Igbo Folktales and the Evolution of the Idea of Chukwu as the Supreme God of Igbo Religion

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This analysis of Igbo folktales reveals eight distinct phases in the evolution of the idea of Chukwu as the supreme God of Igbo religion. In the first phase, dating back to primeval times, the Igbo recognized several supreme nature deities in various domains. This was followed by a phase of the undisputed supremacy of Àlà (the Earth Goddess) as supreme deity. Traces of that primeval dominance persist till today in some parts of Igboland. The third phase was one of rivalry over supremacy between Earth and Sky, possibly owing to influences from religious traditions founded on the belief in a supreme sky-dwelling God. In the fourth and fifth phases, the idea of Chukwu as supreme deity was formally established by the Nri and Arà respectively in support of their hegemonic enterprise in Igboland. The exploitativeness of the Arà power seems to have resulted in the debasement of the idea of Chukwu as supreme God in the Igbo mind, hence the satiric and rejectionist images of the anthropomorphic supreme God in various folktales from the sixth phase. The seventh phase saw the selection, adoption and adaptation of some of the numerous ideas of supreme God found by the Christian missionaries in their efforts to propagate Christianity in the idiom of the people. Finally, in the still ongoing eighth phase, some of the ideas of the supreme God adopted and adapted by Christianity from Igbo traditional sources seem to have been fed back into the Igbo tradition in a syncretic form combining Igbo and Hebraic Christian concepts. It seems clear, from this paper, that the Igbo idea of Chukwu is not a single, monolithic idea but a complex of different, even divergent ideas, which have emerged over the centuries in response to different socio-cultural, political and economic situations.

Igbo folktales are full of images of a character called Chukwu who, to all intents and purposes, is none other than the supreme God of Igbo religion. But a careful analysis of these images will reveal that, in tone and meaning, they are not consistent with one another. They, in fact, fall into two broad, diametrically opposed sets. In one set, Chukwu is presented, in a positive light, as the supreme sky-dwelling creator and dispenser of life and death; and, in some cognate images, he features as the withdrawn high God (Deus otiosus, deus incertus or deus remotus) who nevertheless may be approached through intermediaries such as the minor gods and oracular priests. In another broad set of images, Chukwu appears, in a negative light, as a stupid ogre,
a dupe or a capricious trickster with a warped sense of justice. Considered in the light of the pertinent evidence from history, anthropology, archaeology, theology and comparative mythology, these conflicting images seem to refer, not just to different theologies, but to different stages in the evolution of the idea of a supreme God named Chukwu in the Igbo Religious experience. The purpose of this paper is to outline, in the light of the evidence contained in representative folktales, what appears to be the main phases of this evolution.

In presenting this reconstruction of the history of Igbo religious thought, it is assumed throughout that folktales, especially myths, are not only a mirror of reality but a dynamic instrument for social change. Thus, in the tales cited in this paper, we not only have a complex of motifs expressing and symbolizing certain deep-lying features of human and trans-human existence in Igbo cultural history but also a number of other components which seem to have been deliberately infused into traditional narrative patterns in the service of the religious and ideological positions of the dominant powers of various historical epochs.

Much of the argument of this paper rests on the evidence ably marshalled in Echeruo (1979), Araz kidnapping especially Nwoha (1984) to the effect that Chukwu, as supreme God, is a relatively newcomer in Igbo religion. Echeruo (1979:20) states quite emphatically that "there is no capital letter god among the Igbo outside Alà" and that "God, among the Igbo, is certainly nothing like the God of the Christians"; which ties up with evidence put forward in, among other sources, Thomas (1913, 1:26), that Igbo elders interviewed at the turn of the century frequently said "that they knew nothing of Ciku before the coming of the white man". Yet, Chukwu, as supreme God, is not, strictly speaking, a "stranger" as Nwoha (1984) suggests in his book The Supreme God as Stranger in Igbo Religious Thought. The concept of Chukwu, as Onwejeogwu (1972, 1981) and Echeruo (1979), among others, recognize, is an indigenous creation of Igbo theologians which was later adopted and adapted by the Christian missionaries and ultimately fed back into the Igbo oral tradition in the bowdlerized, albeit syncretic, form in which it exists today. In this regard, I shall be arguing, in this paper, that the reason why the concept seems alien is that it probably emerged as an apostasy to an autochthonous Igbo religion, which was presumably henotheistic at first, recognizing a number of supreme deities each supreme in its own special domain (Chukwukere, 1983), but gradually moving to a situation in which Alà, the Earth goddess, seems to have emerged as the supreme among the supreme deities. Thus, Echeruo (1979:19) states quite categorically: "if ever there was a supreme god among the Igbo, it was Alà. A crisis in our institutions has obscured this fact".

It seems to me that this "crisis in our institutions" dates further back than Echeruo places it - to the emergence of apostatic ideas arising partly from contacts with cultures with monotheistic notions of supreme sky-Gods and partly from the opportunity which this apostasy offered for the creation and maintenance of politico-religious hegemonies through conversion and spiritual colonialism. It would therefore seem that, after centuries of the preeminence of Alà as the supreme among the supreme deities, the Igbo joined their neighbours in the Niger and Benue valleys in an old West African theological
controversy discussed by Armstrong (1982), with reference to the Idoma, in an article entitled, "Is Earth Senior to God?". In this article, Armstrong draws attention to the fact that "The Myth of the quarrel between God and Earth as to their respective seniority is very widespread in the Niger and Benue valleys" (p.12). In the Idoma case, as revealed by Armstrong, traditional ritual and related sources consistently assert the primeval supremacy of Earth over Sky and, by implication, her supremacy over all other sky Gods. Thus, in an Idoma sacrificial liturgy, we hear the following words:

They gave (the sacrifice) to the East. The East said they should give it to the West. The West said they should give it to God. God said they should give it to Earth, for Earth is senior (Armstrong, 1982:7).

