

Rethinking Monotheism: Some Comparisons between the Igala Religion and Christianity

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Abstract

The Igala religion believes in the supreme God (*Ojọ*) as well as the ancestral spirits (*Ibegwu*). This belief system gives rise to the question of whether the Igala religion is monotheistic or polytheistic. Isaiah Ngedu has recently argued that the Igala is a peculiar form of monotheism, namely inclusive monotheism. In contrast, this essay compares the Igala understanding of ancestral spirits with the Christian notions of angels and patron saints, and argues that the question of whether the Igala religion is monotheistic or not concerns how we define monotheism and is therefore merely verbal and will not promote our understanding of the Igala religion.

Keywords: The Igala religion, Interreligious dialogue, Christianity, God

Introduction

Interreligious dialogue fosters a mutual understanding of different religions. In a similar way, second-order reflections upon interreligious dialogue yield insights into the very nature of mutual understanding of different religions. Isaiah Ngedu's main thesis in his excellent paper, "The Igala Traditional Religious Belief System..." is that the Igala religion falls within the category of *inclusive monotheism* or *soft polytheism*. In response to his article, I wish to look closer into the term "monotheism" and other related notions employed in characterizing the Igala religion. My focus is not on the Igala religion as such, but on the very concept by which we try to understand it. I believe such an investigation is fruitful, because notions such as *monotheism* were invented at a time when the Igala religion was hardly studied at all, and are likely inadequate to properly capture what the Igala people believe in. However, although this essay concerns the nature of interreligious dialogue, its main contention is fairly critical. I believe interreligious dialogue conducted in the form of *Is the Igala religion monotheistic?* is not fruitful, because such a question is unable to advance our understanding of the Igala religion.

This essay is structured as follows. I first provide a brief sketch of the Igala people and the Igala religion. Then I summarize the question Ngedu aims to explain, i.e. whether the Igala religion is monotheistic. In response to this question, I first digress a little and draw two comparisons between the Igala religion and Christianity. These comparisons are intended to show that the difference between the Igala and Christianity is not as great as it might appear to be. In the light of these comparisons, I then turn to explain the main thesis of this essay, i.e. the question whether the Igala religion is monotheistic or not is neither substantial nor interesting, because it does not advance our understanding of the Igala culture.

The Igala people

The Igala is one of the major ethnic groups in Nigerian society, and inhabits a large geographical area in Nigeria. It is found mainly in the Eastern Senatorial District of Kogi state, and located within the triangle formed by the confluence of the Niger and Benue rivers. Bounded by Niger in the west, Enugu in the east, Anambra in the south, and Nassarawa and Benue in the north, this area covers a landmass of approximately 13,665 square kilometers and counts 1.6 million people of population, according to the National Population Commission, 2006. The Igala people constitute more than half of the entire population of Kogi state (EBEH 2015, 124-125).

Due to the specific location of the Igala land, its culture is influenced by many of its neighbors, for instance the Yoruba, Edo, Jukun, Idoma, Nupe, Igbo, Hausa, Igbirra, Bassa-Nge, Bassa-Kwomu, and the Kakandas. In particular, the Igala people consider the Yoruba their sister since they both descend from the same ancestor, namely Oduduwa. Besides, the Igbo also see the Igala as their brothers who move their homeland to their present location. Interactions such as these leave a long-lasting mark on the Igala culture.

The Igala land was divided into three administrative regions, namely Idah, Dekina and Ankpa. These regions are the traditional, political and cultural centers of the Igala people. Especially noteworthy is Idah founded in the 12th century and has been the traditional headquarter of the Igala kingdom. Nowadays, it is the largest city in Igala land and boasts population of about 250 thousand people.

