

GOD IN IGBO AFRICAN ONTOLOGY

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ABSTRACT

The concept of God among Ndigbo is rather of controversially recent origin. Although it is rife in post-missionary Igbo religious corpus, its existence in pre-missionary Igbo society is doubtful. For sure Ndigbo did have gods. But God? Ndigbo had no clear evidence of the knowledge of such a being as an omnipotent omniscient who is the author of the universe. They neither feared such a being nor looked forward to meeting such a being. Yet, the traditional Igbo society was a religiously sophisticated society. Ndigbo believed in gods but not in one God. Their religion did not look beyond the universe as the universe was for Ndigbo, the center of reality. Thus, Igbo traditional religion was accordingly centered on the earth. This work investigates the controversies regarding the concept of God in Igbo ontology. The work relies on library research, oral traditions, interviews and the observation and analysis of cultural practices of Ndigbo. Author bias is a critical factor in post-missionary religious literature about traditional Igbo society. The work consciously maintains philosophic disinterest in the analyses of facts and in making inferences.

INTRODUCTION

The phenomenon “God” is a ubiquitous reality in present day Igbo religious thought. Of course, it is because today, Ndigbo are a Christian majority nation. The traditional religion of Ndigbo is almost extinct as it has been under attack since the first European Christian missionary made the first convert in Igboland. Christianity has impeached the traditional religious culture of the people. Hitherto foreign ideas are almost considered traditional in present day Igbo society. Among such concepts is the concept of “God” which as a matter of religious practice, oral tradition or archeological evidence, was nonexistent in traditional pre-missionary Igbo society.

Contrary to the claims of neo-Christian apologists of the Igbo stock, the concept of a god with capital G was neither known by pre-missionary era Ndigbo nor was it observed by earliest European missionaries to visit Igboland as one of the cultural experiences of Ndigbo. Their inability to observe the knowledge of God among pre-missionary Ndigbo is well documented (Obasola, 2014). It is therefore an outlandish historical revisionism among Igbo scholars, especially churchmen to begin to invent hitherto unknown concepts to intellectually inject “God” into the Igbo traditional religious corpus. Of course, the efforts did not jell as there is a glaring lack of concrete evidence of the knowledge of the concept before Igbo religious encounter with European missionaries. These Igbo neo-Christian apologists were mostly products of missionary education. They had uncritically embraced Christianity. They saw Christianity as the universal truth; the universal standard. They were erroneously motivated by the beliefs that: Every European experience must have Igbo African equivalence 2. That

Christianity is a superior religion to traditional Igbo religion 3. That belief in monotheism is a sign of cultural advancement.

Well, as is obvious, these assumptions are clearly fallacious. Contrary to Early modern European arrogance, Europe is not necessarily the center of world. As such is not necessarily the reference point, the standard bearer of the world. That subjects of European colonies assumed such is a testament of the far reaching insidious psychological impacts of colonialism. He who had the better war technology did not necessarily have the better religion. Making the inference from better war technology to better religious beliefs was patently fallacious. It is noteworthy that Igbo Africans did not freely accept the European way of life because they thought it was superior but because they were militarily subdued after bitter, fiercely fought village to village battles. It is well documented that pre-missionary Ndigbo found the religious tales of early Christian missionaries amusing (Achebe, 1958). Failing to make significant inroads into the adult population, the missionaries had to turn to kids and outcasts, using education as a bait. Ndigbo being an ever curious people wanted to obtain the Whiteman's education in order to learn the Whiteman's secrets. Sure, the missionaries did give them education, freely but garnished with Christian indoctrination. The stage thus set, the extinct of the Igbo African traditional religion became a matter of time.

THE ORIGINS OF THE CONCEPT OF THE MONOLITHIC GOD

The idea of an omnipotent, omniscient, universe creating God came into Christianity from Judaism. Although there are many gods, the Christian era Western culture, designated the Judeo Christian god as "God" – the capital "G" god, thereby personalizing an otherwise generic term for divinities. The capitalization of the Judeo-Christian god presupposed its superiority over any other god. It was adjudged the monotheistic god. This concept and tradition of monotheistic divinity was handed down to Igbo African Christian converts by European missionaries.