We are reminded here of an Igbo proverb recorded by Arazy (1982:3):

Chukwu si na ọkika ana ka ya
Anahu eme ya ihere

(Chukwu said that the supremacy of Ânà over him
Does not make him ashamed of himself).³

Similarly, in an interview also recorded by Arazy (1982:3) with an informant whom he describes as "a traditional Igbo religionist", we are told that "Ânà, on which we rest our feet" seems "to be greater (than Chukwu)".

At what point then did the Igbo begin to look up to a sky-God, at first coeval with, but later supreme over the Earth? It seems to me that the influence of Islam, which, as Armstrong (1982:13) notes "had been an active force" in the Niger and Benue valleys "for centuries before the Jihads in Nigeria", cannot be ruled out in the Igbo area⁴ as in the pre-Jihad Idoma and Igala kingdoms. In this respect, it is noteworthy that it is among the Nri, who are not only geographically close, but genealogically affiliated, to the Igala,⁵ that the concept of the supreme sky God, Chukwu, appears to have originated (Onwuejeogwu, 1972:44). And, as we shall see presently, the Nri had good political reasons for adopting and adapting the idea of a supreme Sky-god into the autochthonous religious matrix dominated by the concept of Chi (divine force), Âlà (Earth force) and Mmuo (ancestral spirits). This is comparable to the situation, which, according to Armstrong (1982:13) appears to have given rise to the emergence of the quarrel between Earth and Heaven:

It would seem that the Earth cults and ancestor cults were basic to the whole of Western Sudan, and the myth of the quarrel between Earth and Heaven reflects the new political and military situation. In the ancient earth-and-ancestor religions (Idoma and Tallensi), the seniority question does not arise.

Nor did the question of seniority arise in the ancient religion of the Igbo. It was only when the hegemonic programme of the Nri and other equally disposed Igbo peoples matured that the question arose. In propagating the idea of a supreme Sky God, Chukwu, from which their hegemonic power and authority is claimed to derive, they no doubt provoked the reaction of the custodians of the ancient, autochthonous faith. It would however appear that, in many parts of Igboland, the new theology of "Igwe kà álà" (Sky is greater than Earth)
eventually triumphed, as is reflected in the following tale, "Igwe na Alâ" (The Sky and the Earth), recorded by Carnochan and Iwuchukwu (1963:55-56):

Sky (Igwe) and Earth (Alâ) were struggling over the ownership of a tree. In the course of the struggle, Sky went home but told Earth that she would see what would happen. When he returned to his home, he caused the rains to stop falling and the sun to stop shining, whereupon a great drought of the kind never seen before ensued. One day, all the birds of the sky assembled and agreed to go to Sky's house. At first, they told Nduri (Cuckoo) to go alone. He went. He passed several wildernesses but at last gave up, saying that his wings ached sorely. The birds then asked Qkjr (sparrow) to go. He flew and went. When in the course of his flight he said he was tired, Api (Hornbill) took over from him. When he arrived at Sky's home, he sang, saying,

My father Igwe, my mother Igwe,
Tuma ngwe ngwere;
Earth told me to tell you that you are greater,
Tuma ngwe ngwere;

Sky told him to sing what he sang again, for he did not hear it well. And so he began and sang again, saying,

My father Igwe, my mother Igwe,
Tuma ngwe ngwere;
Earth told me to tell you that you are greater,
Tuma ngwe ngwere;
So that the rains will fall again,
Tuma ngwe ngwere;
So that the sun will shine again,
Tuma ngwe ngwere.

When he finished singing, Sky told him to wait a while. He (Sky) went into his room and wrapped up rain and sun in a parcel and gave to him, telling him not to untie the parcel until he was on his way home. When he arrived at a certain wilderness, he untied the parcel. Immediately the rains began beating him until they threw him into the corner of a forest. When the rains receded, he untied the sun. And when the sun had finished beating him, he said that in no circumstances can rainfall ever kill an able-bodied young man.

In addition to tales of this kind, there are reflections of the apostatic idea of the supremacy of Sky over Earth in the names of cults such as the Oracle of Igwe-kâ–âlâ of Umunneohia, near Owerri, the dwelling place of the withdrawn high-God, Chukwu Abiaama, as suggested in the following Mbanô myth recorded by Onyocha (1984):
Truly, in the olden days, Chukwu Abjama was living at this our place. Our people were giving him all due respect, offering him different kinds of sacrifice and giving him gifts of all kinds. And he was solving different problems for our people according to the needs of each supplicant... In those olden days, Chukwu was living at Umuelemma, in those olden days... That was the time when every Igbo man believed that Chukwu was more close than he is now. In those olden days everyone who lost his kitchen knife would go to Chukwu to enquire why it was lost; everyone who lost his tapping knife would go to Chukwu to enquire why and how it was lost; anybody who lost his tapping rope would go to inquire from Chukwu why it was lost. And he would be told why. Another thing was that, in those days, anybody whose wife did not give birth, the husband would go to Chukwu Abjama in his house to find out why his wife had not given birth to a child...9

And so on. Although Chukwu Abjama operated through middlemen called the awakala priests, he eventually found himself unable to cope with the incessant demands and complaints of men, and so he withdrew from Umuelemma to the Igwekala shrine in Umunneoha, where he continued to receive the litigations and supplications of men through his priests.

