



## **Atheism in Igbo Religio-cultural Philosophy: Justification for the Proof of God's Existence**

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### **Abstract**

The debate on the existence of God has always preoccupied the attention of philosophical theologians and religionists. The argument of the atheist that the problem of evil is a result of the non-existence of God raises human curiosity and probes into God's nature and existence. This problem has not only dominated human curiosity in the past but also the present; holding sway on the human intellectual enquiry, religio-cultural and philosophical search. The objective of the study, therefore, is an examination of the Igbo religio-cultural belief system as it concerns the existence of God. This research adopts a qualitative method premised on critical, and systematic approaches. Data are derived from secondary sources namely: commentaries, documentaries, philosophical, and religious publications. The research uncovers that though various arguments have been advanced by the atheist, including arguments from the lack of evidence for God's existence, or from the manifest occurrence of certain phenomena (eg, pain, suffering) allegedly inconsistent with the existence of God; the Igbo do not labour to prove God's existence because His existence is vividly made manifested in nature. God in Igbo ideology is borne out of humanistic, empirical observation of nature, and not of a metaphysical foundation. Thus, the paper concludes that by the Igbo religio-cultural belief system, the atheist concept of the non-existence of God is an illusion.

**Keywords:** Atheism, (non)Existence of God, Igbo Religio-Cultural Philosophy, Justification

### **Introduction**

Religion makes the most absolute claim in the life, hopes and aspirations, fears and joys of the average African person. Africans are known to be

deeply religious. Each people have their own religious system with sets of beliefs and practices. Deep within every African, is a feeling of an irresistible religious imperative. J. Mbiti expressly highlights the centrality of the African Traditional Religion in African society, maintaining that this religion, its beliefs and practices, and how it affects the African community is the key to understanding the Africans and their world; which is strongly believed to be permeated by the presence of the Sacred.<sup>1</sup> That means religion occupies a central position in the African living experience.

Accordingly, in Africa, religion is a yardstick for the interpretation of their vision of the world, the world beyond, the concept of God, relationship with God and fellow human beings in the society.<sup>2</sup> African's view of reality does not only have vertical, but also horizontal dimensions. His religious ideas and life are not oriented in the Platonic world of ideas (the world of idealism) but have concrete consequences in life in society: how one fulfills one's religious obligations, offers sacrifices to one's god; one's relationship with fellow human beings, and the observance of the moral norms. Africans have different ways of viewing the same God, universe and spirits as real beings, and they exert a strong influence on man. Hence, they are never in doubt of their existence.

The notion of the Supreme Being occupies a central place in the study of the composite elements of Igbo Traditional Religion. Almost all materials so far published on Igbo religious beliefs devote some key chapters to reflect Igbo religio-cultural philosophy. The Igbos generally believe in the existence of a Supreme Being who they call different names according to sub-cultural area groups. It is important to observe that although the Igbos cannot lay special claim as to a point in time when the perception of the Supreme Being was conceived, yet they do not contemplate atheism. It is a fact that belief in a Supreme Being is a universal phenomenon among the Igbos.

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<sup>1</sup> J. S. Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*, 2<sup>nd</sup>. Edit. (Britain: Oxford University Press, 1969), pp. 1-2

<sup>2</sup> Igwegbe, I. O. O. *Sacramental Theological Thinking In The African Symbolic Universe*, (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang Verlag, 1995), p. 40.



This research investigates the concept of atheism within the context of Igbo religious beliefs and cultural philosophies. It further explores how Igbo traditions and ways of knowing might approach the idea of atheism and the arguments for God's existence. The research involves an examination of Igbo religious texts, oral traditions, and philosophical ideas. It also involves ethnographic studies of contemporary Igbo communities and their beliefs. The work attempts an analysis of philosophical arguments for God's existence and how they might be viewed through an Igbo cultural lens.

This research sheds light on the relationship between religion and philosophy in Igbo culture. It contributes to the understanding of atheism in a non-Western context. The research also challenges or refines traditional non-African conceptions of atheism and the idea of God. This research delves into a specific cultural and religious context, offering a unique perspective on atheism and the concept of God.

It is thus, the objective of the study to examine the Igbo religio-cultural belief system as it concerns the existence of God; by evaluating the concept of the supreme being, surveying the atheist perception of God and how it relates to Igbo socio-cultural beliefs. This research adopts a qualitative method premised on critical, and systematic approaches. Data are derived from secondary sources namely: commentaries, documentaries, philosophical, and religious publications.