However, the origin of the concept of a monotheistic god outdates both Judaism and Christianity. Although the Egyptian Mysteries religion had many gods, it gave supremacy to Atum, the sun god which was considered to be the author of the universe (James, 1954). Neither Judaism nor Christianity could really claim authorship of the concept of the monotheistic god. Even if a god were monotheistic, it was not necessarily universal. The monotheistic god of Judaism didn't seem to be interested in the salvation of the rest of the world (the gentiles) (Romans 1:16). The supreme god of Christianity was localized in Jesus Christ who was seen as son of God, God and savior (John 10:30).

The Concept of the Supreme God in Egyptian Mysteries Religion

The Egyptian Mysteries system was the earliest recorded religion to arrive at the idea of a supreme god. Although the Mysteries recognized a plethora of gods in its pantheon, it gave supremacy to Atum which it viewed as the author of the universe. The religion has as its end, the divinization of man through the discipline of the body and the intellect. The Egyptian Mysteries would later spread to the Europe and Asia. Moses, the founder of the Judaic religion was a priest and hierogrammat of the Egyptian Mysteries. The religion he founded necessarily had influences of the Egyptian Mysteries system (James, 1954).

The Mysteries system was the cradle of the belief in a supreme and eventual monotheistic god. It is clear however, that while the Mysteries system arrived at a supreme

god, it did not arrive at the monotheistic god. The Mysteries clearly recognized a plethora of gods. It could not be adjudged as radically monotheistic. Unlike the Judaic religion that disguised the lesser gods as “angels”, the Mysteries simply called them gods, making it difficult to radically view the religion as monotheistic.

The God of Judaism

There is no religion in which the idea of a supreme, monotheistic god is as central as it is in Judaism. Judaism rests on the belief that Yahweh, the God is the author and purpose of the universe. It is the only god which cannot admit of the presence of another god. The Yahweh of Judaism would eventually be translated into English as “God”. Judaism was so determined at projecting the idea of one god that it disguised other apparent gods in its pantheon as angels. Judaism gives no account of the creation or origin of the angels. They co-existed with God, and were involved in the creation of the universe (Genesis 1). If they were uncreated, different from the universe or coexisted with God, they were necessarily gods. Judaism however, chose to designate them as angels. Well, an angel is a type of *god* at least in the understanding of the Mysteries and most non-Judaic religions. Judaism however would not share the glory of God with another being. Accordingly, it did not bequeath the angels any worship. They were designated as messengers of God. Although, they shared omnipresence and eternity with God, they were not deemed to be responsible for the universe even though they were present at its creation.

The God of Judaism although owned the earth and its fullness, was rather interested only in the Jews as salvation was for the Jews, and the Jews alone (John 4:22). It was a Jewish centered god. It was a supreme god but not a universal god. Christianity opened up the Jewish god to the rest of the world.

The Concept of God in Christian Ontology

Christianity inherited the belief in one, supreme god from Judaism of which it is an offshoot. Like Judaism Christianity designates other gods in its pantheon as angels. More than Judaism however, Christianity added demons to its pantheon. God is the benevolent, omnipotent omniscient creator of the universe. It has angels that do its biddings. There is an anti-god known as the Devil which is responsible for evil in the world. The Devil like God, has its own assistants known as demons. Beyond, Devil, angels and demons, Christianity holds that its founder, Jesus Christ is the incarnation of God, therefore God. Christians worship Jesus. Although they acknowledge that he is a native of Nazareth, they bequeath him with omnipotent omniscience.

It is difficult to designate Christianity as a monotheistic religion. Unlike Judaism that fiercely expresses monotheism, in the Christian pantheon, there are three designated gods: The Father, the Son (Jesus Christ) and the Holy Spirit. Christianity maintains that these three distinct entities are not Gods but God. Christianity confronts this logical impossibility by designating it as a sacred mystery which is beyond human understanding.

