

THE SUPREME BEING IN IGBO THOUGHT: A REAPPRAISAL

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Abstract. The greatest challenge confronting the notion of Supreme Being in Igbo thought is the absence of a religious document like the Christian Bible or the Moslem Quran. However, Christian missionaries, anthropologists and philosophers have done much research. This paper examines these early researches on Supreme Being in Igbo thought. It narrows the gap created by the contending Scholars and establishes the fact. The paper as well raises other issues surrounding the Supreme Being in Igbo thought, and shows that analysis of the Igbo idea of Supreme Being based on western parameter results to irreconcilable arguments that cannot advance Igbo ontological thought. The paper however finds that Igbos have a well-developed concept of the Supreme Being prior and post western influence, and rejects the position that the idea of the Supreme Being is strange to Igbo thought. The paper then concludes that Igbo people are highly religious, but this religiosity is in recent times more ephemeral than rooted because of the present western influence glaring in current globalization, modernism and secularism that shifts Igbos from their autochthonous ontological trajectory.

Key Words: Supreme Being, Igbo, Thought, Reappraisal

1. Introduction

Glaring in Igbo philosophical tradition is the science of things through the ultimate causes. Igbo metaphysics, which is the epicentre of Igbo philosophy, engages in critical, orderly, systematic, logical, rational and comprehensive investigation of the ultimate principles of reality, the study of being and that of the universe (Ogugua, 2003: 1). Igbo metaphysics therefore recognizes the phenomenon of causality in nature based on the principle of sufficient reason that whatever exists must have justification for its existence and must have a cause (Nwigwe & Emedolu, 2004:

153). Thus, the Igbos based on experience hold that the Supreme Being that is the first cause of all things exists, but because of his great distance in the heaven, he created several lower Deities to superintend different parts of the universe. Equiano records this Divine distance in 1789, when he notes that the Igbo believes in one creator of all things who lives in the sky; who does not eat but smokes a pipe (1967: 10). The Supreme Being in Igbo context is in fact perceived and explained as the highest in the hierarchy of Beings.

Even in the Igbo understanding of man, metaphysics and philosophy of life, the Supreme Being “is always at the peak oozing out vital force to the existents and sustaining these existents” (Ogugua, 2003:8). In short, the ontological thought of the Igbos reveals it as a truism that the Supreme Being holds the chain of relationship among beings in the Igbo world and beyond. After him comes other existent realities like the gods, ancestors, spirits, man, animals, inanimate, etc through whom he replicates his potency. Indeed, the Igbos know and believe in the Supreme Being from the beginning of their existence hence the existence of God is monotonously captured even in their names and titles (Ukaegbu, 2005: 54).

In Igbo traditional thought and religion therefore, the Supreme Being “Chukwu” ranks highest not only in the spiritual realm but in the physical world. The Igbo concept “Chukwu” which designates the high, great or big God with many other names like “Chineke” and “Osebuluwa” is universally recognized in diverse Igbo communities (Agbedo, 2010: 107). The concept however is a combination of the Igbo words; “Chi” (spirit) and “ukwu” (great, big or high). When the Supreme Being is called “Chineke”, it is a combination of Igbo words “Chi” (Spirit), “na” (that or who) and “eke” (create) designating the spirit that creates or causes everything into existence. When Igbos call him “Osebuluwa” or “Olisebuluwa”, it is a combination of the words “olisa” (God), “bulu” (carry) and “Uwa” (world), meaning the Supreme Being who carries and sustains the world. These names however manifest various functions of the Supreme Being and his place in human existence as perceived by indigenous Igbo people.

Within the hierarchy beings in Igbo philosophic worldview, in which the Supreme Being “Chukwu” is at the apex exists a web of ontological mutual relationship reverently recognized by the indigenous people. This is why researchers on Igbo thought generally agree that Igbo people are very religious. Metuh alludes to this religiosity when he observes that one will not be too long in Igbo country to know the elaborate position of the Supreme Being in Igbo consciousness, and how frequently this being features in their daily speech. In addition, one will not search long to discover how meticulous and pertinacious the Igbos attach themselves to the

Supreme Being. This inclination makes it possible for the Supreme Being to feature prominently and frequently in the consciousness daily and existential engagements of the Igbo (Onuigbo, 2004: 22). In Igbo ontological thought therefore, it is an aberration to talk of community devoid of the Supreme Being. He is always at the peak of human thought, expressions, actions and activities. One of the early British that visited Igbo hinterland in 1869 prior to the advent of Christianity even noticed this religious consciousness and remarks that Igbo people never speak of futurity without admitting “ahinze tsukwu” that is, if it pleases the Supreme Being (Metuh, 1985: 48).

The absence of documented religious beliefs in traditional Igbo society due to non-existence of developed system of documentation among the people has resulted to gross misconceptions and misrepresentations of Igbo thought on the Supreme Being by various thinkers. Hence, these thinkers created ontological gaps as they reconstruct Igbo religious experience and thought several years after its contact with other cultures. Despite the philosophical debate on Igbo thought regarding the Supreme Being, it has always been taken for granted that the traditional Igbo had a firm belief not only in the Divinities but particularly in the Supreme Being whom they view as invincible, sovereign and benevolent. Thus, sub Igbo groups may have popularized their Deities as the Supreme Being “Chukwu”, it does not remove the fact that Igbo thought pre-existed these Deities which emerged sometime in Igbo history.