### **The Concept of Atheism**

Atheism is an argument based on a lack of evidence for God's existence and manifest occurrence of certain phenomena (e.g. pain, suffering,) allegedly inconsistent with nature, sovereignty, intelligence, powerful self-revelation, moral being with just and benevolent concerns for his creatures and existence. Others went further to state that belief in God is an element in human "false consciousness," misbelief and misperception arising out of class-ridden social and economic circumstances.<sup>3</sup> This concept conventionally indicates a lack of belief in the Creator or the Judeo-

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<sup>3</sup> Sinclair B. Ferguson and David F. Wright, *New Dictionary of Theology* (England: Inter-Varsity Press, 1988), pp. 53-54.

Christian God.<sup>4</sup> However, this study finds it difficult to identify atheistic tendencies in the Igbo religion and philosophical world view.

### **Existence of God Among Traditional African Tribes**

The discussion on the knowledge of God in African Traditional Religion raises some pertinent questions which are: How does the African obtain his knowledge of God? What does the concept of God mean to the searching mind of the African religionist? Does the African knowledge of God derive from the empirical observation of nature or has it a metaphysical foundation? In tracing the origin of ATR, it is difficult to say when it was founded and who founded it. ATR is as old as the first African; so he first becomes its “founder”<sup>5</sup> based on his experience in the world and of the world. ATR affirms the Christian religious testimony that in the past, God revealed himself to our ancestors in many and various ways.<sup>6</sup> Thus, the notion of God is indigenous to the Africans and the Igbos. Building on the views of Igweegbe above, this work maintains that before the arrival of the missionaries, the people had believed in the existence of God and had developed well-defined concepts about him.

The early missionaries made the mistake of thinking that the Africans had no idea of a supreme being.<sup>7</sup> They erroneously assumed that they were responsible for the introduction of the concept of supreme being to the Africans. This understanding gave rise to the theory of the *deus otiosus*<sup>8</sup>, which postulates that God is thought to have withdrawn to the skies and left the administration of the universe in the hands of the spirits who act as his intermediaries.<sup>9</sup> For this theory, God does not interfere in the affairs of the world and human beings. The assumption here is that God is held to be too remote in the African Traditional Religion and absent from the daily lives of the people. In an atmosphere of this nature, the cult of spirits is revered

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<sup>4</sup>Ferguson, and Wright, *New Dictionary of Theology*, pp. 53-54

<sup>5</sup>Igweegbe, *Sacramental Theological Thinking In The African Symbolic Universe*, p. 41.

<sup>6</sup>Hebrews 1:1

<sup>7</sup>F. Nwaigbo, *Church as a Communion: An African Christian Perspective: Theology of the Local Church in the Light of the Second Vatican Council*, (Frankfurt/M:1995), p. 200.

<sup>8</sup>Herbert Onyema Anyanwu, *African Traditional Religion from Grassroots*, (Owerri: Lasen Publishers, 1999), p. 71.

<sup>9</sup>A. E. Wallis Budge, *Legends of the Gods*, (London: 1912; Spencer, 1912), p. 56



and substituted for God. Good and evil, salvation and deliverance all rested in the hands of the ancestors.

However, the study of the history of ATR and world-views shows that for Africans, God exists. The African people have designations for God. Many of such designations are replete with meanings, showing what the people think of him. Mbiti holds that “the personal names for God are very ancient, and in many cases, their meanings are no longer known or easily traceable through language analysis.”<sup>10</sup> Evidence of this position could be substantiated by the names of God in different Ethnic groups in Africa.

### **Names of God Among Traditional Nigerian Tribes**

<b>S/N</b>	<b>Areas</b>	<b>Folk Name</b>	<b>Meaning</b>
1	Benin Ewe	<i>Mawu</i>	Owner of the gods
2	Nigeria Igbo	<i>Chineke</i>	God the creator
3	Igbo	<i>Osebuluwa</i>	God the sustainer of the world
4	Yoruba	<i>Oludumare</i>	God Almighty
5	Hausa	<i>Ubangiji</i>	Supreme Being (God)

With the above diagrammatic illustration, one can see a similarity in understanding of God within Nigerian tribes.

### **Atheism and Belief in the Existence of God in Igbo Philosophy**

In the Igbo traditional life, it has become a difficult task to find atheists. The existence of a “strange fellow” as God is a matter that concerns not only the individual but also the entire community.<sup>11</sup> In the African Religion, no one shows a child the Supreme Being.<sup>12</sup> The child learns of it in the early stages of life.<sup>13</sup> For this reason, the community is seriously disturbed by the birth

<sup>10</sup> J. S. Mbiti, *Introduction to African Religion*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), p. 47.

