

## CONCEPT OF ANCESTRAL WORSHIP IN IGBOLAND: ORIGIN AND CHALLENGES OF THE CONTEMPORARY IGBO COMMUNITY

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### Abstract

Ancestral worship in Igbo land is a significant aspect of their traditional religion, which emphasizes reverence to an unknown God through the veneration of ancestors and various gods and spirits. Ancestors, considered as intermediaries between the living and the divine, are respected through libations, sacrifices, and prayers, with the belief that they remain alive in the family and can perform expected roles. The Igbo religious system, which is often described as polytheistic and panentheistic, acknowledges a central deity, Chukwu, who is classified among lesser deities with specific purposes. The concept of God in Igbo traditional religion is unique and distinct from monotheistic or polytheistic thought categories in Judeo-Christian and Islamic religions. This reverence to an unknown God through ancestral worship showcases a monotheistic concept within a polytheistic religious structure, reflecting the complexity and diversity of Igbo religious beliefs.<sup>1</sup>

## INTRODUCTION

### A Brief Overview of Ancestral Worship in the Igbo Land

Ancestral worship in Igbo land is a fundamental aspect of traditional Igbo religion, involving the veneration of ancestors alongside various gods and spirits. The Igbo people believe that their ancestors serve as intermediaries between the living and the deity, protecting and interceding for their descendants. Offerings given to ancestors are considered gifts they would have received if alive, emphasizing respect rather than worship. Ancestors are revered for blessings such as wealth, health, fertility, and longevity. This practice involves maintaining communion and communication with departed relatives through offerings, reflecting a deep cultural connection and continuity across generations.

Elders in Igbo society are expected to provide food and drinks to their ancestors as a sign of respect and honor rather than worship. Ancestors are viewed as divinity friends, symbolizing peace, unity, and prosperity within the family structure. The ritual of ancestral veneration is seen as a means of strengthening communal relationships

across generations. The closeness between the living and the dead emphasizes filial piety and continuity within Igbo culture.

Ancestor worship in Igbo land is part of the traditional African religion, where ancestors are believed to protect the community from epidemics and strife. Shrines dedicated to ancestors are crucial in maintaining this connection. The reverence given to ancestors is not considered worship but rather veneration, highlighting the importance of ancestral guidance and blessings in Igbo cosmology.<sup>23</sup>

### **Statement of the Problem:**

The traditional religion of the Igbo people has been questioned on whether it is a monotheistic or a polytheistic religion. This is an existing challenge as the confusion leads to many assumptions about the traditional religion of the Igbo people, hence questioning its uniqueness. This is because in the traditional African religion, the idea of the presence of many deities who are worshiped. Therefore, this study investigates the monotheistic nature of Igbo ancestral worship.<sup>3</sup>

### **Background of the Igbo People and Their Cultural Practices:**

The Igbo people are a diversified group with a rich cultural history, mainly found in Igboland, a region in Southeast Nigeria. Before European colonialism and the age of the Atlantic slave trade, Igboland was inhabited since ancient times and was governed by the Kingdom of Nri.

Despite having several dialects, the Igbo people, commonly known as Igbo, speak the same language. With strong roots in their history and beliefs, the Igbo people follow many customs, practices, and traditions.<sup>4</sup>

The Igbo culture encompasses different aspects, including visual art, music, dancing, clothing, food, and various languages. Igbo culture is heavily reliant on music, with melodic and symphonic forms emerging from forged iron instruments, such as the *iga* and *pi*, which resemble flutes.<sup>5</sup> The Igbo people love to dance, and each tribe has specific dances that are connected to festivals and religious observances. Root crops, including taro, cassava, and yams, are vital to the traditional economy of the Igbo people.<sup>6</sup>

The Igbo religion is based on the concept of Chukwu, a supreme god who is said to be watching over creation from a distance. The rich traditional beliefs of the Igbo people provide guidance on dealing with gods, spirits, and ancestors and explain the beginning of the world. In Igbo religious beliefs, reincarnation is seen as a means of bridging the gap between the living and the dead. While certain communities continue to follow traditional customs, most Igbo people now identify as Christians.<sup>7</sup>

The Igbo people's social structure of village life, where decisions are made collectively through institutions such as elders' and chiefs' councils. Men and women play distinct roles in society, with men typically engaged in activities such as carving and farming, while women focus on crafts such as pottery making and weaving. The

