagate either the Christian gospel message or Islam. The question, therefore, that looms at the horizon

of this research is: is the idea of Supreme Being of African origin or of Western origin?

Protagonists of a Pre-Missionary Igbo Idea of the 'Supreme Being'

The protagonists in their various academic writings demonstrate that the idea of, and worship of the Supreme Being-God was part and parcel of Igbo traditional religion and thought. They insist that internal evidences from a meticulous examination of oral sources of A.T.R, sacred institutions of traditional culture, Art works and symbols prove their contentions beyond reasonable doubt. Moreover, the fact that traditional Africans are part and parcel of created humanity with rational capacity excludes doubts as regards the existence of the Supreme Being (God) in thoughts and worship. Scholars that hold this perspective include Onwubiko (1991), Obiego (1978) and Okere (1983). Beyond these indigenous Igbo thinkers, there are quite a number of Western missionaries who point to the existence of the Supreme Being in Igbo religion long before the advent of Christianity. Their insights on this issue are quite refreshing. Schoen (1842) speaking of Igbo Monotheism writes:

The Igbo are in their way, a religious people. The word 'Tshuku'- God – is continually heard. Tshuku is supposed to do everything [...] Their notions of some of the attributes of the Supreme Being are, in many respects, correct, and their manner of expressing them very striking. 'God made everything, he made both white and black' is continually on their lips. Some of their parables are descriptive of the perfections of God. When they say for instance that God has two eyes or two ears that the one is in heaven and the other on earth, I suppose the conclusion that they have an idea of God's omniscience and omnipotence cannot be disputed. On the death of a person who has, in their estimation, been good, they will say, 'He will see God;' while of a wicked person, they will say, 'He will go into fire.' I had different opportunities of hearing these expressions from Sierra Leon; but though I was assured that they had not learned them from Christians, I would not state them before I had satisfied myself, by inquiring of such as had never had any intercourse with

Christians that they possessed correct ideas of a future state of reward and punishment. (pp. 50-51).

This idea of the Supreme Being was dated by Schoen before the advent of Western missionaries; meaning that allusions to a Western origin of a Supreme Being is false. Describing Igbo monotheism, Baiki (1856) an early Christian missionary to Igbo-land writes:

The I'gbos all believe in an Almighty-being, omnipresent and omnipotent, whom they call T'shiku, whom they constantly worship, and whom they believe to communicate directly with them through his sacred shrine A'ro. (p. 311).

Horton (1976) also lends voice to this perspective:

The religion of the Egboes is Judaism, intermixed with numerous pagan rites and ceremonies. They believe in the existence of one Almighty, Omnipotent, Omnipresent Being, whom they worship as such, and regard as the omniscient God who concerns himself with the affairs of man. He is known by the name T'shuku, contracted sometimes as Tshi. [...] Tshuku, the Omniscient God, who is supposed to preserve them from harm, communicates with his people through his priests, who resides in a city set apart as holy by all the nation. This place is called Aro, or Ano, to which pilgrimages are made, not only from all parts of the Eboe, including the tribes along the coast [...] but also from old Calabar in the Far East. (p. 164).

Meek (1944) also speaks of an Igbo Supreme Being, which was regarded as 'Great Spirit':

In numerous tribes, he is regarded as a World-Spirit, or Over-Soul. This metaphysical conception, almost oriental in character, is found among the Ibo, who call their Supreme deity Chi-uku, a word meaning 'Great Spirit'. He is the author of heaven and earth, he sends the rain and makes the crop grow. He is the source of all life and the source too, from which men derive their chi or accompanying spirit. . but he is a distant deity of a vague personality, and sacrifice is seldom offered to him directly. Yet he is the ultimate recipient of sacrifice. (p. 3).

These varied perspectives, especially from the Western missionaries who came to evangelize the Igbo people point to the existence of the idea of the

Supreme Being among the Igbo, and that the coming of Western missionaries did not mark its advent to Igbo religion.

The Antagonists of a Pre-Missionary Igbo Idea of the 'Supreme Being'

The antagonists of the idea of a Supreme Being in Igbo traditional Religion object to the claims of the protagonists. Nwoga (cited Ekwunife 2012), expressing the antagonist position of scholars against the idea of an Igbo Supreme Being avers that:

It is also suggested that rather than Chukwu being the Supreme God, if the Igbo had any, the paramount position of Ala (Earth) in Igbo life and ritual gave Ala a great validity as supreme among the Igbo. (p. 31).

