



THE SUPREME BEING IN AFRICAN TRADITIONAL THOUGHT: A LOGICO-ONTOLOGICAL APPROACH

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Introduction

Do Africans have an idea of a Supreme Being? If Africans have such an idea, what does it mean? These are questions that have been discussed for some years now, but have not been satisfactorily answered. They are important issues, because the question whether or not a people conceives of a Supreme Being and the way a people conceives of a Supreme Being largely affect this people's conception of man, human life, values and destiny; it is a key element in the ideology (worldview) of a religious people. Wan Mohd Nor Wan Daud rightly points out that discussions about worldviews "normally centre on the idea of God or gods, the conception of man and his destiny, and the universe" (provided we take the "idea of God or gods" as a way of conceiving the fundamental nature of reality by religiously inclined peoples and cultures).¹ The ideology of a people is basically the popular philosophy of such a people. It provides guides to action not only theoretically but also practically by actively influencing people. Alistair McIntyre says, in this regard, that an ideology has:

three key features. The first is that it attempts to delineate certain general characteristics of nature or society or both; characteristics which do not belong only to the changing world which can be investigated only by empirical inquiry... The second central feature of any ideology is an account of the relationship between what is the case and how we ought to act, between the world and that of morals, politics, and other guides to conduct... The third defining property of an ideology is that it is not merely believed by the members of a given social group, but believed in such a way that it at least partially defines for them their social existence.²

¹ Wan Mohd Nor Wan Daud, *The Concept of Knowledge in Islam and its Implications for Education in a Developing Country* (London: Masell Publishing, 1989), 10.

² A. McIntyre, *Against the Self-images of the Age* (New York: Schocken Books, 1971), 5–7; quoted by Peter Du Perez, *The Politics of Identity* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1980), 49.



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The importance of the idea of the Supreme Being in understanding the ideology and philosophical thought of Africans—a highly religious people—should be clear from the foregoing. However, the idea of the Supreme Being gains additional significance when we realize that Africans had no written records of their conceptualizations. Therefore the proper meaning, function and significance of a myriad of African ideas and institutions can only be accessed through a proper understanding of the ideas of the Supreme Being in African thought.

Given the above, a dispassionate analysis of the idea of the Supreme Being is needed. Such an analysis should be beyond the ethnocentrist struggle between African polemicists (who affirm the existence of the Supreme Being in African thought) and Western polemicists (who deny the existence of such a Being), which tends to becloud, and prevent us from getting at, the truth on this matter. To achieve this purpose, we would examine the nature of the Supreme Being by looking first at the logical character of such a Being and then at the ontological composition that could go with it.

The Logico-Ontological Nature of the Supreme Being

An exposé of the logical nature of our idea of the Supreme Being (or God) should start with an examination of our conception of the Supreme or of Supremacy. According to the *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary of Current English* the word “Supreme” means “highest in degree or rank or authority;” it also means “most important; greatest.” The Supreme Being as the “most important” being could give us a number of ideas (some conflicting) of the logical character of such a being. This is because they describe our own assessment of such a being; hence describing our own attitudinal and subjective state and not the properties of the Being as such. For instance, we may consider a being as the one which is most cherished or feared or respected in a pantheon. Such a being may have no power over other important beings, but its particular position is justified because it alone possesses a quality we do not find in any other member of the pantheon. The logical character of such a conception is essentially particularistic in the sense that a property or some properties are possessed in a mutually exclusive manner by the beings (gods) that make up the pantheon. On the other hand, we may consider a being as the most important and the greatest because it possesses and exercises absolute power over other beings. In this case we would be considering a universalistic logical character, since the imprint or quality or presence of this being is to be found in all things.

The supremacy of the Supreme Being in the first example is not one in which the Supreme Being necessarily has control over the other gods or beings



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in the pantheon or the world. Such a view is clearly amenable to polytheism. An instance of such a view of supremacy can be seen in pre-Christian Germanic religion and mythology. Erich Kahler writes in this regard that:

The principal god, Wuotan (Norse “Odin”), is a sorcerer or Shaman with varied magical gifts. He lacks the omnipresence of a universal god, but he is felt to be ubiquitous because he can suddenly appear anywhere, literally transported by ecstasy, trance or fury... The cosmic struggle begins between two clans of deities. One clan consists of the Van, fertility spirits reflecting the milder, more settled tribal life in the Scandinavian homelands on the northern shores. The Vans are defeated by the Ases, mythical figures originating among the migrating central European tribes. The climactic event of Germanic mythology is Ragnarok. In this gigantic Armageddon, the Ases themselves succumb to giants and dragons gone berserk; and the whole world is destroyed. The Fenriswolf swallows Odin and the Sun; the Midgard-snake slain by Thor, kills him with his poisonous breath. The sky collapses, and its debris crush the earth.³