The Christian god although not logically monotheistic was nonetheless, a universal god. The Christian god was the God of the entire world. Christianity became impelled to send missionaries to the entire world in order to bring the whole world to salvation. Judaism accordingly rejected Christianity in its entirety for the teachings of Christianity were abhorrent to the fundamental tenets of Judaism. The idea of a divinized man as well as the idea of a three-

in-one God was abhorrent to Judaism. It was this tradition and concept of God that Christianity brought to Ndigbo. The God of Christianity was clearly different from the God of Judaism, which in turn was clearly different from the supreme god of the Egyptian Mysteries system. Interestingly, the supreme god of the Egyptian Mystery systems resonates significantly with the god system of the Igbo African religion.

Reality in Igbo African Ontology

The nature of God in Igbo ontology can be properly understood only in relation to the concept of reality among Ndigbo. The Igbo world is thoroughly a materialistic world. Ndigbo are not an otherworldly people. They do not conceive of any reality beyond the cosmos. The Igbo traditional religion is earth-centered. The focus is man's well-being on earth. Even in death, man is not seen as having migrated to any form of existence beyond the earth, rather is seen to have joined the invisible part of the community either as an ancestor or as an *akalogheri* (wandering spirit). At the center of the Igbo world is man. Ndigbo are not a god-centered people. Ndigbo fear the gods because of the ways the gods can affect their lives on earth, not after death. Ndigbo do not consider the gods to have influence over the fate of man at death neither do they consider man accountable to the gods after death.

Certainly Ndigbo did recognize the existence of spirits. But Ndigbo did not see spirits as superior categories of anthropomorphic beings that dwelt in an alternate world. Ndigbo saw spirits essentially as forces on earth. They were part and parcel of the earth system. Ndigbo regarded the earth to be a universe of forces. In traditional Igbo ontology, all reality was material. The earth in Igbo traditional worldview was neither spiritual nor created. It is the primary reality. Ndigbo did not acknowledge any reality beyond the earth. The earth was characterized by forces. There is no ultimate substance in Igbo ontology. Reality is fundamentally diverse. The earth in Igbo ontology is eternal. It has neither a beginning nor an end. It is not teleological to any purpose beyond man. It is beholden to no one. It is the source of life and the center of the Igbo moral order. In traditional Igbo ontology, there is no reality beyond the earth.

THE "GODS" IN IGBO ONTOLOGY

i. Nature:

The gods in Igbo African ontology are essentially cosmic forces (Igboamalu & Emma-Echiegu, 2013). They are part and parcel of the cosmic system. They could be eternal regardless of the wishes of the community or could simply exist at the pleasure of the community or the individual. The critical difference between the Igbo African concept of gods and the Judeo-Western concept of gods is that gods in the Igbo African ontology are terrestrial entities. They are forces on earth. As has been repeatedly stated in this work, the Igbo world is a universe of forces. Man in the Igbo world must continue to attune himself to the forces of nature. His destiny is not to change the universe but to get attuned to it. Man therefore, must use the forces available in the universe to keep himself safe in the universe. The Igbo man is aware that not all the forces in the cosmos works in his favor. He must use other forces to keep malevolent forces at bay (Jahn, 1961).

ii. Status:

The gods are forces the traditional Igbo man uses to attune to positive forces in the cosmos, and to keep at bay, the malevolent forces that seek his destruction. The gods most of the time are created by man. The traditional Igbo man never sees the gods as his makers. He is aware of the powers he has over some of the gods. He is also aware of the powers the gods have over him. He does not see the gods as otherworldly spirits but as forces that operate in the cosmos. Most of gods in the Igbo pantheon existed at the pleasure of the community or individual that worshiped them. A god that failed at its duty could be abandoned or even destroyed by those who worshiped it (Achebe, 1958).

iii. Making:

Most gods in Igbo ontology are created by man using the principle of designation (Jahn, 1961). The Igbo man makes a work of art and designates it as a god by uttering the necessary words and performing the necessary rituals. The process may require just an individual or the entire community. The spoken word has ontological status among Ndigbo (Ebo, 2018). When the word is spoken in a ritual, it is a powerful ontological force among Ndigbo. It is the instrument of designation. It is not the material structure that makes a god but the designation. Of two pieces of carving of exact form, one might just be a decorative work of art while the other might be a divinity. The critical difference is that the designated word has been spoken over the one that is considered to be a divinity. An iroko tree might be designated as a divinity while another might be considered as a valuable source of timber. The process of designation in Igbo ontology is akin to consecration in Catholic liturgy. A piece of bread might be considered a wafer while another wafer might be designated as God after the words of consecration have been spoken over it.