2. Explication of Concepts

Unexplained concepts are largely misnomers that obstruct understanding and knowledge. Nevertheless, defined concepts set the limit and point to meanings inherent in a term. Since philosophy thrives in distinction, clarity, explicitness and creation of better insight into the meaning of words, there is need to define outstanding concepts within this discourse. These concepts include; Supreme Being, Igbo, thought and reappraisal. In Igbo traditional thought, the Supreme Being is synonymous with God addressed as “Chineke”, “Obasi”, “Osebuluwa” or “Chukwu”. These nomenclatures, according to Omoregbe are analyzable names reflecting Igbo beliefs and circumstances in which the Supreme Being is experienced (2012: 64) However, “Being” in this context philosophically connotes an entity and an existence or the chain of processes undergone by this entity as it tends to achieve an end. The “Supreme” attached to this “Being” depicts the entity in question as the highest in hierarchy. The word “Supreme” also connotes the idea of supremacy and points to the ability of this “Being” to control, shape and pave the existence of other realities.

Besides, Igbo is one of the three major ethnic groups in Nigeria.

This tribe situates in the South-eastern part of Nigeria predominantly the states of Anambra, Enugu, Imo, Abia, Ebonyi and parts of Delta, Rivers and Kogi (Ezinwa, 2014: 74). “The Igbos (sic) have a landmass of around 16,000 square miles bounded on the west by Bini and Warri people, on the east by the Ibibio people, south by the Ogoni people and on the north by the Idomas” (Ogugua, 2000: 22). One becomes an Igbo when he is born into an Igbo family and when he participates fully in and lives the beliefs, ceremonies and activities of the Igbo (Chinweuba & Ezeugwu, 2017: 17). This condition certifies Mbiti’s assertion that to be human in Africa is to belong to a particular community and to actively participant in the beliefs, ceremonies, rituals and festivals of that community (1969: 2). This community however comprises of the unseen realities, unborn and the living who are bonded by communal love and harmony made stable by the Supreme Being. Thought, however, is a form created in the mind through interactive reasoning. It can be viewed as something a people consistently think of, something they remember or realize; a subject that occupies their mind and reflects in their existential life. Thought can thus be described as a way of thinking, an idea or feeling associated with a group, nation or tribe. Reappraisal on the other hand gives clue to a previous but unsatisfactory evaluation. Hence, it is a second formal critical examination of something or a discourse to establish a more correct position.

3. Researchers on Supreme Being in Igbo thought

Outstanding contributions on Supreme Being in Igbo thought are visible in the philosophical discourses of Ike, Edoziem, Meek, Okere, Ezekwugo, Oguejiofor, Nwoga, Metuh, Nze, Agbakoba and Aja. For Ike and Edoziem, the Supreme Being in Igbo thought is “Chukwu”. He is omnipotent and surpasses all organic, inorganic or transcendent beings. Ike and Edoziem contend that “Chukwu” is addressed as “Chineke”, “Oseburuwa”, “Chukwuoke” or “Chi Okike” because of his creative capacity (2001: 23). They further aver that;

It is chukwu who ordered and created the universe, as we know it but after creation he withdrew into solitude so that man hardly had anything to do with him directly. This explain perhaps why besides the existence of God as a supreme absolute being, the Igbo believe in the existence of series of deities and spirits, living on the supernatural plane and relating to man and his environment on the natural plane (23).

Alluding to this view, Meek asserts that “Chukwu” is the creator and father of other revered spirits such as “Igwe” (the sky), “Amadi oha” (the Lightning) and “Ala” (the earth deity) (1934: 209). He adds that sacrifices are not usually offered to “Chukwu” but he is regarded as the ulti-

mate recipients of all sacrifices. Okere echoes this thought arguing that the name of the Supreme Being in Igbo thought is “Chukwu” or “Chiukwu” (the great God) or “Chineke” (the Creator) to whom other gods are subordinates (2014: 11). In line with these thinkers, Oguejiofor argues that the Supreme Being “Chukwu” or “Chineke” pre-existed in Igbo thought, but was popularized by the Anglican Church through the use of the concept in the first translation of the Igbo Bible. He then reveals that later in history, Aro people localized the Supreme Being in their oracle and then God began to speak and act (Oguejiofor, 1996: 60).

Despite these accounts, Ezekwugo contends that Igbos were prior to western influence unaware of Supreme Being as understood today. The only Supreme Being they knew, according to him, was the Aro oracle. Ezekwugo posits that prior to the advent of the missionaries; most Igbo communities to stand for the Supreme Being have adopted the name of the Aro oracle, “Chukwu”. He claims that this was actualized because of the presence of Aro people throughout Igbo land, their awareness and the awe-inspiring appearance of the “Chukwu” grotto in Aro community (1987: 72). In line with this argument, Nwoga avers that the concept of Supreme Being is totally alien to Igbo thought. He states that the influence of the Aro oracle and the hegemony of the Aro people over Igbo nation were responsible for the popularity of “Chukwu” over other deities (1984:36). He further holds that most of the Igbo names that contain “Chukwu” actually refer to the Aro oracle and not to the universal Supreme Being as understood today (37). Nwoga adds that the idea of creating out of nothing, which characterizes the Supreme Being, does not even exist in Igbo language. Metuh supports this view arguing that the idea of creation is strange to the Igbos, for creation out of nothing does not exist in Igbo vocabulary and thought. As such, the notion of creator or Supreme Being as understood today was new to the traditional Igbos.

