

The Concept of God in Igbo Traditional Religious Thought

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Anthony Chimankpam OJIMBA

Department of Philosophy, University of Nigeria, Nsukka

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8188-8392>

Email: anthony.ojimba@unn.edu.ng

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Victor Iwuoha CHIDUBEM

Department of Political Science and School of General Studies

University of Nigeria, Nsukka

<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9056-988X>

Email: victor.iwuoha@unn.edu.ng

Abstract

This paper examines the concept of God in traditional Igbo-African religious thought, prior to the advent of Western religion, with a view to showing that the idea of a God/Deity who is supreme in every area of life and sphere of influence and who “creates out of nothing,” like the God of the Christian or Western missionaries, is unrecognized in the Igbo-African traditional religious thought. Even though the Igbo conceive of strong and powerful deities that can only reign supreme within their respective sphere of influence where they are in charge, none of these deities is identical to the supreme God promoted by the Christian missionaries. The Igbo traditional religious worldview maintains a polytheistic religious view, unlike the monotheistic outlook of the Christian religion. To achieve its goal, the paper adopts the method of historical hermeneutics and textual analysis.

Keywords: God, Igbo traditional religion, Creation out of nothing, Polytheism, Monotheism; *Chi, Chukwu, Chineke*.

Introduction

This paper examines the concept of God in the Igbo-African traditional religious thought, before the arrival of the Christian religion, in line with the idea of the Supreme Being, preached by the Christian missionaries, with a view to showing that the Igbo concept of God is not identical with, and does not correspond to, the idea of God, as a Supreme Being, propagated by the Western missionaries and Christian theologians. The paper does not aim at showing that the Supreme God does not exist nor possess the qualities attributed to Him by the Christian religion; rather it aims at demonstrating that this idea was unrecognized in the Igbo religious thought, prior to the advent of Christianity.

Some African scholars and Christian theologians (see NJOKU 2002; METUH 1972), in their reflections on Igbo religious practices, occasionally hold that the Igbo believe in the existence of a Supreme Being. In addition to this, they claim that the concept of God, in Igbo religious thought, is identical to the Christian or Western religious concept of the Supreme God. This God, according to them, possesses special attributes and powers like supremacy over other gods or deities. He is further described as the ultimate cause of the universe, which he created out of nothing (*creation ex nihilo*), and as the eternal and perfect Being. They further maintain that this God is omnipresent and omnipotent and all-good. In an attempt to subvert the Igbo religious view of God and to project monotheism in the Igbo religious worldview, they maintain that other minor deities were created by this Supreme God, who is at the apex of the ladder, and that these other deities or gods are only intermediaries between Africans and the Christian God preached by Christian theologians. Furthermore, they allege that the rituals performed by Africans are offered to this God through the other deities that mediate between Africans and this Supreme God. This presupposes that God, as the above view implies, is not worshipped directly, but through intermediaries.

The above picture of God, painted by the Christian theologians and the Western missionaries, does not tally with the Igbo traditional religious view of God. For the traditional Igbo, belief in God, as well as his existence, is tied to the direct worship and dedication of a shrine to him and not through the mediation of some other gods. Consequently, if there is no particular shrine established for the worship of a god, the traditional Igbo do not recognize its existence and such a God is not active in their thought (see AJA 2015, 135). As Aja has noted, “to translate the names of Igbo Deities such as *Chukwu* and *Chineke* to mean the God preached by the Western missionaries is to yoke to the Igbo religious thought the concept of ‘creation out of nothing,’ which is alien to the traditional Igbo African cosmology” (AJA 2015, 135).

Unarguably, colonialism has affected African religious beliefs and consequently generated intellectual and moral tensions within the African worldview. The same situation applies to Christianity as it ran alongside colonialism and distorted the authentic traditional Igbo religious thought and this has given rise to a confused religious allegiance on the side of the contemporary Igbo. In this paper, we examine whether the Supreme God, as propagated by Western missionaries and Christian theologians, is identical with, or the same as the Igbo God. To properly address this issue, we raise the following questions: What is the authentic traditional Igbo view of God? Is this authentic traditional Igbo view of God the same as the notion of a Supreme God preached by Western missionaries and Christian theologians? Are nomenclatures such as *Chukwu* or *Chineke*, in the Igbo traditional religious thought, identical and interchangeable with the God of Western missionaries, who creates out of nothing? The paper is divided into three sections. Section one examines African oral traditions with reference to the notion of the Supreme God, while section two analyzes the Western and Igbo-Christian theologians’ ideas of God. Section three explores the authentic traditional Igbo idea of God as it differs from the Western idea of God.