<sup>2</sup> "Ancestral Veneration in Igboland." <https://kevblog.net/ancestral-veneration-in-igboland/> 26, 2024)

<sup>2</sup> Francis Chuku Madukasi, Obu: "The Sacred Homestead for Ancestor Veneration in Igbo Traditional Religion." *International Journal of Research and Innovation in Social Science*, Volume V, Issue I, (January 2021):2454-6186. Accessed February 26, 2024. <https://www.rsisinternational.org/journals/ijriss/Digital-Library/volume-5-issue-1/467-477.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> M. Kristel Grace Chinyere Nwuba Sr., The interface between Igbo traditional religion and Christianity. *African Journal of History and Culture*, Vol. 13(1), pp. 37-42, January-June 2021, ISSN 2141-6672 <https://academicjournals.org/journal/AJHC/article-full-text-pdf/A12D92466181> (Accessed February 26, 2024). See also "Igbo Religion," *Encyclopedia.com*, copyright @2019, p.

<sup>4</sup> Katharine Slattery, "The Igbo People—Origins and History" <http://www.faculty.ucr.edu/~legneref/igbo/igbo1.htm> Accessed February 27, 2024).

<sup>5</sup> "Igbo culture and traditions". <https://www.icogermany.de/igbo-culture-traditions/> (Accessed February 27, 2024)

<sup>6</sup> Countries and their cultures, "Igbo." Available from: <https://www.everyculture.com/wc/Mauritania-to-Nigeria/Igbo.html> (Accessed February 27, 2024)

<sup>7</sup> Ohadike, Don C. *Igbo Culture and History*. [https://womrel.siteshost.iu.edu/REL%20300%20Spirit/REL%20300\\_Spirit/Igbo%20Culture%20and%20History.pdf](https://womrel.siteshost.iu.edu/REL%20300%20Spirit/REL%20300_Spirit/Igbo%20Culture%20and%20History.pdf) (Accessed February 27, 2024)

Igbo people have faced challenges ranging from civil war to military coups, but they have maintained their cultural identity through their customs and traditions.<sup>8</sup>

### **What the Ancestor-ship in Igbo land entails:**

One of the Igbo belief systems, the ancestor ship, grants authority over the living to the dead. Similar to reincarnation, it is a belief that existence does not end with death but rather continues in another cosmic kingdom.<sup>9</sup> In other words, ancestors are believed to be disembodied spirits of people who lived upright lives here on earth, died “good” and natural death, and received the acknowledged funerary rites. They could be men or women. For one to become an ancestor at death, he/she must have had a good life while alive and received a befitting funeral. One must understand that not every deceased Igbo family member qualifies as an ancestor, as ancestorhood requires more than a simple death. Obiakor (2010) stated that in the Igbo worldview, Individuals, ancestors, and spirits play major roles. Thus, one of the main reasons the Igbo live decent lives is that they are afraid of their ancestors’ wrath.<sup>10</sup>

The Igbo people believe that their ancestors are always with them in their daily lives, guarding and pleading on their behalf. Therefore, they always invite their ancestors to engage in ceremonies, libations, and morning prayers. As part of the activity, event, or ritual, the eldest member of the family, or whoever is pouring the libation or performing the prayer, will invoke their ancestors (the dead elders) in chronological sequence and mention their names as much as he can recall.<sup>11</sup>

### **Origin and Development of Igbo Ancestral Worship:**

Ancestral worship in Igbo society has a rich and complex history that is deeply rooted in cultural and religious traditions. The practice of worshiping ancestors has been a central aspect of Igbo spirituality for centuries, with its origins traced back to the early inhabitants of Igbo land.<sup>12</sup>

Before the arrival of European colonial powers in Africa, the Igbo practiced a traditional religion centered on the worship of ancestors. Ancestral spirits were believed to continue to influence the lives of their descendants, offering protection, guidance, and blessings through rituals, sacrifices, and prayers to those who honored them.<sup>13</sup> Madukasi opined that the belief in ancestral spirits is not limited to individual families but extends to the broader community, as ancestors are believed to have a vested interest in their living descendants’ welfare and prosperity.<sup>14</sup> The Igbo people believe that their ancestors played a significant role in their existence and continue to exist in the spirit world, influencing the lives of their living descendants.<sup>15</sup> Ancestors are intermediaries between the living and deities, serving as mediators and intercessors in the spiritual realm.<sup>16</sup>