Concurring to this view, Nze observes that Igbo people are pragmatists and they maintain such relationship with their gods. These gods have arisen naturally and for the reason of fulfilling specific needs. As such, Igbo people have nothing to do with a god over whom they have no control; who is transcendent, absolute and supreme in the Christian sense (1981: 21). Thus, they have no god that is universally supreme, but gods that are powerful relative to their own areas of dominion. This thought, he adds, is also in line with Igbo egalitarianism and individualism (21). On the relationship between the gods, Nze contends that the supreme divinities are equal in power and their relation to man is like a tripod hub comprising the supreme gods, supreme ancestral gods and supreme personal gods (25). Each of the gods has its area of influence and operation and holds supreme authority and power in that sphere.

In this debate, Agbakoba took a more logical approach, juxtaposing the present attributes of the Supreme Being with the belief of the traditional Igbos prior to western influence. He observes that the idea of Supreme Being implies the highest, the greatest and the most powerful (2014: 131). He adds that supremacy again implies ability to subjugate others or exercise absolute unfettered control of events and powers. Agbakoba therefore states that supremacy in the monotheistic sense means to occupy the highest position of authority, power and influence (131). These imply that the logical character of the absolutely Supreme Being is that he would possess and exercise universal, eternal, infinite power and influence over itself and all other beings. He would possess all the elements of universality: universal applicability or validity (since he is universally effective); infinite reach, eternal presence, total objectivity or impartiality (132). These qualities according to Agbakoba are not felt in many aspects of Igbo existence. Taking Igbo ethical thought and moral philosophy as instances, Agbakoba observes that “Ani” (earth goddess) who is viewed as the guardian or custodian of morality prevails and not “Chukwu”. As such, atrocities “nso ani” are offences against the earth goddess. This position as held by the Igbos, Agbakoba argues, refutes the idea of general Supreme Being “Chukwu” among the Igbos prior to western influence.

Agbakoba further contends that neither “Ani”, nor her injunctions among the Igbos is even universal but belongs to individual Igbo community. Such injunctions therefore do not manifest the universal character expected of a totally universal being. Agbakoba therefore maintains that Igbo thought conceive divine realities as individually particularistic and lacking logical qualities of total universality. Since “Chukwu” is not composed of universal quality based on his analysis, Agbakoba postulates that “Chukwu” cannot be the Supreme Being either in the sense of an absolutely Supreme Being or in the sense of a decentralized Supreme Being, for he lacks the necessary qualities that make up such being (142).

Aja concurs with the above views positing that the word “Chukwu” in Igbo thought does not refer to the Supreme Being, but to “Ibiniukpabi”, the god of the Aro; a sub section of Igbo people (2001: 61). He observes that when the Aro people spread in Igbo land to trade slaves, they took with them both for protection and as an additional business, the reputation of their “chi-ukwu”. He notes that “Ibiniukpabi” was elevated to the status of the last arbiter, the Supreme and the god beyond whom there could be surer answer to problems.

4. The reappraisal of Supreme Being in Igbo Thought

Since there was no documented evidence in traditional Igbo society due to non-existence of developed system of documentation among the

people, the thinkers in context attempt to reconstruct Igbo thought several years after its contact with other cultures. Their arguments however agree that Igbo people are religious. Nevertheless, can the same Igbo people in their religiosity be ignorant of the universal Supreme Being? The claims of the contending Philosophers are appraised in the critical evaluation of Aro influence, Nri influence in relation to Aro and western influences of the concept “Chukwu,” the idea of creation and Supreme Being in Igbo thought.

4. 1. Aro influence of the concept “Chukwu”

One of the issues raised by Nwoga and others was the use of the word “Chukwu” to designate Supreme Being in Igbo thought (1984: 36). It was alleged that this was a mistranslation by the Anglican Church in translating the Igbo Bible, and in their effort to inculcate the western concept of Supreme God in the natives. At this epoch, the Portuguese Priest Alves Correia, was allegedly the first to speculate that the idea of Supreme Being was imported into Igbo thought, and concludes that prior to that, the Igbos regard the Aro oracle as the Supreme Being. This according to him was because Aro was a small but influential Igbo subgroup. In congruence with this theological position, Nwoga and others contend that the name “Chukwu” actually refer to the Aro Oracle “ibiniukpabi” and not to the real Supreme Being taught by the missionaries. In the past, Aro kingdom had enormous influence in almost all the communities in traditional Igbo society (Okon, 2010: 116). This influence according to Mcfarlan Calabar in the 19th century was supreme, known and feared as far as Niger, and it stretches for over a hundred miles on the right bank of the Cross River and to the south beyond the Enyong river where thousands passed in chains to the big slave market at Itu (1846: 105). Because of this dominant influence, the Aro people localized the name “Chukwu” in their oracle “Ibiniukpabi” and popularized it in Igbo land. Onwu notes that it is generally believed that Aro people from Ibibio land imported “Ibiniukpabi”, and the influence of the oracle spread in Igbo land like a harmattan fire.