The Supreme Being/God and African Oral Traditions

African oral traditions express little doubt regarding the existence of supreme deities or gods in African religious thought. Within the Yoruba religious system, *Olodumare* is recognized as the Supreme Being. The works of *Olodumare* are perceived, within the Yoruba oral tradition, as incomparable (see GBADAGESIN 1991, 99). This is similar to the conception of *Onyame*, within the Akan tradition of Ghana (see AGADA 2017, 2022a, 2022b, 2022c). Other parts of Africa have their oral conceptions of the Supreme Being. The people of Botswana call the Supreme Being *Modimo* (see SETILOANE 1976,78) while the Mende of Sierra Leone calls it *Ngewo* (EKEKE and EKEOPARA 2010, 212). In Edo State of Nigeria, it is called *Osanobua* (see EKEKE and EKEOPARA 2010, 211) and for the Igbo, it is called *Chineke* or *Chukwu* (see METUH 1981, 22; NJOKU 2002, 149; ILOGU 1985, 7).

Oral traditions constitute a reliable source of information and one gets the impression that there is a conception of supreme deities in traditional African societies. However, the point of controversy is whether these conceptions of the supreme deity in the various African oral traditions are identical to the conception of the Supreme God preached by Western missionaries and Christian theologians. Thus, is the supreme deity in African conception of God identical to the God preached by Western missionaries and Christian theologians? This question, no doubt, is answered affirmatively by Christian theologians. Some African scholars also toed the same line of thought (see NJOKU 2002; METUH 1981; ILOGU 1985; MBITI 1969). *Olodumare*, in Idowu's account, for instance, is portrayed as all-powerful, all-knowing, wise, holy and the creator of the world (IDOWU 1973).

Mbiti followed the above line of thinking when he asserts that "God is the origin and sustenance of all things. He is 'older' than the Zamani (distant time). He is outside and beyond His creation. On the other hand, he is personally involved in his creation, so that it is not outside of him or his reach. God is thus simultaneously transcendent and immanent" (MBITI 1969, 29; see also MBITI 1970). Ilogu (1985, 7) concurs when he notes that "for the Igbo, the principal object of belief is the ultimate Reality, which they call chi-Ukwu (the Great God). Variants include Chineke (the God that creates) and Obasi di n' elu (the Lord who is above)." The problem with the above three accounts, which try to show that the Supreme Being in the Western Christian tradition is one and the same with the African God, is that they appear to conflict with some aspects of the traditional oral conceptions of African God. To illustrate, "an *odu of Ifa* relates the story of how *Olodumare* had to consult an *Ifa* priest on the possibility of his own immortality. The *Ifa* priest then instructed *Olodumare* on what to do. He did it and became immortal" (AJA 2015, 138). The implication of the above traditional oral narrative is that *Olodumare* is not all-knowing and all-powerful (see WIREDU 1998; BEWAJI 1998). This goes against the Christian concept of God, who is all-knowing and all-powerful. The same idea of a limited God is also painted in the myth of creation of the Yoruba where *Esu* (the trickster god) is, sometimes, portrayed as having more power than *Olodumare* (see AJA 2015, 138-139). Also, in the Yoruba mythological account of the beginning of the world, it was claimed

that creation began in the city of Ile Ife. “The place was then a watery marsh and God (*Olodumare*) sent an agent called *Orisa-nla* to go and spray some dry soil upon the area to firm it up for human habitation. Coming, before all else, upon some palm wine, and being thirsty, he drank of it, became drunk and fell asleep. Then, God sent another agent, *Oduduwa*, who accomplished the task” (IDOWU 1962, 22). This account of creation does not agree with the Christian notion of the creation of the world. Another account is found in Dogon cosmology, where the beginning of the world is viewed as a “precipitate breaking of a primordial egg by a male component” (cited in WIREDU 2012, 36) and the rest of the history of the world is the process of remedying the consequences of this wilful act (WIREDU 2012, 36). This account, once more, does not tally with the Christian version of the creation of the world out of nothing by the Supreme God. This indicates that the African account of God is different from the idea of God propagated by the Western missionaries and Christian theologians.

