



Traditional Rational Arguments for the Existence of God (TAMUNO) in Ibani Traditional Philosophy

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this paper is to adopt analytic-deductive method to examine some clues on the existence of the Supreme Being in the beliefs and religion of the Ibani; the implication is that hasty generalization and superfluous assumptions, has led some scholars to maintain that the idea of the Supreme Being is of Western importation. Christianity and Ibani traditional philosophy play a major part in contributing to the debate, although the contribution of Christianity outweighs that of the traditional Ibani because Christianity has the epistemological advantage of supernatural revelation and also has the advantage of early documentation. Nevertheless, prior to Christianity, the raw materials for the philosophy of God were stored in oral tradition and highlighted by a highly evidenced and philosophical culture.

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Introduction

The question of a Supreme God in philosophical reasoning has remained pervasive and inevitable in the history of human thought and tradition, largely because it takes the center stage. God appears in the question of God-man relationship to be the reason behind the whole universe. Consequently, man has turned his attention to diverse problems revolving around God, ranging from whether or not he exists, to his essence or nature and other related issues not excluding the all-important issue of his relationship with other beings in the universe. In trying to solve all these problems, Western thinkers do not agree in almost all the issues raised.

In the same vein, the God-question extends to Ibani traditional philosophy. Our interest here is on the most controvertible question of them all, which is, the existence – issue. On this issue we have two major camps. One camp is of the view that the Ibani through natural faith or reason have some knowledge of the Supreme Being. In the other camp is the negative view of some scholars of Ibani traditional philosophy. These scholars contend that the one Supreme God is a stranger to Ibani traditional thought and religious practices.

Scholars of African Traditional Religion and culture seem to take the idea of one Supreme Being among the Ibani for granted; a fact which needs no proof, no examination, and no further argument whatsoever. Philosophy on the contrary, subjects every assumption to critical scrutiny or analysis until all doubts are removed and certainty assured. The concept of the Supreme Being is not a stranger in Ibani traditional philosophy. But before we progress, let us examine who the Ibani are.

Who are the Ibani?

Alagoa and Fombo (1972), Cookey (1974), Dike (1956), Jones (2000), Alagoa (2005) and others have written various accounts on the Ibani. They are a group of people that developed the ancient kingdoms of Bonny and Opobo. This group moved from the Ijo Central Delta and through initiative, hardwork and determination established thriving city-states in the Niger Delta before the coming of the Europeans.

Dike (1956) provided two waves of migrations into the Niger Delta. The first Ijo wave before the arrival of the Portuguese, took place when the settlements were just fishing and salt making villages. The second wave being the most important movement of population, took place between 1450 – 1800 during which the Ibo were “forced or voluntary” migrants, and formed the bulk of the Delta population in the Nineteenth Century (Dike, 1956:30). This period also saw the transformation from “fishing” villages to “City states”.

Alagoa (2005), using oral tradition argued that the remote nature of the possible period of entry into the Niger Delta explain their neglect in their tradition. However, the tradition of migrations are easily recounted and remembered in different parts of the Niger Delta. It is possible to identify the primary centre of migration of the Ibani. The Ibani moved from their location in the Central Delta into the Eastern Niger Delta. Their movement took them Northwards, and later Southwards until they arrived at Orupiri into Okoloma, a name derived from the curlew bird on account of the large number of these birds found here. After the Bonny City state was established, a thriving trade in palm oil and kernel led to the expansion of the Kingdom after the abolition of slave trade. The economic expansion had a multiplier effect on the political terrain and led political gladiators jostle for power.

This led to the split that saw the strategic migration of the Jaja group to the estuary close to the Atlantic Ocean. The Opobo Ibani left their kith and kin in 1869 as a result of the Civil War which led to the separation of the Annie Pepple House and their eventual settlement in the Andoni Territory christened Opobo in fond memory of King Opubo Annie Pepple in 1870. This move enabled Opobo Kingdom to divert trade from Bonny. Opobo was bounded by Ogoni in the North, Bonny and Andoni in the West, the Ibibio in the East and by the Atlantic Ocean in the South. Even though in a different location, Opobo Ibani still retained their Ibani cultural traits and traditions except language which had been lost and in its place a dialect of Ibani-Igbo predominates. This is a testimony to the effect of the palm oil trade and the incorporation of a large population of Igbo speaking people into the City-state.