The point here is that Wuotan (Odin), the principal god, has limited powers although he is supreme in the pantheon (this is apparently a polytheistic vision). Many Africans, piqued by the claims of Eurocentric Europeans (who have apparently forgotten their own past) to the effect that “Deity is a philosophical concept which savages are incapable of framing,” have tried to show that Africans have a pre-Christian idea of a Supreme God in a somewhat monotheistic sense (“Diffused Monotheism” as Idowu puts it). This, as we shall see, is proposing a rather indefensible idea of monotheism instead of simply reminding the Eurocentrists of their past and that the Christianity which they claim as their own originated outside Europe amongst a Semitic people who not only are a mixed breed made of Negroid and Caucasian strains, but were also strongly influenced by Africa.⁴

Supremacy in the monotheistic sense means to occupy the highest position of authority, power and influence. The Supreme Being is the being with supreme power (authority and influence) over other gods and lesser beings. However, such a Supreme Being can be conceived in two ways. The Hebrew way sees the Supreme Being as the source and end of all Creation, eternal, infinite, unchanging, infinitely and totally powerful and actively relating to each of its creations according to its own state. For purposes of brevity and clarity this can be regarded as the Absolutely Supreme Being. The other way is the

³ Erich Kahler, *The Germans* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1974), 35–36.

⁴ See E. Bolaji Idowu, *Olodumare* (London: Longman, 1962), 30–32; 203–204.



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African way articulated by Idowu and others. According to Idowu, from the name Olodumare we can get the following:

Either someone who is a supreme head, one who possesses the scepter or authority; or one who 'contains' the fullness of excellent attributes, one who is superlative and perfect in greatness, size, quality, and worth...The Deity who possesses superlative qualities has also the added attribute of remaining stable, unchanging, constant, permanent, reliable.⁵

Idowu further articulates this view by saying that Olodumare is the Creator, He is King, He is Omnipotent; He is All-Wise; He is All-Knowing; He is All-Seeing; He is Judge; He is Immortal; He is Holy.⁶ Chukwu or Olisaebuluwa, the Supreme God amongst the Igbo, is said to have generally similar qualities.⁷ Although this Supreme Being possesses these superlative qualities and power, it delegates some of these powers to its ministers, the deities, such as Ani, Agwu, Ogwugwu and Igwe among the Igbo and Orisanla, Orummila (Ifa), Ogun and Esu among the Yoruba. These deities are in control of various principles or aspects of life and the universe. They also act as intermediaries between the Supreme Being and humans. The basic nature of this view is that the Supreme Being governs with a great deal of devolution of powers in which the inferior powers or deities can creatively chart their own course, provided it does not conflict fundamentally with the interest and nature of the Supreme Being. Here the presence of the Supreme Being is indirect, by way of His acquiescence to the actions and programmes of the lesser deities. For purposes of brevity, we may regard this as the idea of the Decentralized ("Devolutionary") Supreme Being. The question that comes to mind is whether we can have a Decentralized Supreme Being and if we can, what it would be like. In order to answer these questions and also determine what sort of Supreme Being the African conceived in the pre-Christian era, we should look more closely at the logical structure of the two types of a Supreme Being mentioned above.

The logical character of the Absolutely Supreme Being is that it would possess and exercise universal, eternal, infinite power and influence over itself and all other beings. It would possess all the elements of universality: universal applicability or validity (since he is universally effective); infinite reach, eternal presence, total objectivity or impartiality. The absolutely powerful being cannot

⁵ E. Bolaji Idowu, *Olodumare*, 34–35.

⁶ E. Bolaji Idowu, *Olodumare*, 38–47.

⁷ O. A. Onwubiko, *African Thought, Religion and Culture* (Enugu: O.A. Onwubiko, Bigard Memorial Seminary, 1991), 66–73.



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be a being that shows partiality or favours on grounds of sentiment or passion. For if it is such a being, then either the reason for such partiality or favours is inside the Absolutely Supreme Being or outside it; if it is outside it then a being outside the Absolutely Supreme Being is exercising power over it, in which case it is not absolutely powerful. If, on the contrary, the cause for such partiality is inside the Absolutely Supreme Being (that is, that it can and does will favouring a being as it pleases) then either the Absolutely Supreme Being is not in full possession (control) of itself or it is capricious. Both of these are limiting factors to its power. If it lacks control of itself, then it is not absolutely powerful; if it is capricious, then it could annihilate, in a nihilistic moment, its own very existence, in which case it is not an eternal, infinitely powerful being.