<sup>11</sup> Igwegbe, *Sacramental Theological Thinking In The African Symbolic Universe*, p. 46.

<sup>12</sup> This is a typical Ashanti proverb of the people of Ghana in West Africa. (cf. R. S. Rattray, *Ashanti Proverbs*, Oxford: 1923), p. 50

<sup>13</sup> J. S. Mbiti, *Bible and Theology in African Christianity*, Nairobi: OUP East-Central Africa Press, 1986), p. 101.

and presence of an ‘abnormal person’ without a conscience and a religious heart, capable of participating in the fundamental obligation of the community in the recognition of a Supreme Being. It is self-evident, therefore, that atheistic mentality is alien to the Igbo. God, for Africans, is sacred (holy) and transcendent. Holiness like faith is not a common word in the traditional religious vocabulary, although, it features prominently in everyday life. The holiness of God and his majesty explain why the Africans, like the Jews, do not approach God directly, but rather through intermediaries such as the deities.<sup>14</sup>

### **Existence of God in Judaism and Islam**

The centre of the Jewish religion is said to be the knowledge of God (*da’ath Elohim*). This is knowledge evidenced in the right living relationship with God, hence, wisdom says that the fear of God is the beginning of knowledge. However, a theologian would see and interpret the presence of evil in the world in a deep act of Faith. But for others, the omnipresence of evil is a revolting scandal unless one takes that heartrending step into faith, as Christ did: thy will be done not mine, even if I do not understand the road offered to me.<sup>15</sup> The New Testament takes up this idea of God and develops it to its deepest sense. The recognition of the presence of evil still dominates the Christian theology; serving as an appendage to affirming the existence and presence of a benevolent creator God in the person of Jesus Christ. Jesus recognized the existence and presence of evil in the world,<sup>16</sup> and demonstrated the love of God to humanity; a paragon of God’s divine love<sup>17</sup>, who came on earth in human form to redeem humanity. God is for him, the author and foundation of all life.<sup>18</sup> He defended his claim on knowledge and

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<sup>14</sup> Ilogu, *Christianity and Ibo Culture*, p. 19.

<sup>15</sup> P. J. Lefebvre, (1994), 134; cf. Mt. 26:24.

<sup>16</sup> Mk 4:15; cf. Lk 10:18; 13:16; 22:3, 31; Joh 12:31; 13:27-31i; cf. Act 5:3; cf. Rom 16:20; 1 Cor 5:5; 7:5; cf. 2

Th 2: 9; cf. 1 Tim1:20; Rev 2:9, 13, 24; 12:3c-9; 20:7.

<sup>17</sup> Mk 4:15; cf. Lk 10:18; 13:16; 22:3, 31; cf. Joh 12:31; 13:27-31i; cf. Act 5:3; cf. Rom 16:20; cf. 1 Cor 5:5; 7:5;

cf. 2 Th 2:9; cf. 1 Tim1:20; cf. Rev 2:9, 13, 24; 12:3c-9; 20:7.

<sup>18</sup> W. Kasper maintains that for Jesus, God is not an unmoved mover and unchanging principle, but as the living God, who gives life and love. He is the source and foundation of love and life.



existence of God, not in a theoretical approach, but through a pragmatic one; in practical experiences and working of miracles. <sup>19</sup>Jesus understood God in the line of the history of Israel as God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, as Yahweh, who has made Himself known and experienced as *He Who Is*.<sup>20</sup> God, in a special way, revealed Himself in His Son, in the Person of Jesus,<sup>21</sup> and through Jesus, God had shown His salvation and love to the world. The idea of One God and Father of all men, as we know it, builds on the central theme of the New Testament teaching and its interpretation, as it is confined to the Christian context.<sup>22</sup>

In the medieval period, Thomas Aquinas maintained that ultimate reality rests on two basic sources of knowledge, namely, in the intuitive as well as in the rational sense. From this, he drew the inference that human beings can acquire the knowledge that God *is*, although we cannot grasp in the confirmative sense *his essence*. He insisted that God's existence is not self-evident to human persons, since we do not know his essence. Aquinas went on to maintain that humanity is not destined to remain silent about the source of his religious experiences. Nevertheless, we can speak of God either negatively or positively. Following this Thomistic procedure, it becomes self-evident that man can as well speak positively about the nature of God through simple analogies – *via analogical*.<sup>23</sup> “The most positive way to the knowledge about God is by useful analogies, similes, and metaphors. Therefore, in the Christian religion, we designate *God as a heavenly Father or Christ as the Lamb of God, who takes away the sins of the world* (Joh 1:35).”<sup>24</sup> Christ came into the human world because humanity was lost in

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<sup>19</sup> The central theme of Jesus message is the arrival of God's Kingdom; a Kingdom that is now in their midst. He demonstrated this in a practical sense through His Words and Deeds: in His preaching and Healings. [(cf. H. Kessler, “Christologie”, in: T. Schneider, (ed.), *Handbuch der Dogmatik*, Düsseldorf: (1992b), 271-272).