The above tale appears however to be a rationalization of a later phase of the evolution of the concept of Chukwu, the Sky God supreme over the Earth, a phase to which we shall return presently. What is important at this stage is to recognize the connection between the idea of Igwe-kala and the idea of Chukwu, and the crisis in Igbo religious consciousness which they signify. According to Echeruo (1-79:19-20),

Igwe-kala was simply not only a devilish sect but a heretical one. Its very name was a daring - consciously daring - challenge to the supreme deity of the Igbo people. The cult placed Igwe above Ala, and claimed him as supreme. To propose that was in itself an abomination, that is to say, a defilement of the Earth; imemuala. In short, Umunneora and Igwe-kala must be seen in the history of our institutions as a phenomenon which came closest to setting up a god cult above that of Ala herself, the ultimate sanction to morals.

Perhaps what Echeruo should have said here is that Igwe ka Ala of Umunneoha is one of several similar institutions which emerged, in the course of Igbo history, as a consequence of the Nri-inspired assertion of the supremacy of the heavenly Chukwu over the earth-force, Ala. Another institution of the same kind is the oracle of Chukwu Ukpaja, popularly known as the Long Juju or Ibiniukpaabi, of Arochukwu, which, as Echeruo (1979:20) observes, "succeeded" where "Igwe ka Ala failed". For Echeruo, the success of the Chukwu cult of Arochukwu where Igwe ka Ala failed, "was made possible by three considerations, namely, the integration of Chi into this religious system, its avoidance of conflict with Ala and, finally, its decisive separation of Ekê and Chi in the Igbo metaphysics" (1979:20). In pursuit of this thesis, Echeruo (1979:21) goes into a fairly detailed explanation of the concept of Chi, which he describes as "probably one of the most complex theological concepts ever devised to explain the universe". He then proposes a reconstruction of how the Aro cult
seems to have arrived at the concept of Chukwu:

What the Aro cult of Chukwu did was to build on (the) thoroughly Igbo foundation (i.e. the concept of Chi) and to propose a universal chi parallel to (though more powerful than) the individual Chi. That idea blended beautifully into the Igbo world view. Chi was separated from Chi Ukwu which then became the standard Igbo name for The Almighty. And yet, Alà was undisturbed; in fact, it was through Chukwu that Alà could best be appeased; and the priests and charlatans who propagated Chukwu's powers knew they had the goodwill of Alà working for them. Chukwu survived; Igwe kà Alà did not.

There is little doubt in my mind that, in its general outlines, this is a fairly credible reconstruction of the origins of the idea of Chukwu in Igbo religion. But Echeruo appears to be mistaken both in his assertion that the idea was originated by the Aro and in the suggestion that Aro theology succeeded where similar theologies failed. As we have already proposed above, the concept of Chukwu in Igbo religion was originated by the Nri whose politico-religious hegemony based on the supremacy of Chukwu preceeded that of the Aro.11 As Onwejeogwu (1972:44) speculates,

It is very probable that autochthonous Igbo culture of the pre-Nri period had not developed the concept of 'Chukwu'. Nri people developed the concept of 'Chukwu' and a theocratic monarchy that controlled the 'earth force' by the use of ofọ.

It is also true to say that Nri theology succeeded even more than that of the Aro, and this is because of the very pragmatic way in which it not only subsumes the age-old Igbo concept of chi as divine force and cosmic light12 but also in the way it accommodates and reconciles the conflicting claims of Alà (Earth) and Igwè (Sky) by presenting them both as manifestations of the new supreme God and as coeval and equally significant spiritual forces (alụsị) created by Chukwu to operate "the hidden laws of good and evil" in the universe. As summed up in Onwejeogwu (1983:4):

Chukwu (from chi ukwu) is the creator of all things, with four manifestations of his existence. First, Chukwu is Anyanwù, in a symbolic meaning of "the sun"; as the sun's light is everywhere so is Chukwu's presence everywhere manifested; as the sun, so is Chukwu all powerful, and as the sun's light reveals things so is Chukwu the source of knowledge. Secondly, Chukwu is Agbàlà, the fertility of the earth and the beings that inhabit it. Thirdly, Chukwu is conceived as Chi, or the power in living beings enabling them to procreate from generation to generation. Fourthly, Chukwu is ọkịkẹ, creator of everything visible and invisible and of the laws that govern them. These laws are neither good nor bad, but simply enable things to work. Good and evil are the products of invisible beings or forces, alụsị. Alụsị, the invisible creations of Chukwu, are the 'beings' or 'forces' that manipulate the hidden laws to shower good and evil onto the visible world of men. The Nri distinguish four types
of alusi: those directly established by Chukwu such as ana and Igwe; 
those established by Eri such as Ifejioku, eke, oye, afo, nkwo; 
those established by the ancestors such as idemili, udo, aro; and 
that called agwu which is an ambivalent supernatural associated 
with afa.

What we have here is a careful apportionment of practically everything 
of significance in ancient Igbo religion under the supreme power of Chukwu in 
such a way as to suggest a harmonious coexistence of all in the interest of 
man. This theology went down well with the Igbo as can be attested to by 
the extent and enduring influence of the Nri hegemony which it was, in the 
first place, created to support. And, in fact, while the subsequent Aro 
thology appears to have fallen into ridicule and rejection, as evidenced by 
the tales to be considered later (below), the basic lineaments of the Nri 
thology together with its cognate myths have survived in the Igbo tradition 
up till the present day.