It could be said, of course, that such a being can be capricious in all things except its own existence; in other words, it would obey the law of self-preservation. However, if that is so, then it would not have control over its own existence. Such a being cannot say like Jesus Christ: “No one takes my life away from me. I give it up of my own freewill; I have the right to give it up and I have the right to take it back.”⁸ It follows then that the Absolutely Supreme Being must necessarily be a totally rational (or rationalistic) being. This is not to say, like Kant, that the rational order/form can exist apart from, prior to (and, hence in some sense superior to) the Absolutely Supreme Being (this was a subtle enlightenment critique and substitution for the idea of God in the Western tradition). Rather, it is to say that the Absolutely Supreme Being is necessarily—by its own very nature—absolutely rational; to be less than absolutely rational would be to be less than the Absolutely Supreme Being.

When we turn to the Decentralized Supreme Being we see that its logical structure should be the same as that of the Absolutely Supreme Being. This is because if it has the attributes discussed above and hence is supremely powerful, then its ministers are nothing but a projection of its powers. These powers, the powers and activities of the gods, are in effect, substantially, the presence and activity of the Supreme Being; they form one essence, hence, one substantial reality. We thus have to take the Supreme Being and its ministers as one block or totality, one substance. The Decentralized Supreme Being as a singular substance should be of the same logical nature, that is, be necessarily totally rational; truly universal as discussed above. This would be a necessary element of its being. We can now examine the African conception of the Supreme Being and other deities to see what their logical character looks like. Before we do this, however, let us note that the Absolutely Supreme Being and the Decentralized

⁸ John 10:10, as rendered by the *Good News Bible* (New York: American Bible Society, 1978), 139 (NT).



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Supreme Being, indeed any being conceived as possessing the attributes of eternal, infinite omnipotence and omniscience cannot be composed of an ontological constituent that could in any way hinder or foreclose the full logical (rational) expression of its being. Thus from the logical character of a being we can determine whether such a being is really a Supreme Being.

The Logico-Ontological Character of the Supreme Being in African Thought

We shall examine here the way the idea of the Supreme Being features in traditional African thought (i.e. the degree to which we can properly attribute total universality to this idea) by looking closely at Igbo culture, particularly the ethical sphere of the Igbo people. One reason for embarking on this analysis, for going beyond the names and supposed attributes of this Being, is that the names of the Being are in dispute. This is not peculiar to the Igbo. Amongst the Yoruba, Idowu gives four possible interpretations of the name Olodumare (the Supreme Being); Fadipe and others say that the usual name for the Supreme Being is not Olodumare, but Olorun (the Lord of the Sky); for Fadipe, Olodumare came with Christian influence, while for Idowu it is Olorun that came with Christian influence.⁹ Amongst the Igbo, the dispute about the name of the Supreme Being is deeper. It has been argued that Chukwu, the name of the Supreme Being, is actually “Chiukwu abiam,” the name the Aros gave to their deity Ibiniukpabi (the long Juju) in their commercialism. It came to be widely accepted because of the mutually reinforcing success of Aro commercialism and the revelations of the juju. Even amongst the Igbo of the former Nsukka province, where Chukwu is called Ezechitoke, Aro, the influence is unmistakable, for when stated in full it is “Ezechitoke abiam.”¹⁰ Amongst the Western Igbo, the name for the Supreme Being is Olisaebuluwa (the Orisa—deity—that bears or carries the world). But this may well be a deity whose specific task is to bear the world, making it no more supreme than other principal deities or, since “uwa” means both the universe (or the earth) and fortune, Olisaebuluwa may mean the god that bears fortune or the god of fortune. This interpretation is supported by the name Osaemenam which means “Olisaebuluwa does not inflict misfortune (ill luck) on me.”

Let us now examine the logical nature of the presence of the Supreme in the Igbo ethical system. The ethical codes of people are a set of injunction(s),

⁹ O. A. Onwubiko, *African Thought, Religion and Culture*, 67–68.

¹⁰ J. Obi Oguejiofor, *The Influence of Igbo Traditional Religion on the Socio-political Character of the Igbo* (Nsukka: Fulladu Publishing Co., 1996), 60.



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which issue from a communally accepted source of normativity. Normally, therefore, the ethical code of a community that believes in the existence of a fully Supreme Being, in either of the two senses discussed in the last section, should issue, directly or indirectly, from such a Being.