The influence and popularity of the Aro oracle in Igbo thought was enhanced by Aro participation in trans-Atlantic slave trade (Okon, 117). At this epoch, Aro civilization generated trade in which Igbo people and their neighbours were commodities of trade. History holds that in Nsukka axis ten slaves sold for a horse, and at Uburu slave market a horse exchanged for six adult slaves. In fact, the Aro oracle was used to exploit the Igbos economically, politically and humanly. Funny enough, those purported to have been swallowed by Aro oracle resurfaced somewhere only to be sold as slaves or used for one form of sacrifice or the other (Onuigbo, 2004:20). This obnoxious act lasted till the British military force destroyed the long

Juju as it was also called in 1910, and brought the terror of Aro people to an end (20). Does this however mean that the Igbo Supreme Being “Chukwu” was destroyed with the destruction of the Aro oracle in 1910? This notion if accepted goes against the Igbo universal thought about God as a Supreme spiritual being that is immaterial and indestructible by any material force.

It is pertinent to note that the essence and potency of Aro oracle as the Supreme Being were exaggerations contrived for economic and political purposes. With this deception, the proponents exploited the deep religiosity of the Igbos to enslave them, and to dominate economic and political activities within the Igbo nation. Thus, the idea of Supreme Being that emanated from Aro ontology was a religious cult dominated and controlled by select businessmen, who chose to earn their wealth by controlling the slave market in Igbo land. As such, the Aro oracle had little religious content, and cannot be taken as the Igbo Supreme Being “Chukwu” which pre-existed it.

4. 2. Nri influence of the concept “Chukwu” in Igbo thought in relation to Aro and Christian influences

Although the Philosophers of Igbo ontology on the Supreme Being centered much on Aro influence, Nri myth of origin also employed the word “Chukwu” in depicting the Supreme Being who sent the Igbo ancestor and progenitors; *Eri* and his wife *Namaku* into the world (Onwuejogu, 1978: 22). Obviously, the Supreme Being Nri meant was not the Aro’s “Ibiniukpabi” but the Supreme Being (God) that lives in the sky and understood in western thought (Aniamalu, 2010: 5). As Aro people were famous through slave trade, Nri people were famous before that epoch as custodian of Igbo culture; customs and tradition. The fundamental questions now are; which of the two Igbo sub groups; Nri or Aro popularized the concept Supreme Being “Chukwu” among the Igbos? Or did the word “Chukwu” exist in Igbo vocabulary before the Aro, Nri and western influences? If the Nri myth pre-dates western influence and Aro ascendancy to prominence, then the Supreme Being “Chukwu” could not have been introduced into Igbo thought by the missionaries or Aro people.

Again, if the alleged Igbo thought on Supreme Being revolves around Aro oracle or stems from western influences then which came first; the Igbo as a society, the Aro and their oracle or the advent of western influences? If it is the Igbo society, which came first, that means that Aro and their oracle “Ibiniukpabi” as well as the western influences among Igbos are not as old as Igbo land. Then, which Supreme Being was the Igbo people in general holding on to before the existence of Aro and advent of their oracle and westerners? Or does it mean that the pristine Igbos do

not share the basic human characteristic of being a religious being? It will be absurd to assume this. If alleged Aro and western origin of Supreme Being “Chukwu” are on the other hand correct, it will however mean that Aro, their oracle and western influences in Nigeria pre-existed Igbo people. If so, Arochukwu and European influences other than Nri would have reflected in Igbo history, myths, folklores and proverbs as where and how the Igbo progenitors began their existence. More so, if Igbo traditional understanding of Supreme Being is Aro oracle then “Ibiniukpabi” or long Juju which are other names for this oracle would have been in popular use among the Igbos of other communities. It would have at least constituted one of the praise names for the Supreme Being constantly used in worship and adoration then and in this modern time.

Historically, Aro influence was felt in 17th century during the trans-Atlantic slave trade and that of the west was around 12th century. Consequently, the claim that the Supreme Being “Chukwu” among the Igbos refer to “Ibiniukpabi” of Aro people, or that the idea of Supreme Being was introduced in Igbo thought by the Europeans are not actually correct for Nri influence (myth of origin) has been among the Igbos from time immemorial. Till date, this myth still teaches that Igbo progenitors began their existence in Nri before their descendants spread to other parts of Igbo land. It may therefore be that Aro people called their oracle the Supreme Being “Chukwu”, because they erroneously assumed it to be the Supreme Being they had so much thought about. It may as well be that the Aro oracle was assumed to be supreme like the Supreme Deity which the Igbos already believe to be existing somewhere. In this case, the Supreme Being could not have been a total stranger to the Igbo people as assumed by some thinkers.

Perhaps, the Aro used the Oracle “Ibiniukpabi” to deceive other Igbo communities into believing that the Supreme Being “Chukwu” they too thought was resident far away in the sky actually has its abode and priests in Aro community. Besides, some scholars have observed that Aro’s assumption was contrived to promote and justify their trade and dominance of other people as Divine endorsed. All these however point to existence of ancient consciousness of the Supreme Being in Igbo thought prior to Aro and western influences. Father Mellett attests to this ancient consciousness and writes that even in sacrifices to the spirits and the ancestors, Igbo natives invariably invoke the Supreme Being (God) in the beginning (Onuigbo, 2004: 21). Nwigwe and Emedolu reiterate this religious experience and aver that the Supreme Being is not strange in Igbo cosmology as is evident in Igbo proverbs, wise sayings, parables and prayer patterns (2004: 155). These oral documentations may not be scientific and logical, yet they remain the only clue to the fundamental thought

expression of Igbo people.