The Nri myths referred to above constitute the main body of Igbo folktales 
in which we have positive images of Chukwu, as supreme God. It is however 
easy to recognize the hegemonic orientation of these tales in their rationali-
zation of the numerous claims of Nri priest-kings (the Eze Nri) to power and 
authority in the Igbo world.

To begin with, some of the tales present the Eze Nri kingship as a 
sacerdotal institution ordained by Chukwu. In a tale reminiscent of the 
Yoruba myth of the descent of Oduduwa (the founding father of the Yoruba) from 
heaven,13 Chukwu is presented as sending Eri (the founding father of the Nri) 
and his wife, Namuku, from heaven, "to take possession of the land", as Afigbo 
(1981:43) puts it. As in the cognate Yoruba myth, the earth was "soft" and 
"waterlogged" when Eri descended:

Chukwu sent a smith, 
who dried it with charcoal and bellows... 
The descendants of the Smith 
Made hoes, knives and carving tools. 
The ichi marks were made on 
The face of Eze Nri's son and daughter. 
The artists are called Dioka 
(Onwuejeogwu, 1981:67).

Here, clearly, is a myth rationalizing Nri control of early Igbo technology 
and the special ritual ties between the Nri priest-kings and the celebrated 
smiths of Awka, a relationship which is mirrored more clearly in a version of 
the same myth recorded by Thomas (1913, 1:51). After receiving yams for the 
first time, from Chukwu,

The Ezenri sent a message (to Chukwu) that the ground was too wet, 
and he was told that he must send to the Awka people; they took 
their blacksmiths' bellow and blew till the ground was dry. When 
the yams were full grown, the Ezenri shared them out. The Awka people 
made qton and Nri people took qton and put alose and ajana everywhere.
Related to this is another myth which attributes, to the Eze Nri, the original domestication of yam and the revolution in Igbo agriculture which this civilizing influence brought about. In one version of the myth, Chukwu gives yam directly to Eze Nri and Eze Adama soon after their descent from heaven:

Ezenri and Ezedama came from heaven and rested on an ant heap; all was water. Cuku asked who was sitting there and they answered, "We are the kings of Nri and Adama". Thereupon Cuku and the kings talked. After some conversation Cuku gave them each a piece of yam; yams were at that time unknown to man, for human beings walked in the bush like animals.

After eating his portion, Ezedama went to ask for more; Cuku gave him another piece and instructed Ezedama to tell Ezenri to send his eldest son and daughter. The Ezenri sent them and Cuku told them to bring a big pot, which he sent back again. The Ezenri was to plant this pot wherever he chose and no one was to look into the pot for twelve days; when they looked in and saw yams growing they went to Cuku and told him, and Cuku said, "plant them, put sticks, and lift the runners."

In another version of the myth, yam and cocoyam are presented as the respective offshoots of the heads of the son and daughter of Eze Nri chopped off and buried by the king in obedience to the commandment of Chukwu, a motif reminiscent of Yahweh's instruction to Abraham to sacrifice his beloved son, Isaac to him:

No one could sleep at first, but one day a child-king went to Cuku's place for firewood. Cuku took a piece of yam and gave it to the child and when it got home it lay down and slept. Its parents thought it was dead and lamented but when it woke it explained matters to its father, the child was sent for more yams; (it) brought some home and the king and his wife both ate. The king then resolved to go and fetch yams from Cuku; Cuku then made a bargain with the king that he was to mark his son with the ọchị marks and cut off the heads of both his son and his daughter and then bury them in his garden; a male slave was also to be killed and a female slave, and gardens were to be made with their heads. He was to wait twelve days and then go and look, and in twelve days yams had sprung from the heads of the men and koko-yams from the women; from the elder son had sprung palm and coconut and all big trees, and from the daughter corn and all plants.

Adaka is the head of all the yams, Mgbulichi of all the koko yams. Iroko is the king of all the trees, coconut the child of the king; therefore iroko and coconut must be buried like men, or at any rate receive the same sacrifices.

Then people planted yams and ate and all slept; all countries came to beg the king for yams but he said he could not sell; they had to bring seven fowls, a pot, chalk, and goats. The king made medicine with it and they took it to their lands and sacrificed ọvọjiko;
the king told them he couldn't sell but only give yams for they were his children; they, on the other hand, were to give yams to Nri men when they saw them; if people refuse to do this the Nri man puts down ọtọ and takes it away and the yams follow him; to get yams again the man must bring fowls, etc., to the king. The medicine which the king makes is called opiti; yams and koko yams are cooked, but if a man eats he must not lick his fingers; each takes a piece of yam and throws it on someone else; after this all go home and plant yams (Thomas, 1913, 1:137-138).

In both tales, it is easy to see the key elements of the hegemonic propaganda which gave birth to them. As originators and controllers of what Afigbo (1981:50) describes as Earth Force (Àlà), Yam force (Ìfàjìgàbù) and the associated ritual staff (Ọgbọ), Nri priests arrogated to themselves the responsibility of preparing "yam medicine, Ògwù jì, at the right season for ensuring a plentiful supply of yams in all surrounding towns or in towns that subjected themselves to the eze Nri" (See Afigbo, 1981:52). By the same token, the Nri priest claimed the ritual responsibility of removing nso ọ́nị or ọzụ (abomination) everywhere in Igboland that acquiesced to their religious myth and hegemony.