Amongst the Igbo, the source of normativity is Ani, the earth goddess. All serious moral offences are “Nso Ani” (a breach of the earth goddess’ taboo). Apparently, Ani is a Minister of the Supreme Being. If this is the case, then these injunctions are from the Supreme Being. This would be the general line of thought on this matter with people like Idowu’ who argue for a Decentralized Supreme Being or a Diffused Monostheistic picture for Africa. These injunctions include negative (prohibitive) and positive ones. Among the prohibited acts are incest, stealing, (especially of yams and other valuables such as cows), patricide, murder or accidental killing. All of these, however, are offences against members of the clan or the community (the maximal political unit). This will become clearer when we look at the “Nso Umueze-Aroli Nze-na-Ozo” of the royal Umueze-Aroli kin group of Onitsha. The Nze-na-Ozo men are priests of the ancestor/lineage cults which are closely bound to the Ani goddess, a goddess whose generative/creative activity makes all life possible. She is “the beginning of all life and the recipient of life.”¹¹ The ethical code of this lineage-based priesthood expresses the highest ethical standards of the people, as should be expected.

Nso Umueze Aroli – Nze na Ozo:

- 1.a I ga n’asopulu Okpala gi.
 - b I ma ga ya niru.
 - c I ga n’efe ya Nru.
 - d I ga n’akwudolu ya n’ilo mgbencha.
- 2.a I ga n’ene nna gi na nne gi anya.
 - b Iga n’afufu n’anya. O bu alu m’obulu n’itie nne gi m’obu nna gi ife; m’obu Ikpoo fa iyii nso. Ifendia ga bu ife anemegha emegha.
3. Iga n’elote ikene Ani.
- 4.a I ma n’apu ilo nachi jie.
 - b O di na nkpa, I ga anyalu akpa gi ya bu madu g’eso gi.
5. Nze na Ozo adighi asi asi.
6. Nze na Ozo adighi ezu ori.

¹¹ Ben N. Chukwudebe, ed. *Onitsha Quo Vadis* (Owerri: B.N. Chukwudebe, 2nd edition 1986), 22.



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- 7.a Nze na Ozo adighi egbu madu – ya bu na Nze na Ozo adighi anu ogu; Odighi agwo ogwu igbu madu;
Odighi aku nsi
8. Nze na Ozo adighi ayi nwada; m’obu nwunye ebo.
- 9.a Nze-na Ozo adighi eso agba izu igbu madu.
 - b Omaso gbaa izu imedide umunnaya.
10. Nze na Ozo adighi eli nni onamaro onye silinu.¹²

Translation:

- 1.a You should respect your ‘okpala’ [the head of your family or family group; literally father, the one who succeeds and represents or personifies a dead father, grandfather, great-grandfather, etc.].
 - b You must not be forward toward your Okpala; you must remain subordinate to him.
 - c You must pay him homage [with gifts, etc.].
 - d You must always defend him, show loyalty and support to him in any conflict with outsiders.
- 2.a You should take good care of your parents.
 - b You should love them. It is a major offence to beat or curse either one of your parents; such an offence requires cleansing and restitution through the necessary traditional ceremonies.
3. Remember always to salute, show gratitude to, and as the case may be to propitiate, the Ani goddess.
- 4.a You should not leave your house [go visiting, etc.] once it is dark [at night].
 - b If it is necessary that you do so, you must be accompanied by an able-bodied person [‘madu’ stands for a person, male or female, of any type; but it seems that the idea here is an able-bodied man, who can put up some defence if the need arises].
5. An Ozo-titled man does not lie.
6. An Ozo-titled man does not steal.
- 7.a An Ozo-titled man does not kill human beings; therefore he does not fight.

¹² Ben N. Chukwudebe, ed. *Onitsba Quo Vadis*, 40. Divisional letters of the alphabet are mine (7b “made” – originally “madu,” apparently a typographical error).



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- b He does not make or contract anyone to make “medicine” [any type of magical/spiritual/physical device put together by a native doctor, sorcerer, etc.] meant for the killing of anyone. He does not apply “medicine” of any type at all against people.
8. The Ozo-titled man does not involve himself in sexual relations with any female from his family or clan [incest]; nor does he involve himself in such relations with the wife of any member of his family or clan.
- 9.a The Ozo-titled man does not involve himself in a conspiracy to kill anyone.
 - b And he should not be involved in any discussion or conspiracy that is in any way detrimental to his patrilineage [extended family and clan].
10. The Ozo-titled man does not eat food cooked by a person or people he does not know. [Probably to avoid unhygienic food and the deliberate poisoning of food by malicious persons].

