THE SUPREME GOD IN IGBO
LIIFE AND WORSHIP

BY

EMEPFE E. METUH
(Onitsha, Nigeria)

The thesis, accepted for a long time for the traditional religion of
all Africa peoples, found its clearest but most extreme expression in
the words of Westermann for whom "Africa's God is a 'deus incertus'
and a 'deus remotus'". This opinion has fossilized in the theory of
the so-called 'withdrawal of God', a withdrawal seen in the attitude
of unconcern with which he is said to be treated. He is said, to have
no temples or shrines. No prayers or sacrifices are made to him
directly. This theory has also been applied to the Igbo beliefs about
God.

In Baden's view, the influence of God in Igbo life is negligible.
"It is purely theoretical and has no marked influence on life and
character". Correia puts this view dramatically: "Dios exist bien,
ma pourquoi l'adorer? II n'est pas méchant, c'est les dieux qu'il
faut adorer". This view has been repeated in different forms
by many writers on Igbo religion.

But already in 1926 Talbot pointed out that Chi (God) lives away
in the depths of the sky, but is not quite so distant as among the
Yoruba; he takes an interest in mankind." In some places, as among
the Aff~po Edja, Chineke has cult symbols, personal family and
public altars. Regular sacrifices are made to Chukwu. It is a pity

1) This article is adapted from a thesis presented to the University of London
5) Correia, Afonso, L'animation d'Es e les divinités de la Nigeria, Ant'Waru
1925, 36.
6) Cf. Ford, Darryl, and Jones, G. J., The Igbo and Igbo Speaking Peoples
of South-Eastern Nigeria, 1920, 21; African, F. A., Sacrifice in Igbo Religion,
Studies 1070, 11.

that for a long time there was no research carried out to confirm and find out more details about this alleged worship of the Supreme Being among the Igbo. Recent research by Shelton among the Nsukka Igbo has revealed that there exist alters, and direct and regular sacrifices to Chukwu. The recent book by Akinwale contains some valuable first-hand information about direct sacrifices to Chukwu in different parts of igboland. We shall supplement this evidence with some original data which we have gathered on this subject. We shall show that God booms very large in Igbo life and psychology even though there is an ever-present fear of the spirits. God is the ultimate source and end of morality but the spirits, especially Aja (earth-deity) and the ancestors are its immediate administrators. These are direct acts of worship of God including prayers and sacrifices.

God in Igbo Life

One has not to be very long in Igbo country to know how much God’s is in Igbo consciousness and how frequently he features in their daily speech. The Igbo do not approach Chukwu only “in the last resource of extremity, when all other gods, arbitrators, advocates, mediums and mediators have mischievously failed” as Leonard Arthur says. This was the experience of W. Romanke, a C.M.S. missionary who wrote in 1869:

“This you always find among the Ibo. They never speak of futurology without substituting ‘Ahonwe Tchukwu’ ies. if it please God.”

According to Talbot, each morning every Ika 1000 raises his hands to heaven, rubs them and says “God, I thank you for long life”. Should one turn to Igbo daily life, one finds that it is equally full of the sense of divine presence and majesty of God’s care and protection. For the morning greeting, the Igbo say “Isu na go ola” (have you done well from sleep); and then go on to enquire about one’s family.

9) Akinwale, 30-52.
12) Talbot, 40.
children, and business. If everything is well with the neighbour, the
well-wisher says: "O lu Chukwu" (It is God, or thanks be to God).
The congratulation for a mother who has recently given birth, or
anybody who has had a stroke of good fortune is "Chukwu owu" (God
does wonders). Anybody who feared a grave danger would say
"Chukwu obere" (God wouldn't agree).

An Igbo proverb says God as the only hope of the hopeless. "Chukwu
staw onye na ofu ofo (God owns the person lost in the forest)." 13)
A person who finds himself in such a situation will still derive comfort
in the phrase "onemere ihe gihia Chukwu ghiia" (There is nothing
that will surprise God). Yams is the staple food of the Igbo, and a
very successful farmer will take the title of Eze iji (master of yams).
Yet an Igbo saying recognizes that "Chukwu ji ji, ihe meri, onye
enye omumia ozi" (God has both the yam and the knife, only those to
whom he sliced a bit can eat).

