

A Critique of “The Question of the Nature of God from the African Place”

<https://dx.doi.org/10.4314/ft.v12i2.5>

Submission: Nov 1, 2023 Acceptance: Nov 23, 2023

Emeka C. EKEKE

Department of Religious and Cultural Studies
University of Calabar, Calabar, Nigeria and
Research Fellow, Department of the Study of Religions,
University of Religions and Denominations, Qom, Iran.
emekacekeke@unical.edu.ng; emekacekeke@gmail.com
<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8995-5676>

&

Enyioma E. NWOSU

Department of Religious and Cultural Studies,
University of Calabar, Nigeria
ebhens2@gmail.com, enyiomanwosu@unical.edu.ng
<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2884-0859>

Abstract

This critique engages with the article titled "The Question of the Nature of God from the African Place," by L. Uchenna OGBONNAYA published in Vol. 11. No.1 of this journal. This critique will employ a focused argumentative methodology to assess its contributions to the discourse on African Philosophy of Religion. It will also evaluate the article's strengths and weaknesses, emphasizing the articulation and support of key arguments. Through a systematic examination of the presented evidence and methodological approach, the critique aims to shed light on the nuanced perspectives on the nature of God within the African philosophical framework. Further, this assessment will provide a comprehensive understanding of the article's implications for contemporary religious studies and intercultural dialogue, contributing to the ongoing conversation surrounding diverse perspectives on divinity.

Keywords: Philosophy of Religion in Africa, Nature of God in Africa, African cosmology, African Traditional Religion.

Introduction

The study of African views in Philosophy of Religion and the essence of God has gained importance in the current discourse, as it intersects with broader philosophical and theological concerns. In this context, the article titled "The Question of the Nature of God from the African Place" by L. Uchenna Ogbonnaya (2022), offers a thought-provoking examination of the intricate interpretations of the nature of God in the African setting. This critique aims to analyze the strengths, limitations, and contributions of the aforementioned article to the ongoing discourse on the nature of God within the African philosophical and theological framework.

Our objective is to provide constructive critique of the thought-provoking article, specifically by delving deeper into the African perspective on the concept of the Supreme Being or God. God, the omnipotent and everlasting Supreme Being, is perceived by individuals in many manners. His association with humanity elicits adoration and gives rise to various religious beliefs that depict Him in different ways. Various religions promote belief in multiple deities. While some do not perceive God as an individual being, others refer to God in specific human names (BROWN, 2017). God possesses various designations, existence, fundamental qualities, properties, and inherent characteristics. Consideration of these characteristics give rise to various philosophical theories and theological doctrines. Theology in religions presupposes the nature and existence of the Supreme Being. To a significant degree, the underlying belief is not only that there exists anything, such as a concept, ideal, force, or intentional inclination, that can be referred to as God; but in addition, there exists a self-sustaining, self-aware, individual entity, who is the source of all things and surpasses the entire creation, while also being present inside every aspect of it (BERKHOF 1988). Emeka C. Ekeke and Chike A. Ekeopara (2010, 210) discuss the African perspective on the existence and awareness of the Supreme Being. They cited an Ashanti proverb, "No one shows a child the Supreme Being," to illustrate that individuals born in Africa do not require formal education to comprehend the existence of a Supreme Being. The knowledge of God's existence is inherent and universal, even among children. Yet, this knowledge of his existence does not imply knowing His nature, which is what Ogbonnaya (2022) has philosophically considered in his article.

Understanding the true nature of God is a matter of great importance to those who seek relationship with him. In Africa, religion is seen as something that should influence every aspect of life, rather than just acknowledging the connection between God and the world and His presence both beyond and inside it. However, the rational inference about the nature of God, based on ideas found in religious scriptures and observations of nature, does not imply that the presence of God can be logically proven without any question. Various arguments, such as ontological, cosmological, teleological, moral, historical, or ethnological, might be used to demonstrate the existence and nature of God. Further conceptualizing the nature of God leads to even studying the African place. Answers that at least would serve some academic needs are the target of Ogbonnaya's work, which the present essay attempts to critique.

This critique is organized around the following subheadings for clearer understanding: appraisal of the paper, strength of the paper, contribution to scholarship, methodology, weaknesses of the paper and conclusion.