It is important to state here and now that a close affinity exists between the Ibani and the Ndoki, which an unsuspecting researcher may not decipher. The Ndoki and the Ibani are brothers. Oral traditions in both communities hold that the Ndoki came Southwards in search of their Ibani brothers and some Ijaw settled at the coast inquired of their mission. The response from the Ndoki migrants was "Aminadokiari" meaning "they were searching for their brothers".

Oral tradition states that the Europeans found the word "Aminadokiari" difficult to pronounce and adulterated it to Ndoki. Till date (2019) the people are known as Ndoki people. Alagoa (1972:178) corroborated this when he wrote thus:

"The traditions suggest that they migrated North and Eastwards from the central Delta along with the ancestors of Ibani to their present location where they were affected by Ibo cultural influences."

Another confirmation of this brotherly tie comes from the traditions that states that the Ndoki migrants in search of their Ibani brothers passed enroute of Imo River, an estuary of Bonny River (Rio Real) to their present location settling first at Obunka. Alagoa (1976:337) again states that:

"The Ibani (Bonny) say their ancestors came from central Delta through Ibo hinterland. After a period of sojourn in Ndoki territory, they came down the Imo River through Andoni country to the coastal state."

These two accounts of the migration confirm the link between the Ndoki and the Ibani and suggest that there was a time both sojourned together. Armoury Talbot (1967) affirmed thus:

"Indeed, it is now settled and well beyond argument that the people of Bonny came originally from Ndoki ethnic group."

What Necessitated the Study?

The philosophical argument on traditional fore-knowledge of God (Tamuno) by Ibani people arose as a result of superfluous assumption and hasty generalization by scholars that Christianity or God-being remains a Western idea or concept. The ideal fact remains that the Ibani people already had the fore-knowledge of God prior to the coming of Europeans in Africa through its traditional belief, culture, native names and proverbs. This may not be scientifically proved nor possess documentary evidence but could be clearly understood through its oral evidence, proverbs and native names like 'Tamunoosisi' meaning 'God I beg' etc proves that Ibani tradition acknowledges God as the Supreme

Being though no one can claim that the ontological knowledge of God is a Western idea.

However, issues such as non-documentary evidence or scientific proof of fore-knowledge of God by Ibani tradition, lack of communication gadgets and channel of transmitting African culture and tradition to other parts of the world prior to the advent of Europeans in Africa, Western imposition of religion, language barrier and primitivism among Ibani people remain the sources of this hasty generalization. The argument therefore tends to bridge the gap between the superfluous assumption and hasty generalization that Christianity in Africa (Ibani in particular) is a Western religion as such projects Ibani tradition to acknowledge the supremacy of God.

Traditional Rational Clues

By this phrase, we mean that the conception in the Ibani mind, of the existence of the Supreme Being has nothing whatsoever to do with missionary influence or any cultural influences like Westernism or Christianity. Rather, the magnificent conceptions or knowledge of God among the pre-colonial Ibani is native and original to them and such knowledge comes basically from natural light of reason. This reason leads him to wonder about the mysteries in the world and to recognize the maker of all things. Since there are neither sacred writings, no formulated scientific, philosophic proofs or ways of demonstrating the existence of God as obtains in Christianity and Western philosophy, knowledge of God is encapsulated in oral tradition which is easy to remember and passed on from generation to generation. We rely heavily on these traditional modes of conceiving God because it is pointless to expect a systematic, highly philosophical, well-documented Western-type theology or philosophy of God. This has been the great error of many Western ethnologists of Ibani philosophy. In the absence of Churches, Bible, prayer books, even preachers they concluded that the traditional Ibani man has no notion of the Supreme God. Let us demonstrate the existence of God (Tamuno) beginning with analysis of pre-Christian Ibani names.

