

Deities in African Traditional Religion and Igbo Cosmology

BY

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Abstract

The beginning of the 19th century witnessed an upsurge in the study of African Traditional Religion. Scholars like J.S. Mbiti, Ikenga Metuh, Parrinder, Bolaji Idowu et al ignited the research for African identity through the study of an appraisal of its Indigenous / Traditional Religion. An important theme which manifested in these studies is the Deity. Deities occupy strategic/important position in the study of African Traditional Religion. Contrary the hitherto believed or expressed positions of the Eurocentric Scholars, that the untutored Africans cannot conceive of God, Researches of African scholar had proved that position as not only false but most misleading. Africans know and worshiped God before the inversion of Africa by the white colonialists. The Igbo of Nigeria knew God from their creation. Even with all the

colonization, modernism, so called Whiteman's civilization, these deities are still recognized and revered till date.

Introduction

African world view according to Metuh (1987:103); ... "shows that most African societies recognize fundamentally two different types of divinities (deities)." The Supreme Being is one and can only be one, and the divinities that are many and feature in almost every sphere of African life. This Supreme Being or God is believed to be living, provident creator who is directing each individual person and the entire universe to a definite goal. As the sole creator of everything in the world, the Supreme Being was not created and has been there from the time immemorial. In the words of Otite and Ogionwo (1985:152), "God is real to Africans in their practical religion." No wonder St. Paul puts it succinctly when he says: "... ever since God created the world, his everlasting power and deity-however invisible-have been there for the mind to see in things He has made (Rom.1:20). On the other hand, Metuh (1991: 110) continues.

The deities are created by God and are subordinate to Him. They are His messengers. Their intimate but subordinate relationship with God is conceptualized in terms of Father/Son, Chief/Messenger or Lord/servant relationship. Their status is not different from the Christian ideas of the guardian angel.

Onyeocha (2012: 41) does not agree less with this assertion as he posits, "The African would rather talk about God in fully functional and practical terms so that he would be involved and interested in their affairs." According to Fuller Lois (2001:22), virtually all Africans

traditionally believe in a Supreme Being who created everything else, in the divinities who are usually related to certain functions like the sun, sky, rain, storm, bodies of water, earth/farming and iron/hunting. He posits that these spirits (deities) are everywhere though each one usually has a particular place where it normally lives.

For Gehman Richard (2010:89), the world in Africa is alive with a variety of spirit beings (deities), who are said to have been created by the Supreme Being and have less power than the creator. These spirits are said to be ministers of God. Idowu (1962:33-37) names such Deities as Olodumare (Yoruba name for God), the “immovable rock that never dies; Orisa-nla who serves as God’s messenger (1962:71); Ododuwa, the ancestor of the Yoruba; Orunmila, the creator divinity (1962: 22-24). Onwuliri (2011:11) posits that recent studies reveal four main belief systems that characterized with African Traditional Religion. These are belief in God, belief in divinities, belief in spirits and belief in ancestors. The Supreme Being (God) is the creator of Heaven and the Earth including man and all other creatures either directly or through His subordinate deities. He is the Supreme King of the theocratic world.

The divinities on the other hand are created spiritual functionaries presiding over the natural elements of the universe and acting as intermediaries in man’s relationship with the Supreme Being. Divinities are created and therefore are offspring or sons of the Deity (God). Quarcoopome (1987:56-58) writes in support of the afore mention postulations that in African belief, as in other religions, God is the creator of the universe, the absolute controller of the universe and the source of all powers and authority and all moral and ethical sanction for the orderly relations between men. Quarcoopome goes on to say that the divinities are traditional gods in father/son relationship with God. The

divinities have derived powers, and are functionaries in the theocratic governance of the world (Quarcoopome, 70).