In their folklore, the Igbo invented *Chukwu* or *Chineke* in an attempt to explain the nature of things. One such Igbo folklore regarding the origin of death has it that:

‘One day, God threatened to destroy the world.’ All humankind had to find a way to solve the problem by sending messages to God about what they would like to happen instead. Two messengers were sent – the dog, by the group that did not want death at all, and the tortoise by the group that did not mind death, as long as people died one after the other. The tortoise reached God first and obtained the decision. The decision could not be changed when the dog finally arrived. The tortoise had arrived before the dog because the dog had stopped from time to time to eat faeces. ‘The story ends that ‘since that day, death has been taking men one after another’. (AJA 2015, 139)

The above story portrays God as not all-powerful. This is because, if God were as powerful, as portrayed in the Christian tradition, he would have revoked the decision to prevent death from claiming people’s life one after another. This view of God in the Igbo oral tradition clearly conflicts with the Christian account of God propagated by Western missionaries and Christian theologians. This is why African scholars like Aja (2015, 140) warn that:

[C]are must be taken in interpreting a Supreme God in African Igbo religion in terms of the Supreme deity propagated by Christian theology. The circumstances that led people to discover their Gods differ from place to place, and people from different historical backgrounds may not have discovered the same ideas of God.

This presupposes that “in finding an identity between the African supreme deities and the supreme deity of Christian religion, the scholars and clergy were not only influenced by Christian theology” (AJA 2015, 140) but “they were also concerned about furthering the notion of the universality of the Christian God” (GBADEGESIN 1991, 100). As a follow-up to the above view, Kwasi Wiredu, while analyzing the attributes of the African God, posits that the Akan of Ghana nurture the idea of the Supreme Being, but distinguishes this Supreme Being from the Christian God with reference to the attribute of transcendence. For him, the Akan God cannot be described as transcendent, since transcendence implies being outside space and time. In African ontology, for him, to exist means to exist in space and time and whatever that is outside space and time, does not exist, for the African (see WIREDU 2012, 34). Thus, being in space and time is what existence connotes for the African mind. The implication of the above assertion, by Wiredu, is that the Christian concept of God, as a transcendent being, above space and time, does not apply to African ideas of God. Thus, the fundamental question is this: Do nomenclatures like *Chukwu* or *Chineke* in the Igbo religious thought connote the “Christian” God?

Western and Igbo Concepts of God

Slavery and colonialism played crucial roles in the distortion of the Igbo African traditional religious thought. The slaves taken from Igboland and Africa, by extension, were meted various forms of inhuman treatments. When Western slave traders were convinced of the human status of the African and that the African had a soul and could feel pain, they modified their system of enslavement in form of colonialism (see NJOKU 2002, 142-143). So many African societies were easily won over by the colonialists as a result of their centralized religious and political structures (see SAMBA et al 2021, 3). However, because of the egalitarian structure of the Igbo traditional society, the colonialists found it extremely difficult to penetrate the Igbo heartland. This quest necessitated the establishment of the indirect rule system of warrant chiefs that eventually crashed due to resistance from the egalitarian Igbo population. Consequent to the failure of colonialism to penetrate Igboland, the colonialists devised another strategy, in the form of religion, to break the spiritual backbone of the Igbo people. The people were made to believe that everything white is superior, including Western religion and system of education, while whatever that is black is fetish, barbaric and inferior. Many Igbo, who were won over by this deception and who were schooled in the Western tradition, began helping the missionaries and the colonialists in propagating Western religion and consequently distorting Igbo traditional religious thought. The result of this deception is what is playing out today in contemporary African religious thought in terms of a confused religious system, as a result of the lost traditional religious authenticity of the Igbo.