In his work, Ogbonna asserts that the sacred homestead, known as Obu or Obi, is one of the most significant places for ancestor reverence in Igbo society. This architectural edifice serves as a symbol of traditional religious ties, compensating for the loss of contact with ancestral homes and providing the community with cultural

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Obiakor, E. E., & Onuora, “Igbo Ancestor-ship and Christian sainthood: The Bigotry”, *Global Journal of Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences* Vol.7, No. 8, (2019): 17-23. <https://www.eajournals.org/wpcontent/uploads/Igbo-Ancestor-Ship-and-Christian-Sainthood.pdf> (Accessed April 14, 2024).

<sup>10</sup> E. E. Obiakor, *Reincarnation in Igbo Belief System: The Paradox*, PhD. Thesis Nnamdi Azikiwe University Awka (2010).

<sup>11</sup> Ethel and Ngozi: *Igbo Ancestorship and Christian Sainthood*

<sup>12</sup> Chukwma O. Okeke, Christopher N. Ibenwa, and Gloria Tochukwu Okeke, “Conflicts Between African Traditional Religion and Christianity in Eastern Nigeria: The Igbo Example.” *Sage Journals* 7 (2017), <https://doi.org/10.1177/2158244017709322> (Accessed February 27, 2024)

<sup>13</sup> Madukasi, “Obu,” 469.

<sup>14</sup> Owobusola Oluwapelumi, “The Role of Spirits and Ancestral Spirits in Igbo Mythology: Guardians of Tradition and Identity”. <https://www.oriire.com/article/the-role-of-spirits-and-ancestral-spirits-in-igbo-mythologyguardians-of-tradition-and-identity> (Accessed March 1, 2024).

<sup>15</sup> Umezina, Cletus. "The supreme being in the Igbo traditional religion in southeastern Nigeria: A critical analysis." *Asian Journal of Social Science & Humanities* 3 (2014): 59–65.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

security.<sup>17</sup> Obu is also seen as a place for spiritual rededication and the evocation of proud ancestry, reinforcing the Igbo people's importance of communal values and traditions. Obu is also a place for spiritual re-dedication and the evocation of proud ancestry, reinforcing the importance of communal values and tradition.<sup>18</sup>

### **Cultural Significance and Ancestral Worship Rituals**

Ancestor worship holds immense cultural significance among the Igbo people, shaping their spiritual beliefs, social structure, and identity. The veneration of ancestors is deeply rooted in Igbo culture, reflecting a profound respect for lineage, tradition, and community cohesion.

#### **Cultural Significance:**

1. **Lineage and Identity:** Ancestor worship reinforces the importance of lineage and ancestry in Igbo society. It connects individuals to their roots, emphasizing a sense of continuity and community belonging.<sup>19</sup>
2. **Social Cohesion:** Honoring ancestors fosters unity and solidarity among family members and the broader community. It serves as a unifying force that strengthens social bonds and promotes a collective identity.<sup>20</sup>
3. **Spiritual Connection:** Ancestor worship establishes a spiritual connection between the living and the deceased, emphasizing the belief in an afterlife and the enduring presence of ancestors in the lives of their descendants.<sup>21</sup>

Ancestor worship plays a vital role in preserving cultural heritage, reinforcing social values, and maintaining a strong sense of community among the Igbo people.

#### **Rituals Associated with Ancestor Worship:**

The rituals associated with ancestor worship in Igbo land are deeply rooted in cultural traditions and play a significant role in honoring and connecting with deceased ancestors. Some key rituals include the following:

1. **Shrines and Offerings:** Ancestor worship rituals in Igbo land often involve the creation of shrines dedicated to ancestors where offerings such as food, libations, and prayers are made. These offerings are a way to show respect, seek blessings, and maintain a connection with the deceased ancestors' spirits.<sup>22</sup>
2. **Libations and Incantations:** Pouring libations and chanting incantations are common practices in Igbo ancestor veneration rituals. Libations symbolize communication with ancestors and seeking their guidance, whereas incantations invoke their presence and blessings.<sup>23</sup>
3. **Ceremonies and festivals:** Various ceremonies and festivals are dedicated to ancestor worship in the Igbo culture. These events involve communal gatherings, prayers, rituals, and offerings to collectively honor ancestors and strengthen familial and community bonds.<sup>24</sup>
4. **Tomb Sweeping:** Rituals such as Tomb Sweeping Day or Singing Festival involve cleaning and maintaining ancestral graves, offering food, burning incense, and paying respects to ancestors at their burial sites. This practice symbolizes remembrance, respect, and continuity of familial ties.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Mazi Ogonna, "Igbo Old Religious Houses of Worship Before Christianity." Accessed March 1, 2024. <http://ekwendigbo.com/index.php/en/blog-footer/item/36-igbo-old-religious-houses-of-worship-before-christianity>