The scholars that belong to this category, therefore, insist on the Christian/Islamic origin of the Supreme Being or at best foreign origin of this concept. Their position can be categorized thus:

- a. That African traditional religious culture is at the lowest rung of evolutionary development. The primitive traditionalists cannot conceptualize such a lofty philosophical concept as the Supreme Being.
- b. That the Christian/ Islamic Supreme God cannot enjoy the same status as God with the primitive traditionalists' God. According to Arazu (2005), the traditional Ultimate Being is either nothing or at best 'god'. There are many gods in traditional religious culture brand polytheistic religions and God by some of the antagonist.
- c. That the concept of the Supreme Being is a missionary invention into Africa. The missionaries introduced it and imposed it on African Traditionalists who appropriated it and made it their own in modern times.

The first objection to the idea of the Supreme Being is based on racial bias- the reason being that Africans couldn't have conceptualized such a lofty idea. The second is based on the misconception of the idea of gods with that of the Supreme Being. The third is based on the ignorance of missionaries of African Traditional Religion- it was an ignorance deepened by racial bias.

Attributes of the Supreme Being in African Traditional Religion as an Evidence of the Idea of 'Supreme Being' In Pre-Missionary Africa

Having studied the basis of the antagonist argument against a pre-missionary idea of the Supreme Being in Igbo land, there might be the need to study generally the attributes of God in African ontology, and from these attributes to know the possibility or impossibility of the idea of the Supreme Being. First of all, among the people of Africa, there are differences in the concept of God. Oguejiofor (2010) attributes this to the epiphenomenal of the global condition of the various peoples of Africa. However, Idowu (1973) holds that there are unifying attributes of the African Ultimate Reality. These attributes in the contention of Awolalu and Dopamu (1979) are words or phrases that speak of the traits, properties, qualities or characteristics of God and what is believed to be his role in relation to the world and man. These attributes include:

- i. God is Unique: By unique, is meant that God is different from other creatures. In the graphical presentations of Onunwa (1990) and Ijiomah (2005) of the African universe, God occupies a unique place, high and above all other creatures. While others are creatures, he is the creator. He is transcendent, sovereign and possesses absolute power. From the diagram above, which expresses the hierarchy of being, God is seen at the apex as the ultimate being.
- ii. God is Real and Active: Among the Igbo, he is called: *Chineke* (the God who creates), *Chukwu* (the great God), *Ekekereuwa* (he who created the world), *Chi-oke* (God that apportions lots), *Nna-di-Ebube* (the awe-inspiring father), *Odogwu-nagha* (victorious warrior), *Ome Mgbeogharike* (actor in times of difficulty). From these names, God is real and active. If he fails to respond as expected, the Igbo would ask "*Chukwu I no nura*" (God are you asleep).
- iii. God is the absolute controller of the universe: The African God is not a withdrawn God; he has full control over the universe. The Igbo would refer to him as *Osebuluwa* (the sustainer of the universe). He did not just create the world but actively sustains it. All other creatures are in being for the reason that he is also in existence. He is neither a Remote God (*Deus Remotus*) nor a Withdrawn God (*Deus Otiosus*). He is, both transcendent and immanent.
- iv. God is One: Among the Igbo as among many African peoples, there is only one God called *Chukwu*, even though the

nomenclature is contested, he is regarded as God and creator of the universe. Thus, African Traditional Religion has come to be understood, though lately, as a monotheistic religion because it recognizes only one God.