Mbiti (1967:29), while writing about African Traditional Religion, stresses that in all African societies, without a single exception, people have a notion of God (Deity) as the Supreme Being. This knowledge is expressed in proverbs, short statements, songs, prayers, names, myths, stories and religious ceremonies. This Supreme Being created the whole world and all that is in it. The Supreme God provides and sustains the world. He is regarded as King, and ruler who rules or reigns over all things. Mbiti (1969: 75-76), contributes that "... the spiritual world of African people is very densely populated with spirit beings; spirits and the living-dead." These divinities are on the whole thought to have been created by God, in the ontological category of the spirits. Busia in Forde, (1954: 191) agrees that "... it is believed that God purposely created the deities to guard men."

Writing about deities in African Tradition Religion, Mugambi and Kirima (1976:2) argue, "... lest the African forgets that he was born divine and ceases to hunger and aspire, we look at the attempts of Africans to advance and maintain the relationship with the Divine (Deity)". Anyacho (2005:244-245) supports this position by asserting that there is a wild spread belief in God amongst the Africans, who is believed to be Supreme and the over-all Lord, God is essentially a spirit and is recognized as such in all the African tribes. God is invisible and infinite and cannot be comprehended by the finite man. Anyacho goes further to state that in the hierarchy of power, divinities stand next to Supreme Being. They are believed to be God's lieutenants who are given ministerial functions by God. As such, they are ministers of God with derived power. As ministerial deities, they occupy significant positions in the life of every African

community. Their major function is meditation between God and man.

Awolalu and Dapamu, (1979: 34, 54&72), posit that “Africans believe in God, in divinities, in spirits and ancestors.” Thus whatever exists, owes its existence to Supreme Deity. Whatever happens is due to His creative activity. Creation is the most widely acknowledged work of the Deity (God) throughout Africa. Other deities emanated from the Supreme Deity, or they were engendered by Him, or they were brought forth by Him, or they came into being in consequence of Him to serve the will of God in the theocratic government of the world. The deities are ambidextrous in nature and by creation-they can be both good and bad simultaneously. Amongst such other deities in Africa include orisa-nla, orunmila, ogun among the Yoruba; ala, amadioha, agwu, ojukwu among the Igbo; olokun, ogiuru, among the Edo; egbesu, binabu, amakiri, among the Ijo and mawu-Lasa, sagdata, hevioso or xevioso, among the Ewe and Fon to mention but a few.

Writing on African world view, Onwubiko, O (1991: 3) opines: “Ideologically speaking, the African is a world of inanimate, animate and spiritual beings. The African is conscious of the influence of each category of these beings in the universe.”

Their existence, for the Africans, is a reality; so also is the fact that they interact as co-existent beings in the universe. Onwubiko (1991:60-61) affirms that in African Religion, there is a belief in the Supreme Being called by various indigenous names among the many African communities like Ngewo in Sierra-Leone; Chukwu in Igbo land; Olodumare in Yoruba land; Nyame in Ashanti; etc. Taking this position, Onwubiko no less aggress that Deities are major features of the African Traditional Religion and by

extension the African people- making them and their world full of Deities. No wonder Egonu (1988:329) posits that to Africans, "... the material world becomes a creation of God, a world of wonder and interest and a school for curiosity and its satisfaction." This belief falls in line with what Rudolf Otto has called the mystery that is tremendous and fascinating. The invisible world of the Africans being the world of spirits, a world which is extremely real, it is the home of divinities with hierarchies. At the apex is the Supreme Being. Below the Supreme Being are minor divinities. At the base are the ancestors.

While writing on African Traditional Religion and its relationship with deities, Ray (1976:64-65) argues that "... while the Supreme Being generally remains in the background as object of ultimate concern, daily religious life is given amongst Africans over to more concrete forms of divinity." He continues that unlike the Supreme Being (God), these other powers are highly dynamic, communal, and vociferous. Indeed their very nature is essentially bound up with human experience. Hence they require many temples, shrines, priests, cult groups, images, rituals, and offerings to organize the frequent transactions between them and mankind.