In other Nri religious myths, Chukwu is portrayed as the source of the four-day Igbo week (izu) specially revealed by him to the Eze Nri:

Chukwu sent strange visitors to Eze Nri.
They came, four strangers with baskets.
They refused to disclose their names.
In the night, Eze Nri discovered their names
By sending rats into their baskets...
In the morning Eze called them:
Eke! Oye! Afo! Nkwọ!
Eze's wisdom was praised.
And they said:"Have four markets and four days.
Call them Eke, Oye, Afo, Nkwọ".
They vanished
(Onwujeogwu, 1981:66).

The relationship between this myth and Nri claims to the control of commercial activity in the ancient Igbo world is underscored in the closing paragraph of another version of the same myth recorded by Thomas (1913, 1:138):

Cuku sent the days of the week: four things like women carried baskets and came to the king's house; neither king nor doctors knew what they were, but they said that if the king did not sleep he would see at night; a rat came out and went inside the basket, called Eke eke, what is inside your basket, and so on for the other days; the king remembered the four names and when the four things stood in a row he called them by their names.

If a woman cannot go to the market she goes to the king's place, puts her basket down and takes it home again. Nri people make
markets by planting oglisi wood.

Other tales from Nri religious mythology assert the right of Nri priests to officiate in the title-taking and coronation ceremonies of other Igbo communities or refer to the well-known role of the Nri as peace-makers in Igboland. As Onwuejeogwu (1972:48) stats, "The power and authority of Eze Nri were based on the belief and recognition of many Igbo settlements that Eze Nri had spiritual authority over them", and this belief and recognition in turn appears to have rested on the faith which the myths linking the Eze Nri institution with the new supreme God, Chukwu, seems to have elicited throughout a wide area of Igboland. As Afigbo (1981:61) observes,

Nri priests moved from 'one corner of the globe to another' (eluwa dum) spreading the gospel that they came from the sky and that Chukwu had empowered them to crown kings, make yam medicine, remove nso, control agricultural calendar and make peace in return for giving yam and other food crops to all peoples.

This Nri missionary activity resulted in the first Igbo experienced of religious colonialism. Consequently, the Nri town emerged as the "Holy City" of the Igbo (Afigbo, 1981) and the sacred cradle of Igbo culture comparable to Ife in Yoruba consciousness.

As has been pointed out, Nri mythology mangled to propagate the idea of a great Sky God, Chukwu, without challenging or destroying the sanctity and authority of Ala and other basic components of autochthonous Igbo religion. This strategy was ultimately copied by the Aro, as pointed out by Echeruo (1979:20), in the development of their local deity (Ibiniukpaabi), which they had derived from the autochthonous Ibibio cult of Ibritam, into the sanctuary and oracle of Chukwu, the power base of their theocratic hegemony. But the Aro were less successful than the Nri. Lacking the tact and pacific temperament of the Nri, the shrewd but violently exploitative and slave-trafficking Aro priests failed to elicit universal acceptance of the Chukwu of their oracle. The fraudulent and devilish aspects of the cult soon became widely apparent despite attempts by Aro missionaries to paint a glorious image of its indwelling God. It seems to me that it is out of this awareness of the negative features of the Chukwu of the Aro cult that a large cycle of tales ridiculing the idea of Chukwu were created.

The most brazen of these countermyths in which the false claims of the Aro "Supreme God" are debunked, are those which portray Chukwu as a stupid ogre or as a trickster tricked in his attempt to inflict mindless cruelty on people. In one of the most popular of the tales in this cycle of countermyths (Ogbalu, 1972:1-4), Chukwu is easily outwitted by Mbe (Tortoise), the Igbo trickster hero:

Once upon a time, Mbe went to Chukwu's house as was the custom. Chukwu went into the room, brought a piece of stories, gave it to him, saying; "Break kola". Mbe looked up and looked down and thought very hard.
Then he (Mbè) went outside, prepared a large pad, came back to Chukwu's house and said to him, "Take this pad and carry the Earth (Alà) with it." Chukwu cried out aloud to Mbè and asked him, "Can a man carry the Earth?" Whereupon, Mbè cried out aloud to him and asked him, "Can a man break a piece of stone, is it kolanut?" Chukwu looked up and told Mbè that he would send for him again on his return journey from where he was going. Mbè agreed, left and continued on his journey.

Notice the implications of the dominant motifs in this tale: Mbè's mock-pilgrimage to the Cukwu oracle; the impossible task proposed by the dim-witted ogre, Chukwu, in total disregard of customary Igbo "kola hospitality", and the idea of the superiority of Earth over Chukwu, who, in fact, ironically recognizes himself as a puny mortal ("man") in the face of Ala:

*Mmadụ q na-ebu ala ebu?*
(Can a man carry the Earth?)

In the rest of the tale, it becomes clearer and more specific that the stupid task master presented here is no other than the God of the Aro Oracle, Chukwu Ukpabía:

On his way back from his journey, Mbè returned to Chukwu's house and greeted him: "Chukwu Ukpabía, I have completed my journey and I am on my way back home." Then Chukwu gave him some money and asked him to go and buy palm-wine for him. But he told him to ensure that he neither put the wine in a pot nor in a calabash; that he neither came through a bush nor a road when bringing the wine; that he neither came in the morning nor in the afternoon nor in the evening; and that the wine container should neither be full nor short of being full.