Appraisal of the Paper

When embarking on a journey of contemplation regarding religions, individuals often encounter confusion due to the complex nature of religion. A prime example to this assertion is the African Traditional Religion (ATR), which encompasses the African people's search for a higher power and the divine disclosure of God to humanity (NWOSU, 2018). In order to mitigate potential confusion, it may be insufficient to solely rely on philosophy; instead, including insights from theology could be beneficial in facilitating comprehension. According to Ninian Smart (1995), it is crucial to acknowledge secular ideologies as integral components of

human worldviews. The differentiation between religious and secular beliefs and practises, as observed in modern Western societies, does not accurately reflect the manner in which other civilizations classify and categorise human values. Africa, often characterised as having a strong religious inclination, is a society where every aspect of life is deeply influenced by its religious beliefs. Therefore, an examination of African religion may be seen as an exploration of the intricate nature of its people, encompassing both traditional and contemporary aspects of their lives (MBITI 1977).

The paper by Ogbonnaya addresses the fundamental inquiry into the constituent nature of God, with a focus on African philosophical perspectives. It challenges the prevailing notion that God is purely a spirit devoid of material substance, arguing that this idea originates from a dualistic ontological system that dichotomizes reality into spirit and matter, considering spirit as good and matter as evil. In contrast, the paper advocates for an African duality perspective, which emphasizes the coexistence and complementary nature of spirit and matter, asserting that both are integral components of existence (OGBONNAYA 2022, 116).

Ogbonnaya's inquiry into the essence of God from an African perspective is a fresh engagement that prompts a reflective mind to consider the nature of God in African Traditional Religion (ATR), as well as in other religious beliefs prevalent throughout the vast continent of Africa. The endeavour to elucidate the African philosophy of religion as a component of African philosophy, akin to Oriental, Western, or other philosophies, is undertaken by Ogbonnaya. He seeks to address the question of the nature of God in the cosmology of the African people, necessitating the utilization of certain theoretical frameworks. He utilized both Asouzu's Ibuanyidanda ontology and Ijiomah's harmonious monism to bolster his argument, and employing the philosophical approach of conversationalism (OGBONNAYA 2022, 116).

The paper sets the stage by providing an introduction to African philosophy of religion, emphasizing the critical examination of religious realities within the African philosophical context. It discusses the significance of understanding the African experience of reality and engaging with it through an African culture-inspired logic lens. The author highlights the importance of investigating the concept of African philosophy of religion, focusing on the African understanding of God (OGBONNAYA 2022, 117-118).

In the subsequent sections, Ogbonnaya (2022) delves into African religious cosmology, examining the conception of God within the context of the tripartite and dual nature of the world. The paper explains that God holds a central position in African cosmology, existing at the apex of the hierarchical order of beings. It also explores the prevalent belief in African thought that God is purely a spirit without any material aspects, drawing parallels to the dualistic philosophical system (OGBONNAYA 2022, 118).

Furthermore, Ogbonnaya (2022, 119-120) in the following sections, introduces the concept of African duality theory, exemplifying this perspective through the discussion of two prominent African culture-inspired ontological frameworks: harmonious monism of and Ibuanyidanda ontology. It elucidates how these philosophical systems theorise the inseparable interconnection between the

physical and spiritual aspects of reality, emphasizing the complementary relationship between spirit and matter.

Ogbonnaya (2022, 120) states that “African philosophy involves a critical, rigorous and systematic reflection on the African experience of reality and how one engages with reality.” Of course, this approach promoted keywords like ontology, dualism, harmonious monism, conversationalism, being, and being-in-the-African-world. Thus, “reality is to be experienced and investigated to arrive at the truth about itself.” This may prompt a thinker to imagine how to do this. Ogbonnaya suggests using an “African culture-inspired logic lens” to identify reality. How does one do this, or is it just logic? Are all truths provable or does logic prove them? Questions like these probes the idea that philosophy confuses rather than solves problems. If this research fills a gap, it must explain God's nature or qualities from an African cosmological perspective.

Consequently, the paper argues that God's constituent nature should be conceptualized through the lens of African duality, considering God as comprising both spirit and matter. Drawing on the principles of Harmonious Monism and Ibunyanidanda ontology, Ogbonnaya (2022) advocates for a holistic understanding of God that encompasses both the spiritual and material aspects, emphasizing the complementary relationship between these components. The paper concludes with a call to reconceptualize God's nature in light of the African duality perspective.