4. 3. Creation in Igbo Thought

Among the properties of Supreme Being in Igbo thought is the character of creation. Based on the linguistic analysis of Igbo language, Nwoga argues that Igbos are unaware of the Supreme creator because the idea of creation which bothers on making something out of nothing does not exist in Igbo thought (1984: 37). Mbaegbu disagrees with this taught asserting that although Igbo thought did not establish the material used in creation, the Igbo vocabulary “chi-na-eke” universally depicts the Supreme Being who creates and shares (2015: 137). Among created realities as encapsulated in Igbo myths, proverbs and parables is “Chi”. This refers to the spiritual form of the individual that resides in the metaphysical realm. This entity is similar to Plato’s form of physical realities in the immaterial world (Stumpf, 1994: 58). “Chi” is therefore the spiritual double or aspect of an individual, the life force or the spiritual companion of a living person. Arinze acknowledges this created spiritual entity when he writes that in Igbo thought, each individual is created with a spirit, a genius, or a spirit-double; his “Chi” which is resident in the spirit world before the Supreme Being “Chineke” soliciting good things for the individual (1970: 15). As such, the Supreme Being for the Igbos expresses himself to mortals through the “Chi” that belongs to the individuals (Ogugua, 2003: 19). Igbo thought reveals that this ontological entity “Chi” was created by the Supreme Being ever before its physical copy, and it determines with the Supreme Being where, when, and how of one’s birth, existence, fate and death (Dukur, 2010: 14).

The notion of creation is indeed a recurrent idea in Igbo thought. Hence, Igbos constantly refer to the Supreme Being “Chukwu” as “Chineke” and “Ezechitoke” to depict his capacity to create. In fact, African causal theory allows no room for chance occurrences. More so, the issue of “chance” or “luck” viewed as “uncaused event” is unknown or rather foreign to the Africans (Aja, 2001: 61). Consequently, Igbos universally believe that nothing just happens for every occurrence depends on causality sorely controlled by the Supreme Being. This means that even their existence and the origin of things are rooted in their belief in a Supreme cause who prevails on earth despite the activities of other Deities. This brings into serious question the claim of some Philosophers that the word creation or creator is alien to the Igbos simply because Igbo ontology lacks a developed logical explanation of creation. However, “Chineke in Igbo thought also points at the Supreme Being who shares, it is understandable that sharing is about what exists. As such, people cannot be passionate about sharing without the idea of how what to share was made

or produced. It is therefore obvious that the idea of creation and Supreme creator existed in Igbo thought and this Supreme Being pre-dates the existence of man and other realities.

4. 4. Basis of Aro, Nri and western influences of the concept of Supreme Being in Igbo thought

The fundamental question now is; why did Aro and Nri people of Igbo extraction as well as the early missionaries popularize the Supreme Being “Chukwu” in Igbo land? A critical study of these developments shows that Aro influence hinged on socio-economic, political and religious reasons. It was their intention and goal to dominate the entire Igbo land and its environs economically, politically and religiously. Parading their “Ibiniukpabi” as the Supreme Being was therefore a way of justifying their economic, political and religious domination. In all, they wanted people to think they were acting based on Divine mandate. Okon shares this view positing that the Aros who were the principal slave recruiters in the hinterlands have to manipulate Igbo thought by projecting their Deity “Ibiniukpabi” as the Supreme Being “Chukwu” in real form (2010:117). The national commission for museums and monuments in Calabar also reiterates similar view recording that:

many Igbos and Ibibios that were sold in Calabar were recruited by the Aros through the combination of means, among them raids, kidnapping, direct purchase in slave markets and fairs, and above all through the manipulation of their god, “ibiniukpabi” also known as the “long Juju” in the European records” (2010:5).

Thus, around the bight of Biafra and all over their Settlements in Igbo land and beyond, the Aros described their Deity as the Supreme Being. This action was similar to what St. Paul did among the Athenians in the Areopagus filled with Epicurean and Stoic philosophers when he supplied them the unknown God whose altar he claimed they already have (Acts 17: 16–34). Therefore, within the yardstick of time and power, precisely over a period of hundred years, the Aro Deity “Ibiniukpabi” attained immense power and became the supreme court of appeal and the greatest Divinity among Igbos (Thorp, 1986: 203). As such, its priests were found living in most of the principal places and exercising most baneful influence (203). In reality, Aro Deity was a mere tool used to enhance trade and to acquire economic gains and political domination. This manipulation paid off, hence there is no mention of trans-Atlantic slave trade without the outstanding role of Aro people whom the historians describe as “the God-men of the slave trade” (Okon, 2010: 117).