<sup>20</sup> Ex 3:13-15; Is. 17:8e; cf. Dt 32:39; 33:3; cf. Is 43:13; 51:16; cf. Wis 3:1; cf. Joh 8: 19; 10:30, 38; cf. Joh 8:24; cf. Rev 1: 4g.

<sup>21</sup> (Röm 8:15-17, 29; Gal 4:4-7; Joh 17:5

<sup>22</sup> Nwaigbo, *Church as a Communion: An African Christian Perspective: Theology of the Local Church in the Light of the Second Vatican Council*, p. 198.

<sup>23</sup> T. Aquinas, S. Th. 1, q. 13a. 2c; S. Th. 1, q. 13a. 4; cf. S. Th. 2 IIq. 186 a. 1; W. Breuning highlights this aspect of the knowledge of God through analogy.

<sup>24</sup> Nwaigbo, *Church as a Communion: An African Christian Perspective: Theology of the Local Church in the Light of the Second Vatican Council*, p. 199.

the cloudiness of self -love and could not decipher our way unaided and alone without the grace of God. God is to be worshipped by men and women as the Lord and Father of love and adored in the *Spirit of truth*, for God is spirit. Those who worship Him must do so in spirit and truth (cf. Joh 4:24). In Christianity, God's essence is the communion of three divine persons *Father, Son, and the Holy Spirit*.<sup>25</sup> Whereas in Judaism, the one and only God has revealed Himself to the people of Israel as saviour and deliverer, as creator and Lord of the universe.

The Islamic religionist opine that, its religion confesses faith in the one, everlasting and almighty *Allah* who has finally revealed Himself through the Prophet Mohammed the last of all the Prophets, beginning in the order of the Old Prophets until the time in which Jesus came.<sup>26</sup> Allah is one and Muhammed is His messenger.<sup>27</sup> It demands absolute devotion to the will of Allah. Members are obliged to acquire knowledge of the essential teachings of this religion. But some authors contend that Islam is not simply a religion, but a way of life for every believer, whom it guides from cradle to the grave.<sup>28</sup> It is a complete code of life, and a culture-producing factor in that Muslim culture profits from all available sources without jeopardizing its roots Quran and *Sunna*.<sup>29</sup>

A Muslim is called to fulfil the will of Allah in all areas of life in politics, comics, and social order, etc. The Islamic religion does not demarcate between secular and spiritual, but it rather spiritualizes human existence completely<sup>30</sup> and thereby produces a social system that reconstructs human

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<sup>25</sup> *The Catechism of the Catholic Church (CCC)*, Ibadan: 1992, 86, art. 232-237; 253-256; cf. Gen 1:2; Nicene Creed (DH 150); cf. Joh 14:17, 26; 16:13; Council of Florence (1439) DH 1302.

<sup>26</sup> Sattler, Dorothea / R. Schneider, "Gotteslehre", in: T. Schneider, (1992b), 99; cf. NA 2.

<sup>27</sup> W. M. Watt, "Conditions of Membership of the Islamic Community", in: C. J. Bleeker (ed.), *Initiation* (1965), 195-198, 196.

<sup>28</sup> A. N. Odoemene, "Christianity in Africa and Islam", in: J. S. Ukpo, et al. (ed.), *CASAS* (1993), 57.

<sup>29</sup> A. Khushid (ed.), *Islam: Its Meaning and Message*, (Lagos: 1977), pp. 7-8.

<sup>30</sup> A. N. Odoemene, "Christianity in Africa and Islam" p. 59.





life in its entirety.<sup>31</sup> The Islamic tradition holds that the thirst and pursuit of religious knowledge is atonement for one's sins.<sup>32</sup> The above shows how these religions manifest knowledge and the essence of God. Contrary to the sterile notion of God as one and the only being, therefore, the African Traditional Religion understands God as one who has manifested himself as having various intermediaries: spirits, and ancestors, among others.

### **Origin of Igbo Concept of God**

Tracing the origin of the concept of God in Igbo religio-cultural philosophy is as difficult as it is in various tribes in African religious beliefs. To understand the genesis of it, one would need to trace the man who first lived in the South Eastern geo-political zone of the present Nigerian state so that he becomes its first "founder"<sup>33</sup> by his experience.