In the face of all this, I find it difficult to justify Uchendu's as-
sertion that "The Igbo high god is a withdrawn god." 14)

Chukwu and Morality

Discussing morality, Pattinder says of West African peoples:
"Though God is generally regarded as upholding the moral laws, and
judging men after death in accordance with their actions, many prac-
tices seem to have little to do with him." 15) My material suggests
that this statement is more representative of Igbo beliefs and practices
than Arima's opinion on this subject: "Do morality is not clearly
referred to God... Since Chukwu does harm to no one, fear of the
spirits and a narrow utilitarianism allow HIm into the background." 16)
This opinion does not seem to distinguish principles from practice.
"The orthodox ethical norm does not consist in the ordinary behavior
of men," 17) Easson finds this dichotomy also in the Igbo approach
to morality. According to him, certain delinquencies (e.g. murder, theft
and adultery, are considered heinous crimes and deemed contrary
to the will of God and punishment will surely follow. But "actual fear
of retribution is not sufficiently strong to check wrongdoing... To
be found out by his fellow-man is regarded as far more shameful than,
offending God. In this he is not different from the rest of mankind." 18) Yet the beings immediately concerned with law and morality are Jiak (the earth-deity) and Njikho (ancestors). "Abi deprives evil men of their lives and her priests are the guardians of public morality." 19) Most heinous crimes are called Jiak or Ai (land taboo). Of a person who commits such a crime it is said "Omosho d apo Ai" or "omunara d apo" (he defined the land). 20) But there are two ways in which God exercises control over morality: (i) through the prerogative he has of allotting a good or bad chi to an individual in his reincarnation cycles; 21) (ii) through his control over reincarnation itself. The Igbo believe that all evil-doers, no matter how secret, are seen by God and never go unpunished; or if a wrongdoer does escape, his descendants will not. An Igbo who feels cheated will say, "Oba Chukwu ga eke" (God will judge) or "Chukwu amaa na aghamu anys" (Is God no longer awake?). The most obvious way in which God exercises such judgement is by lightning. A person killed by lightning is not mourned, for he is deemed to have been punished by God for his sins or that of his relatives. God can punish an evildoer by giving him a chi which will bring him only misfortunes. This, it may be recalled, was the fate of Ochikwe, the chief character in Achebe's novel Things Fall Apart. A person who has lived a bad life generally does not reach the Ami Mmuo. 21) But where he can escape this control by performing the necessary ritual purification, God can still punish him by preventing his reincarnation or by making him reincarnate as an animal or a tree. "Transmigration ... is regarded as the greatest possible punishment for the instigator, the murderer, the witch, and the sorcerer. 'Igbagh was no mmadu', 'May you not reincarnate in the human form', is a great curse for the Igbo." 22) **Prayers to Chukwu** Many prayers are offered to God through the deities, especially chi

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20) Green, M. M. Igbo Village Affairs, London 1914, 102.
22) Okeke, V. C., 192.
and Anoson (sun). Prayers addressed directly to God are mostly in the form of invocations. These are very frequent:

"Thus, when the head of a family wakes up in the morning, he may, after washing his hands, bat a kola or some food on the ground, saying ‘Obisi, Iddime’ (Chikwu), watch over me and my children this day. Any one setting forth on a journey may ask Chikwu to make the object of the journey successful and bring him home again in safety." 29