Nri people popularized the Supreme Being “Chukwu” merely for socio-cultural, religious and political reasons. Socio-culturally, Nri people intended to retain their custodianship of Igbo worldview, culture and myth of origin. As such, their consistent reference to the Supreme Being “Chukwu” authenticates their ancient position. As the custodian of Igbo worldview, and the assumed pristine abode of Igbo progenitors, Nri remains the custodian and head of Igbo traditional religion and philosophy. It is on this capacity that when any ontological explanation is sought in Igbo society, Nri is contacted. When grave sins like murder, suicide, incest, etc are committed in any part of Igbo society, “Akakpo Nri” (Nri dwarfs) and ritual agents are hired for expiation, cleansing or burying the victim (Anyanwu, 2004: 10). Be that as it may, early westerners in Igbo land came for religious purpose but displayed high amount superiority complex and bias. This was why they approached the natives placing every thought through western parameter. With their glaring bias, already existent Igbo thought and approach to the same Supreme Being they came to preach were condemned as paganism. Thus, the early missionaries were bent on inculcating the western thought to the repudiation of Igbo thought on the same Supreme Being. Besides, the influence of Nri people was directed towards upholding the Supreme Being already existent in Igbo thought while the Aro influence geared towards reversing the already existent Igbo thought by purporting that their Deity was the Supreme Being so as to enhance their trade and domination over others.

5. Supreme Being in Igbo Thought

Of what essence is this Supreme Being in Igbo thought? A critical look at Equiano’s narrative indicates that one of the things he could recollect about his Igbo ontology was that they believed in Supreme Being who lives in the sky. This Supreme Being according to him does not eat food but smokes a pipe (1967:10). This is a graphic description of the perception of the Supreme Being in Igbo worldview at a time prior to the mentioned influences. When one looks up, there is graphic picture of smoke moving about in the sky. The obvious explanation among pristine Igbos was that it must be the abode of the Supreme Being of all the earth, and the cloud is the smoke arising from the pipe he is smoking. Thus, Igbos also address the Supreme Being as “Obinigwe” (dweller in the sky) even in this modern epoch. This apparently explains why there is no shrine or sacrifice for the Supreme Being by the traditional Igbo people (Parrinder, 1977: 14).

In Igbo existence, the Supreme Being “Chukwu” undergoes a consistent universal recognition. He is acknowledged as the source of every success as well as misfortune. At every success, Igbo people unconscious-

ly or consciously exclaim, *Chukwu dalu* (God thank you) *ekene dili Chukwu* (thanks be to God) or *Chukwu ebuka* (God is big, great or amazing). The same essence of Supreme Being also surfaces in Igbo art of naming from time immemorial prior to Aro, Nri or European influences. Hence we have traditional Igbo names that suggest the knowledge and essence of Supreme Being “Chukwu” and his activities such as; ‘Chukwuemeka’ (God has done well), ‘Chukwunweike’ (God owns power and strength), ‘Chukwuma’ (God knows everything), ‘Chukwudi’ (Supreme God exists), to mention but a few. Some of the names even serve as prayers to the Supreme Being such as “Chukwulota” (God remember us), while others acknowledge his benevolence such as “Arinzechukwu” (praise God), “Kenechukwu” (thank God), etc. Arinze points out that these names that depict the nature of Supreme Being in Igbo ontology have been taken by great grandparents who died long before Nri, Aro and Europeans influences in Igbo land (Arinze, 1970: 10). As such, those names could not have emanated from Aro, Nri or Christian influences. Rather, they are indications that Igbo world and thought are *ab initio* replete with essence of the Supreme Being.

6. Foundation of the ontological conception of Supreme Being “Chukwu” in Igbo thought

Man is naturally hylemorphic. This position stems from the Igbo concept of “*mmadu*” (human being), which is neither the body nor the spirit alone, but a synthesis of the two; an expression of totality or wholeness of the human person (Anih, 1991: 76). This is what Plato meant when he postulates that man is composed of matter and form. As such, man is not purely a material being. He is capable of thinking, reflecting and willing which are activities that belong to being on a higher grade of existence (Arua, 2007: 6). Based on this, man’s spirit always quest for metaphysical realities and seeks to be united with them. This character naturally makes man a rational and metaphysical being that is in constant search for an ultimate cause of realities.

Nevertheless, to ask how the idea of the Supreme Being “Chukwu” originated among the Igbos, is similar to asking what things are made of or are the cause of realities, which formed the foundation of philosophy (O’Donohue, 1994: 28). In fact, the early Greek philosophers were propelled by such quest to reason and raise fundamental questions and hypothesis about the ultimate cause of cosmic realities, answers to which formed the early philosophy (Russell, 2004: 32–37). These questions are however the product of “wonder” in which Plato and Aristotle also found the origin of all Philosophy (Mbaegbu, 2009: 1). Human experience of the nature of the universe; its complexities and order made human beings

to wonder. Ruch and Anyanwu put it succinctly when they observe that the Igbo “African sees that there is a Divine power manifesting itself in everyone and everything in the universe” (1984: 163). This wonder led to search for the ultimate giver of their experiences of birth, existence, difficulties, breakthroughs and death in their world.

These experiences are in fact universal among human beings, and not restricted or limited to particular geographical locality. Hence, experience according to Schillebeeckx is generally a way of knowing and believing (1967: 104). Man as a finite being is constantly striving to grasp the unlimited (Oguejiofor, 1996: 6). Thus, man’s inclination for the totality is indicative of his restless finitude, which constantly seeks to grasp the infinity (6). This search, for many Thinkers is an expression of the natural phenomenon of openness characterizing human beings everywhere. For Scheller, this is openness to the world, for Buber and Levinas, it is openness to the other, while for Pannenberg, it is openness to God the Supreme Being.