However, the higher gods among Ndigbo do not require ritual designation. They are ubiquitous and superior to man. For instance, Earth (*Ala*) the supreme god among Ndigbo neither required ritual designation nor a shrine. *Chi* is not designated, but an altar is designated in the average individual's compound for the worship of his *Chi*. The altar is not regarded as the *Chi* but a point of communion between the individual and his *Chi*. Ndigbo considered *Chi* to be an invisible force. This practice of making alters to *Chi* led some missionary writers to believe that Ndigbo did not worship the idols in the shrines but viewed them as messengers of a higher god. That was erroneous. The altars to *Chi* were shrines but not gods. They were simply alters for communion with *Chi*. The altars could be found in the average Igbo compound for every man had to worship his personal god, *Chi*. The designated alters were not identical with the *Chi*.

iv Hierarchy:

a. *Ala* (The Earth goddess): The greatest god in Igbo ontology is Earth (*Ala*.) Ndigbo considered *Ala* (Earth) to be the mother and sustainer of life. Ndigbo, considered Earth, to be the supreme god. All morality (*nso*) and customs (*omenala*) were derived from it. Unlike other gods, the Earth did not necessarily require a shrine. It is ubiquitous. It carries and sustains man. Man must keep it sacred by avoiding acts that are considered abominable to the Earth. Ndigbo considered *Ala* (Earth) to be sacred. The priestly clans of Nri ministered to it. The priests specialized in performing earth cleansing rituals to appease the Earth goddess especially when an abominable act has been committed by a member of the community. Abominations such as the shedding of innocent blood were especially abhorrent to Earth, and required ritual cleansing of the earth to avoid the wrath of the goddess.

Elevated as *Ala* was, Ndigbo did not consider it worthy of worship. There are no festivals dedicated to *Ala* in the Igbo calendar. There are no altars dedicated to it. Ndigbo simply considered the earth to be sacred – deep environmentalism. Although it was supreme, Ndigbo did not consider it to be “God”. Ndigbo did not consider it to be creator of man but the mother of man and the sustainer of nature; the force of fertility. They did not consider *Ala* to be the source of the cosmos as Ndigbo neither believed in a mono-source cosmos nor in a created cosmos.

b. *Chi* (The personal god of the individual): After *Ala* is *Chi*. *Chi* is the personal god in Igbo pantheon. *Chi* is the special divine influence in the individual. Ndigbo consider *Chi* to be the creator of the individual’s personality and the director of his destiny. Like the *Ala*, the individual is utterly powerless before his *Chi*. The *Chi* could neither be impeached nor changed by the individual. Igbo proverb says *if one runs ahead of his Chi, he will run a bad race*, meaning that one must be attuned to his *Chi* or suffer a bad fate. *Chi* determines the fate of the individual on earth. It destines a man to greatness or to woes. The individual can only appease his *Chi*. He cannot afford to be angry with his *Chi*. *Chi* is the most worshipped god in the Igbo pantheon. The average Igbo had his personal alter in his compound where he worshipped his *Chi*. Like *Ala*, *Chi* is ubiquitous in Igbo ontology.