The Western missionaries, with the help of the Igbo Christian theologians, began to project their idea of God into Igbo traditional thought. This distorted Igbo view of God is based on Greek philosophical ideas dating back to Plato and Aristotle, developed by Aquinas and eventually became dominant in Western philosophy and theology (see SWEETMAN 2007, 64). In this Western religious tradition, God is conceived as the Supreme Being, the creator of the universe and all that is in it. He is the ultimate cause of the universe, which he created out of nothing. He is further described as the eternal being as can be seen in Aquinas' cosmological arguments. In this Western view of God, he is also conceived as a perfect being, who is omnipotent and omnipresent and beyond the influence and control of man. These attributes of God, in the Western tradition, do not apply to the traditional Igbo African idea of God. The Igbo God does not create out of nothing. In traditional Igbo society, each particular deity or god has an area it is in charge of and reigns supreme only in such area or locality, but not in other areas, where other deities are in charge. Even though a particular deity or god can be powerful enough to extend its influence in other localities, it is not described as supreme in such localities in the Igbo religious worldview. Igbo religious thought is originally polytheistic, with the Igbo universe boasting of a multiplicity of gods with none of them adjudged as supreme, unlike in the monotheistic religious tradition of the West. Furthermore, the traditional religious relationship the Igbo have with their god is mutual, contractual and reciprocal relationship (see AJA 2015, 148). In this relationship between the traditional Igbo person and his god, it is expected that both sides fulfil their own part of the contract. This implies that the traditional Igbo person worships his god, but, at the same time, expects such god to render the service for which it is being worshipped. Should this god fail to live up to the expectation of the worshipper, in the Igbo culture, such a god is discarded and described as a piece of wood by the worshipper and another god is sought after to replace the discarded god. For instance, in Igbo culture, if a god named *Ikenga* fails to live up to its *Ikenganness*, such a god is consequently regarded as only a piece of wood, discarded and replaced with another by the worshipper (cf. ARINZE 1970, 16). This type of relationship is not applicable to the Western God, who is outside and beyond the control and discipline of the worshipper. We will revisit the above arguments in full, in the next section, where we will exhibit the typical structure of Igbo religious thought.

In their quest to perpetuate Western dominance and superiority of Western religious thought, the converted Igbo Christian theologians were enlisted to help in propagating Christianity (see AKAH 2016,142). It is also observable that some Igbo Christian thinkers impose Christian frameworks on traditional Igbo religion. Ikenga Metuh (1990, 108) warns against such tendencies, which he ended up propagating. He belongs to the school of Igbo Christian thinkers who favour the identity of the Igbo religious God with the Western missionaries' Supreme God. In his account of the Igbo traditional religious view of God, Metuh posits that the Igbo employ three related terms in their usage of the word *Chi*, namely, the Supreme Being, the Guardian Spirit and the notion of destiny.

The word *Chi*, as used in a religious context, evokes three related concepts: the 'Supreme Being', the 'Guardian Spirit', and the 'Idea of Destiny' or 'Fortune'. Only the context can show which of the three is uppermost in Igbo's mind [sic] when he uses the word 'chi'. This is borne out by the fact that the word appears in many Igbo proverbs sometimes referring to one concept, sometimes to another: the Supreme Being, one's personal spirit-guardian; even one's destiny. (METUH 1981, 22)

Reacting to Metuh's manner of conceiving Chi, Egbeke Aja argues that *Chi* does not in any sense evoke the idea of a Supreme Being in the Igbo religious tradition. This is why he contends that:

[T]he Igbo experience and consciousness of transcendent power operating in their affairs gave rise to and is subsumed in the concept of *Chi*. Around this concept of *Chi*, the Igbo consolidated their expectations of life and fortune. It is this *Chi* that is the god of the Igbo person. Each person, in the Igbo thought, has his or her god, although a certain level of maturity is required before a person can set up a shrine to the god. (AJA 2015, 148)

Aja disagrees with Metuh that *Chi* evokes the idea of Supreme Being in Igbo religion. He holds that there is no single universal Supreme Being in the Igbo religious thought; rather, each god or deity can only be described as supreme within a particular Igbo locality where it reigns (see AJA 2015; cf. NZE 1981, 21). Furthermore, for Metuh, the Igbo descriptions of their God also revolve around three nomenclatures: *Chukwu*, *Chineke* and *Olisa*. In reacting to this, Nwoga (1984, 33) argues that the word *Chukwu*, as employed by Metuh, to describe the traditional Igbo Supreme Being, does not fit into the Igbo traditional religious scheme. For him, the word is projected on the basis of the cleverness and hegemony of the Aro people, which is just one locality in Igboland, in trying to impose their local deity as the Supreme Deity on the entire Igbo religious structure. Nwoga, in his work, [The Supreme God as a Stranger in Igbo Religion], rejects the name, *Chukwu*, and describes it as a stranger in the Igbo religious worldview. Similarly, in his book: [Chi: The God in Igbo Religion], Ezekwugo re-echoes the view projected by Nwoga regarding the inappropriateness of the concept of *Chukwu* in the Igbo religious thought. For him, *Chukwu* is just a name for a local deity in Aro, which the missionary appropriated and generalized to Igbo religious thought in their quest to project their idea of the Supreme God into traditional Igbo religion. According to him:

Originally, *Chukwu* was just one local god among many; one of a thousand and one Igbo 'jujus' or 'alusi' deities. His ascension to the status of a chief god is attributable to three factors: the wide-spread distribution of the Aros throughout Igbo land, the superior cleverness of the Aro people themselves, and the awe-inspiring nature of *Chukwu*'s grotto. (EZEKWUGO 1987, 96)

Ezekwugo admits that the god of the traditional Igbo person is symbolized in the concept of *Chi*, which describes a personal god and not *Chukwu*, which Metuh sees as evoking the idea of the Supreme Being in Igbo religion.