It becomes a fact that the arm-chair researchers and stay-at-home investigators like A.B. Ellis (1894:38), and Leo Frobenius (1913:187), while distorting African history, claim that Africans have neither a concept nor worship of the one interminable God. Their position is far from the truth and indeed from an obvious reality. And accordingly, Temple (1969:21) has aptly warned that "... anyone who claims that primitive peoples possess no system of thought excludes them thereby from the category of men." Thus, one can never speak of African traditional religion without the recognition of its basic principal element called deity or god. Otherwise what would a worshipper be doing with such a religion?

Deities in Igbo Traditional Religion/Cosmology

When one speaks of Igbo traditional religion here, it should be noted that it concerns the specific traditional religion of the Igbo person as different from those of his counterparts like Yoruba, Efik, Ijaw, Akan or Dogon. Therefore, the attempt here is to look at the traditional religious lives of the Igbo people in relation to the deities. A renowned author and scholar of Igbo extraction, Chinua Achebe (2012:12) did not mince words when he says: “In Igbo cosmology there are many gods (deities). A person could be in a good stead with one god and not the other-ogwugwu (deity) can kill a person despite an excellent relationship with ‘udo’ (deity).”

This is an obvious fact that accounts for the Igbo concern for one to maintain a harmonious relationship at all times with the supersensible world. Hence, Onunwa (2005: 12) writes that the Igbo belief in Supreme God is an over flogged issue...Although many Igbo people demonstrate many strong belief in the clan deities, their belief in the Supreme Deity has been confirmed by many scholars like O’Connell, Schon and Crowther, Talboth, Basden, Meek etc. the belief in Chukwu (Chineke), though the cult is not evenly established in all parts of Igbo land, has been constant feature of religion.

Anyanwu (2004:70) observes that “... the notion of the Supreme Being as a Deity occupies a central place in the study of the composite elements of Igbo traditional Religion.” And in support of this assertion Ezeanya (1976:56) argues that it is a fact that belief in a Supreme Being (Deity) is universal amongst the Igbo people and though various names are used to designate him in different areas, yet the reality is that those names try to express essentially the same. Opoku (1978:27) adds further that the “Supreme being is without concrete form

or body.” He is therefore never represented in the form of images or worshipped through them. God is also thought of as different from other spirits and divinities. His power transcends theirs and he has the unique attribute of immanence. To this, Njoku(1980:1), concludes that the “Igbo believe firmly in Supreme God whom they address by this attributes, Chukwu-the Great God; Chineke-the God that creates; “Obasi bi na Igwe”-God who lives in the heaven.”

In the words of Ellis (1894:36), since the Supreme Being created the entire world, man inclusive, and retires into other important things; man reserves His worship and sacrifice for more active agents (deities). Anyanwu (2004:93) supports this position as he posits that “... these agents or divinities are believed to perform useful functions and as agents and ministers of God, they assist Him in the governance of the universe.” Isichie (1976:24-27) posits that fortunately, “... the Igbo are very keen and stable particularly in the culture of the divine and the sacred.” The Igbo vision, understanding and interpretation of the universe of beings are deeply spiritual and religious, and features the following a firm and constant belief in the invisible universe of divine beings, good spirits and bad spirits, and the spirits of the dead.

A German missionary, James Frederick and Samuel Crowther (Journals, 1982:50-51) writing on the Igbo in 1841 confesses that “The word ‘Tshuku’ God is continually heard. Tshuku is supposed to do everything.... Their notions of some of the attributes of the Supreme Being are, in many respect, correct, and their manner of expressing them, striking. ‘God made everything: he made both White and Black’ is continually on their lips. Some of their parables are descriptive of the perfections of God”. In line with this and while tracing a mythical religious’ origin to the calendar, Horton (1956:18) posits,

Chuku sees that the sun travel across the world in the day-time to cut it into two; and the moon travels across it at night to cut it into two. But as the sun and the moon travel in different directions, so the world is divided by Chuku into four parts, and so Chuku created four days, Olie, Afo, Nkwo, and Eke. This is why the number four is sacred to us.