When we look closely at these laws, we see that laws 4 and 10 are not ethical injunctions but security measures; however Chukwudebe holds that these commandments are similar to the Decalogue and that “the difference lies in the application.”¹³ Truly the difference lies in application, but it is not as Chukwudebe conceived it. The difference lies in the scope (the horizon) of applicability of these laws, that is, the degree to which these commandments are sentences that should apply in a totally universalistic manner. When we look at these commandments, we see that they are not meant to apply in a totally universalistic manner. Let us examine them closely.

Commandment 1.d demands “patriotism.” It establishes in-group loyalty (self-preservation) over and above any other ethical demand such as justice, truth, “respect for persons as ends” in dealing with an out-group. Indeed, this law explains the whole character of the ethical codes of this community and it is generally the same for all Igbo communities.

By its nature, commandment 2 is a particularistic law. This is because it addresses the attention paid to two particular human beings out of the whole of humanity. Although the sentence “Everyone should love his or her parents” is a universal one, the action it elicits is highly particularistic; it does not address humanity as a whole. The sentence thus addresses the relations between particular persons defined as parents and other particular person(s) defined as offspring.

¹³ Ben N. Chukwudebe, ed. *Onitsha Quo Vadis*, 38.



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As regards commandment 3, the goddess Ani, as said earlier, is the being from whom the ethical commands issue; she punishes offences. Ani, however, is not a universal goddess in Igboland, in the sense of having a common priesthood, rites, shrine, and so forth. Every community has its own Ani, which is believed to be the hallowed presence of the earth goddess, who brought forth their ancestors and supports and guarantees the life of their progeny in the present and the future. Ani is, therefore, the ultimate lineage cult and, hence, the character of its injunctions, ultimately, are of the nature of approval for those things that would aid the preservation (the material, physical preservation and continuation) of the lineage (the family, extended family, clan, community). It should be noted, however, that for the preservation of the family, the extended family, and at times the clan, the first port of call is the ancestor, because the ancestors act as intercessors between humans and Ani and Chukwu. Ani, however, is taken by some to be the Supreme Being.¹⁴ Ani is the Supreme lineage cult (the goddess that bore the lineage just like a mother her child), as can be seen in the expression “Ani be anyi eme kwe” in response to an evil proposal (“Our Ani won’t allow such an evil”; better still “The Ani that made and guarantees the preservation of my clan/lineage won’t permit such an evil”); Ani is thus ultimately a god of concrete material self-preservation. For these reasons, the Ani of a people provides injunctions and rewards (positive and negative) only for members of such a community. It is not binding on outsiders, whether they are Igbo-speaking or not. Thus we have Omenani, “the being that obtains in the land or in the community;¹⁵ these are the customs and traditions of a people and approved for a people by their earth goddess. We also have in common usage, Omenani anyi (our Omenani); Omenani fa (their Omenani); Omenani ndi (the Omenani of a people) or Odibendi (that being that obtains amongst a people). It should be noted here that while there are common features amongst the Igbo, especially amongst the major regions of the Igbo-speaking people, there was no consciousness of Omenani Igbo in the pre-colonial era, and even up until now. It is always Omenani ndi (i.e. the omenani of a given community). Because Ani is a goddess of self-preservation, her injunctions cannot pass the test of total universality, especially those which require the bridging or crossing of the subject-object divide in favour of

¹⁴ J. Obi Oguejiofor, *The Influence of Igbo Traditional Religion on the Socio-political Character of the Igbo*, 69–72. Oguejiofor explores the ideas of those who think, with very good reasons, that Ani or Ala is the Supreme Being amongst the Igbo. See also M. Echeruo, *A Matter of Identity* (Owerri: Ministry of Information, 1979).

¹⁵ T.U. Nwala, *Igbo Philosophy* (Ikeja Lagos: Lateramed Publishing (Nigeria), 1985), 26.



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objectivity, impersonality, or impartiality. From this, it should now be clear why we have rule 1.d.

The injunction in commandment 5 has to be interpreted in the light of rule 1.d. One must not lie to a member of the in-group, but if a lie is required in the defence of the *okpala* or the family or the clan, such a lie is no offence.

Just as in the above case, the injunction in commandment 6 pertains mainly to the in-group. One cannot steal that which belongs to a member of the community; outside the community however, one may do as one pleases. This may be seen in the fact that an *Ozo*-titled man can sponsor or acquiesce in, without offending the *Ani* of his society, the kidnapping of a person outside the community. The need for such kidnappings arose from the demand for human sacrifices by oracles, divinities, for prosperity “medicine,” and also from the need for slave labour.