Mbè took the money and went home. When he returned to his house, he thought very hard and hit at what to do. He bought wine and put it into a food mortar. Then, in the middle of the night, he took the wine and passing *kpum kpum* through a water-tunnel, entered and said: "Chukwu Ukpabía, I have bought the wine and here am I with it." Then Chukwu asked him, "Did I not ask you not to come in the morning?" But Mbè replied, "Is this morning? Is this afternoon?"

Again, Chukwu asked him, "Did I not tell you neither to pass through a bush nor through a road while coming?" To which Mbè replied, "Đid I come through the bush or through a road? Was it not through a water tunnel that I came with the wine?" Then Chukwu asked again, "Did I not tell you that the wine container should be neither full nor short of being full?" In response to this, Mbè pushed the mortar in which he put the wine to one side in such a way that the wine touched the edge of the mortar on one side and appeared half-full on another side. And he told Chukwu, "This wine in the mortar, is it full or short of being full?" At this,
Chukwu stared vacantly and shook his head thinking: it is said that pride goes before a fall. When a person's cup is full, it might overflow.

So when these things passed by, Chukwu gave Mbe a cock and a hen and told him that before a year ran out the cock would lay eggs while the hen would crow. Mbe took the two fowls and went home. One day, he came out to the middle of the market and hitting himself on the head with a club, began to cry gently, gently, saying that he was in deep waters. People asked him, "Mbediogu, what is the matter with you?" Mbe replied and said, "My father has died in childbirth and my mother has been killed on the warfront while fighting." At this, Chukwu cried aloud at him, asking him, "Does a man give birth? Do women go to war?" And Mbe retorted, saying, "Does a cock lay eggs? Does a hen crow?"

We are of course dealing here with a common tale-type in which the name of Chukwu Ụkpajịa has been substituted for the names of other stupid ogres. The same is true of other tales, such as the following, "The Two Boys" recorded by Thomas (1918:86). Here Chukwu is subjected to a thorough-going ridicule in a series of encounters which seem to have no other apparent purpose than to undermine any claims to divine omnipotence or omniscience which may be arrogated to any being of that name:

A woman conceived often, but the children died. She asked a doctor and he divined. She conceived and bore a living child and called him Amacamifowa (A). Then she bore another boy and called him Amacagaifeowa (B).

She fell sick; the boys said, "Let us get firewood for her." B went to the back of Cuku's house and cut wood. Cuku said, "Who is that?" "I, A," he replied; "All right; the wood shall stop in the ground, the axe in the wood, and the hand on the axe," said Cuku. And it was so. B nearly died. Then Cuku called and said, "Wood come out of the ground, axe out of the wood, and hand "from the axe", and it was so. A came and quarrelled; he took the axe and cut firewood in the back of Cuku's house. Cuku called, "I, A," he answered. "All right," said Cuku, "the wood shall stop in the ground, and the axe in the wood, and the hand on the axe". A called out to Cuku, "May you swell, may you fill the house and come outside too." So Cuku swelled and could not speak. A could not move.

A boy in another house in Cuku's place asked who was breaking wood in the back of his father's house. A said, "I;" He said, "Let the wood come out of the ground, the axe out of the wood, and the hand off the axe." And it was so. A then called out, "Let Cuku dry, etc." So Cuku recovered.

Cuku went to A's house and said he would come up for A to shave his head. A took a skull, took corn leaves off and put the corn in a calabash. Cuku came; A said he was working; Cuku said he would shell
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corn if A would shave his head.

A shaved the head and Cuku rubbed his hand over his head and said, "Why did you shave all my head; put it back." A said, "Take the corn cob and put the seeds back". Cuku could not do it, so he went.

Cuku gave A a round basket to fetch water; A took cassava, spread it, and put a circle round it, and told Cuku to carry it in when it rained.

Rain fell when A went to the water; Cuku tried to carry the cassava and ground, but could not. A could not carry the water, so he washed and went home. Cuku asked, "Why is there no water?" A asked, "Why is the cassava not carried in?" "Did you ever see a man carry land on his head?" replied Cuku. "Did you ever see a basket for water?" answered A.

Cuku called A and B; he gave B one cow and A one bull. "Keep them for seven years, and each year you will have one calf," he said. They did so, but A got no calves. B went and Cuku asked for A. "A has stranger at home," said B. "All right," Cuku and B shared the cows. B went home.

A took the bull and went to Cuku and said it got no calves, "Take the bull back," but Cuku would not take it. B threw it into the house and went.

In other tales, the idea of Chukwu as the God of creation is debunked by means of motifs which question his sense of justice and fairplay. In the common Igbo myth of how death came into the world (See Egudu, 1973:23 and Ugochukwu, et al, 1977:20), it is indeed ridiculous that the so-called omniscient creator bases his decision that humans should be subject to death merely on the chance failure of the human messenger, Dog, to reach his house in time. This capricious incapacity of Chukwu to arrive at fair decisions is stressed in the following version of the Ohafia myth, "Ife Meenị Chinèkè Kwere À na-ègbu Anụ" (Why God Ordained the Killing of Animals):

Big beasts and small beasts
They came together
They went and asked God Creator-that-moulded-man-and-moulded-spirits:
"You, O lord that moulded us -

5 Animals with flesh and blood
Humans with flesh and blood -
They (humans) have begun to kill and eat the flesh of our kind
Let them kill us no more
We are one"

10 God asked them: "What are you people saying?"
They once again told their story
He said he had heard
He summoned humans: "Have you heard what animals have said about you? They have come to plead with me that you should kill them no more.