Pre-Christian Ibani Names: Demonstration of the Knowledge and Awe of God

Oputamuno is the name of the Supreme Being in Ibani ontology used in myths, proverbs and folklore. The Ibani invokes Tamuno consciously or unconsciously several times a day and one wonders if for a considerable number of times he is not referring to the Supreme Being. Let us examine names prevalent that God is existent being in pre-colonial Ibani. These names depict absolute power and Supremacy of God (*Tamuno*): *Tamunokoro* (God is power or to God belongs all strength), *Tamunonengiofori* (Nothing is impossible with God). There are names which express gratitude to God for His Divine providence like *Tamunoboma* (God is gracious) *Tamunomininyana* (God has shown mercy). Names also expressing wonder and praise in the face of God's majesty and power: *Tamunokurom* (God is very great); *Tamunodu-gbam* (God is fearful); *Tamuno-Ibim* (God is glorious); *Tamuno-Ibim* (God is honour or honourable); *Tamunotonye* (God's wish); *Tamunosisi* (God, I beg); *Tamunonenginyeofori* (Nothing is greater than God); *Tamunotomkiri* (God's world); *Tamunodiepiri* (God has given).

These names show that the Ibani have an indigenous belief in the existence of a Supreme Being. They serve as

traditional rational evidences for establishing belief in the real existence of the Supreme Being among the pre-colonial Ibani. Apart from these names, there are many names in Ibani which the pre-colonial Ibani give to their children and from these names their concept of God are easily deduced. They include names that serve as a key to the Ibani concept of God. *Tamuno-Temem* (God creates); *Tamuno-Temem* (God gave). Some names praise God's knowledge: *Tamuno-nimin* (God knows); *Tamuno-wengi-bara* or *Tamuno-Wengi-Bare-Nimin* (God knows my steps or my journey).

These names express faith and confidence in the Supreme God and have not been coined by Christians. The Christian Church came into the Niger Delta in the 15th century; the existence of these names implies belief in the existence of God before the coming of Europeans. The implication is that one is in a position to argue from their existence, Ibani belief in the existence of a God whose abode is in Heaven above. A Supreme God whose awe and majesty makes it impossible for Him to be amongst these earthly creations. The following Ibani names express this:

Ibani	Meaning
Soala	Heavenly Chief
Soalali	Heavenly celebration
Sodienye	Heavenly gift
Soibi	Heaven is good
Soibifaa	Heaven's goodness will never end
Sotonye	Heaven's wish
Sopriala	The Chief that heaven gave me
Sogbilabem	Heaven will ask
Songo	Heavenly wealth
Sodiari	Heaven is watching
Tamunoiyeowuna	God hear my cry
Tamunosuibiman	God's time is the best
Tuminitamunokuma	If men were God
Tamunodienye	God's gift
Boma	Praise
Apatamunobarasuum	I commit it into God's hands
Ipiriala	The wealth God gave me
Tamunokuro	God's strength
Tamuno-duabofaha	He who walks with God cannot be misled
Tamuno-iduari	God is leading me

Even if these (names applied directly to God) do not suffice, there are also names which explicitly assert that God exists. Such names are *Tamuno-Omie* (which means: God is). *Omie* is the very word, to exist. *Omie* is the third person singular meaning; he/she/it exists or is. In the above name, it is stated simply that *Tamuno-Omie* (God) is and *Tamuno Per-Omie* (God still exists). This is a more emphatic form of the first name *Tamuno-Omie*, *Per-Omie* is added for emphasis to assure the doubting Thomas that the fact is beyond doubt.

These assertions though dogmatic in nature, are based on practical experience. The Ibani man seeing the mysteries and wonders of the universe must have drawn conclusions, namely that *Tamuno-Omie* (God really exists). The above names are traditional evidences establishing the existence of God in Ibani traditional ontology. But care must be taken to know where to draw the curtain, that is, more efforts should be made to limit ourselves to those names which are in existence before the coming of the missionaries.

Analysis from Ibani Proverbs

Proverbs are the feathery ornaments with which speeches are decorated. They enliven public speeches at meetings, social gatherings, religious and political rallies and various other occasions. For Chinua Achebe, proverbs are the oil with

which words are eaten (Jaja, 1994). There is also the indispensable function; it codifies traditional beliefs or faith in God, man and the universe. Proverbs reveal religious faith, a world view, and the aspirations, hopes and fears of the people. In proverbs, the Ibani enshrined the ancient wisdom, beliefs and the accumulated experiences of the people. Let us analyze some indigenous proverbs which express the absolute, supreme or ultimate nature of God.