Kant recognized these human religious and philosophical tendencies characterizing the Igbos even in his critique of metaphysics where he calls the inclination a natural dialectic of pure reason...inseparable from human reason (1976: 300). This tendency leads reason to search in all cases for a complete, exhaustive or comprehensive explanation (Wilkerson, 1976: 103). The search for the Supreme Being, which marks the confluence of philosophy and theology, is therefore ingrained in human nature and not limited to locality or particular culture. As such, there is no way the idea of Supreme Being will be strange to the Igbos. Again, there is no way such an idea will be given to the Igbos by the west or a particular section of Igbo land like the Aro or Nri people. Hence, Basden testifies that there is from time immemorial a circumscribed belief in the Supreme Being and future life by the Igbos (1966:36). Isichei concurs with this view stating that Igbo worldview is overwhelmingly a religious one (1973:80). Indeed, the belief in the Supreme Being “Chukwu” in Igbo ontology stems from their worldview, which culminates from the innate quest for meaning in their world. Moreover, worldview in this context is understood as overall empirical, mental and metaphysical picture of a people about realities, which forms their notions about life, and underlies their cultural, religious, political, economic and social activities. Ogugua calls it the central control box of a people designing and governing their existence (2005: 64). Kalu articulates it as “a unified picture of the cosmos explained by system of concepts which order the natural and social rhythms and the place of individuals in them” (1983: 38).

Generally, the worldview is discernible from a people’s religious beliefs, rituals, festivals, folklores and myths (Oguejiofor, 2009: 2). For

these contain the visible expression of the corpus of people's belief systems (Ejizu, 1986: 15). Thus, Igbos have no written ancient documents but they preserved their beliefs in myths, rituals, symbols, folklores, philosophy and proverbs (Ekei, 2007: 49). And these are sufficient rational and philosophical explanation of their thought about their world.

7. The present Igbo ontological state about the Supreme Being “Chukwu”

Igbo belief in the metaphysical world is profound, and this reflects in all aspects of their life (Onuigbo, 2004: 3). This belief did not culminate from any of the arguable influences in this discourse, but rather from the pristine worldview and religious experiences. The Igbos believe that the Supreme Being is ever present and virtually predetermines human existence. As such, the people depend to a large extent on the benevolent Supreme God to achieve success and for solution to their fears, worries and mysteries of life. Indeed, the Igbo try to decode the mind of the Supreme Being especially in chaotic events, when at the cross roads of life and when encompassed by vicissitudes of life. In fact, whatever happens to the Igbos receives a religious interpretation. For them therefore, natural disasters, failures, epidemics, infant mortality, deaths and accidents do not just happen, the Supreme Being wills it. Consequently, moves are made to forestall or quell such problems through prayers and sacrifices. Thus, Igbo life is capped with religious inclination replete with idea of the Supreme Being; his sacredness and reverence. These religious thought and observances point to the being that is beyond time and space, a being that is all-powerful and rules all other spirits (Basden, 1966: 36). In line with this thought, Onuigbo adds that among the Igbos, the awareness of Supreme Being; respect and reverence for him even brought about the idea of good and evil, right and wrong that culminated in their religious morality (2004: 4).

However, the present Igbos are not purely on this philosophic-religious trajectory due to incursion of foreign religions and influences in Igbo land. Consequently, the Igbos are fast embracing western cultural values and jettisoning that which is ontologically African. This has truncated both the communal order of things and the existential cohesion stabilizing the community as well as the interiority of the Igbo individuals. As such, Odimegwu observes that the shift in Igbo thought and cultural pattern creates *evolues* or schizophrenic and crisis laden personhoods out of Igbos (2008: 63). This malady arises from the fact that the Igbo thought, by which the people define and realize themselves is being ridiculed and bastardized, and most Igbos no longer find in it the stable and ideal foundation of an integral personhood.

The situation is more pathetic as the Igbos could not on the other hand effectively identify in, from and with the strange and bastardizing western thoughts whose elements are at variance and in conflict with the fundamental constituents of their autochthonous thought on the Supreme Being, Deities and the spiritual world. Thus, the fundamentally affected is not just communal but intrinsically the personal (Chinweuba and Ezeugwu, 2018: 8). The affected Igbo thought is not just what ties one Igbo individual to other members of the community, but that, which constitutes the interiority of the being of the individuals in the community. It is fundamentally the internal equilibrium of Igbo personhood, which derives from their worldview and forms their socio-political, economic and cultural pattern as well as their stable and communally appreciated values. Consequently, the Igbos are currently undergoing perennial crisis of being and personhood, which are evident in their present socio-political, cultural, economic and technological disintegration in modern Nigeria. It is in view of this condition that Obierika moaned that things among the Igbos have fallen apart (Achebe, 124–125). Ougua articulates this current Igbo ontological shift and its consequences this way:

the Igbos are this day swimming in ocean of confusion, they left their basic-metaphysical values, and embraced the western metaphysics with attendant woes – materialism, nihilism, negativism, etc. By so doing, they clouded their minds with negation, imitation, and their souls have no success again. Now the Europeanized-Igbo people, in the language of Frantz Fanon ‘Black skin, White man’, already deculturalized, feel they have not met spiritual needs of the times. They have lost their ontological and metaphysical bearing (2003: 1).