- v. God is Creator: Africans have the belief that God either created the world or delegated some divinities to carry out some assignments as regards the creation of the world. According to Oduwole (2010), Yoruba scholars agree that the human person is made up of three basic elements: *Ara* (body), *Emi* (breath) and *Ori* (soul). Idowu (1973) opines that the body is the creation of *Orisha nla* (Arch-divinity). He was assigned by *Olodumare* (the Supreme Being) to mould the body of human beings. It is only the Supreme Being that puts the spirit into the body so as to give it life. However, even when a divinity is delegated, it does not take the place of God. It acts only in the capacity of a dean of the Ultimate Being.
- vi. God is King: Most African traditional societies speak of God as King. This attribute is related to God as the controller of the universe. The idea of God as king speaks of him as the sovereign controller of the universe. Among the Mende, he is "The Chief"; among the Yoruba, he is *Oba Orun* "The King in heaven"; among the Igbo he is *Eze Enuigwe* "The King of Heaven". Through inculturation, such ideas have also filtered into African Christianity which witnesses the naming of God as King, as among the Igbo who refer to Jesus as "Jesus *Igwe*", which means 'Jesus the King'.
- vii. God is Omnipotent: While recognizing that God creates and sustains all things, the African implicitly recognizes God's Omnipotence. Since there is no limit to the being of God, and every being acts according to its nature, it would imply that His power is without limit. He does everything possible, even the ones we sometimes consider impossible. A God without this attribute fails the first test of deity. Among the Akan of Ghana he is *Otumfoo* (The Mighty or Powerful One); The Yoruba concept of God as *Olodumare* and the Igbo concept of God as *Chukwu* also speak of God's omnipotence.

- viii. God is Eternal: Eternity is the total simultaneous and perfect possession of life without limits. This implies that God has no beginning or end. He made us who abide forever and is always the self-same and His years do not fail. 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).
- ix. God as Judge: The African believes that all his actions will be judged, rewarded or punished. God is the impartial judge who will either reward or punish him for his actions, both private and public actions.

Attributes such as "one" and "absolute controller of the universe" points to a Supreme Being, who is at the apex of reality. However, contrary to the opinion of Westermann (1935) that the African God is far away from his people, God in Africa is a "*Deus incertus*" and a "*Deus remotes*". He is part and parcel of the African's daily life, and his care and protection is daily felt. He is part of the African's daily speech, in proverbs and wise sayings. What other God can possess attributes like one, absolute controller of the universe, unique unless he is the Supreme Being. These attributes speak of the supremacy of the being described.

The Misconception of Divinities as 'Supreme Being'

Where then did the whole idea of polytheism come in? Western missionaries confused divinities with the Supreme Being. At this point, it might be reasonable to distinguish between the Supreme Being and divinities. What are divinities? In the Igbo universe, there is only one God, who is high and is expected to be reached through intermediaries. These intermediaries are called divinities; they share aspects of the divine status. Some Africans believe that they emanate from God; as such, it is incorrect to say that they were created by him, but more correct to speak of them as offsprings of the Supreme Being. This explains why the *abosom* of Ghana, *orisa-nla* of the Yoruba, *Olokun* of the Edo are referred to as sons of the Supreme Being. They are responsible to God for whatever act they perform in their relationship with human beings. Their function is to ensure that God is not bordered with petty problems from the earth; they are not an end in themselves but a means to an end, and everything they do is dependent upon God's approval; this does

not in any way change the fact that they are a powerful set of spiritual beings. They are functionaries in the theocratic governance of God, sometimes referred to as his messengers and at other times as his sons. Awolalu and Dopamu (1979) refer to them as the executive heads of various divine departments in the Supreme Being's monarchical government. Each divinity has a name, usually describing its function: as we have *Ala* among the Igbo meaning earth, and speaks of earth-goddess, or *olokun* in Yoruba, *Okun* meaning ocean, generally meaning the god of the sea.

Arinze (1970), speaking from the Igbo perspective, avows that:

God is the Supreme Spirit, the creator of everything. No one equals him in power. He knows everything. He is altogether a good and merciful God and does harm to no one. He sends rain and especially children, and it is from him that each individual derives his personal 'chi'. But this supreme spirit has made many inferior spirits who are nearer to man and through whom man normally offers his worship to Him. (p. 10).

The difference between these divinities and the Supreme Being is very obvious. They are inferior spirits, while the Supreme Being is a superior spirit. They vary in number from place to place. Among the Igbos, these divinities include: Anyawu who is the son of Chukwu (the Supreme Being), Amadioha, another son of Chukwu, Ala, the sole daughter of Chukwu, Ahiajoku, Chiomumu, Nne Mniri, Ekwensu, Agwu, Ibiniukpabi, Ojukwu, etc. These deities are deans of the Supreme Being who perform different responsibilities for the Supreme Being. Moreover, the fact that some of them are referred to as his sons and daughter, already speaks volumes of the place of Chukwu in the community of the Igbo deities.