The absence of documented religious beliefs in traditional Igbo society due to the non-existence of a developed system of documentation among the people has resulted in gross misconceptions and misrepresentations of Igbo thought on the supreme being by various thinkers. Hence, these thinkers created ontological gaps as they reconstructed the 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, that sub-Igbo groups may have popularized their deities as the Supreme Being "Chukwu", does not remove the fact that Igbo thought pre-existed these Deities which emerged sometime in Igbo history. The Igbo belief system affirms the Christian Religious testimony that in the past, God revealed himself to our ancestors in many and various ways.<sup>34</sup> Analysis of the hierarchy of Igbo divinity reveals the existence of intermediaries. Sacrifice is first offered to Aní. The Aní will offer it to Chukwu. Then Chukwu will give Aní the object of request

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<sup>31</sup> Nwaigbo, *Church as a Communion: An African Christian Perspective: Theology of the Local Church in the Light of the Second Vatican Council*, p. 199.

<sup>32</sup> A. K. Mohammed, *What is Islam?* (India: 1998), pp. v-vi.

<sup>33</sup> Igwegbe, *Sacramental Theological Thinking In The African Symbolic Universe*, p. 41.

<sup>34</sup> Hebrews 1:1

(child) and *Ani* sends the answer (child) to me.<sup>35</sup> That *ani* is viewed as part of nature, is seen as a medium through which the orthodox Igbo traditional religionists approach God.<sup>36</sup>

H. Adigwe holds that the idea of the existence of God is something characteristically common in the African Traditional Religion.<sup>37</sup> He maintains that the Africans, have knowledge of a Supreme Being, an ultimate reality, which they call various names. Such as *Chukwu* (*chi-ukwu*), meaning the Great God, *Chineke*, or *Ezechitoke* – the creator God for the Igbo people, and *Obasi*<sup>38</sup> for the Effik- have dense theological imports.<sup>39</sup> These names show what the people understand God to be, a creator who orders and brings things into existence. F. Nwaigbo, underlines the concept of God as an important idea and as a vehicle through which the Igbo people understand the notion of creation as a whole, serving as a network of communication in the Igbo Traditional Religion.<sup>40</sup> They know God through nature. And the names they give to God exemplify their deep knowledge of Him.<sup>41</sup>

In a nutshell, the ontological thought of the Igbos reveals it as a truism that the supreme being holds the chain of relationships 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

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<sup>35</sup> F. Arinze, *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion*, R. Willard Trask (trans.), New York: 1959, p. 22.

<sup>36</sup> Arinze, *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion*, p. 23.

<sup>37</sup> H. Adigwe, *Crisis and Conflict in Nigeria: A documentary Source Book 1966-1969*, (London: Oxford University Press, 1971), p. 35; cf. E. Ilogu, *Christianity and Ibo Culture*, p. 17.

<sup>38</sup> Adigwe, *Crisis and Conflict in Nigeria: A documentary Source Book 1966-1969*, p. 35; cf. I. D. Nwoga, *The Supreme God as Stranger Igbo Religious Thought*, (Enugu: SNAPP, 1984), p. 15.

<sup>39</sup> Nwaigbo, *Church as a Communion: An African Christian Perspective: Theology of the Local Church in the Light of the Second Vatican Council*, p. 197.

<sup>40</sup> Nwaigbo, *Church as a Communion: An African Christian Perspective: Theology of the Local Church in the Light of the Second Vatican Council*, p. 197.

<sup>41</sup> Ogugua, *Igbo Understanding of Man*, P. 8



his potency.<sup>42</sup> 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.<sup>43</sup> This is why researchers on Igbo thought generally agree that Igbo people are very religious, one will not search long to discover how meticulous and pertinacious the Igbos attach themselves to the Supreme Being.<sup>44</sup>

### **The Reality of God’s Existence in Igbo Religio-Cultural Belief System**

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 a critical, orderly, systematic, logical, rational and comprehensive investigation of the ultimate principles of reality, the study of being and that of the universe.<sup>45</sup> 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.<sup>46</sup> Thus, the Igbos based on experience hold that the Supreme Being who is the first cause of all things exists, but because of his great distance in 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.<sup>47</sup> The Supreme Being in the Igbo context is perceived and explained as the highest in the hierarchy of Beings.

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<sup>42</sup> Mbaegbu, C. C. “A Philosophical Investigation of the Nature of God in Igbo Ontology,” *Open Journal of Philosophy*, vol. 5, 2015, pp. 137–151. <http://www.scrip.org/journal/ojpp>.