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Omenka Egwuatu Nwa-Ikenga, "Odinani: The Sacred Arts and Sciences of the Igbo People." <https://igbocybershrine.com/2011/01/26/honoring-your-ancestors/> (Accessed March 4, 2024).

<sup>20</sup> Madukasi, "Obu," 472.

<sup>21</sup> Owubusola, "The Role of Spirits."

<sup>22</sup> Madukasi, "Obu" 471.

<sup>23</sup> Mmaduabuchi Okoli, "Music and rituals in Igbo Traditional Society", *Journal of the Association of Nigerian Musicologists*, 16 (1). 2 (2022). Accessed March 7, 2024. <https://www.ajol.info/index.php/janm/article/view/230238>

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Chukwuma *et al.*, "Conflicts between traditional African religion."

5. Symbolic Gestures: Symbolic gestures such as lighting candles, burning incense, bowing, and offering prayers are common in worship rituals of Igbo ancestors. These gestures are symbolic acts of reverence, remembrance, and seeking blessings from ancestors.

These rituals, among others associated with ancestor worship in Igbo land, are essential for maintaining cultural heritage, honoring ancestors, and fostering a strong sense of connection with the past and the spiritual realm.

### **Monotheistic Elements in the Ancestral Worship of Igbo**

Monotheistic elements are evident in the belief system of Igbo ancestral worship that acknowledges a supreme being "Chukwu" as the ultimate deity.

#### **A. The concept of a supreme being (Chukwu).**

While Igbo traditional religion is not strictly monotheistic or polytheistic, the concept of Chukwu as the central deity reflects Igbo ontology's monotheistic tendencies.<sup>26</sup> The belief in Chukwu as the Supreme Being reflects a fundamental understanding of a transcendent entity that governs all aspects of existence and creation.

The term "Chukwu" signifies the Supreme God in Igbo cosmology, embodying attributes of omnipotence, omniscience, and omnipresence. Chukwu is considered the creator of all things, the source of life, and the sustainer of the universe.<sup>27</sup> This concept aligns with the monotheistic principles

By emphasizing a singular, all-powerful deity who holds authority over all other spiritual beings and forces.

Furthermore, Chukwu is perceived to be benevolent and beneficent, overseeing both good and evil spirits while maintaining control over all aspects of existence.<sup>28</sup> The Igbo people pray to Chukwu for protection, guidance, provision of needs, and blessings, viewing him as the divine king, ruler, judge, and master of the universe.<sup>29</sup>

#### **B. Understanding of Ancestors as Chukwu Intermediaries**

In Igbo cosmology, the understanding of ancestors as intermediaries to Chukwu, the Supreme Being, is deeply rooted in traditional Igbo religious beliefs. Ancestors are perceived as spiritual entities who hold a special connection to Chukwu and act as mediators between the living and the divine realm.<sup>30</sup> This intermediary role is significant in facilitating communication, blessings, and guidance from Chukwu to the living descendants.

In traditional Igbo religion, the ancestors are believed to have transitioned to the spiritual realm, where they maintain a close relationship with Chukwu. As intermediaries, they are seen as influential figures who can intercede on behalf of the living, conveying prayers, requests, and offerings to Chukwu.<sup>31</sup> This spiritual connection allows ancestors to play a vital role in protecting, guiding, and blessing their living descendants.

The belief in ancestors as intermediaries underscores the interconnectedness between the physical and spiritual worlds in Igbo cosmology. Ancestors are essential links between the earthly and divine realms, ensuring a harmonious relationship between the living, the ancestors, and Chukwu.<sup>32</sup> Their role as intermediaries highlights the reverence, respect, and spiritual significance attributed to ancestors within Igbo traditional religious practices.