Njoku agrees with Metuh that the Igbo nurture the idea of a Supreme Being in their religious thought, identical to the Christian God. He describes the Igbo traditional religion and, by extension, African Traditional Religion, as monotheistic or what he simply identifies as “consultative monotheism” similar to Bolaji Idowu’s concept of “diffused” or “bureaucratic monotheism” (see IDOWU 1975, 58), rather than polytheistic as many African scholars argue (see AJA 2015; NZE 1981; EZEKWUGO 1987; NWOGA 1984). According to him:

Whether we call ATR ‘diffused’ or ‘bureaucratic’ monotheism, as Bolaji Idowu suggested, or ‘liberal’ or ‘consultative’ monotheism, as I would prefer; we do not need to strain our imagination to recognize that it is high time we dropped the use of the term *polytheism* in characterizing ATR. ATR has a loose monotheistic structure and there is nothing in this mode of understanding that is against authentic or valid religious reasoning. (NJOKU 2002, 146)

We disagree with Njoku that Igbo traditional religion(s) conceive of the supreme being in monotheistic terms. To devise an argument in order to create an impression that the Igbo religious structure is monotheistic, while in practice and theory, it is polytheistic, is to wallow in self-deception and in claiming what one is not. The Igbo forebears or ancestors worshipped gods and not a particular God or as Nze (1981, 21) puts it: “...there is no single instance when the Igbo perform a sacrifice to the worship of a single Being of the Christian concept.” Furthermore, Aja concurs with Nze that the traditional Igbo religious structure is practically and theoretically polytheistic as he warns that:

To foist ingenuous argument in the attempt to appear to be monotheistic while in theory and practice the Igbo is polytheistic, is “to cling to what we are not.” ...Facts of Igbo experience show that the Igbo are polytheistic; they are not monotheistic. There is no basis to think or feel that monotheism is more in tune than polytheism with what is truly religious...Its metaphysical origin lies in the distinction between *having* and *being*...The current desperate search for Christian conceptual pegs on which to hang traditional African religious categories is unreasonable and futile. (AJA 2015, 148-149; cf. LINDEMANN 1992, 5-9)

Njoku, himself, indirectly accepted that the Igbo religious structure is not monotheistic when he asks: “could it be that the Aros, through their so-called trick, imposed a kind of religious monotheism in Igbo hegemony, which the missionaries saw as an advantage? On this ambient, historical research continues in its scrutiny” (NJOKU 2002, 163). Furthermore, he also technically accepted

that the Aro people, a particular locality in Igboland, deceptively manipulated the authentic traditional religious belief of the Igbo and that the name *Chukwu* was the name of a local deity of Aro elevated to the status of a Supreme Being by Aro people, which the missionaries advantageously keyed into in projecting their foreign religious idea of a Supreme God in Igbo religious architecture (NJOKU 2002, 160).

Despite this admission made by Njoku that the idea of the Supreme Being in Igboland was an Aro trick geared towards raising their local deity to the status of a chief god in Igbo society, which the Western missionaries capitalized on in projecting their religion in Igbo religious culture and which proves that the Igbo is traditionally and originally polytheistic, he could not say to what extent the Aro manipulated the Igbo religious belief. We will revisit the issue of the Aro dominance and manipulation of Igbo religious belief, in the next section.

Njoku further admits that “the African Christian theologian willingly and unwillingly has a basic problem – a son of two worlds (African and Christian) to which he pays no complete allegiance” and that “it is difficult for African philosophers and Christians alike to free themselves from conceptualizing African realities in Western frames” (NJOKU 2002, 145-146). However, despite making this admission, he fell into the same pit. For instance, in an attempt to hang the traditional Igbo religious worldview on a Christian conceptual peg, he deliberately avoided mention of an important attribute of the Christian God, which is *creatio ex nihilo* and refuses to discuss this attribute in the light of the Igbo god, who does not create out of nothing but creates from already existing materials. In the following section, we will revisit the above argument and show that the authentic Igbo traditional religious concept of God is different from the idea of the supreme God propagated by Western missionaries and Christian theologians.