According to Ilogu (1974:34): “Next to Chineke-is a pantheon of gods: Anyanwu (the son god); Igwe (the sky god). Amadioha (the god of thunder and lightening) and ala, (the earth goddess). “

This category of divinities or deities according to Iwe, (1989:12) derive their powers from God, and are functionaries presiding over the natural elements of the universe (such as water, fire, the land, the sky, etc) and acting as intermediaries in man’s relationship with the Supreme Being. God existed from beginning according to Metuh(1991:72). By the beginning, the Igbo understand the time when nothing besides God was in existence. They do not talk of-nor could they conceive of a time when God did exist. He is eternal. The Igbo mind however, does not stop to speculate how or when God came into existence. There is no concept of God as an *Ens a se*, ‘a being existing of itself. But the Igbo belief that God pre-existed everything, warrants the conclusion that He is not dependent on other beings for His existence Therefore, as an uncaused cause, God is distinct from the world. The Igbo Mythology implies that god created the world from nothing. He is thus the First Cause.

While assessing the reality of and features of deities in Igbo cosmology, Metuh (1991:131-132) emphasizes that man indeed is in the centre of the universe. Above man is the Supreme Being and the ring of many and very powerful

heavenly deities, while below him is ‘ala’, Earth Deity, the queen of the underworld, local spirits and ndịichie, ancestors. Thus in the ontological order of beings, man is in the centre, with god, the Deities above him as man looks to these superior divine forces for help and protection against evil spirits and the forces of evil. For the Igbo, God is the ‘Principal Source and End’ of the universe. Everything in the universe comes from God, is continuously linked with God, is sustained by God, and tends towards God as its final end.

The Deities are creatures of God, subordinate beings to Him and have been given different assignments by God. ‘Ala’, for example is custodian of morality and traditional customs, ‘Anyanwu’ brings good fortune and ‘Chi’ brings fertility. For the Igbo, man comes from God and goes back to God. In another write up, Metuh (1987: 69) posits very strongly that in Igbo, there are a host of different Deities, spirit forces believed to meet different human needs. The sun deity brings fortune especially wealth, the thunder deity is regarded as the agent of God against undetected criminals. Each deity is believed to be agent of in his assigned sphere of influence.

Iwe (1991:145) writes that the Igbo as a people possess a culture that is permeated and pervaded by sense of the divine, the mysterious, the supernatural and of divine providence. Their attachment to God or deities is almost instinctive and emotional. Appeal to the divine and divine providence colour and characterize personal names, parables and proverbs. Iwe sums it up like this “the incidence of success or failure, fortune or misfortune, life or death is often referred to God (Deity). Ilogu (1985:34) while writing about the Igbo Deities posits that “... the principal God of the Igbo is called ‘Chineke’ or ‘Chukwu’. ‘Chineke’ literally means the creator God, whilst ‘Chukwu’ means the Great God.” The great God is believed to be the Author of heaven and earth

who makes animal and plant life grow. Next to the Chukwu or Chineke is a pantheon of gods: Anyanwu (the sun god), Igwe (the sky god), amadiōha (the god of thunder and lightning) and Ala (the earth goddess), which is the most important deity in Igbo social life as the guardian of morality, the controller of minor gods of fortune and economic life and other innumerable minor deities which are sometimes personifications of the facts and features of natures and of daily life. They include 'Ifejioku', the god of farm work, 'Agwu', the god of divination and herbal medicine, etc.