15 What you should do is this,
Let the animals be killed, one of each kind, one of each kind
When each has been roasted, season it with salt, cook it and store it
Let each be roasted -
'till the day I shall come and judge the case between you - in three nkwo days ahead -

20 That is when I shall come and judge the case between you
Between you humans and animals"
Humans found Antelope
They found Antelope
Roasted it, stripped it of its skin.

25 They went on my little-blameless-ones, they
killed every kind of animal without exception
They roasted them, seasoned them with salt, roasted,
Every kind of animal in the world without exception
They killed them, one of each kind, one of each kind
It went on until the third nkwo day, big beasts and small beasts gathered together.

30 They sent and called God, Creator-that-moulded-man-and-moulded spirits
He came
God, Creator-that-moulded-man-and-moulded-spirits, he came.
He sat apart by himself asked them: "What are you people talking about?"
They (animals) said; "See, humans, they kill us mercilessly, all without exception.

35 When they kill us, they eat our flesh
We are of flesh and blood, they are of flesh and blood
It was you that created one kind created the other kind
Pray, tell them to kill us no more.
He (God) said that they should be served with cola

40 Their complaint was in order
Antelope-meat was given to Antelope, Antelope ate
Ochichi-meat was given to Antelope, Antelope ate
They roasted Leopard-meat and gave it to Leopard, Leopard ate
Unyo-meat was given to Unyo, Unyo ate

45 All without exception, their meat was given to them, they ate
God, creator-that-moulded-man-and-moulded-spirits asked them:
"What you have just eaten, were they sweet in your mouths,
Or not?
They said it was all sweet in their mouths (Azùonye, 1985).

It is no doubt possible to look at this tale from a humanist perspective as an image of the anthropomorphic God seen exclusively in terms of the
pertinence of his actions to human interests: 'Chukwu is on the side of man in whose image he was created'. But we are dealing here with an ironic and satiric image of a so-called supreme creator who cannot even be taken seriously by his own so-called creations, as in the following tale about "Chukwu and the Birds", translated from Thomas (1913, III:53-54) in which the bird, Obele (the greater Hornbill), is clearly amused by Chukwu's pretension to the power of creation:

Chukwu created various kinds of birds; and he told them to come so that he would give them wings, give them tails and give them their characteristic cries. They came, took their shares and each of them left and went home. Obele came last and said: "Father, Chukwu, give me my own share and let me go." But he (Chukwu) said to him, "Where did you go all this while that you weren't able to come in time, at the time your fellow birds came? See what has happened now: the whiteness that would have become yours is no longer yours." And he said to him, "All right, our father, I am going." And he burst into laughter. As he was laughing, Chukwu said to him: "Obele, are you laughing, laughing at me, at me who am Chukwu? Chukwu is all-knowing!" And he said to him, "No! It is not you I am laughing at." But he said to him, "Laugh on and go, laughing will kill you." And so Obele went on laughing.

In other tales, Chukwu merely occupies motifemic slots in various tale-types usually occupied by characters symbolizing various vices. In "Tortoise and Cuku" (Thomas 1918:57), for example, he occupies a slot in which in other oicotypes of the same tale is usually occupied by the heartless usurer - a folk shylock - called Umezurike who would exact even the last drop of blood from his unfortunate debtors. And in "Ewu Chukwu" (Chukwu's Goat), otherwise titled "God and the Two Brothers" (Basden, 1921;431; Ugochukwu et al, 1977:162; and Nwaozuzu, 1985: Appendix), Chukwu takes the place usually occupied by a heartless spirit or hag who dwells under water and through whose temptations the innocent is rewarded and the wicked punished just as the temptations of the Devil 19 expose innocence and vice in man.

It seems to me that the voices of dissent which created the above tales in which negative images of Chukwu are presented were still very active about the time of the arrival of European Christian Missionaries on the shores of Igboland in the 19th Century, for what the missionaries came up against amounted to a spiritual no-man's-land in which one evidence of belief in a supreme being called Chukwu was quickly countered by another bluntly denying any knowledge of such a God. The unsettled nature of the Igbo religious scene at that time is evidenced by the numerous mutually inconsistent terms for the Igbo supreme God and Devil recorded by S.W Koelle in his Polyglotta Africana (1854). As summed up in Green (1967) and Nwoqa (1984), the names for God include Dsuku (Chukwu), Agbara, and Dsigogike (Chukwu okike) while the names for devil include Igwe, Amadioha, Iguakala (Igwekaala) and Onyigiri. It was indeed a situation in which one man's supreme God was another man's Devil. Naturally, it was a situation which lent itself to alien religious manipulation and conversion.
The Christian missions were rather opportunistic in this regard. Recognizing the Nri-Aro apostasies and their theological terminology as operating on the same hegemonic principles as their own, they quickly adopted and adapted them and made them the basis of their evangelism in Igboland. This development which, with the spread of Christianity, muffled much of the prevailing traditionalist rejectionist opinion created room for the mechanism whereby the new Christian idea of Chukwu as supreme God was fed back into the Igbo oral tradition from where many a scholar, in recent years, has retrieved it as positive traditional evidence of the kind presented in Ugonna (1984: 16-17):

From the beginning God (i.e. Chukwu) has existed. At first he was alone in heaven but later created innumerable spirits who lived with him. Time passed. Later he created uwa (the world), at first a mass of formless dust which in course of time compressed into firm earth. Then Chukwu caused water to cover the whole earth and later this water subsided and gathered in hollows, and wet earth appeared.