Strengths of the Paper

Original Perspective: The paper presents a fresh and original perspective on the nature of God, offering insights from African philosophical traditions that are often overlooked in mainstream philosophical discourse. This uniqueness adds value to the broader conversation on the topic.

In-depth Analysis: The paper comprehensively analyses African religious cosmology and philosophy, demonstrating a profound understanding of the subject matter. The Ogbonnaya's exploration of various ontological frameworks and their implications for understanding the nature of God adds depth to the discussion.

Cultural Context Sensitivity: The paper showcases a sensitivity to cultural context, emphasizing the importance of understanding African realities and experiences within their cultural framework. This approach enhances the paper's credibility and relevance within the field of African philosophy of religion.

Cosmology: The work produced usable models of African cosmology. Ekwealor, Onunwa, and Ijiomah's Igbo African worldview models provided strength. The African worldview (cosmology) is aligned because it is very impossible to describe something one has never seen or experienced. Worldview, or how humans see reality, is called “dynamic conception” here, making the tripartite conception dual. The unseen is sometimes categorised as in the spirit world, while the visible is concrete and true. Even if these worldviews are incomplete and the God whose nature is studied here is not fully understood, they provided a start. The fact that God, gods, and spirits exist, despite humans being at the centre of the earth, may explain why African cosmology is "an ontologised cosmology," as it deals with the nature of existence. The disappearance or extinction of a god/deity occurs even in religion. Max Siollun says Africa was the first area outside the Arabian Peninsula to practise Islam (SIOLLUN 2021, 252). The people worshipped secondary deities and spirits who controlled weather and

fertility in addition to God. On the other hand, many, especially in the West, believe that religion is no longer needed, which is why people like Segal advocate reductionism, which analyses religion in secular rather than religious terms, including origin, function, meaning, truth, etc. Africa remains religious and God-dependent, supporting Einstein's claim that science without religion is meaningless (cited in NWOSU, 2021, 100). Religion is a prominent way of life in Africa, and without it, cultural life would be incomplete (NWOSU, 2018, 271). This is also the view echoed in the paper.

Clarity and Coherence: The paper effectively presents complex philosophical concepts in a clear and coherent manner, making it accessible to a wide audience. The logical progression of ideas and the use of illustrative examples contribute to the overall clarity of the arguments presented, especially the author's conception of God in Africa. Africa accepts God as ultimate reality. Ogbonnaya (2022) said "in God, spirit and matter are in a mutually complementary relationship." Truly, "God possesses physicality - physical substance like human bodily parts." God is spirit in Africa, so many say the place seems to have limited His nature to spiritualism, rarely spirituality. As a philosopher, he argues in his work that Africa's spiritualism raises questions regarding the African God's dualism. Therefore, Ogbonnaya switched to African duality to answer the question of whether God is pure spirit and define his constituent essence. The African duality hypothesis, which says that reality contains metaphysical and physical dimensions, is reflected. Reality cannot exist without this two-sidedness. Real God is no exception, according to Ogbonnaya (2022). God, like all realities, is twofold. Harmony of spirit and matter, unification, world immanent missing link(s), pure spirit, *ibuanyidanda* imperative anthology, noetic propaedeutic psycho-therapeutic measure, *isi-na-odu* analogy, *obioha*, existential conversion(ism), and harmonious monism were some of the concepts explicated in the paper. All were meant to convey Ogbonnaya's convictions about God's nature in Africa. No matter the argument, Ogbonnaya contends that African religious conviction holds that the supreme God is the same worldwide as in all other faiths with God-person monotheism.

Contribution to Scholarship

The paper makes significant contributions to the scholarship of African Philosophy of Religion, offering valuable insights and advancing the understanding of this field. Some of its contributions include:

Critical Analysis of African Philosophical Traditions: The paper provides a comprehensive and critical analysis of various African traditions and their interpretations of the nature of God. By examining these traditions in depth, the paper contributes to the elucidation of the diverse philosophical perspectives within the African context.