<sup>26</sup> Kirstel, Mary. "The Interface."

<sup>27</sup> Modestus C. Anyaegbu, Is "Chukwu Okike Abiama" the Supreme Being of Igbo Religious Thought? Questioning the Assumptions! *An African Journal of Innovative Studies* 4 No. 2, 2023, ISSN: 26814-0788, <http://doi.org/10.13140/rg.2.2.20726.47684> (Accessed March 10, 2024).

<sup>28</sup> Ojimba, A. C., & Chidubem, V. I. (2011). The Concept of God in Igbo Traditional Religious Thought. *Journal of African Philosophy, Culture and Religions*, 11. No. 4. (December, 2022) <https://dx.doi.org/10.4314/ft.v11i4.7s> (Accessed March 10, 2024).

<sup>29</sup> "The Concept of the Supreme Being in Igbo Traditional Religion: A Critical Analysis for a Better Understanding." Available from: <https://dokumen.pub/the-concept-of-the-supreme-being-in-igbo-traditional-religion-a-critical-analysis-for-a-better-understanding-1nbsped-9783832593407-9783832543389.html>.

<sup>30</sup> U. M. U., "God, Divinities and Ancestors in African Traditional Religious Thought," *An African Journal of Arts and Humanities*, Vol. 3 No. 4 (June 2017). ISSN: 2488-9210 (Online) 2504-9038. Accessed March 12, 2024. <https://www.igwebuikeresearchinstitute.org/journal/3.4.10.pdf>

<sup>31</sup> Edmund O. Egbah, "A Reassessment of the concept of Ibo Traditional Religion" *Numen*, Vol. 19, (April 1972):68-79. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3269588>. (Accessed March 12, 2024).

<sup>32</sup> Isichei, E. (1976). *A History of the Igbo People*, (London: Macmillan, 1976).



### C. Monotheistic Tendencies in Religious Practices of Igbo People

According to Anthony and Victor (2022), Igbo society is deeply religious, like other traditional societies in Africa. A significant number of Igbo people continue to practice their traditional religion despite the arrival of other religions. However, since its arrival, Christianity has been the only religion competing with the Igbo traditional religion.<sup>33</sup> Since the arrival of Christianity as a religion in Igbo cosmology, there is no doubt that it has had a significant effect on traditional religious thought in Igbo. Consequently, some have questioned whether Igbo religious philosophy acknowledges an ultimate deity. Divergent views of the Igbo religious worldview have been expressed as a result of this uncertainty.<sup>34</sup> In every particular Igbo community, it is said that there exist different deities who perform different responsibilities in protecting its adherents. However, despite the prevalence of ancestor worship and the acknowledgment of various deities, monotheistic tendencies are discernible within Igbo religious practices. These tendencies reflect a belief in a singular, principal divine force that governs the universe and guides human affairs. Key examples of monotheistic tendencies in Igbo religious practices are as follows:

#### 1. Chukwu Invocation in Rituals

While Igbo rituals often involve supplications to specific deities or ancestors, they frequently begin or end with invocations to the supreme deity, Chukwu.<sup>35</sup> Chukwu is the source of all existence and the divine authority that transcends all other spiritual entities. Invoking Chukwu underscores the belief in a singular, omnipotent force that governs the cosmos.

#### 2. The Moral and Ethical Framework

Religious practices of Igbo people are often intertwined with ethical principles and moral values that reflect the will of Chukwu.<sup>36</sup> Igbo society emphasizes concepts such as justice, honesty, and communal harmony, with individuals expected to adhere to moral standards that align with Chukwu's divine laws. The notion of moral accountability to Chukwu underscores a monotheistic understanding of human responsibility and ethical conduct.

#### 3. Unity of the Purpose in Worship

Despite the multiplicity of deities and ancestral spirits in Igbo cosmology, a unifying belief in the ultimate sovereignty of Chukwu exists. Igbo religious gatherings and ceremonies often emphasize collective worship and communal solidarity,<sup>37</sup> reflecting a shared reverence for Chukwu as the supreme divine authority. This unity of purpose in worship underscores a monotheistic orientation toward a singular divine entity, even in the middle of the diversity of spiritual beings recognized in the Igbo tradition.