The Igala religion

The Igala people believe in many kinds of divine or supernatural beings, including God, Ancestors, and Diviners. According to the Igala religious system, these divine beings are not regarded as equals or rivals, but form a hierarchical order. The highest or most supreme divine being is God, which Igala people call *Ojochamachala* (*Ojọ* in short). At least three features are derived from the supremacy of God. First, God is so supreme that He is beyond not only human description but also man's direct interaction with him. Second, God is so supreme that He creates both divine beings and also the entire world. Third, God is so supreme that he gave powers and authorities to the divine beings below Him to watch over the different spheres of human life.

Especially noteworthy in the Igala religion are the ancestors (*Ibegwu*), who rank second in supremacy under God. They are not living relatives such as grandfather or great-grandfather. For the Igala people, living relatives inhabit *ilei* (this world), whereas the ancestors belong to *oj'ona*, namely the afterworld, which is believed to be the continuation of this world. Thus, the ancestors are people who were once alive but regarded as everlasting after their death. The most important and peculiar feature of the ancestors is that they have a direct link with God himself, and thereby function as the messengers or representatives of God. For this reason, the ancestors are held in high regard and even awe, and considered as the protectors of the Igala society as well as the source of law and justice. Thus, as Negedu points out, "in interior villages where Igala culture is practiced to its fullest, God is not even mentioned when *Ibegwu* is the topic of discussion because it is taken for granted that they act in place of God." (NEGEDU 2013, 118). The worship of the ancestors is arguably the most distinctive feature of the Igala religion.

Is the Igala religion monotheistic?

According to the previous section, the Igala people believe in both the supreme God (*Ojo*), who is unknowable and ineffable because of His utmost supremacy, and the ancestors (*Ibegwu*), who are directly worshipped by the Igala people and function as the messengers of God. At this point, the question naturally arises as to *whether the Igala religion is monotheistic or polytheistic*. Here, Negedu suggests (correctly, in my view) that the key issue concerning polytheism is not simply that there are many gods, but rather how they relate to one another. (NEGEDU 2013, 123) In the traditional polytheism found in Egypt, Babylon and Ancient Greece, gods are independent from one another. This belief has been specified as *hard polytheism*. The Igala religion, in contrast, envisions a different picture of gods. For (as mentioned previously) the Igala gods form a hierarchy, where Ancestors and Diviners are subsumed under God. Thus, the Igala religion is neither absolutely polytheistic nor an absolutely monotheistic. According to Negedu, a more appropriate tag would be soft polytheism, monolatry, or inclusive monotheism, namely the belief in many gods, one of which is more supreme than the other. In conclusion, he remarks as follows:

What is troubling about the African conception of God is that it seems to imply that the West has a clear understanding of the concept of God in the African Traditional Religion. Idowu notes that the authors of this conception have erred, because they have been ignorant of that which forms the core of religion which they endeavour to study. The West, therefore, does not have a wholesome grasp of the concept of God. The concept of God is not a monopoly of any society. (NEGEDU 2013, 126)

That is to say, the traditional conception of monotheism, derived from the West and based mainly on the Abrahamic religions, fails to apply to the Igala religion. A different look on monotheism is therefore needed.

Two comparisons between the Igala Religion and Christianity

In my view, there are some striking similarities between the Igala religion and Christianity, but we are likely to ignore these similarities if we focus mainly on whether the Igala religion is monotheistic.

To explain my point, I shall begin with a curious case I found in Ngedu's essay. According to him, the Igala religion believes in one supreme God on the one hand, and many ancestral spirits on the other. Thus, for Ngedu, both the supreme God (with an uppercase *G*) and the ancestral spirits are identified as *gods* (with a lowercase *g*). In other words, they are *divine beings*, so to speak. However, calling both the supreme God and ancestral spirits (the lowercase) *god* is already an implicitly theory-laden interpretation since the Igala religion does not have just one single name (the lowercase "god") for both of them. Rather, they are called *Ojọ* and *Ibegwu*, respectively. Crucially, such an interpretation can be controversial, for it is not necessarily true that both *Ojọ* and *Ibegwu* must be called god.

