

# THE IGALA TRADITIONAL RELIGIOUS BELIEF SYSTEM: BETWEEN MONOTHEISM AND POLYTHEISM

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## Abstract

Specialists on African Traditional Religion and culture hold the position that the concept of the Supreme God is embedded in the religious life of the African people long before their contact with the Western world. The Igala traditional culture is not left out in this search. There is an enduring problem of situating the religious worldview of the Igala people. This work stands as a blueprint into the nature of most of Africa's religio-cultural belief systems. Using the Igala traditional concept of the supra-sensible in the light of the African Traditional Religion, we situate the belief system within either polytheistic or monotheistic structures, but not without some sense of hermeneutics and critical discourse. In the final analysis, we aver that the Igala traditional belief system falls within the category of inclusive monotheism.

## Introduction

Igala is an ethnic group in Nigeria. The home of Igala people is situated on the Eastern side of the river Niger and Benue confluence. They are the major ethnic group in present Kogi state of Nigeria, West Africa. As Africans they belong to the Kwa subgroups of the Niger Congo language family.<sup>1</sup> The Niger Congo languages constitute one of the world's major language families and Africa's largest in terms of geographical area and number of speakers.

Igala is a language of the Yoruboid branch of the Defoid. The defoid languages constitute a branch of the Benue Congo language family. It comprises the Igala and the Itsekiri group of south-western Nigeria. The name derives from its most widely spoken member, Yoruba. It is therefore note-worthy, at first instance that the Igala and the Yoruba share almost the same view in their notion of God. There is a very thin line in pronunciation of words that depict divinities with their qualities. Research has shown that

the concept of the *Ata* may have relational connection with a Yoruba word used to refer to kings both in Ayede Ekiti and Oshogbo respectively.<sup>2</sup> Armstrong was emphatic as he says that “the most definite statement that can be made about the Igala is that they had a common origin with the Yoruba and that separation took place long enough ago to allow for their fairly considerable linguistic differences.”<sup>3</sup> It is more preferable to say that there is a relational connection between cultures than to say that one emanates from the other since humility has not proven to be a virtue where cultures and civilizations contest for relevance.

### **Igala Traditional Concept of God**

Igala tradition is a product of culture and an integral part of African culture. The concept of God is central to religion and therefore constitutes one of the central themes of the cultures in Africa in general. The Igala traditional concept of God is a belief in the Supreme Being whom they call *Ojọ*. *Ojọ* is held so supreme, that out of his supremacy he gave powers and authorities to the gods and spirits over the different spheres of human life. These gods and spirits have practical dealings with human beings in their everyday life activities.

Igala cultural heritage shares the same thought with African thinkers who believe that in the acquisition of knowledge, the past is as relevant as the present. Little wonder then, Boston asserts that: “Their way of saying that a fact belongs to the widest order of human experience is to say that it was known to the ancestors of long ago, *ibogijo igbele*.”<sup>4</sup> Thus, an elder who is asked on the beginning of the usage of *Ojọ* would always say, *enwu k'am'atawa kowa kw'iko igbele igbele de*, which means, this is what our fathers taught us from ancient times.

Also, among the Igala people, there is a belief in a tripartite hierarchical order of supernatural or divine beings (God-Ancestors-Diviners).<sup>5</sup> These beings supersede the position and role of the ordinary man. It may appear that the Igala people have many ultimate beings, but they believe in one Ultimate Being. What appears to be many is just a hierarchy of suprasensible beings. This Ultimate Being is the Supreme Being called *Ojochamachala*; the

Being beyond human description. “The nature of God escapes human comprehension.”<sup>6</sup>

Prominent among the names of God that depict his nature is *Ojo ogbekwugbekwu*; the Great God. The length of these names; *Ojochamachala* and *Ojo ogbekwugbekwu* have made it necessary to apply its shortest form *Ojo*. Though the Igala people find it difficult to comprehend the real nature of God, even if he attempts to, it is impossible, yet he cannot deny the supremacy of an ultimate Being who is the author of the creative order. The Igala people therefore ascribe the name *Ojokiny'amenu duu*; God the creator of all, to this Supreme Being. African thinkers put creation as one of the unique works of God. “Over the whole of Africa, creation is the most widely acknowledged work of God. This concept is expressed through saying that God created all things...”<sup>7</sup>

The closeness of the Igala with the Yoruba, the Igbo, the Gwari people, etc. would appear as though the Igala people of Kogi state have a borrowed notion of God. Though there were influences, they still have their peculiarity. There is a general belief in the supreme God called *Ojo*, but that it is a function of intercourse between cultures or tribes is impossible to determine. African culture generally have a name they ascribe to the person of God, but the spirits and gods that serve as intermediaries with the Ultimate Being differ from one culture to another.