The Igbo morning prayer is addressed to God. Curiously enough, this is the first thing each paternal family does every morning. Before this he speaks to no one. A son of his wife brings him a basin of water in front of the Chikwu spoiled. The man brings his ofo. He lays his ofo on the ground, he bends a kola-nut, chews a part of it and spits it as his ofo. He now takes up his ofo and prays to Chikwu, the spirits and his ancestors. 30 There is no fixed formula but the prayer follows a general pattern. He first greets in order, Chikwu, the spirits and the ancestors, then he confesses his sins (he in fact confesses his innocence and asks pardon for wrongs he may have committed unknowingly); he asks for blessing for himself and his family. Finally, he asks blessing for all his well-wishers and curses for those who wish him evil. "Ofa enye na-akwu maka, va Chiche na-akwu ya" (as a person prays for others, so God prays for him). Arene and Ojika give models of this prayer. 31 This is certainly the Igbo worship which the Rev. J. During described in his report of 1878. His rather cynical account shows how distorted his knowledge of this Igbo custom is:

"How they offered their prayers every morning! With their stick each brush, when they cursed it to their satisfaction they took it out and slew their hand with it around their head many times and sprinkled spits as they think and said God must eat it, and he must give them money (money) and Room of their enemies want them to die, such an one must die, and in front of their houses they planted a tree and prays through it; they said, when they speak to it, the stick conveyed their worth to God. All broken places, roads, placed on the roots of the trees: he said: they gave it to God". 32

A tiers and Priests of Chikwu

According to During's report quoted above, Chikwu's altar at Osusuare was a tree planted in front of the house. During does not

29 Mark 6, 21 ff.
30 ibid.
31 Anosia, P., The Religious Contact of Igbo Names, 39. First is a sacred number for the Igbo.
32 During, 25; cf. Anosia, p. 25; also Shelton, A. J., Mem 65, 1878, 16.
33 CMS Archives, Cambridge, Niger Mission. — Osusuare 1904 (During).
identify the tree, but mentions that broken pans and plates are left at its base. 28) Talbot is more precise. Chukwu’s shrine is not a zubbin.

“His (Chukwu’s) most common symbol is an Ogba, cocoa, or Awha (or ochi) yam, or upling or a god, some four to six inches high, usually accompanied by round or flat stones, and a pot or pot containing water and sometimes yellowwood, eggs, phalic chalk-coups, round stones and palmwine. 29) Talbot confesses, however, that there are places such as Agbaja and Nkpara where no symbols are made. 30) Shetton publishes some photographs of some altars and shrines dedicated to Chukwu in the Nsukka division. 31) The individual personal shrines can take several forms: “cone-shape earthen altar”, “a life tree called either Ogba or Alapa”, “a very small house-type structure”. There are village communal shrines called Omu Chukwu (place of God, literally mouth of God). He describes one such altar found at Umueme-Gwa village.

“Each altar is in the village square, and is set upon a conical earthen mound four feet in height. The altar itself is the wooden carving placed atop the earthen mound and its main face is directed toward east, where the sun rises.” 32)

It would be interesting to know whether this type of altar exists outside the Nsukka area. What serves as an altar for occasional direct sacrifices to Chukwu in some parts of Igbo-land is much simpler. This is set up when needed and consists of “a white fowl at the foot of a palm midrib.” 33) Meek describes the setting up of the altar: “He takes a white chicken and hages it by the feet in a sheet of bamboo which is stuck into the ground.” 34) This sacrifice, called Aja Ese Ema (sacrifice to God, king of the sky), is more widely distributed in Igbo-land, as will be seen later.

Chukwu has no priests like Aja (earth-deity) or other nature-deities. But with, ochi (the guardian deity) and Ndibe (ancestors) the minister at the cult of Chukwu can be any adult, a paterfamilis, the lineagehead or Ikweye (the oldest man in the village). 35) The
sacrifice made to Chukwu through Anyanwu, according to Meek, may be made by anyone. 36) According to Shelton, among the Northern Igbo the daily prayers and regular sacrifices are offered to Chukwu by the family head at the family shrines and by the Oyrna of the clan at the communal altars. One of Arinze’s informants mentions that Aja Eze Enwa is made by a a b i n (medicine man). 37)  

Direct Sacrifices to Chukwu

Our data on this topic suggests that many Igbo groups make direct sacrifices to Chukwu. Such sacrifices are not as rare as it is often suggested.38) In our analysis here we shall try and determine when and how frequently direct sacrifices are made to God, and how many types of such sacrifice there are.