<sup>43</sup> F. N. Ukaegbu, *The Igbos: The African root of Nations*, (Ibadan: Heinemann. 2005), p. 54.

<sup>44</sup> Metuh, E. I. (1985), *African Religions in Western Conceptual; Schemes: The Problem of Interpretation*, Ibadan: Claverianum Press. 1985), p. 48. See also Metuh, E. I. “The Supreme God in Igbo Life and worship”, [www2.fiu.edu/~ereserve/0100076131](http://www2.fiu.edu/~ereserve/0100076131) accessed 10/08/2018.

<sup>45</sup> P. Oguqua, *Igbo Understanding of Man*, (Awka: Double Pee Communications.2003), p. 1

<sup>46</sup> B. E. Nwigwe & C. C. Emedolu, (2004), *Emergent and Contentious issues in African Philosophy*, (Port Harcourt: University of Port Harcourt, 2004), p. 153

<sup>47</sup> E. Schillebeeckx, *Revelation and Theology*, London: Sheed and Ward, 1967), p. 10

## Creation in Igbo Thought

Chief among the properties of the Supreme Being in Igbo thought is the character of creation. Based on the linguistic analysis of the 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.<sup>48</sup> Mbaegbu disagrees with this thought 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.<sup>49</sup> Among created realities, as encapsulated in Igbo myths, proverbs and parables are “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.<sup>50</sup> “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 creator 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.<sup>51</sup> As such, the Supreme Being for the Igbos expresses himself to mortals through the “Chi” that belongs to the individuals.<sup>52</sup> 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.<sup>53</sup>

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. African causal theory allows

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<sup>48</sup> D.Nwoga, *The Supreme God as Stranger in Igbo Religious Thought*, (Ekwereazu: Hawk Press.1984), p. 37

<sup>49</sup> C. C. Mbaegbu, “A Philosophical Investigation of the Nature of God in Igbo Ontology,” *Open Journal of Philosophy*, vol. 5, 2015, pp. 137–151. <http://www.scrip.org/journal/ojpp>, p. 137

<sup>50</sup> S. E. Stumpf, *Philosophy History & Problems*, (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1994), p. 58

<sup>51</sup> F. A. Arinze, *Sacrifice in Igbo Religion*, (Ibadan: Ibadan University Press, 1970), p. 15

<sup>52</sup> Ogugua, *Igbo Understanding of Man*, p. 19

<sup>53</sup> M. Dakor, *African Freedom: The Freedom of Philosophy*, (Saarbrücken: Lambert Academic Publishing., 2010), p. 14



no room for chance occurrences. More so, the issue of “chance” or “luck” viewed as an “uncaused event” is unknown or rather foreign to the Africans.<sup>54</sup> 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.”<sup>55</sup>

The account of creation is a clear manifestation of a belief in the existence of a Supreme Being, a First Principle, the Causal Cause, Unmoved Mover and Originator of all things in African Religion many thousand years before the advent of Christianity in Africa. Equally, it proves, from an African religious perspective, that the belief in God, the Creator, and the Source of all things neither originated from the missionaries nor from the religion they brought to Africa. In ATR, there is an affirmation of the existence of God, though, the African does not necessarily labour to offer rational proof of his existence.<sup>56</sup>

### **Names as Proofs of God’s Existence in Igbo Socio-Cultural Philosophy**

This is evident, for instance, in the use of the name *Chukwu* among the Igbo, in South-Eastern Nigeria. In some parts of the land where the word *Chukwu* is used, people sometimes add the word *Okike* – giving God the quality of *okike* – that is *Chukwu-Okike* which is “God that creates.” In the Onitsha

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<sup>54</sup> E. Aja, *Metaphysics: An Introduction*, (Enugu: Donze Press. 2001), p. 61

<sup>55</sup> G. W. F. Hegel in E. J. Smith, *Philosophy of Religion*, (London: 1965), p. 105.

<sup>56</sup> Eze, *African Philosophy: An Anthology*, pp. 25-26.

areas where the variant word *Chineke* is used, the emphasis is on the creative activity of the Supreme Being.<sup>57</sup>

Among Igbos, names indicate the attributes of God such as his supremacy, benevolence, all-knowing, etc. Such names include:

S/N	Name of God	Meaning
1	<i>Chukwuma</i>	God knows
2	<i>Chinenye</i>	God gives
3	<i>Chijindu</i>	God holds life
4	<i>Chidindu</i>	God is alive
5	<i>Chijioko</i>	God holds every man's share
6	<i>Chisaram</i>	God answered me
7	<i>Chidera</i>	What God has written is written
8	<i>Chielozolam</i>	God never forgets me
9	<i>Chinecherem</i>	God is thinking about me
10	<i>Chisimdindu</i>	God said I should be alive
11	<i>Chidiebere</i>	God is merciful
12	<i>Chinemeze</i>	God gives royalty
13	<i>Onaburuaguiheogbonaonu</i>	He takes away what is in the mouth of a lion

It forms part of the African traditional religious belief, especially among the Igbo people, that a person receives his/her gifts or talents, character traits or indeed his/her portion in life generally before he/she comes into the world.<sup>58</sup> In addition, God is considered to be the source of human life. As the source and sustainer of human life, He gives to each person at birth a particular portion of the divine being called *chi*.