### **Divinities**

There is almost a thin line between divinities and ancestors in Igala culture. However, the ancestors (*Ibegwu*) rank second in authority to the Supreme Being. Some persons extol the *Ibegwu* as having a direct link with God himself. This is due perhaps to the role of *Ibegwu* as messengers or representatives of God. 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. People always tend to fear those things that threaten their life and their sense of courage is affected, especially in relation to disasters. The presence of the *Ibegwu* confirms the statement; “the evil that men do live with them”.

If we compare the interaction of vital forces in the universe to a spider's web, then in day to day life, the ancestors form the principal strand without which the fabric collapses. Thus, it is the superhuman quality of their power, not the omnipotence, that makes them so valuable, and sometimes, so dreadful, to their descendants in any extremity. The ancestors are therefore both the protectors of the society as well as the source of punishment.<sup>8</sup>

The ancestors are the departed relatives of the living, who led good lives on earth and at present, have found an abode with the rest of the ancestors in the other world. For the Igala, "the dead are the essential force behind their existence; they control crop-yields, human fertility, peace and progress in their society."<sup>9</sup>

There is therefore the belief in the existence of *ilei* (this world) and the *oj'ona* (the afterworld). The *oj'ona* is the world of the ancestors. For the Igala people, the *oj'ona* is a continuation of *ilei*. That is why it is believed that a king in this world is also a king in the hereafter. A slave in this world is also a slave in the hereafter. Little wonder, slaves were buried with kings in former times.

The *Ibegwu* are ever-living and active, once they have died, they become 'everlasting'. "The Africans regard these beings as being alive and keeping surveillance over the affairs of the living."<sup>10</sup> Even the advent of westernization till today has not been able to comprehend and compromise this belief. The question of the possibility of the dead praying for the living and protecting their interest, associating and communing with them have been running through non-African minds.

Ancestors are specially remembered once every year at the *Ibegwu* festival. The day of this festival occurs shortly before yams are harvested. It marks the beginning of the period of harvesting yams. In this period, the ancestors are appreciated for their protection throughout the previous year and are appeased to bestow more blessings in the coming year. The *Ibegwu* shrine is cleaned thoroughly during this period in preparation for the festival.

Among the divinities, the Igala people have strong belief in *Ikpakachi*. These are gods of the river where the community fetch their water. When a child is born, a drop of water (*omiumo*) from the community stream is given to the child. The child then gets one of

the spirits from the stream as a guardian. The sources of *Ikpakachi* spirits are near the streams or rivers. In some places, holes are dug beside houses of *Ikpakachi* worshippers and as many bottles as possible are fixed in the holes. Each person has his or her own bottle. Parents perform this rite once they give birth to a child and as the child grows, they expect the child to sustain the *Ikpakachi* in a bottle form. People who are stubborn to the dictates of this spirit should be ready to bear its consequences. The spirit protects lives and property and puts off obstacles; it also brings illness to the stubborn of heart. Every man is married to a female *Ikpakachi* (*ọya Ikpakachi*) and every woman is married to a male *Ikpakachi* (*ọkọ Ikpakachi*). It is noteworthy to state that although some divinities may differ depending on one's lineage, the supernatural ultimate is the same. The influences of other cultures have brought into Igala cultural heritage the worship of other gods and spirits. For example, the belief in *Ogun*, the god of iron, the belief in *Akpabana*, the god of thunder, etc. may have been influenced by the Yoruba tradition.

*Ifa*, for instance, is considered as the god of divinization in Igala culture. It is believed that *Ifa* carries messages from the other-world to this world. It is also a medium of dialogue between the living and the ancestors. Worship of gods and spirits are usually carried out at the advice of the *Ifa* priests and are usually led by special individuals, depending on the grade of worship. There is the *atama ẹbọ* (priests and priestesses) of the various gods, goddesses and spirits who lead worship.