At this point one may compare the injunction on stealing here with that on stealing in Christianity, especially since white Christians were major slave dealers. To state the contrast simply, whereas the Christian injunction prohibits such an activity expressly because it condemns any such act, notwithstanding the fact whether the person kidnapped is a member of one’s community or not, the injunction in this African tradition is not so. Christian white men who undertook kidnapping for slavery and other purposes did it of their own accord. Some tried to bend the Christian law to suit their own purpose; it is said, for instance, that some argued that it was a good thing to kidnap pagans and bring them as slaves to Christian countries because this would facilitate their conversion and salvation; a bogus argument indeed.

Again, the fact that commandment 7 is not a commandment with universal application and dimensions comes out when we appreciate the fact that in the monarchic society of *Onitsha*, one must be an *Ozo*-titled man to aspire to be king. However, the ceremonies of installation require extensive rituals and sacrifices, including the sacrifice of five human beings, whom the aspirant would have to provide. This was the practice in *Onitsha* before 1901, when *Samuel Okosi*, a Christian, was installed *igwe* (king), Cows were then substituted for humans and this has since been the case. For other monarchic societies amongst the *Igbo*, *Edo*, and *Yoruba* people, this sort of substitution is believed to have taken place although one cannot vouch that it was indeed so. Apart from this, communities collectively engaged in human sacrifice amongst the peoples of Nigeria for one reason or the other, such as making powerful “*juju*” or “medicine” for the community’s protection or its fertility or in responding to the demands of a deity. In respect of human sacrifice amongst the *Yoruba*, *Idowu* says that:



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The highest type of sacrifice among the Yoruba used to be human sacrifice. No one can be quite sure that this sacrifice is not being offered, if secretly and only on urgent occasions even these days, although after the establishment of British rule in the country, it was made illegal. In the old days, human sacrifice by the Yoruba was the climax of sacrifices. The occasion was more often than not a matter of national or community importance. There were divinities to whom the annual offering must be human. Such was Oramfe of Ile-Ife, and of Ondo; so also was Ogun... The sacrifice was also offered whenever it was believed expedient that someone should die as a sacrifice of appeasement in order that the community might be saved.¹⁶

Idowu's attempt to show that it is not true that the Yoruba only use non-Yorubas for their human sacrifices demonstrates the particularism of this practice. The in-group is the kin group; those from outside, whether Yoruba-speaking or not, are the victims (this of course is born out of the instinct for the preservation of oneself in and through the lineage group). As he writes:

The notion, which has been spread abroad that the Yoruba did not, as a rule, offer their own kith in sacrifice, is not quite correct. The moral prerequisite to such a sacrifice was that shortly before the sacrifice a warning must be sounded publicly that there was the likelihood of someone missing within the next few days and in order to be safe from such a tragedy, everybody should keep indoors after a certain hour of the night for a specified period. That meant that at certain hours of the night during that period, those who had been prepared to catch a victim would be abroad, and the very first person they met, if he was suitable for their purpose, would be caught, no matter who he might be. Someone, a stranger, very likely usually fell into the trap and was sacrificed. There were, however, specific cases in which the ritual demands were that the victims should be contributed by certain chiefs in the community from the membership of their own compound. In such a case, the victims would be household slaves who had been acquired by purchase or as war captives, should the oracle be still more definite about the victims, then whoever was mentioned would be sacrificed. There were secret

¹⁶ E. Bolaji Idowu, *Olodumare*, 119.



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societies the members of which customarily sacrificed in turn their own offspring.¹⁷

Again, commandment 8 shows similar limitations to the others above. The Ozo-titled man ought not to engage in incestuous sexual relations (with a daughter or wife of the lineage group); outside this group of women the law is silent. Sexual relations outside this group are no offence, so it is not extra-marital relations that are an offence, it depends on who the partner is. Pre-marital sex should be treated in a similar manner for some have their Ozo-title before marriage.