The names and adages of the Igbo of South-Eastern Nigeria, as seen above, confirm the existence of God. For the Igbos, no one but God can take away what is in the mouth of a lion. These names and adages are as old as the people of Igboland and their religious beliefs.

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<sup>57</sup> Ilogu, *Christianity and Ibo Culture*, p. 22

<sup>58</sup> Onwumere A. Ikwuagwu, "Initiation in African Traditional Religion" A Dissertation (1998), p. 69.



It can be argued from the above that in African Traditional Religion, just like in the Christian religion, to give a name is to confer identity. It is to confer an act of power and make an assertion of ownership or some other form of control. Thus, the names for God in the ATR manifest his identity. In this way, the reality and knowledge of God in the African Traditional Religion are disclosed in the names given to him.

For the Igbos, Chijindu God sustains life, invariably, the universe and, if God were to die, the whole world would collapse. He averts calamities, supplies rain, provides fertility and assures rich harvest and security from evil forces. The Africans see God as a merciful one. Thus, there is this common adage that God drives away flies from a tail-less cow.

### **Analysis and Deduction from Igbo Proverbs**

Proverbs for the Igbo are vegetables for eating words; they are feathery ornaments with which speeches are decorated. They enliven public speeches at meetings, social gatherings, religious and political rallies and various other occasions. For the Igbos, proverbs are the oil with which words are eaten. (*ilu bu mmanu eji eri okwu*).<sup>59</sup> The Igbo do not emphasize only the enlivening role of proverbs in any gathering. There is more to that. There is an indispensable function, namely, it codifies traditional beliefs or faith in God, man and the universe. Proverbs reveal religious faith, a world view, and the aspirations, hopes and fears of the people. Consequently, the Igbo have a store of proverbs in which are enshrined the ancient wisdom, beliefs and accumulated experiences of the pre-modern Igbo man. Let us analyze and deduce the real existence of God from some popular indigenous proverbs which express the absolute, supreme or ultimate nature of God. *Achokata Dibia Agaba Chukwu N'Iru* (After consulting a native doctor for several times all to no avail it becomes necessary to go directly to God).

On analysis, this proverb apart from emphasizing the fact of God's existence also acknowledges some of his essential attributes, namely, absoluteness, ultimate power, etc. *Chukwu Gbo Ogu Ile Dibia Abulu Eziokwu* (traditional medicine men admit the truth of any case that has been settled by God (*CHI-UKWU*)) This is a way of acknowledging the Monotheistic Ultimacy of *CHI-*

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<sup>59</sup> Chinua Achebe, *Things Fall Apart*, (Ibadan: Heinemann, 1980), p. 41

*UKWU* in moral issues, namely, that God's decision is infallibly true and final. God is portrayed as the basis and guarantor of morality, probably because he knows not only the hidden activities of man but also hidden intentions; and would vindicate the falsely accused. Based on these assumptions the Igbo say: *Chukwu ma njo onye* (only God knows what is evil and can judge human intentions). *Chi bu obo onye ana emegbu emegbu* (God vindicates the course of a wrongly persecuted soul). He will judge the world and apportion justice. Here God is conceived as the existent, Supreme Being with absolute power and authority in both moral and socio-cultural issues. The regular approaches to him through mediator-gods, instead of emphasizing the fact of his non-existence strengthen the fact that he exists and there is non-like him. He demands special reference and moral dignity that he is not approached the way the gods, his creatures are approached. Some proverbs also emphasize God's providence. There are proverbs which express God's omniscience, omnipotence, kindness; his creative nature etc; which can also be deduced from the proverbs mentioned above. Though there are no proverbs in Igbo culture that expressly say that God's existence is a fact or self-evident truth almost known to all, these proverbs tell us more about God's nature and attributes and by implication his existence. It would be tantamount to self-contradiction to deny existence to a being considered or acknowledged by these people to be both the principles of absoluteness, creation and continued existence and dependence of all creatures whose being is contingent upon the Necessary Being, God (*CHIUKWU*). The above proverbs are clearly indigenous, as old as the traditional Igbo who coined them. They were in existence before the arrival of Christianity.