### **The Attributes/Works of God**

Generally, in African Traditional Religion, the names ascribed to God are based on the experience of a particular people. Some names are personal and mean only God, other names are descriptive, that is, portray attributes of God. The works and the attributes of God go hand in hand. God's attributes however are not determined by his works. For example, God is good independently of what he has done for us. But human language and also the Igala contextualization has made it possible that we may say for example, 'God is good', because of the good things of life we have received. Some do not acknowledge the fact of God's goodness, not because God has not

bestowed his blessings, but because they have not recognized the goodness of God.

The Igala tradition holds that *Ojọ m'ẹnwu duu* (God knows all things). He judges a secret intention, both good and evil, that is why he is called *akajọ ẹnyo* (the good judge). He is also called the one who bestows good reward (*arọmẹ ẹnyo*). *Ojọ ki n'ukpahu duu* (God that has all powers) is also his attribute; *Ojọ odobogagwu'* could also be used in expressing the omnipotence of God.

*Ojọ achele ki ma k'ichan*; the one that showers gifts without any iota of arrogance, is also attributed to God. All these attributes of God have made the religious Igala man to acknowledge God's kingship. In the attributes, we see that man names God and through these names he gives to God, he draws closer to God. With all these attributes, it is obvious that the Igala person is naturally God-conscious. As it were, all these attributes are anthropomorphic: "The image and work of the human rulers tend to be readily projected on to the image of God."<sup>11</sup>

God is regarded as the life-giving spirit of man, the controller of man's action and the creator of all things (*Ojọ ki ny'amẹnwu duu*). *Ojọ* created everything and lives in the sky. *Ojale* (sky) is the abode of *Ojochamachala*. The *ilẹ* (earth) belongs to men, while the *oj'ona* belongs to the ancestors. However, the practical effects of these two worlds are felt here and now. That is why God, in Igala culture, has given power to each one according to his/her capacity and they are to use these powers to worship him and to enhance the welfare of one another.

Through man's relationship with those in the afterlife man has link with God. The ancestors were once living beings with flesh and blood. They were 'heirs' of the living and so it is believed that they have a duty towards the living. The ancestors therefore act as guardian spirits. The Igala performs his duty to the Supreme God and such guardian spirits (ancestors), not out of fear but out of reverence and devotion. God is not seen as an object of argument. God is, (*Ojọ dọmọ*), He exists and we owe him worship.

### **Monotheistic or Polytheistic?**

These various complications in the concept of God among the Igala make it almost impossible to classify the Igala people under a particular concept that depicts a form of worship, either as pantheism, polytheism or monotheism. The two likely terms to make our selections therefore are polytheism and monotheism. But is it possible that the Igala notion of God falls under the polytheist category? Properly speaking, polytheism presupposes a pantheon in which *Ojochamachala* would be one. But *Ojochamachala* is the Supreme Being distinct from other beings. There are no two *Ojochamachala*. *Ojo ch'okate*- there is only one God. They believe that God is one and also believe in the existence of several spirits.<sup>12</sup>

First of all, in discussing the divinities, we are confronted with two basic issues: the first is that a pantheon implies pluralism and this brings up the question as to whether or not polytheism applies as an appropriate, descriptive term for African traditional religion, and the other is of the nature of the divinities and their relationship to Deity. Accordingly, Tillich opines that: "polytheism is a qualitative and not a quantitative concept. It is not a belief in a plurality of gods but rather the lack of a unifying and transcending ultimate which determines its character."<sup>13</sup> A.C. Bouquet is of the opinion that there is something inherent in human nature which makes pluralism more satisfying to him than a unitary conception of reality. He sees it as being a matter of traditional culture rather than race. To some extent, it is a rich diversity of life, coming especially with the development of the communities. Practical polytheism is more or less frankly speaking pluralists, provided we are allowed to believe that the divine principle remains supreme, and that others are subordinate.<sup>14</sup>