While commandment 9.a has already been treated in the comments on commandment 7; commandment 9.b reinforces the demand for in-group loyalty, expressed clearly in 1.d and implicitly in the other commandments, except for 4 and 10. The way the Onitsha Igbo, and indeed the Igbo, approach ethics is summed up in the proverb “Okuku ada alu ulu na akwa ya” (“A fowl does not wreak havoc among its eggs”).¹⁸

We have seen that the source of normativity, Aní, is conceived as belonging peculiarly to a given people and hence is not universalistic in character; nor are her injunctions universalistic in character, for they are apparently meant for the preservation of a specific lineage group and the promotion of the welfare of such a group. They obviously do not manifest the total universalistic character expected of a totally universal being. Since, however, Aní is representing and expressing Chukwu (if Chukwu is the Supreme Being in either of the senses discussed above) then these ethical injunctions are really from Chukwu. Since Aní is particularistic in character, Chukwu also must be so. Since Aní is ultimately a god of self-preservation, then Chukwu can be no different. As a matter of fact, Chukwu is expressly conceived as such in the Nri myth of creation; here Chukwu demands of Eri the sacrifice of his first son and daughter if he desires to survive a famine.¹⁹ Since these ethical commands are seriously lacking in universality, especially objectivity, impersonality, or impartiality, then they could not have come from a totally universalistic being, because ethical commands reflect the nature of the being issuing them, indeed they are of the very essence of such a being. From the foregoing it should become clear that neither Aní nor Chukwu, whom Aní represents, are characterized by the logical qualities of total universality. If, however, Chukwu is not composed of these qualities, then Chukwu cannot be the Supreme Being, either

¹⁷ E. Bolaji Idowu, *Olodumare*, 119–120.

¹⁸ S. I. Bosah, *Groundwork of the History and Culture of Onitsha* (Onitsha: S. I. Bosah, n.y.), 190. I have substituted “wreak” for the original “wrought”.

¹⁹ B. Abanuka, *Myth and the African Universe* (Onitsha: Spiritan Publications, 1999), 77–79.



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in the sense of an Absolutely Supreme Being or in the sense of a Decentralized Supreme Being, for it lacks some necessary qualities for the existence of such a Being as discussed above.

This explains why the idea of Chukwu is very vague in traditional society, as can be seen in the dispute about its name and its lack of priesthood, temple or shrine cult, festive day(s), and so on. Let us also note here that in pre-Christian times, personal names involving Chukwu were rare compared with such names today. In pre-Christian times the most common names were Okeke, Okafor and other names relating to the deities' graces or curses, such as wealth, death, strength, health, war or strife. The dominance of names relating to Chukwu conceived as the Supreme Monotheistic God in contemporary times is due to the influence of Christianity.

Finally, let us also note that Idowu's notion of a Diffused Supreme Being (a Decentralized Supreme Being) does not hold water. Either a being is genuinely, i.e. totally, absolutely supreme (as is the case in the various forms of monotheism) or it is not genuinely absolutely supreme (in which case we have a case of mere preeminence in a pantheon). This is because the logical structure of an Absolutely Supreme Being and that of a Decentralized Supreme Being are the same, if the latter is genuinely supreme. What we have shown is that the logical structure of a genuinely Supreme Being did not exist in African thought of the pre-Christian era. The implications of this principle are enormous, affecting all spheres of life. Let us explore them by looking at the sorts of influences the structure and ends of the traditional ethical system generate in contemporary African societies.

The Effects of Particularistic Traditional Ethics on Contemporary African Societies

In order to appreciate the influences of traditional ethics on contemporary African societies we have to properly understand the notion mentioned above of material self-preservation in traditional society. In Igbo ontology there is an unbroken connection between life on earth (i.e. this life) and life hereafter, such that a man who lives here and dies continues his life in the world beyond in the state in which he lived here. If a man is wealthy and socially well accepted by his kith and kin here, he will live in splendour and honour in the spirit world, provided that his people perform a befitting funeral ceremony, in which they display wealth and show honour for the departed personality. For this reason, kings, titled men, and other high personages were buried with a great deal of wealth and even slaves, in order to let the kinsmen beyond know that a wealthy person is returning and to provide him with the materials to live in some wealth



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and honour in the spirit world. All that happens at death in Igbo ontology is that the human being sheds his/her gross material body, ordinarily the visible material body, leaving the ethereal essence. This has the form of a human, is translucent, and can traverse space and time and be present in things in a manner ordinary people cannot. It can, however, like humans, be hungry, angry, etc; and it also possesses the intelligence and power to help or harm human beings. For the same reasons the Igbo threw very bad people or people who were suffering abominable diseases into the evil forest, without any honour, or, depending on the gravity of the situation, they could bury such persons in the family burial place but with little honour. All such persons will continue their existence outside the ancestral spirit land of the good and acceptable, where they will remain restless and forever continue their suffering.