And so on, we find similar evidence deriving from the feedback of Christian theology into the Igbo oral tradition in the works of such Christian theologians as Arinze (1970) and Ilogu (1974), among many others.

Indeed, the situation in the Igbo oral tradition, today, is such that a researcher - armed with a tape-recorder and other instruments of field research - can record a most bewildering range of tale-types and motifs presenting a much wider variety of different images of Chukwu than we have considered in this paper. Even today, new images of Chukwu, as the Igbo supreme God are being added to the existing stock by individual myth-makers and various groups. A case in point is the giant siamese twin image of Chukwu combining a masculine "Mmuo" aspect with a feminine "Agwu" aspect, recently introduced by I.N.C. Nwosu in his fascinating Ndi Ichie Akwa Mythology and Folklore Origins of the Igbos (1983). And there will be many more such images in the future. It is however hoped that the paradigm presented in this paper will contribute, to a certain extent, to the sifting and categorization of such data, placing each in its proper historical position and recognizing the socio-psychological realities behind their coming into being.

NOTES

1. In this article, the term "folktale" is used in its widest possible sense, as defined in Thompson (1946:4) "to include all forms of prose narrative, written or oral, which have come to be handed down through the years". The "fairy tale" of the European tradition comes under the Igbo akụkọ i̍fọ while the "myths" and "legends" of the European tradition come under the Igbo akụkọ ifùrù (or akụkọ òkìkè) and akụkọ mgbàkà (or akụkọ ndị ọdogwu/dikị). A wider umbrella term for myths, legends and other tales told as true (i.e. historical narratives) is akụkọ ala (lit. stories of the land or the earth). For the source of some of these terms, see Nwaozuzu (1982).
2. Echeruo is here referring to an earlier phase of Igbo religion before the Christian mutation of the Igbo concept of Chukwu was fed back into the Igbo oral tradition.

3. The translation is mine.

4. The fact that the Nigerian Jihad of Usman dan Fodio did not reach Igboland should not be taken as foolproof evidence that Islamic theological influences may not have been felt in the Igbo culture area through peaceful commercial and similar contracts in the Niger and Benue valleys. There is matter for further research here.

5. For evidence of Nri-Igala genealogical relations see Onwuejeogwu (1981).

6. The simultaneous reference to Sky-gods as "father" and "mother" appears to be a common motif in West African traditional religions.

7. The translation is mine.


10. In discussing the Chukwu oracle in this article, I have drawn freely from a 5-part Radio talk, "Aro Civilization" which was broadcast over the Voice of Biafra in 1968. This reconstruction of the rise of the Chukwu oracle is based on oral evidence recorded for me by Miss Lovett Okoroji from two Aro informants.

11. This follows from Afigbo's (1981: 15-16) periodization of early Igbo history into an "Eri Period" followed by "the Era of Aro Ascendancy".

12. The idea of chi as "cosmic light" or sunlight is implicit in the Igbo description of day-break as "Chi ofufo". See also Achebe (1975) for further notes on this idea.


14. In a tradition discussed in Azuonye (1968), the cult of Chukwu is portrayed as a spoil of war.

15. Again and again, in Igbo folktales and songs, Chukwu appears as an inhospitable monster who would rather offer death to his stranded unexpected guests than charity. Thus, in a popular song recorded by Ogbalu (1974: 172-173), Mbe (Tortoise) arrives at Chukwu's door while pursuing a lost palmfruit. As he knocks at the door, the following dialogue culminating in Mbe's death, ensues:

Chukwu said to him
"Whosoever knocked at that door
May his hands stick to the door!"
Mbe said to him,
"Whosoever spoke those words,
May his words stick to his mouth!"
And so it was that for one palm fruit,
Mbe was put to death!
(The refrain after each line is "Aja Mbene!").

16. We have similar subtle insinuations of the overriding supremacy of the Earth in many other tales and songs. For example, in the version of the popular cumulative ballad, "Nwakatimkpọrọ" (recorded by Ugochukwu, et al, 1977:134), there is a chain of actions and reactions in which one superior force overcomes another: the breadfruit that kills Nwakatimkpọrọ is cut by a Wooden Spear; the Wooden Spear is eaten by Termites; the Termites are eaten by a Fowl; the Fowl is seized by a Kite; the Kite is shot by a Gun; the Gun is cut into pieces by a Matchet; the Matchet is reduced to shrapnel by the Blacksmith; the Blacksmith is burnt to death by Fire; the Fire is put off by Water; and the Water is sucked up by the Earth, the ultimate as summed up in the lines:

Gini ga-emere m ala nynwa?
Hm Nwakatimkpọrọ!
O nweghi ihe ga-eme ala
Hm Nwakatimkpọrọ!

17. The possible glosses for these names are Amachamifeuwa (Do I know everything of this world?) for Amacamifowa, and Amachagomifeuwa (I now know everything of this world) for Amacagaifeowa).

18. The story of the folk usurer, Umezurike, occurs in the oral tradition of Isuikwuato, Imo State.

19. Significantly, in this respect, an informant interviewed by me, in March 1973, after an Omabe performance at Nsukka describes Chukwu as "Lusifia" (i.e. Lucifer) in pursuit of his argument that "Chukwu abaka" (i.e. Chukwu exists in many different forms, including, in other words, the diabolic form).

References