God in Igbo Traditional Religious Thought

The Igbo society, just like many other human societies, is a deeply religious one. The African traditional society exhibits, in various dimensions, its beliefs in powers beyond the human reality that are believed to control the universe. Within the Yoruba religious worldview, *Olodumare* is recognized as having superior powers over other deities. This, notwithstanding, the Yoruba religious worldview is dominated by a multiplicity of gods. Each significant aspect of life has a deity assigned to it. To make a bountiful harvest, for instance, a typical Yoruba person will sacrifice to the god or deity in charge of agriculture – *Orisaoko* and to be fertile or wealthy, he or she sacrifices to the god of fertility or wealth – *Osun* (see OLANIYI 2018, 115). This same thing is applicable when protection is sought by the Yoruba man, where he sacrifices to another deity in charge of protection – *Ogun*. In this connection, Gbadegesin (1991, 75) asserts that “it is a general knowledge that the Yoruba recognize more than four hundred deities, beside *Olodumare*.” Ile Ife, the spiritual abode of the Yoruba, is described as having only one day within the entire year that is not dedicated to any deity (see GBADEGESIN 1991, 75; cf. AJA 2015).

Traditional Igbo society is religious like other traditional African societies. A reasonable percentage of the Igbo are still stuck to their traditional religion, despite the advent of foreign religions. This is why Aja (2016, 142) is of the view that the Igbo “have not been easily won over to Islam, and Christianity remains the only exotic religion competing with the traditional religion for allegiance.” Christian religion, no doubt, has some effects on the Igbo traditional religion both conceptually and mentally. Consequently, some authors (see AJA 2015; NWOGA 1984; NZE 1981) have doubted whether a supreme deity exists in Igbo religious thought. This doubt has led to the expression of divergent opinions regarding the Igbo religious worldview.

It is to be noted that every particular Igbo community has an acknowledged deity that reigns supreme over that particular community (see AJA 2015,142). Thus, when reference is made to God in any Igbo narrative, it does not immediately evoke the idea of a Supreme Being as Christian theologians will expect us to believe. The same situation is applicable to the concept of *Chukwu*, in Igbo religious thought, as briefly discussed in the previous section. In the Igbo traditional religious worldview, the concept of *Chukwu* does not connote the idea of a supreme being across the Igbo world. Rather, *Chukwu* is tied to the Igbo oracular practice (cf. AJA 2015). This is why in the Igbo traditional religion, “whenever a case becomes difficult, *ejereya be Chukwu*,” meaning to go to the oracle in Arochukwu for consultation to sort out the difficult case in question (NWOGA 1984; cf. EGUDU 1973). Thus, *Chukwu* does not connote a Supreme Being, but only describes a powerful deity in Aro, whose influence, as well as power, is only recognized within the Aro locality in Igboland. This is why Nwoga writes that:

The biggest oracle which pervaded Igboland from the 17th century was *IbiniUkpabi* of Aro... When the Aro went into the rest of the Igbo land to trade in slaves, they took with them, both for protection and as an additional business, the reputation of their *Chi-Ukwu* (Big Chi)thereby elevating *Ibini Ukpabi* to the status of the last arbiter, the god beyond whom there could be no surer answer to problems. Aro agents all over the Igboland and beyond advised individuals and groups among whom they lived to go ‘to consult’ *Chukwu* whenever a case went beyond local solution. (NWOGA 1984, 36)

The implication of the above assertion is that had the Aro dominance, with reference to their god, *Chukwu*, materialized into full-blown political and social dominance, all other gods across the Igbo nation would have been irrelevant and of no value. “*Chukwu* of Arochukwu would have become the Supreme God in Igboland, although still with connotations different from the sole Creator God of Christianity” (AJA 2015, 144). However, with the arrival of the Europeans and their religion, the concept of *Chukwu* was dislodged from its oracular sense of Aro-*Chukwu* and turned into a Supreme Being. Even though gods have the

capacity of becoming so powerful and their recognition transcending the locality where shrines are established for them, in the Igbo world, this does not automatically connote that such a deity is supreme over other deities recognized in other Igbo localities. This is because the Igbo religious worldview is polytheistic by nature and each particular locality has an assigned deity or god in charge of that area. For instance, the Okija deity (*Arusi Okija*) is a powerful deity in charge of the Okija locality, just like *Chukwu* is a deity in charge of Aro locality. Therefore, the idea of one particular deity that is supreme in all Igbo localities and who “creates out of nothing,” like the God of the Western religion, was not recognized in the Igbo-African traditional religious thought even though Christianity has, to an appreciable extent, permeated contemporary Igbo world.