In the opinion of Kalu (1978: 42) which the writer strongly shares too, "... in our (Igbo) traditional setting, men were faced with uncontrollable force of nature; their reaction was to imbue these with spirits and to seek the aid of good gods, patron ancestors." He posits that a votary would variously plead with patron gods, placate evil spirits and end by threatening the gods that if he failed to perform, his groove would be over grown with grass. Anene (1966: 12-13) also states and correctly too that no study of the Igbo is intelligible without a clear appreciation of the pervasive reality of the supernatural world which comprises a hierarchy of gods: the most important perhaps, was the god of the land-the unseen president of the small localized community. No community is complete without the shrine of the god of the land.

Obilor (1994:117) asserts the views of G. Parrinder (1987:139) that oral tradition, missionary records and archaeological reports show that the Igbo are traditionally deeply religious, who knew 'Chukwu' (God) before they knew Christianity. Obilor (1994:118) continues "... history has rather proved right the thesis of Olaudah Equino and Basden that God did not deny the Igbo the idea of Him whom they worship." The Igbo according to Metuh (1985:38) know only one world inhabited by both visible and invisible beings.

“The Igbo world whether visible or invisible was a “real” world in every sense of the world.” The invisible world belongs to the spirits. Obilor (1994:117) cites Uzoukwu who regards the Igbo world as one: “... where time and space, objects and persons are made sacred...where from cradle to grave life is moving towards fullness through dynamic interaction between the human community and it’s spiritual originators (Deities). “

The spiritual beings with whom the traditional Igbo man seeks to commune through prayers are uncountable because during the invocation or offering of food to the deities, after naming all the deities recognized by name, the Igbo would say “onye ukwu, onye nta bia were oke gi” meaning everyone both small and great come and take your share; they are varied and hierarchically ordered according to Obilor (1994:125).

Metuh (1985:146) points out that at prayers, four categories of spiritual beings could be identified amongst the Igbo. He lists them as “... the Supreme Being or God, Chukwu, the Nature deities, the Spirit-forces, and the living dead” as Achalonu-Olumba (2010:185) states that amongst the Igbo there is a goddess who lives in the earth and whose worship is autochthonous and of black African origin. Chukwu is the infinitely powerful, indefinable, absolute supreme deity encompassing everything in space and space itself, in the traditional Igbo spiritual belief system and Igbo mythology. Linguistic studies suggest that the name “Chukwu” is a portmanteau of the word “Chi” (spiritual being) and “Ukwu” (great in size). In the Igbo pantheon, Chukwu is where the source other Igbo deities originate from and are assigned different tasks. The Igbo people believe that all things come from Chukwu including the deities who bring the rains necessary for plants to grow and control everything

on earth and the spiritual world. While today many Igbo people are Christians, the traditional ancient Igbo religion is known as *ọdịnaani*. In the Igbo mythology, which is part of their ancient religion, the Supreme God is called Chukwu who created the world and everything in it and is associated with all things on Earth.

There are also minor deities that are discarded when they are no longer needed. On the strength of the facts being discussed here, Ejizu (1985:136) posits that it was the traditional religious cosmology of the Igbo which, in the final analysis, responds to the message of the Christian missionaries and thus, allowed conversion to take place. To this view, Ilogu (1985:201) adds, “Decay in the Ibo moral code started when Christianity preached directly against some Ibo beliefs like the spirit-world of the Ibo and the earth goddess (ala) and her sanctity around which a good deal in that moral code was built. Igbo proverbs also emphasize the existence and care of God for men-“God drives away flies for a tailless cow”. “God gives each person a hook to hook out his daily bread”. “God owns a man lost in the forest”. “If God is not in the plot, a person cannot die” and many more. (Metuh and Ojoade, 1990:109).

Conclusion

It is clear from the above postulations and arguments that the concept of deities in African Traditional Religion is not only conspicuous but also ubiquitous, in Igbo cosmology/worldview. There is no aspect of the indigenous African’s/Igbo idea of the sacred that does not recognize a deity. It becomes doubtful if the Igbo could have engaged in

any religious affairs for that matter without due recognition and reverence to the deities as essence and means of their well being. The debate no doubt goes on and on.

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