Meek says that anyone may sacrifice to Chukwu through Anyanwu “when he feels inclined or when directed to do so by a diviner.”39) Shelton finds that “in some villages there is regular daily worship of the High God, and in other villages worship tends to occur either on an annual festival day dedicated to the High God or when the individual faces a particular problem which requires his supplications to God rather than one of the aliens.”40) According to Talbot, “As a rule sacrifices are made to God at the two great festivals of seed-time and harvest.”41) Arinze gives an interesting instance among the Ogbia of the Ora clan, where sacrifice to Chukwu takes the form of an initiation rite. The rite fits one to set up a Chukwu symbol before which he can henceforth offer daily prayers as already described:

“There are two stages to full initiation into the cult of Chukwu. The first stage was open to men, but only men with family responsibilities. The second stage was open to men who had passed what my informant describes as ‘the age of war’.”42)

Aja Eze Enwa (Sacrifice to God, King of Heaven)

It is very difficult to determine from the sources available how many types of “direct sacrifice” exist in Igbo traditional religion. Arinze identifies a type called Aja Eze Enwa (Sacrifice to God, King
of Heaven). 42) Ariize's research has shown that Aja Ee Eemu is very widely diffused in Igbo-land. The direct sacrifice to God described by Meek, Talbot and Basden vary only in details from Ariize's description of Aja Ee Eemu. According to one of Ariize's informants, this sacrifice is usually made during the harvest season. The objects required include a white chicken, eggs, yams, an eagle's feather and a long pole (afolu gnonu). The minister, usually a gbua (medicine man), ties the chicken, the yams and the eagle to the end of the pole with a white cloth, which he then places in the ground, with the pole (igwe) and the objects suspended in the air. He then offers another chicken and an egg at the foot of the pole while saying the following prayer:

"Eemu Eemu, receive these our gifts for the preservation of our families, our relatives, our friends, increase our children and our crops, so that by this time next year we may have something to give thee."

The people standing around answer "Ofo-on" i.e. (let o be so). 44) The sacrifices to God which Talbot observed are made at the two great festivals of seed-time and harvest. Ai Aro (an Igbo group) "If anyone is told by the doctor to make a sacrifice, he generally offers up a white fowl at the foot of a palm mid-rib." A white fowl hung on a bamboo also features in the sacrifice which Meek says are offered to God through Anyanwụ. 45) This again raises the question already referred to of how much Chukwu is associated with Anyanwụ (sun), and whether Aja Ee Eemu in all cases is offered to Chukwu through Anyanwụ. Basden in fact suggests that the reason why white objects are used in sacrifices to Chukwu is "because the sun is white, it is thought that the Great God will accept no other than a white sacrifice". 46)

Irunma Chukwu (Implantation of God)

Anonja discovered a type of direct sacrifice to God among the Oguta Igbo-group called Irunma Chukwu. This literally means "implantation of God". Irunma Chukwu is an initiation rite performed in two stages as explained above. The objects used for this sacrifice are largely the same as those used for Aja Ee Eemu. At the first stage

42) Ariize, 35.
44) Ariize, F. A. 54.
45) Meek, 22.
46) Basden, 41.
of *Iruma Chukwu*, the usual hanging up of the offerings on a bamboo as in *Aja Eze Enu* is preceded by a ritual at which the initiate prays with water and phallic chalk for the health and prosperity of his family and village, while the second level "in order to *Chukwu*" and later shared in a communal meal. 47)

The second stage of *Iruma Chukwu* requires the service of the oldest man in the village. The first bamboo planted at the first stage is brought down and replaced by another, this time planted between two planks of ironwood (ada) about four feet high each. The same type of objects (a white fowl, yams, eagle’s feather etc.) are tied on the bamboo as offerings for Chukwu. After this a castrated goat is offered up to Chukwu along with the second white fowl. These are later slaughtered and shared in communal meal. The initiation ceremony ends when "the initiate is brought to sit in the place where up till now the prelate had been sitting. He then prays as he has been taught with water, chalk and *kola nut" 48) as every elder does every morning.