The word *Chukwu*, in the Igbo world, has a linguistic dimension which can be used interchangeably with *Chineke*. The former is culturally rendered as a great spirit, while the latter is translated as the spirit that creates – *Chi-na-eke* (cf. AJA 2015, 144). The point of controversy is the *ke* root or principle, which has to do with the act of creation. In the Igbo worldview, the *ke* principle does not connote the idea of creation as in creation out of nothing or making something out of nothing, which is associated with the Christian God, but only describes the act of sharing. Therefore, from the traditional Igbo perspective, *eke* denotes one who shares and *ke* means divide. This is why Aja (2015, 144) asserts that:

Translating *Chineke* as “God that creates” does not fit into the Igbo conceptual scheme. *Chineke*, then to keep to its Igbo language and etymology, has to mean *China Eke*, representing God in his duality as each person’s deity and destiny, the determinant of a person’s lot in life for good or ill, the providence that decrees whether a person will survive or not to reap the fruit of his or her labour. The duality makes some names interchangeable: for instance, *Ekelaka* can be interchanged (with) *Chilaka*...while *Ekeoma* can be interchanged (with) *Chioma*.

It is to be noted that the employment of *Eke*, as enunciated in the above quotation, will not only and always connote the idea of sharing since the Igbo language heavily depends on the tone of pronunciation. This, notwithstanding, “the root – *ke* in *Okike* does not mean creation out of nothing” (AJA 2015, 145). This implies that in the Igbo worldview, the Christian conception of “creation out of nothing” is foreign to the Igbo traditional thought. Rather, the Igbo trace the origin of any entity in terms of another entity already in existence. Thus, to use a different religious conceptual framework or category, say, Christianity, to study another religious tradition, like Igbo traditional religion, would only amount to a distortion of such religion. This is implicated in the concept of *Chineke*, adopted as the god that creates, by the Western missionary and Igbo Christian theologians, in order to give the attribute of *creatio ex nihilo* to the African god, which is a distortion of the religious architecture of the Igbo. Consequently, Aja warns that:

[T]he concept of *Chinaeke* as the “creator God” should be accounted as an attempt to yoke onto the Igbo religions thought the category of creation *ex nihilo* in the bid to claim that the traditional African religions are also monotheistic, just as Judaism and Christianity are. The ordinary meaning of the Igbo word *okike* is not to make things out of nothing – a characteristic easily and readily attributed to the supreme God propagated by the Christian missionaries. (AJA 2015, 147)

The above view, expressed by Aja, attests to the point that using Western religious schemes to study the Igbo traditional religion is only an attempt in futility which does not show the authentic nature of traditional Igbo religious view. It is the duty of African philosophers to examine, distil and sieve the authentic African traditional religious view from the concepts and teachings of Western religion in order to bring about an enlightened understanding of the religious beliefs and concepts of ATR and Christianity. This underscores the importance or significance of this enquiry.

Margaret Green does not accept that there is anything like the Supreme Being in African religious thought. In expressing doubt over the existence of a supreme deity in Igbo religion, she asserts that:

Whether or not there is any conception of deities that is either universal or at any rate more than local; it is not easy to know, as for *Ci* [spelt as Chi] the spirit who creates people– and whose name as in *Cineke* [*Chineke*] has been taken by the Christians to denote the Creator, it is difficult to know what the real Igbo significance of the word is. *Ci* and *Eke* together create an individual, but each person is thought of as having his own *Ci* and whether over and above this, there is any conception of universal *Ci*, seems doubtful. (cited in AJA 2015, 145)

The above view, by Green, expresses uncertainty regarding the existence of any being like the Supreme God in Igbo religious thought. It is also in the same spirit that Echeruo, in his Ahiajioku lecture, denied the existence of any supreme God in Igbo thought. In his estimation, if one should talk about any idea of a supreme god in the Igbo worldview, one should rather make reference to *Ala* (the Earth). This implies that to posit any deity, in Echeruo’s perspective, which is greater than *Ala* (the Earth) is tantamount to heresy and devilish in itself. Thus, for him, to propose any god greater than *Ala*, in Igbo thought, is an abomination which amounts to a defilement of *Ala* (the Earth) (ECHERUO, 1979, 19). It is important to note that *Ala*, in Echeruo’s view, does not connote the idea of the Christian God. The important role assigned to *Ala*, by Echeruo, is premised on its critical function in the control of morals in the Igbo world. The Igbo worldview maintains a belief that *Ala* is the only principle that overrides the capriciousness of an Igbo man. If any Igbo man commits an abomination, whether seen or not seen by anybody, the Igbo believe that such a person will be hunted by *Ala* (the Earth).