The missionaries erroneously translated *Chi* as the generic term for god. Although Ndigbo considered *Chi* to be god, pre-missionary era Ndigbo did not use the term “*Chi*” as the generic word for god.

c. *Amadioha* (The god of thunder): Ndigbo did not put much premium on punishment after death. The consequences of offending the gods were expected to be experienced on earth. *Amadioha* was the Igbo god of vengeance which delivered justice to the people (Abiaka, 2004; Orji, 1989; Ibeabuchi, 2012). It was the executor of the wrath of the gods. Ndigbo believed that thunder only struck those who offended the gods. *Amadioha* was usually called upon by those who have been wronged to exact vengeance on their behalf especially against a powerful oppressor. In some parts of Igboland, *Amadioha* is called *Kamalu* or *Kamanu*, usually shortened for *Kalu* or *Akanu* (McCall, 2000). *Amadioha* is associated with red colour, and is symbolized with the white ram (Onyeakagbu, 2018).

d. Clan gods: In the Igbo pantheon, localities had gods associated to them. Communities or clans had their gods. These were the gods they made for the protection and well-being of such communities/clans. They were local gods worshipped only by the people of such localities. The making of community gods involves communitywide rituals.

e. River gods: Rivers in Igbo ontology were always associated with gods who were said to be the owners of such rivers. If the river cut across several communities, the god would be influential among those communities. *Orashi* is a typical river god.

f. Choice gods: In the Igbo pantheon, individuals were free to make shrines to gods of their choices and worship them. The freedom of worship was innately ingrained in the Igbo religious culture. There was no doctrinaire religion in Igboland. There was no absolute god. Although Ndigbo thought some gods more powerful than others, they equality recognized the necessity of other gods to exist and to be freely worshiped. No god was considered to be the owner of the Igbo race. Ndigbo respected the individual’s choice of gods.

This cultural disposition was the reason, Ndigbo freely gave lands to European missionaries to build their churches and worship their gods unmolested. They did not consider it a big deal since Igbo gods did not discriminate against other gods.

IGBO CONCEPT OF "GOD"

The idea of another world which is the source of the cosmos was unknown to traditional Igbo African society. The idea of a creator of the world was unknown to the traditional Igbo African society. The idea of an anthropomorphic being to whom the cosmos is accountable was unknown in traditional Igbo African society. The idea of a single source cosmos was unknown to traditional Igbo African society. Ndigbo never considered any being nor any phenomenon to be omnipotent. Ndigbo neither conceived of a created cosmos nor a cosmos that would be destroyed someday. In the traditional Igbo society, the cosmos was teleological to no being. Not even man could claim to be the object of the cosmos. He merely had to attune himself to the cosmos. Ndigbo knew neither a heaven nor a hell. As far as the traditional Igbo African society was concerned, there was no possibility of an "outside" to the cosmos. It was always this one, diversified material cosmos.

If the traditional Igbo society never knew of an otherworld that was responsible for the cosmos, they could not have possibly known of other beings save those that are part and parcel of the cosmos. They could not have known of the inhabitants of such nonexistent otherworld, be they divine or mortal. If the traditional Igbo African society never knew of a creator of the cosmos, they could not have known God, the author and finisher of the cosmos (Hebrews 12:2). The essence of the capital "G" god is the authorship of the universe. Traditional Igbo African society did not ascribe the authorship of the universe to any being: divine or mortal. Traditional Igbo people in life and in death did not consider themselves accountable to any being beyond the community. They did not look up to any god or demon to whom the universe was accountable. If traditional Igbo society did not feel any form of moral accountability to any being beyond the community, they couldn't have possibly known a God. How could they? Ndigbo never felt beholden to any being beyond the community.

As traditional Igbo society did not conceive of a single source cosmos, they couldn't have conceived of a single being in charge of it. As the Igbo African cosmos was essentially diversified, its gods were necessarily diversified. There could not possibly be a single god in a diverse cosmos which was considered uncreated. Traditional Igbo society did not ascribe to any god, the creatorship of the cosmos. Whoever claims otherwise should point out where the shrine of such a god was located; where it was worshiped; when it was worshiped; and which festivals were dedicated to it. The answer is NONE - for the very reason that it never existed. It couldn't have, because it was unknown. If traditional Igbo society could not conceive of an omnipotent being, how could it have conceived of a God? God is chiefly characterized with omnipotence and omniscience. God was the ultimate power. Nothing was impossible to it. But traditional Igbo society did not ascribe these qualities to any being. How could the idea of God have existed among them when the ideas of the qualities that characterized God were nonexistent among them? None of the gods in Igbo pantheon was characterized as omnipotent. Ndigbo conceived of the cosmos as uncreated and eternal. The ideas of a God the creator and an uncreated eternal cosmos are mutually exclusive. If God existed in traditional Igbo ontology, Ndigbo would have certainly bequeathed it the authorship of the cosmos. However, Ndigbo did