Benjamin also captures this present Igbo ontological condition and writes:

deep down inside the consciousness of the vast majority of the people is a feeling of despair, a feeling made even more keen and sharp because of man’s inability to understand the potency of the divine powers built into him at creation by the ultimate reality (1969: 2).

Evidently therefore, most Igbos profess their faith in the Christian God who is the same with the Supreme God “Chukwu” already existent in their traditional thought. But when at the crossroads of their lives or when situation becomes bizarre, they go back to the traditional thought and understanding of the Supreme Being (Chinweuba and Ezeugwu, 2018: 122). In other words, they follow the traditional orthodox trajectory in approaching and decoding the mind of the Supreme Being leaving be-

hind the western acquired approach. This mode of existence they syncretically practice within the alien religions. As such, the western ontological knowledge about the Supreme Being is often viewed by many Igbos as a learnt one; an addition rather than a replacement of the pristine worldview (Hin-Huag, 2002: 52)

From the foregoing, it stands that Igbo concept of Supreme Being “Chukwu” possesses a sulfuric odour of race and inheritance, a complex air of mutability and immutability. In other words, it reflects Heraclitus’ “state of being or permanence and a state of motion or flux (Odimegwu, 2008: 24). Based on this reality, cultural diffusion, interpenetration and resultant cultural pluralism merely register significant outlook that is often ephemeral (Berger, 2008: 5). For extrinsic way of life does not totally engrave intrinsically in the very being of traditional inhabitants. Thus, one cannot strip off his black skins, root out his black soul or totally change his Igbo nature and root (Knor, 2008: 90). Yet, the pathetic ontological condition of the Igbos is an indication that when a people abandons their religious and philosophical thoughts which are the fulcrum of their culture; tradition, customs and values as well as the seed of their life, the more they will be distanced from the basic ontological and metaphysical principles which ground and do express their culture and thoughts. With this, such people become vulnerable and loose aspects of their identity and worth. This paves way for the neglect of their spiritual, physical, ontological and metaphysical needs.

8. The philosophical implication of Supreme Being in Igbo thought

The argument deeply touches the rich cosmic and metaphysical thoughts of the Igbo people. These thoughts are however interwoven with Igbo philosophy. Thus, the key to understanding Igbo philosophy lies in understanding their sense of Supreme Being and other Deities. Besides, the study reveals that the conduct of the Igbos is tied to their religious views. In other words, the idea of the Supreme Being has moderating effect on the overall conduct of the people. This is why Leonard asserts that Igbo people “eat religiously, bathe religiously, dress religiously and sin religiously”. However, the rationale behind Igbo expression of the sense of Supreme Being in anthropological ways is depicted in this study. Thus, the Igbo art of naming and daily expressions underscores their supernatural conceptions. This art connotes Aristotle’s postulation that “as men imagine the gods in human form, so also they suppose their manner of life to be like their own” (Umezina, 2014: 64)

Again, there is a historical significance in the study as the issue in contention involves the discovery of the state of Igbo thought in a Be-

ing that is supreme before the advent of Christianity. The study therefore reconstructs the actual metaphysical thought of the Igbo people prior to western influence. This makes the knowledge encapsulated in Igbo thought available to the world. Generally, the paper unravels the fulcrum of Igbo mode of operation and existence. This connotes their interest and why they behave the way they do, as well as their present, metaphysical sense felt wherever they are. For the Igbos truly, the spiritual control the physical and the physical shapes the spiritual. Since the notion of the Supreme Being is the basis of the stable interiority of the Igbo people, it stands that the rest of mankind have to possess the knowledge existent in Igbo thought on the Supreme Being and approach Igbos from that correct position. This will tremendously create a harmonious socio-political and economic relationship between Igbos and the rest of mankind. In all, the study is a revelation of the Igbo history and social order; an order that stems from their attachment to the Supreme Being.

9. Conclusion

The Igbos may not have evolved a unified socio-political administration and economic structure; their thought and theology of the Supreme Being are the same. For Primitive experience, religion or faith could only be tribal and not personal (Russell, 2004: 21). This theology is evidently present in their myths, parables and proverbs. Igbo life is therefore highly theocentric. From the Igbo myth and tradition, the Supreme Being lives in the sky and he is omnipresent, omniscient, omnibenevolent and omnipotent.

However, Igbo essence of the Supreme Being lacks the necessary ingredients that will meet the standard of the western mind on the nature and character of a Supreme Being. This is because the evolution of the idea of a Supreme Being was still in its rudimentary stage at the time colonialism met the Igbo nation. Again, the social and intellectual development of the people at that time could not articulate a logical explanation of the attributes surrounding the Supreme Being. This notwithstanding, the present study establishes a clearer picture of the pre-western Igbo ontology and theosophy. The Supreme Being could not have been alien to the Igbos because the matter of creation is a natural intuitive thought that is common to all peoples. It arises as the people ask basic questions about their existence, origin, vicissitudes of life and the author behind them. To deny the Igbo this level of basic human ingenuity is a gross underestimation of the humanness and intellectual capacity of the traditional Igbo people.

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