Conclusion

The foregoing analysis establishes the accuracy of this quotation from Partridge:

"It has been said that God might have been herded from Greek thought without damaging its logical architecture, but this cannot be said of African thought, for God is both the creator and the principle of unity. He is the source and essence of *aara Ki" 49

The opinion which sees the African religion as purely anthropocentric, and God on the periphery of African world view, cannot hold its own in the face of the evidence we have presented above. God in Igbo religion it at once transcendent and immanent. The transcendent God is the creator, the father of the *Abulu*; the concept of the Earth mother. 50) The immanent God is the Supreme Spirit, who sends sparks of himself in the form of *chi* into men, natural phenomena and things. 51) Men come and go in reincarnation cycles, 52) but it

47) *Anosui, 65.*
48) *Anosui, 65.*
51) Ibid., 20.
52) *Utukwu, 56.*
in God who is the "central moving force." 53) The immanent God looms large in Igbo daily life and psychology, while prayers and sacrifices are frequently offered to the transcendent God. 54)

Since I completed the thesis on which this article is based, the questions raised earlier on about (i) how much Chukwu is associated with Anyanwu (Sun) and Chi (Depot of Chukwu in man); (ii) whether Aja Este Ewu, or any other sacrifice is ever offered to Chukwu directly, have continued to intrigue me. In fact since I returned home to Igboland, I have carried out some field work during which I held unrecorded interviews with many Igbo elders who are still adherents of the traditional religion.

The response of one Nwokwu Ezumali, a titled elder of his (Isi Akwụ Division), is typical of how uncertain even the adherents are on these points. Asked whether the personal Chi to which goats and fowls are sometimes sacrificed is identical with Chukwu (the Supreme Being), he answered with a rhetorical question—"Does anybody ever get something (ife) and kill for the Chukwu who created us, besides this sacrifice which we make through the sun (ihe na Anyanwu anyi na ife)?"

This response suggests that the Igbo consider it absurd to make blood offerings to God the creator. When I pressed him and further asked "Do you ever give gifts or sacrifices to God?", "Yes", he replied. "When one gets a good fortune, one tells him, O God! who created me to come to this world, I greet you. If he has anything to offer him, he places it at the Omu Chi (the altar of the personal spirit) and says, this is to thank you."

Data from these and other interviews have confirmed me in the belief that the Igbo have sacrificed intended to be direct and exclusive for God. Yet my data also show that, at least in parts of Akwa Division, these sacrifices are made either through Anyanwu (his visible symbol in the cosmos) or through the "Chi" (his spark in man).

These two seemingly contradictory facts are not in fact contradictory for the Igbo in this area. They have of course no clearly thought out formula which resolves this paradox, but they do try to resolve the paradox by considering Anyanwu and Chi as visible symbols.

53) Cf. Patterson, Religion in Africa 42, 50f.
54) Ibid., 50f., 52f.
of the invisible Chukwu. An informant constantly refers to these two entities vis-a-vis Chukwu as “Ofe anya” (lit. Worship eye — things you have before you at worship). The same term, “Ofe anya” is also used of shrines in relation to the spirits who dwell in them. Hence, it would seem that they are in fact laying Chukwu’s sacrifices before his visible symbols (Anyanwu and Chi), in the same way as sacrifices intended for the spirits are laid at their shrines.

Aja Yar Eme in Anyanwụ area is called Ihe onwu Anyanwu (pitching the mouth [after] of the man), and Ifeoma Chukwu is very similar to Ihe onwu Chi (pitching the mouth [after] of Chi). Another name for Chukwu in his area is Anyanwu na Anyi, while he is freely referred to as Ahịa.