Cultural and Contextual Understanding: Through its exploration of cultural and contextual factors shaping the understanding of the nature of God in African philosophy, the paper enriches the scholarship by shedding light on the intricate interplay between cultural beliefs, historical context, and philosophical thought.

This contribution deepens the understanding of the cultural roots and influences on African religious philosophy.

Comparative Insights: By engaging in comparative analysis, the paper highlights similarities and differences between different African traditions, thereby facilitating a deeper understanding of the complexities and nuances within the African Philosophy of Religion. This comparative approach contributes to the broader understanding of the diversity inherent in African philosophical thought.

Theoretical Framework Development: The paper contributes to the development of theoretical frameworks within the field of African Philosophy of Religion by synthesizing various philosophical perspectives and offering conceptual frameworks for understanding the nature of God from an African standpoint. This contribution fosters a more sophisticated and nuanced understanding of the philosophical underpinnings of African religious thought.

Contribution to Interdisciplinary Studies: By bridging the gap between philosophy, theology, and cultural studies, the paper encourages interdisciplinary dialogue and promotes a holistic understanding of the nature of God within the African philosophical context. This interdisciplinary approach enhances the scholarly discourse and fosters a more comprehensive and inclusive understanding of African Philosophy of Religion.

Methodology

Certainly, assessing the methodology employed in the paper "The Question of the Nature of God from the African Place" requires an understanding of how the author approached the research and analysis. Given the nature of the topic, it is important to evaluate the methodology in terms of its suitability, rigour, and overall effectiveness. Here is an assessment of the methodology:

Philosophical Analysis: The paper predominantly relies on philosophical analysis, utilizing conceptual frameworks, ontological reasoning, and critical evaluation of historical and contemporary African philosophical traditions. The author demonstrates a strong command of relevant philosophical theories and thoroughly examines key concepts, contributing to the paper's academic rigor and depth.

Comparative Study: The paper engages in a comparative study of various African philosophical perspectives on the nature of God, highlighting similarities and differences between different cultural and religious contexts. This comparative approach enriches the analysis and allows for a nuanced understanding of the complexities inherent in the topic.

Literature Review: The paper demonstrates a thorough literature review of existing scholarship in the field of African philosophy of religion, incorporating a wide range of scholarly sources and academic works. The author's comprehensive review of the literature enhances the paper's credibility and ensures that it is situated within the broader academic discourse.

Cultural and Contextual Analysis: The methodology includes a deep exploration of cultural and contextual factors that influence the understanding of the nature of God in African philosophical traditions. The author's sensitivity to cultural nuances and historical context enriches the analysis and ensures that the paper acknowledges the multifaceted nature of the topic.

Limitations: However, the methodology might be limited by the lack of empirical research and the potential bias resulting from a strong focus on specific philosophical traditions. The absence of empirical data might limit the applicability of the findings beyond philosophical discussions, and the potential bias could restrict the inclusivity of alternative perspectives.

Overall, the methodology employed in the paper demonstrates a robust engagement with philosophical inquiry and a nuanced understanding of cultural and historical contexts. While the lack of empirical research and potential bias are notable limitations, the overall approach is effective in facilitating a comprehensive analysis of the question of the nature of God from the African philosophical perspective.

Weaknesses of the Paper:

The Knowability of the Supreme Being: The concept of comprehending the nature of God has been a prominent subject of discussion throughout all religions, often leading to the presence of agnostic viewpoints. In such bamboozling task, Christianity, for instance, teaches that He can be known and the knowledge of Him is an absolute requisite unto salvation (BERKHOF, 1988). In this sense, ATR as religion, considering either the Being of God or, that, alongside His attributes, also portrays the concept of knowing the nature of God as herculean, for which this research argues it nearly as a missing link in the theology or philosophy of African Religion. However, it can be argued that the being of God does not admit any scientific definition, and the argument remains that the God we are talking about is not one of several species of gods. Even in Africa, some believe that He made all or that even the primordial came from Him. Some critics have described this type of inference as influenced by Christianity. But Ogbonnaya did not engage nor clarify his arguments that lean towards this direction. This may have been the same problem Martin Luther tried to settle by distinguishing between the *Deus absconditus* (hidden) and the *Deus revelatus* (revealed God) yet maintained that in knowing the *Deus revelatus*, we only know Him in His hiddenness. In such line of thought African religion or Africa has its manner of showing to some extent the nature of God. The Supreme Being is one and can only be one, for which African religion is definitely theistic. Ikenga-Metuh (1987) maintains that African belief about God as expressed in the myths, names, proverbs and sayings, show him as a living and personal being. He is different from the fundamentally recognized divinities. In this instance, Ogbonnaya has not really captured the sources and structure of African religion comprehensively, as to be able to pry into the people's idea of the nature of God properly.