To see why this interpretation can be controversial, we can analyze a parallel case in Christianity. On the one hand, like the Igala religion, Christianity also believes in non-human supernatural beings which are not God, namely *angels*. Angelic belief is not exclusive to Christianity; it is found not only across Abrahamic religions but also in Zoroastrianism and Neoplatonism (see POPE 1907; DAVIDSON 1967; MUEHLBERGER 2013). Christian theologians even distinguish and organize angels in three different spheres: angels in the first sphere are closest to and in direct communion with God; those in the second sphere are responsible for governing or guiding the created world; and those in the third sphere, closest to human beings, are guardian angels of nations, countries and peoples. But on the other hand, unlike Ngedu, Christian theologians typically refuse to call any angel *god*. Of course, they will not mistake angels as the supreme uppercase God, but that is beside the point. The point is rather this: for Christian theologians, not even the label of lowercase *god* is appropriate for angels, and not calling any angel *god* does not create any problem. Consequently, although Christianity is committed to the existence of angels, it is still widely regarded as monotheistic, even absolutely monotheistic.

The comparison with Christianity indicates the following: First, both the Igala religion and Christianity believe in non-human supernatural beings at the level of first-order religious practice. Second, at the level of second-order interreligious reflection, it is neither obvious whether these non-human supernatural beings should be called lowercase god, nor is it even clear how we should settle this issue. But lowercase god or not, angels and ancestral

spirits remain just what they are. The facts are almost identical, but the names are different. If that is the case, does it *really* matter if we call the Igala *monotheistic*?

Here is another curious case. Negedu notes that in the Igala religion, the ancestors' divinity "begins at the point when they *become 'living dead'*", and that "*all living beings who lead good lives are potential gods*. We can therefore not speak of proper polytheism or proper monotheism as such" (NEGEDU 2013, 127). I do not know if there is a special term for the idea captured by the italics above, so I will call it *Transformed Divinity*, in the sense that the status of divinity is neither intrinsic nor immutable but requires a certain kind of transformation. Put in another way, the Igala's Transformed Divinity is the view that some lowercase gods *were not gods at some points but only became ones afterwards*. Again, one cannot help but notice a parallel in the Christian notion of *patron saint*. A patron saint is neither God nor angel nor any kind of spiritual being, but is regarded as a special mediator with God and merits a special form of religious observance (PARKINSON 1913). The Christian patron saint shares with the Igala ancestor two salient features. First, she is (or was) at least at one point a human being. Second, she has greater power than other human beings and therefore functions as a medium, so to speak, between God and other human beings. On the other hand, the main difference between the Igala ancestor and the Christian saint is that only the former is called a lowercase god. But even if the saint is not called a god, Christian theologians still recognize that she has significant god-like power.

Now, are Christian angels and saints really lowercase gods or not? Alternatively, are the Igala ancestral spirits really lowercase gods or not? Considering the above comparison, one cannot help but feel that these questions are not very substantial. If we are not dealing with interreligious dialogue, then we would already command a sufficiently clear idea about Christian angels and saints (or the Igala ancestral spirits, for that matter), even if one does not know the proper answers to the questions above.

Rethinking monotheism: The case of the Igala Religion

Now let us turn to the main question of this essay: Is the Igala religion monotheism, polytheism, or something else? As mentioned above, the Igala religion believes in one supreme God on the one hand, and many minor ancestral spirits on the other. Both the supreme God (with an uppercase *G*) and the ancestral spirits are identified as *gods* (with a lowercase *g*). Bearing this information in mind, one naturally proceeds to ask: Is the Igala religion monotheistic or polytheistic? My initial impression, however, is that this issue is not very substantial and interesting, since it doesn't concern the nature of either the Igala religion or Christianity, but only has to do with how the technical notion of monotheism—a notion extant neither in the Igala nor in