"The concreteness of man's ultimate concern drives him toward polytheistic structures, the reaction of the absolute element against these drives him toward monotheistic structures..."<sup>15</sup> Thus, worship of a multiplicity of divinities is rated very high in the traditional religions of Nigeria of which the Igala tradition stands out as one. One thing stands out among them all, that is, the element of worship.<sup>16</sup>

According to Opoku, Polytheism is grossly inadequate as a description of African traditional religion, for a religion cannot be

said to be polytheistic merely because there exist many divinities in that religion. The key question with regard to polytheism remains the relationship between the gods in the pantheon, and here, the religious belief of the Egyptians, Babylonians and Greeks, which are classical examples of polytheism, can throw considerable light on our understanding of the term.<sup>17</sup>

In classical polytheism, the gods in the pantheon were all independent of one another. One of the gods might be regarded as the chief, but he was never regarded as the creator of the other gods.<sup>18</sup> This understanding of the concept of polytheism justifies the claim of the Igala in monotheism, since what appears to be many is just a hierarchy of supernatural beings. That notwithstanding, its distinctiveness from the classical polytheistic concept lies in the fact that the one who is the Chief of all gods and goddesses is also the creator. Idowu gave an example of a clear case of polytheism, which he described as “proper polytheism”. Using an evident example of the Olympian situation, we have a system where the gods appear not to have transcended the realm of the universe of social cliques and inter-tribal conflicts. All the gods were of the same rank and file. They also shared in the passion of men and used their divinity to compete with, and beating men up.<sup>19</sup>

In the Igala concept of God, subscribing to Quarcoopome’s line of thought, *Ojochamachala* is not of the same rank and file with other divinities. He is the Supernatural Ultimate that is beyond the realm of the knowable. He is above the pantheon and therefore not part of it. The divinities were brought into being by him. They derive their power and authority from him. The divinities are not end in themselves, but they serve as means to an end. A situation therefore may exist where the divinities, although deriving their power and authority from God, can be treated for practical purposes as ends in themselves. Another reason also is that the divinities are accorded regular worship, whereas God is rarely worshipped directly.<sup>20</sup>

At some points in the Igala tradition, there are manifestations of polytheistic elements, as is the case with *ẹbọ emọ*, that is, oath taking. The ancestors, as already noted, are revered as gods meant to protect the interest of the human race. At the same time,

If a person is suspected of being a thief, a sorcerer or a witch in the community, and he wishes to swear his innocence, he will be made to take an oath in the shrine of *ẹbọ anẹ*, ode or the Ancestral Spirits... it is expected that if the person is guilty, he will fall sick and die or he will fall sick and confess within the period...<sup>21</sup>

It is note-worthy that *ẹbọ emọ* is always the last resort and the ancestral spirits are treated as gods in themselves without reference to any ultimate supernatural being. Recourse to these divinities and other spirits has overshadowed the worship of *Ojochamachala*. It is because of this that many are inclined to deny that element of monotheism. However, Okwoli notes that, if God is not given direct worship in Igala tradition, it is because the people believe that the worship of divinities and other spirits is directed to him. Little wonder, he has given the running or the administration of the world to the lesser divinities.<sup>22</sup>

Like the Yoruba cultural heritage, there is therefore no absolute polytheism or an absolute monotheism, though concepts of the divine must include both concreteness and ultimacy.<sup>23</sup> The Igala tend towards an emphasis on concreteness on the divine as available to man. Yet there is also recognition of an ultimate which transcends man expressed in the Great God, *Ogbẹkwugbẹkwu*. When the focus is placed on this God, it is appropriate to speak in terms of monotheism. "However, this monotheistic concept of God tends to be unstable. On the one hand, insofar as God is ultimate, he is unavailable for practical needs and thus tends to be irrelevant to life."<sup>24</sup> This distinction between the concrete and the ultimate in the Igala notion of God is still very complicated. Like some tribes and culture, the Igala people have not escaped the tension between the ultimate and the concrete. They differ from others and among themselves in their specific attempts to deal with the tension.