not know God, therefore, could not bequeath the cosmos to any being. If they did know God, God certainly would have been the originator of the Igbo cosmos. If in the Igbo African ontology there were no consequences for not pleasing God, it means that God didn't matter to them because it did not exist in their consciousness. In the Igbo African ontology, there were severe consequences for displeasing the gods. How could displeasing the gods have sinister consequences while displeasing God have zero consequences? God simply didn't exist in the traditional Igbo African consciousness. Therefore, the idea of God in Igbo African ontology is a nullity. The idea of the capital "G" god is a stranger to Igbo religious thought (Nwoga, 1984). As Arazu lucidly declared, the idea of "One Supreme God" is a missionary insertion into Igbo religious thought (Mbaegbu, 1997).

The Etymology and Place of Chukwu in the Igbo Pantheon

Chukwu as an almighty God is a missionary creation. Such designation was unknown to pre-missionary Ndigbo. For sure, there was the Arochukwu deity known as *Chukwu*. It was very popular in pre-missionary Igboland but it was just what it was: the deity of the Arochukwu clan – a community god. *Chukwu's* shrine was located in a bush at Arochukwu known as Okonto (Njoku, n.d). Its oracle was *Ibin Ukpabi*. It was a god that was specifically sought after as the final arbiter in contentious disputes. When a dispute cannot be settled through the Igbo kindred arbitration system, recourse was normally made to an oracle. *Ibin Ukpabi* was the powerful oracle of *Chukwu*, the Arochukwu deity. Those who presented themselves to the oracle did not in any way think that they were presenting themselves to an omnipotent omniscient. They neither thought themselves standing in the presence of a creator nor did they think that they were in the presence of a being that would have any impact on their fate beyond death. They simply saw themselves in the presence of a being they believed that had the power of arbitration.

The Arochukwu people were a very influential clan in pre-missionary Igboland. They were a migrant warrior clan. Their sway pervaded entire Igboland. Ndigbo were not a hegemony making people, otherwise, the Aros had the capacity to subdue the entire Igboland. They served as experienced mercenaries in intercommunal battles. They were the dominant slave traders in Igboland. They had trading routes all over Igboland. Along these routes, Aro settlements sprang, making the Aro influence even more widespread. Apart from these settlements, Aro families settled among different communities in Igboland, spreading the Aro influence nonetheless. In Igboland, towns that have "Ndi" or "Chukwu" in their names are said to have originally migrated from Arochukwu. Ndikerionwu, Arondizuogu, Aguluezechukwu and Ndiowuu are communities said to have originated from Arochukwu. Likewise families that bore Chukwu, Ezechukwu, etc. in pre-missionary Igboland were also said to have originally migrated from Arochukwu.

Wherever Aros went they replicated the *Ibin Ukpabi* oracle to adjudicate in local disputes. Very serious cases however were referred to the main shrine at Okonto in Arochukwu. Naturally, Chukwu became a very influential deity across Igboland. But that was as far as arbitration was concerned. Pre-colonial Ndigbo never invoked it while making libations neither did they invoke it for protection nor for a favorable harvest.

Contrary to missionary insinuations, *Chukwu* did not derive from *Chi Ukwu*. As has been pointed out earlier on, Ndigbo did not have a generic term for god or God, for such an entity

was unknown to them. They did not know god. They knew forces. Each deity was a force of a kind. It existed in its own right. *Chi* was the personal spirit, the cosmic influencer of an individual's personality and destiny. Other than *Chi*, Ndigbo did not refer to any other being as *Chi*. No deity in Igboland was addressed as *Chi*. *Idemili* was never addressed as *Chi*. No Umuchu man has ever addressed the community's deity *Uchu* as *Chi*. No Arochukwu man ever addressed his clan's deity *Chukwu* as *Chi*. Neither *Ala*, *Ogwugwu*, *Amadioha*, *Ahianjolu*, *Ezekoro*, *Ulas* nor any deity for that matter was ever addressed as *Chi* among Ndigbo. If *Chi* were the Igbo generic term for god, the deities would naturally be traditionally addressed as *chi*. Historically, the reverse is the case. So, the idea of the so called Igbo supreme *Chi ukwu*, simply does not jell even though *ukwu* means "great", *Chi ukwu* remains a misnomer nonetheless.