Divination and Revelation: The belief that the spiritual controls the physical is widely held in many traditional African religions. Adherents of those religions

hold that life generally is lived under the shadow of the spirit beings that includes God. This makes divination a serious need, much like the laboratory for tests to reveal sicknesses and drugs. Divination therefore, goes beyond ordinary human needs. It serves the purpose of enlightenment and disclosure of hidden truths. Divination and prophetism feature prominently in Africa in situations of looking into hidden truths, including the nature of God. It is also a kind of prayer to the divine to make known to humans some higher thoughts and mysteries. It is describable as, the art or practice that foresees or foretells future events and discover hidden knowledge through interpretations made possible by the aid of supernatural powers. Mbiti's claim that the complete nature of God escapes human comprehension (1977, 38) notwithstanding, it is believably achievable with divination as God permits. Alongside is revelation and the act of getting divine truth communicated by God to humans; God also chooses His channels most times. The nature of God Himself is not an exception in this instance. In Africa, it is not clear that divination will fade, even in the face of technology, scientism, globalization, digital modernism and the like. But despite his expositions, Ogbonnaya should have done more to showcase possibility of divination or revelation aiding the knowledge of the nature of God. Ogbonnaya (2022, 119) argues, "one is left to wonder about the constituent nature of this God." Instead of that, he should have recalled that although God in Africa is reached through intermediaries but that He is not limited to that. This thought needed to be decoupled in his wonderment to grasp the nature of the Omni-present, Omni-scient and Omni-potent God of Africa. Once more, in this contemplation, Ogbonnaya ought to have elucidated to his audience that the African God, possessing omniscience, is aware that if He were to be fully comprehended by humans, He would no longer have His divine nature. Once one comprehends this concept, there will no longer be any uncertainty regarding the rationale for God's selection of how, whom, and when to disclose His nature. It is evident that God indeed does so in Africa, which can potentially establish connections between interpretations of religious language.

Names of God (Supreme Being) in Africa: The significance of names within African cultures extends beyond personal identity, encompassing their role as a means of imparting knowledge. Within this context, the names ascribed to God serve as representations of his inherent characteristics, encompassing both his attributes and actions. Emefie Ikenga-Metuh's (1987) in his *Comparative Studies of African Religions* dedicated a chapter to the understanding of African theism, with a specific emphasis on the concepts of God and the deities based on their names. Ikenga-Metuh (1987) expanded upon Mbiti's (1977) while aligning with Awolalu and Dopamu (1979) to underscore the religious significance of names in Africa, particularly those attributed to deities. From an analytical perspective, names possess a significance that extends beyond being abstract concepts devoid of specificity or simply designations. However, these names possess significant and symbolic implications (1987, 36). In this context, it is observed that names often possess descriptive qualities that reflect the nature of God, as evidenced by numerous myths and teachings pertaining to deities. The inherent and external characteristics of God, as well as the conceptualization of His hidden nature, are encapsulated in the names by which He is recognised, albeit requiring some effort

to interpret. This takes His will, divination, prophecy or other sources of African mysticism to get at, no matter the quantity. Illustrative, the Yoruba call God, *Olodumare* or *Edumare*. “The name *Olodumare* divides into three parts; Ol’ = Oni; it means “the owner of”, *Odu* means Chief head, scepter or authority,” all portray a height above most human imagination. The Igbo have *Chukwu* or *Chineke*. *Chukwu* is the biggest and highest of all gods and the only God, while *Chineke* means the creator God or God that creates. The names also have the carriage of God’s nature; believably the creator God can release information of Himself at will. This also accounts for the belief of having His breath, personal chi as a refraction of the central Force in humans as guiding spirit or guidance that extends up to luck in individuals among the Igbo people. This extends to community life as can be found when studies are extended. Apart from the nations already mentioned, the Edo, Nupe, Ijo, Tiv, Efik-Ibibio, Ewe and Fon, Akan and Ga, Kono, Mende, Ogoni, Yala, Zulu, Maasi, Hausa, Fulani, and all African tongues, have God’s attributes and nature embedded in His name. If Ogbonnaya had apprehended a semblance of this name concept, it would enhance the overall flavour significantly.