Within polytheism there are hard and soft varieties. Hard polytheism views the gods as being distinct and separate beings, soft polytheism views the gods as being subsumed into a greater whole. Within polytheism, a number of attitudes to the worship of the gods can be discerned. Monolatry, henotheism coined by Max Muller. It

means belief in and possible worship of, multiple gods, one of which is supreme. It is also called inclusive monotheism or monarchical polytheism. This henotheistic view is held probably because the one that is supreme is more powerful or worthy of worship than other gods.<sup>25</sup>

The word monolatry is based upon the Greek roots *monos*, which means one and *latreia*, which means service, or religious worship. It seems to have been first used by Julius Wellhausen to describe a type of polytheism in which only one god is worshipped even though the existence of other gods is accepted. Other gods in other cultures may be acknowledged as existing but ignored, or they might be treated as different cultural manifestation of the same divinities. Most of what we refer to as monotheism is in actual sense monolatry.<sup>26</sup> It is also common that each individual god represents a unique value, personifies some aspect of humanity, and/or maintains stewardship over some facet of nature.

Let us take Paul Radin's concept of monotheism and see where we can situate the Igala concept of God,

Monotheism itself presents a number of phases. A recent classification of its history divides it into three stages; into monolatry, i.e. a belief in a Supreme Being but the persistence of the worship of other deities at the same time; implicit monotheism, i.e. a belief in a supreme deity yet no definite denial of other gods; and lastly, explicit monotheism, a belief in a supreme deity and a denial of the existence of other gods...<sup>27</sup>

Although polytheistic systems postulate a coherent group, this does not mean they do not acknowledge the existence of outside gods, when faced with gods from other cultures and religions, they are usually three different responses. One is to claim that some or all of the outside gods are really the same as the gods currently worshipped, just with different names. Any new aspects or power are simply incorporated into the older gods. A second response is to take some of the new gods and adopt them as new members of the

pantheon. A final response is to accept that the other gods exist, but not worship them in any active manner.<sup>28</sup>

Polytheists generally believe that gods are distinct and separate beings. Soft polytheism is a variety of polytheism in which adherents believe in many gods or goddesses but consider them to be manifestations or aspects of a single god rather than completely distinct entities. Soft polytheism may include varieties of monolatry, henotheism, coupled with forms of pantheism or panentheism. In hard polytheism, the gods appear as independent agent who can be, and often are in conflict with one another.

### **Concluding Remarks**

Igala traditional concept and by extension African religions, combine principles of unity and multiplicity, transcendence and immanence, into a single system; thus, in many instances the supreme God is the one, omniscient, omnipotent, transcendent, creator, father and judge. From the time of the first contact with Muslims and Christians, Africans recognized their supreme gods to be the same as the God of Christianity and Islam. It is not known whether African religions were more or less monotheistic than they are today, although it is certain that African notion of God has developed over time.<sup>29</sup>

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.

Quarcoopome agrees with the fact that a situation may exist where the divinities, for some practical purposes can be treated as ends in themselves. Much emphasis is always on the worship of the divinities. At this level that gods' worship overshadows *Ojochamachala*, we speak in terms of polytheism. However, there is still a line of contradiction to be adequately filled. If one who has led good life on this earth is an ancestor in the after world, a slave who led good life cannot remain a slave. It is rather proper to say that

such a slave becomes a king over an earthly king who, when on earth never lived a life that is worth commending.

With regard to the ancestor-gods, from its description we could see that there was a time when they were not. Their divinity begins at the point when they become 'living-dead'. The implication of this is that all living beings who lead good lives on earth are potential gods. We can therefore not speak of proper polytheism or proper monotheism as such. For the concept of God as perceived by the Igala includes both elements of concreteness and ultimacy. Thus, there is a mixture of both the polytheistic and monotheistic category.

Radin's attempt to give a unique definition of monolatry that is different from its etymological meaning creates tension. If we are to subscribe to his notion of monolatry, then we can adequately conclude that the Igala notion of a Supreme Being falls within this understanding. However, the ability to hold on to varieties of the definition/meaning of monolatry breeds inconsistency since monolatry as a concept has not reached the state of ambiguity. Anyone who therefore rejects Radin's meaning of a monolatrous notion of God would by implication reject its application to the Igala people. Hence, it would go a long way to questioning the entire project that we attempt to tackle. It would therefore be more proper to speak of the Igala trado-religious belief in terms of soft polytheism that includes versions of monolatry and henotheism.

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