Christianity—is defined. For if the parties of the debate define the notion of monotheism specifically as the number of supreme God/ uppercase God, then the Igala religion is monotheistic rather than polytheistic by definition. Likewise, if the parties of the debate define the notion of monotheism generally as the number of divine beings/ lowercase god, then the Igala religion is polytheistic rather than monotheistic by definition. Thus, whether the Igala religion is monotheistic or not turns out to be just a *verbal* question; it depends not on the nature of the Igala or Christianity, but rather on what we mean by “monotheism”, and hence can be answered relatively easily by a more precise definition. Thus, if two parties correctly understand what the Igala religion believes in, and they agree that the Igala religion is (or is not) monotheistic, then this is merely because they agree on the meaning of monotheism. The alleged claim that the Igala is monotheistic, if true, provides us with no substantial information regarding what *Ojo* and *Ibegwu* are. And if these two parties disagree, this is merely because they define monotheism in different ways. Still, the disagreement indicates nothing informative about what *Ojo* and *Ibegwu* are.

In light of this, let us turn to examine Negedu’s main thesis. He suggests that the Igala religion is an instance of inclusive monotheism, which is the “belief in and possible worship of, *multiple gods, one of which is supreme*” (italics are mine). However, given what I have just said in the previous paragraph—if a belief system is committed to multiple gods, shouldn’t we just call it polytheism instead? And if such a system is also committed to one supreme God among other gods, wouldn’t it be better to call it *exclusive polytheism* instead? My point is that, if we duly acknowledge the verbal nature of the initial question, then we would proceed with issues of definition more cautiously. In this way, we would see that, so far as the Igala religion is concerned, the label *exclusive polytheism* is more appropriate than *inclusive monotheism*. I don’t mean to advocate the label *exclusive polytheism*; what I am saying is simply that, *if* we are going to use technical terms like monotheism and polytheism, then exclusive polytheism is *more* appropriate than inclusive monotheism.

Summing up my previous argument: assuming that certain religions such as Christianity and Islam are monotheistic, calling the Igala religion “monotheism” doesn’t foster any mutual understanding between the Igala and Christianity. The reason is as follows. Unlike Christianity and the Igala, “monotheism” is not a reality that exists in certain history or culture. Rather, it is a technical term invented to describe said realities. Therefore, whether such a concept is correctly applied to a certain reality must depend on what we mean by such a concept. To clarify, compare these cases: Case 1: “the Igala believes in *Ojo*”; Case 2: “the Igala is monotheistic.” There are three differences between them to be noted. First, Case 1 is about reality, whereas

Case 2 is about interpretation of reality. Second, whether Case 1 is true depends on whether it corresponds to reality, whereas whether Case 2 is true, on the other hand, depends first and foremost on what is meant by the interpretation. Last but not least, anyone familiar with the Igala religion will agree with Case 1, but remains doubtful about Case 2. Thus, when it comes to interreligious dialogue, if a Christian wishes to understand the Igala religion, she is advised to understand it in its own terms, to see the reality for herself. The same goes to the Igala people. It might be difficult, but there is no other way, for we cannot understand the Igala religion or Christianity just by notions such as *monotheism* or *polytheism*.

Conclusion

This essay reflects upon the nature of interreligious dialogue via Ngedu's analysis of the Igala religion. Ngedu suggests that the Igala religion be understood as a peculiar form of monotheism, namely inclusive monotheism. I contest this view and argue as follows. Notions like *monotheism* are technical terms invented to describe reality. To be correct, such a correction should be based on the proper understanding of the relevant reality, such as the belief content of the Igala religion. Therefore, it is our understanding of the Igala religion that determines how we want to define *monotheism*, and not the other way round. Just by saying that the Igala is (or is not) monotheistic will not promote our knowledge of the Igala. Thus, any interreligious dialogue conducted in the form of the question, *Is a certain religion monotheistic?* will be just a verbal business.

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