### **Critical Analysis and Deduction from Myths**

#### **The Myth of the Origin of Death**

One famous myth of the Igbos, under circulation in various forms and which tells how death came into the world is narrated by Obiego. At the beginning of things when there was nothing, neither man nor animals nor plants nor heaven nor earth, nothing indeed, nothing was, only one very powerful person was and his name was *CHUKWU*. Then He came and created both the water below, animals and everything as we see it today. Afterwards, *Chineke* created man, man was the head of all things, but *CHINEKE* and





ALA own man. After a long time, death entered the world and began killing men. Men sent a messenger to Him asking Him whether the dead could be restored to life and sent back to their homes.<sup>60</sup> They chose a dog as their messenger. The dog, however, did not go straight to Him, rather he dallied on the way. The toad had however, overheard the message and he wanted (wished) to punish mankind. He overtook the dog and reached *Chineke* first. He said that he had been sent by men to say that after death, they had no desire at all to return to the world. *Chineke* declared that He would respect men's wishes and when the dog arrived to *Chineke* with the true message, *Chineke* refused to alter His decision. Accordingly, a human being may be born again, he cannot return with the same body and the same personality.<sup>61</sup> The myth does not in any way suggest a doubted existence of the supreme being, instead, it emphasizes how death came into existence.

### **Myth of Why the Supreme Being Withdrew from the World of Men**

At Nnokwa in Idemili South Local Government Area of Anambra State, there is a myth of how CHI- UKWU (God) and man or earth was near to each other originally. The sky then, lay just above the earth. Men could reach CHI- UKWU (God) through a rope which hung down from the sky. There was no death at this time when God created the world and man. Men never lacked anything, God was interested in their affairs, associating and providing for them in all their needs. God was very near to man. The spirits and men were one. One day it happened that a woman spat out into the eyes of God.<sup>62</sup> He was offended and withdrew with the sky to its present position and punished men by causing them to die. Since then, things became difficult for men on earth. Evil, sin and suffering have spread all over the earth.

### **The Igbo and the Proof of God's Existence**

The debate for the existence of God dominates the field of philosophy of religion yet the Igbos are left out in this. That Igbos do not struggle to prove the existence of God neither implies that they are not reflective nor does it

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<sup>60</sup> C. C. Mbaegbu, "Traditional Arguments for the Existence of God" in *ajol-file-journals\_497\_articles\_87336-2010*, p. 41.

<sup>61</sup> Cosmos Okechukwu Obiego, *Africa Image of the Ultimate Reality: An Analysis of Igbo Ideas of Life and Death in Relation to Chukwu-God*, (Michigan: P. Lang, 1984), pp. 28-30

<sup>62</sup> Mbaegbu, "Traditional Arguments for the Existence of God", p. 41.

suggest that they have no scientific knowledge. It must be noted that philosophy, the King of knowledge originated in Africa, among the Egyptians, the cradle of knowledge and human civilization. The reason that Igbos do not labour themselves to prove God's existence is that His existence is vividly made manifest in nature. It is seen as a waste of time to delve into such an exercise when the facts are there. The reality of nature only goes to manifest God's existence and gives support to this fact. His knowledge of God is not one that is merely borne out of humanistic, empirical observation of nature, but one that has a metaphysical foundation. This does not suggest that Africans are not rational. For them, the proof of God's existence is not a priority. For Igbos, and as demonstrated above, God simply exists. There is no need to doubt, question or even to disprove the truth of this statement. His existence is a reality in which the beauty and splendour of nature manifest. Moreover, the fact that they do not question, doubt or disprove the truth-value of the statement 'God exists', does not mean there is no room for Atheism, Agnosticism, Skepticism, or even Atheism in an African traditional setting.

### **Conclusion**

This paper examined studied and examined Igbo religio-cultural belief in the supreme being and the atheists' position. The work observes that various arguments have been advanced by the atheist, including arguments from the lack of evidence for God's existence, or from the manifest occurrence of certain phenomena (eg, pain, suffering) allegedly inconsistent with the existence of God. It maintains that the existence of God is a product of human gullibility and sentimentalism. 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 parameters results to irreconcilable arguments that cannot advance Igbo ontological thought. The paper however finds that the Igbo have a well-developed concept of the Supreme Being prior to 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. Igbo religio-cultural belief system concludes that atheists believe that the non-existence of God is an illusion hence the reality of nature goes a long way to affirm the manifest existence of the ultimate reality.



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