#### 4. Monotheistic Interpretations of Ancestor Worship

While ancestor worship is a prominent aspect of Igbo religious life, some scholars view it as a means of connecting with the divine essence embodied by Chukwu. Ancestors are often regarded as intermediaries between the living and Chukwu, with offerings and prayers directed toward them as channels for communicating with the supreme deity.<sup>38</sup> In this interpretation, ancestor worship is not viewed as a polytheistic devotion but rather as a monotheistic practice that acknowledges the divine presence manifested in ancestral spirits.<sup>39</sup>

### Comparison of Igbo Ancestral Worship with Other Religions

Igbo ancestral worship is a core aspect of the traditional belief system. It differs significantly from the concept of God in major monotheistic religions, such as Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, as identified by Onwuejeogwu.<sup>40</sup> Let us delve into the key points of comparison:

<sup>33</sup> Ojimba, A. C., & Chidubem, "The Concept of God in Igbo Traditional Religious Thought", *Filosofia Theoretica: Journal of African Philosophy, Culture, and Religions*, 11. No. 4. Dec. 2022. <https://dx.doi.org/10.4314/ft.v11i4.7s> (Accessed April 11, 2024).

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

<sup>35</sup> Nwachukwu Anakwenze, "An Igbo Philosophy of God: The Concept of God in Igbo Religion." (Peter Lang, 1997).

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

### **The concept of God.**

**Igbo:** Chukwu (the Great God) is the Supreme Being, a distant creator, and God. Ancestral spirits (ndichie) are intermediaries between the living and Chukwu. They are revered and honored, but not worshiped.

**Monotheistic Religions:** All three religions believe in a single, all-powerful God who is actively involved in the world. He interacts directly with humanity and demands worship and obedience.

### **Role of the Ancestors**

**Igbo:** Ancestors are believed to watch over and influence the lives of their descendants. They are honored through offerings, libations, and ceremonies to seek guidance and blessings. Maintaining good relations with ancestors is crucial for well-being and prosperity.

**Monotheistic Religions:** Ancestors generally hold no special place or power. In some traditions, they may be revered or remembered, but they are not seen as intermediaries or sources of influence.

### **The focus of rituals:**

**Igbo:** Rituals in Igbo tradition often focus on appeasing and honoring ancestors. Offerings, prayers, and festivals aim to maintain a positive relationship with ancestors.

**Monotheistic Religions:** Rituals in these religions typically focus on worshiping God, expressing devotion, seeking forgiveness, and celebrating religious holidays.

### **The Connection between Ancestors' Reverence and the Acknowledgment of a Higher, Unknown God:**

Ancestors and the acknowledgment of a higher, unknown God are integral parts of Igbo spirituality, and they are interconnected in a way that reflects the Igbo people's understanding of the spiritual world and their place within it.<sup>37</sup> Ancestors are believed to be intermediaries between the living and the divine, and their spirits are believed to continue to play a role in the lives of their descendants. Ancestors are honored and respected through various rituals and ceremonies, and guidance and protection are sought in times of need.

Simultaneously, the Igbo people recognize the existence of a higher, unknown God, known as Chukwu or Chineke, who is considered the source of life and power. This God is believed to be beyond human comprehension and is often depicted as a mystery or enigma. While ancestors may be revered and consulted for guidance, Chukwu is the ultimate authority and source of all blessings.

The connection between reverence for ancestors and acknowledgment of a higher, unknown God in Igbo land is rooted in the belief that the ancestors are part of a larger spiritual system that is ultimately controlled by Chukwu.<sup>38</sup> Ancestors are honored and respected not only for their own sake but also as a way of acknowledging and connecting with the divine power that lies beyond the human realm.

### **Challenges and Controversies Surrounding Igbo Monotheistic Beliefs**

Nwafor affirms that the Igbo people's monotheistic beliefs have been a subject of controversy and challenges.<sup>39</sup> While Christianity and Islam, which are monotheistic religions, have gained significant following among the

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<sup>37</sup> Nmah E. Patrick, *Spiritual Dimension of Land Identity Crisis in Igboland of Nigeria: An Ethical Reflection*, Unizik Journal of Arts and Humanities 12 (2012). 2 (2011). <http://dx.doi.org/10.4314/ujah.v12i2.6> (retrieved April 14, 2024).