The Concept- 'Supreme Being' in Igbo Religious Thought

A glance at the Jewish, Christian and Islamic religions reveals that the word 'Supreme Being' is a creation of the Christian and Muslim missionaries during their encounter with Africa. The references to the Christian and Muslim God as Supreme Being and the denial of such to Africa was based on racial pride. It was a creation religions that considered themselves superior to others. Originally, word like Supreme Being does not exist in

Jewish, Christian and Islamic texts or scripture. For instance, in Judaism, you would rather have concepts that suggest the supremacy of God:

1. El Shaddai (Lord God Almighty)
2. El Elyon (The Most High God)
3. Adonai (Lord, Master)
4. Yahweh (Lord, Jehovah)
5. Jehovah Nissi (The Lord My Banner)
6. Jehovah-Raah (The Lord My Shepherd)
7. Jehovah Rapha (The Lord That Heals)
8. Jehovah Shammah (The Lord Is There)
9. Jehovah Tsidkenu (The Lord Our Righteousness)
10. Jehovah Mekoddishkem (The Lord Who Sanctifies You)
11. El Olam (The Everlasting God)
12. Jehovah Jireh (The Lord Will Provide)
13. Jehovah Shalom (The Lord Is Peace)
14. Jehovah Sabaoth (The Lord of Hosts)

In Islam, some of the names used for God that speak of his supremacy include:

1. Ar Rahim (الرحيم) The Most Merciful
2. Al Malik (الملك) The King, The Sovereign
3. Al Quddus (القدوس) The Most Holy
4. Al Aziz (العزیز) The Almighty, the Self Sufficient
5. Al Jabbaar (الجبّار) The Powerful, the Irresistible
6. Al Khaaliq (الخالق) The Creator
7. Al Baari' (البارئ) The Maker
8. Al Musawwir (المصوّر) The Fashioner of Forms
9. Ar Razzaaq (الرزاق) The Ever Providing
10. Al Fattaah (الفتاح) The Opener, the Victory Giver
11. Al Alim (العليم) The All Knowing, the Omniscient
12. Al Qaabid (القابض) The Restrainer, the Straightener
13. Al Sami' (السميع) The All Hearing
14. Al Basir (البصير) The All Seeing

In the Christian creed, the word 'Supreme Being' does not exist; concepts employed in reference to God include:

1. Father Almighty

2. Creator of heaven and earth
3. Maker of all things, visible and invisible
4. Judge of the living and the dead
5. The First and Last
6. The Beginning and the End
7. Author and Finisher of our faith
8. Author of Eternal salvation
9. Author of Life
10. Author of Peace
11. Chief Cornerstone
12. Consuming Fire
13. All Sufficient
14. Blessed and only Potentate
15. Blessed Hope

In these names of God in Judaism, Christianity and Islam, without the attachment of Supreme to them, already speak of the supremacy of God without the use of the concept, and this is exactly what we find in the Igbo traditional naming of God. As such, the idea of 'Supreme God' is only a recent creation. However, although the concept is new, the meaning is as old as the Igbo universe.

Conclusion

The names used to speak of God in Judaism, Christianity and Islam were names given to God on the bases of the people's relationship with God. This is not different from what was obtainable in Africa before the advent of Christianity and Islam. The adherents of Igbo Traditional Religion spoke of the Supreme Being in terms of their relationship with him. Africans are real, concrete rather than abstract and a people of relationship. The idea of relationship as the basis of the African's idea of God accounts for the varieties of meanings or descriptions of God in various African sub-cultural areas. For instance, among Africans: The Yoruba call him *Olodumare* or *Edumare* (The King of heaven); The Igbo call him *Chukwu* or *Osebuluwa* (Great God or sustainer of the universe); The Edo call him *Osanobua* or *Osanobwa* (Creator and sustainer of the universe); The Nupe call him *Soko* (The supreme deity that resides in heaven); The Ijo call him *Temearau* (The creatress of all things -feminine term-); The Tiv call him

Aondo (The power above that creates and rules all things); The Ibibio refer to him as *Obasi Ibom* (The God who lives above the earth); The Akan call him *Odomankoma* and *Nyame* (full of mercy and the God of fullness respectively); The Mende of Sierra Leone call him *Ngewo* (The eternal one who rules from above); The Kono of Sierra Leone call him *Meketa* (The Immortal or eternal). These names speak of the relationship of the people of Africa with a God who is Supreme. These names have been in existence even before the advent of Christianity or Islam.

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