From the perspective of the Igbo natural egalitarian and democratic make-up, Nze counters the idea of monotheism and the notion of one supreme God in the Igbo worldview. He posits that the Igbo have no idea of any one supreme god but a multiplicity of gods that reign supreme in their respective Igbo localities or functional areas of life:

They [the Igbo] assume the existence of numerous gods...There is a Supreme Being that created man; there is Supreme Being that created trees; there is a Supreme god of the Earth. The Sun is a God....There is no single instance when the Igbo perform sacrifice to the worship of a single Being of the Christian concept...there exists no occasion when a Supreme Being of the Christian description is appeased or worshipped, it can be said that this Being does not exist at all or exists but is not recognized because he is passive. Our fathers worshipped gods and not a God (NZE 1981, 21-30).

The above view, as enunciated by Nze, expresses the polytheistic and egalitarian nature of Igbo religious view. This attests that the Igbo religious world does not subscribe to monotheism, like you would find in other religions like Christianity. Rather, the Igbo world recognizes the existence of multiplicity of gods, each of them in control of a particular locality or an area of life, where it can be adjudged supreme.

Another salient point to note is that the existence of a god, in Igbo culture, is tied to the worship and establishment of a shrine to such a god. Where no shrine is dedicated to any god and where such a god is not worshipped, the Igbo do not recognize such a god (see AJA 2015, 135). Thus, the idea of a supreme God, as projected by Western missionaries and Igbo Christian theologians, is a distortion of the natural and original architecture of the Igbo religious worldview. If there are no shrines dedicated to such God, in the Igbo conception, it is not recognized by them, even if it exists in the passive or remote mode. As we have briefly hinted, in the previous section, the Igbo believe in a mutual, reciprocal and contractual relationship with their god. In a situation where a god is worshipped, in the Igbo worldview, but such a god is not living up to the expectations of the worshipper in keeping its own side of the bargain or contract, the worshipper can discipline such a god by terminating the contractual relationship. The worshipper can dispose of such a god and can go for another god. Such reciprocal or contractual relationship does not exist in the Christian religious world. Thus, the idea of the supreme God of the Christian religion is unrecognized in Igbo traditional religion. One may argue that the Supreme Being of the Christian religion existed in Igbo traditional religion, before the advent of the Western missionaries, but he was only passive or remote in the Igbo culture. However, the aim of the paper, as we have shown above, is not to argue for the passive or remote existence of a Supreme Being of the Christian religion in Igbo culture, but to show that such a Being was not recognized or acknowledged in the

Igbo traditional religion, before the advent of the Christian religion in Igboland, even if he existed in the passive or remote mode. The paper maintains this position because, as we have shown above, the authentic traditional Igbo religious thought is polytheistic and certain attributes of the Supreme God like the ability to create out of nothing, transcendence, etc., are not identifiable with the authentic traditional Igbo god, who does not create out of anything, but from already existing materials and who is directly worshipped by its adherents and not through intermediaries.

Conclusion

This paper defended the idea that the Igbo religious conception of God is distinct from the Christian or Western missionary concept of God. It shows that the authentic Igbo traditional idea of God is not identical or identifiable with the idea of Supreme God propagated by Western missionaries and Igbo Christian theologians. The paper noted that the Igbo religious view of God is primarily polytheistic as it recognizes a multiplicity of gods, unlike the monotheistic outlook of Western religion that acknowledges only one Supreme Being. It further submitted that certain attributes of the Western God, like the ability to create out of nothing and omnipresence, make it unrecognized in the Igbo religious tradition. This submission is made because, the Igbo god does not create out of nothing, but from already existing materials. Furthermore, each particular god or deity in the Igbo culture has a shrine dedicated to it as its place of worship and reigns supreme only in such area and does not extend its supremacy to other Igbo localities where it is not in charge and where it is not worshipped. The paper frowned at the current quest by Igbo-Christian theologians to study Igbo traditional religious thought using Western religious categories. Such efforts, the paper argued, will only amount to a distortion of the authentic traditional Igbo religious thought. The paper invites African philosophers of religion and theologians to focus on examining, distilling and sieving original and authentic traditional Igbo religious ideas separate from the concepts, ideals and teachings of Christianity, in order to bring about an enlightened understanding of both the Christian worldview and the Igbo traditional religious worldview.

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