<sup>38</sup> Emmanuel Chinedu Anagwo, "Cult of the Ancestors and Saints from the Igbo (Nigerian) Experience: A Liturgical Evaluation" in *African Christian Reflections on Culture and Dialogue*, ed., pp. 57-76. Chris Grzelak, S.C.J. *Journal of Catholic Reflection for Southern Africa*, 35 2 (Grace & Truth: Hilton South Africa, 2018): 8-21.

[https://www.academia.edu/42888755/CULT\\_OF\\_THE\\_ANCESTORS\\_AND\\_SAINTS\\_FROM\\_THE\\_IGBO\\_NIGERIAN\\_EXPERIENCE\\_A\\_LITURGICAL\\_EVALUATION](https://www.academia.edu/42888755/CULT_OF_THE_ANCESTORS_AND_SAINTS_FROM_THE_IGBO_NIGERIAN_EXPERIENCE_A_LITURGICAL_EVALUATION) (Retrieved April 14, 2024).

<sup>39</sup> Nwafor, M. (1993). Monotheistic nature of God in Christianity and African traditional religion: The Igbo context. [https://www.academia.edu/14879687/COMPARATIVE\\_STUDY\\_OF\\_THE\\_MONOTHEISTIC\\_NATURE\\_OF\\_GOD\\_IN\\_CHRISTIANITY\\_AND\\_AFRICAN\\_TRADITIONAL\\_RELIGION\\_THE\\_IGBO\\_CONTEXT](https://www.academia.edu/14879687/COMPARATIVE_STUDY_OF_THE_MONOTHEISTIC_NATURE_OF_GOD_IN_CHRISTIANITY_AND_AFRICAN_TRADITIONAL_RELIGION_THE_IGBO_CONTEXT) (Retrieved April 14, 2024).

Igbo, their traditional religion is predominantly polytheistic, with a belief in a supreme god, Chukwu, and various deities and spirits.

One of the challenges surrounding Igbo monotheistic beliefs is the perception that ATR is inherently polytheistic and therefore incompatible with monotheistic religions.<sup>40</sup> This perception is based on the fact that the ATR recognizes various deities and spirits, which are often venerated and accorded some form of worship. However, scholars have argued that the Igbo concept of God, as represented by Chukwu, is similar to the monotheistic concept of God, in that Chukwu is the Supreme Being and creator of the universe.

The impact of colonialism and Westernization on Igbo religious beliefs and practices is another challenge. The early European missionaries introduced a foreign method of worship that neglected the cultural and religious values of Igbo people.<sup>41</sup> This has led to a situation where whatever comes from Europe is seen as superior, while Igbo cultural artifacts and traditional religious practices are discarded.

Direct interreligious dialogue with ATR practitioners is also a controversial issue. While some argue that such dialogue is necessary for the mutual understanding and exchange of views between Christianity and traditional African religions, others see it as a potential threat to the mutual relationship and the authenticity of traditional religious practices.<sup>42</sup> The challenges and controversies surrounding Igbo monotheistic beliefs are complex and require a different understanding of religious beliefs and practices, as well as the impact of colonialism and Westernization.

### **Conclusion.**

Ancestral worship is a central aspect of the Igbo religion, involving the honoring of deceased ancestors who are believed to watch over and influence their descendants. Offerings and rituals aim to maintain good relations with ancestors. Ancestors are honored and respected and are not worshiped as the supreme deity. The supreme Igbo being is considered a distant Creator God. Ancestors act as intermediaries between the Chukwu and the living. Ancestral worship strengthens lineage, social cohesion, and the spiritual connection between the living and dead. Shrines, offerings, libations, ceremonies, and tomb sweeping are common practices for honoring ancestors.

Belief in Chukwu as a supreme being reflects a monotheistic element despite the presence of ancestor reverence. Ancestors are seen as Chukwu intermediaries, not separate deities. Unlike in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, where God interacts directly, Chukwu is a more distant figure who assigns duties to ancestors and other divinities (gods) in the pantheon of gods. Ancestors play a more prominent role in Igbo spirituality. Ancestors are part of a larger spiritual system ultimately controlled by Chukwu. Reverence for ancestors is a way to connect with the divine. The monotheistic nature of Igbo beliefs is debated, with some considering their religion polytheistic due to the presence of multiple deities. Colonialism and Westernization also impacted the religious practices of Igbo people.

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<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> Matthew, “*Monotheistic Nature of God.*”



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