Chineke

Like *Chukwu*, *Chineke* is a missionary creation. There is a clear absence of a creator-god in the traditional Igbo pantheon. There is no creation story in Igbo origin mythology. Ndigbo did not see the world as created. Consequently, they did not recognize a creator-god. Ndigbo traditionally considered the earth to be the eternal mother of nature. They did not believe that any god was behind the earth for the earth itself was the Igbo traditional preeminent god. *Chi* was the influencer/molder of the individual's personality and destiny. But it was not seen as the cause of the individual's being. *Eke*, literally meant "creator". It was nonexistent in the traditional Igbo pantheon. There is nowhere in Igboland where there is, or there was ever a shrine dedicated to *Eke*. No festivals; no taboos.

Chineke literally means "the *Chi* that creates". Such a god was unknown among traditional Igbos. It was a later translation of God by the missionaries when they realized that *Chukwu* was etymologically an Arochukwu deity. It is a fact that the missionaries instigated the attempted destruction of the *Chukwu* shrine in Arochukwu by a British military expedition in 1902 (Afigbo, 2006).

Oseburuwa

Oseburuwa is the shortened word for *Olisah buru uwa*. It literally means "the *Olisah* (god) that sustains the world". *Olisah* crept into the Igbo pantheon through the western Igbos. *Olisah* has its roots in *Orisha*, the god system of western Nigeria who were neighbors to western Igbos (Brandon, n.d; Jahn, 1961). The acculturation is obvious.

CRITIQUE OF THE NOTION OF THE MONOTHEISTIC GOD IN IGBO ONTOLOGY

History and anthropology point clearly that pre-missionary Ndigbo had no notion of a monotheistic god. The introduction of Christianity to Igboland by the missionaries led to the search for Igbo equivalence of this Western reality. The quest threw up *Chukwu*, *Chineke* and *Olisah* as possible translations of the Western God. Ndigbo however, were a polytheistic people.

Igbo converts to Christianity felt that the absence of a monotheistic god in Igbo ontology was a minus to traditional Igbo civilization. Some authors had erroneously postulated that belief in one god was a sign of advancement in civilization. Igbo converts felt the need to bolster the image of Ndigbo as a people with advanced indigenous civilization by twisting Igbo religious ontology to meet the expectations of respectability in the eyes of the missionary West. Hence, the outlandish claims of queer monotheism among Ndigbo. That was sheer revisionism.

Ndigbo were a proudly polytheistic people. Igbo polytheism was the height of religious sophistication and frankness. It was a realistic and practical view of god that kept Ndigbo focused on building happiness on earth instead of expecting utopia in an imaginary afterworld. If Ndigbo were monotheistic, they would never have tolerated the missionary's claim of having a supreme, absolute, only true god. Ndigbo were never angered at the missionaries' claim that his god was the only true, living, supreme God. They were rather bemused at his naivety.

CONCLUSION

This work has meticulously pointed out that the concept of "god" in Igbo ontology is unique, significantly different from the Western generic usage of the term, and fundamentally polytheistic. What "god" meant in Igbo ontology was not necessarily what the term meant in Western discourse. There is no ontological requirement that a uniquely Igbo reality must have a Western equivalent. In Igbo ontology, a god was basically a force, cosmic or manmade. Since there are many forces in the universe, there were accordingly many gods in the Igbo experience of the universe. As Ndigbo traditionally saw the universe as fundamentally material, they did not yield to the idea of an otherworldly god. Theirs was but this one eternal world, experienced materially in the community. Igbo religiosity was therefore, necessarily centered on the present world. Although, there are many Igbo words for God today, these words never had the presently ascribed meanings in their pre-missionary usage.

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