Scope of Analysis: The paper focuses predominantly on African philosophical traditions and does not extensively engage with other global philosophical perspectives on the nature of God. This narrow focus might limit the paper's ability to offer a comprehensive comparative analysis of the nature of God in Philosophy of Religion in general.

Potential Bias: The paper's strong advocacy for the African duality perspective might lead to a potential bias, overlooking potential criticisms or counterarguments that could challenge the proposed viewpoint. A more balanced approach that considers alternative perspectives could strengthen the paper's overall credibility.

Language Accessibility: Depending on the target audience, the paper's use of specialized philosophical terminology and complex theoretical concepts may hinder accessibility for readers less familiar with the field. Striking a balance between academic rigour and reader-friendly language would improve the paper's accessibility.

By considering these strengths and weaknesses, one can better understand the implications and contributions of the paper within the broader discourse on the nature of God from an African philosophical perspective.

Conclusion

In summary, the paper significantly contributes to the scholarship of African Philosophy of Religion by providing a critical analysis of concepts in traditional religions, fostering cultural and contextual understanding, offering comparative insights, contributing to theoretical framework development, and promoting interdisciplinary studies. These contributions collectively enrich the academic discourse and deepen the understanding of the complex and multifaceted nature of the African Philosophy of Religion.

Ogbonnaya argues that the knowledge of attributes carries with them the knowledge of the Divine Essence or Being, as essential qualities, and each of them reveals some aspects of the nature of God. In his words, “my concluding argument is that God cannot be pure spirit if the African duality lens examines its constituent nature. Instead, God will be seen as consisting of spirit and matter that are harmoniously complemented and integrated as they coexist as a whole” (OGBONNAYA 2022, 125). The task surrounding the study of God accounts for the allegation of it being an under-researched concept in African philosophy of religion. Notwithstanding such limitation, Ogbonnaya has taken some steps by researching the Nature of God in African place or religion (ATR), and this is a commendable contribution.

***The authors declare no conflict of interest for this work**

Relevant Literature

1. AWOLALU, J.O. and DOPAMU, P.A. [West African Traditional Religion], 1979. Onibonje Press: Ibadan.
2. BERKHOF, Luis. [Systematic Theology], 1988. University Printing House, Oxford.
3. BROWN, D. A. (2017). [A Guide to Religions], 2017. Prudent Universal Press: Kaduna.
4. EKEKE, Emeka C. & EKEOPARA, Chike A. “God, Divinities and Spirits in African Traditional Religious Ontology” [American Journal of Social and Management Sciences], pp. 209-218, 2010. Vol 1. No 2. Web
5. IKENG-METUH, Emefiele. [Comparative Studies of African Traditional Religions], 1987. IMICO Publishers: Onitsha.
6. MBITI, John S. [African Religions and Philosophy], 1977. Heinemann: London.
7. NWOSU, Enyioma E. “Religion, Culture and Morality from the African Background.” AKSU Diakonia: Journal of Religion and Culture], pp. 270-288, 2018. Vol 1. No 1. Paperback
8. _..... “Comparative Study of Religion,” [Methods, Theories and Issues in the Study of Religion, Emeka C. EKEKE, ed.], pp. 99-113, 2021. Stiffaith Print & Co: Calabar. Paperback
9. OGBONNAYA, L. Uchenna. “The Question of the Nature of God from the African Place” [Filosofia Theoretica: Journal of African Philosophy, Culture and Religions], pp. 115-130, 2022. Vol. 11. No. 1, Special Issue. DOI: [10.4314/ft.v11i1.8](https://doi.org/10.4314/ft.v11i1.8) Web
10. SIOLLUN, Max. [What Britain Did to Nigeria], 2021. Hurst & Company: London.
11. SMART, Ninian. [The World’s Religions], 1995. Cambridge University Press: Cambridge.