For the Igbo, life as so conceived is supreme, hence we find such names as Ndubisi (life is supreme) Nduka (life is the greatest) Ndukaku (life is greater than wealth). The life meant here is not simply the individual's life, but more importantly the corporate life of the lineage, running back to the ancestors, which is sustained by the ancestors and Aní, within which the individual can reincarnate, within which the individual lives both in this world and after death. Good and bad, right and wrong are in reference to this lineage context, for herein lies the supreme good, the standard by which right and wrong are determined, by which injunctions become morally valid or invalid.

The Igbo idea that life is the supreme good can be universalized across space and can also be held invariable. The trouble with this view, however, lies with objectivity (impersonality, impartiality). If whatever goes against life is evil and that which promotes or tends to preserve life is good, then we cannot have ethical rules that are objective (impartial, impersonal). For instance, suppose we have customs officers charged with patrolling a section of the Nigerian border to intercept smugglers; suppose the leader of this patrol is incorruptible and suppose the leader is approached by some unscrupulous and ruthless smugglers offering a large sum of money to let them pass or, in the event of refusal, experience their wrath in a shoot-out. Suppose the majority of the patrolmen have already been compromised by accepting large sums of money and the patrol leader has no time to call for reinforcements (leaving a situation in which his men could cooperate with the smugglers to assassinate him). What should the patrol leader do? Accept the bribe? Or refuse the bribe and risk his life to stand up to his duty and moral obligation by trying to stop the smugglers? Or, refuse the bribe and do nothing to stop the smugglers? Traditional Igbo ethics will recommend the last option, the ethical issues involved (the duty of the patrol leader, etc.) are not more important than the patrol leader's life. But if moral rules are to be abandoned in the face of threats, then there can hardly be



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any firmly entrenched rule except that of survival. The commitment (existential commitment) that makes an ethical order move beyond the survival level to the levels of material self-supersession—the peak of vertical auto-transcendence—will not be there.

The fact that objectivity is imperiled in this ethical system can also be seen in cases in which one is forced to choose between the preservation of either one of two lives. Suppose one is faced with a situation, in which if one tells the truth one will lose one's own life, but the life of one's neighbour will be preserved, but if one lies, one will preserve one's own life, while one's neighbour, who is innocent, will lose his life. Should one tell the truth or lie? This raises the question, whose life should be preserved? If a person tells the truth in such circumstances he/she values truth and justice more than his/her life; if he/she lies, he/she values his/her life more than the truth and justice.

In the traditional African ethical system the answer to this question would be that in some circumstances it is better to tell the truth in such a situation, whereas in others it is better to lie. How are we to know the circumstances in which to lie or tell the truth? The situation in which if one lies one would save one's life at the expense of one's neighbour's life would be justified if one's neighbour is not a member of one's lineage, but it would not be justified if one's neighbour is also from one's lineage. Indeed, it would be justified if one had to save the life of a member of the lineage at the expense of an outsider; telling the truth here at the expense of a kinsman's life is blameworthy. What this comes down to is that the injunction to tell the truth is not universally applicable or valid; consistency and rationality are limited, rules do not apply objectively and impersonally here. Personal involvement, especially when it involves one's own life or the corporate life of the lineage would determine the moral standing of an act.

Thus, as mentioned earlier, strictly speaking, traditional ethical codes exist for the individual in the lineage context; outside this level they command no force. Outside this level we have an ethical jungle where anything could happen; there are no serious codes or injunctions, people are free to act as they choose; and all this is partly because Ani and the ancestors draw no obligations outside the lineage and are interested principally, if not solely, in the lineage group.

We may thus begin to understand the extraordinarily deep levels of corruption and irresponsibility in our civic life as a failure of a particularistic ethical system to meet the demands of a more universalistic environment. A man, for instance, who understands that it is an offence to steal only from his kinsmen will find it difficult not to steal from the abstract entity called the state government of a multi-ethnic country which apparently has no direct relations with his kinsmen.



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Because the traditional ethical system is limited in terms of objectivity/impersonality, it is not an open all-inclusive system that addresses humility as such. Traditional ethics is completely inadequate today with people leaving their villages/towns and living amongst strangers, with today's population movement and multiethnic states. The trouble with the traditional ethical system, as can be seen, is with its logical structure and the ends that go with the structure; these determine its scope, its horizon. Once we understand that the ethical horizon of traditional ethics is inherent, it can be seen that external factors, such as colonialism, did not create it. Clearly, we require a totally universalistic system that would not discriminate on grounds of kinship to create a universal basis for commitment/attachment and identity. This is one of the major requirements for the development of contemporary African societies, politically, socially, economically, and in other respects.