One of such proverbs that emphasizes God's existence and acknowledges His ultimate power, *Chukwu Gbo Ogu Ile Dibia Abulu Eziokwu*, is a way of acknowledging the Monotheistic Ultimacy of Opu-Tamuno in moral issues. It means that God's decision is Supreme. God is portrayed as the basis and guarantor of morality, because he knows not only the hidden activities of man but also hidden intentions; and would vindicate the falsely accused. *Tamuno Ingeri ani Kara Kara Karaye na si ye ninin* (only God knows what is evil and can judge human intentions). *Tamuno* will judge the world and apportion justice. Here God is conceived as the existent Supreme Being with absolute power and authority in both moral and socio-cultural issues. The regular approaches to him through mediator-gods, instead of emphasizing the fact of his non-existence, strengthen the fact that he exists and there is none like him. He demands special reference and moral dignity which explains why he is not approached the way other gods, his creatures are approached.

Proverbs also emphasize God's providence. There are proverbs which express God's omniscience, omnipotence, kindness; his creative nature etc; which can also be deduced from the proverbs mentioned above. Though there are no proverbs that expressly say that God's existence is a fact of self-evident truth almost known to all, these proverbs tell us more about God's nature and attributes and by implication his existence. It would tantamount to self contradiction to deny existence to a being considered or acknowledged by Ibani people to be both the principles of absoluteness, creation and continued existence and dependence of all creatures whose being is contingent upon the Necessary Being, God (*Tamuno*).

The above proverbs are indigenous and as old as the Ibani nation. They were in existence before the arrival of Christianity. The proverbs which are coined with God's name are usually few in Ibani traditional culture and this is not unusual of a set up where the Supreme Being is considered a transcendent being, very great, majestic and awe-inspiring and holy, compared to the deities who are his creatures. Before the advent of Christianity, the Ibani conceive God as a transcendent, majestic and fearful being but could not resist preserving his existence in proverbial forms even if it means doing that at the expense of their being punished by him.

Contribution of Ibani Traditional Conception of God

The concepts of God in Ibani world view have meaning and should be appreciated as such. They form the basis of our individual and communal behaviours. Christianity indeed capitalized on them early as basis for evangelism. Christianity therefore proceeded conveniently from the known elements of traditional religion of the Ibani to the facts of the Christian faith. No wonder Christianity as a religion witnessed a sharp rise in converts over the years in the Niger Delta; but it is another thing to argue whether they are really converted? From practical experience of the Ibani Christian it has been observed that the traditional God and gods of the Ibani are still in opposition to the Christian God and the former is still in opposition with the latter.

Okolo (1995) in highlighting this negative contribution of African traditional religion to Christianity observes and correctly, too, that experience fully bears out that the Ibani gods have not been completely routed by Christianity; neither do they appear to be fast in retreat. However, what has been very much overlooked by modern scholars is that as far as the practice of genuine Christianity by the Ibani is concerned, African Traditional Religion constitutes a great obstacle. African Traditional Religion is more of a great hindrance to gospel reception or proclamation than a preparation for the gospel.

What actually is the contribution of Christianity to Ibani Traditional Religion and vice versa? Before the advent of Christianity our fore-fathers were in possession of the concepts of God and gods, which are deducible from all the various cultural expressions or oral tradition of the Ibani. However, these concepts were not yet scientific. What Christianity contributed to Ibani traditional notions of God is better summarized in the phrase, logical conclusion and fulfillment. Areas brought to their logical conclusions include documentation, true nature of God, creation out of nothing, relationship of God with other mediators, the vertical dimension of auto transcendence and the Theo-centric world view. Apart from turning out skin-deep Christians, Christianity did one thing for the Ibani. It brought God very near to them. What the early missionaries did with the help of our catechists was to translate the Hebrew Christian names into personal names and gave them to the children of early converts. Hence the rapidity with which Ibani names are gradually replaced.

Conclusion

The concept of the real existence of the Supreme God among the traditional Ibani is indigenous. What they think was foreign to them is the idea of a Christian God as opposed to the Ibani God and gods. What the Christian missionaries taught the traditional Ibani is the concept of God at the epistemological level, that is to say the precise nature of God which is one and not one and many as the Ibani believe; this phenomenal God of the Ibani is in many ways opposed to the phenomenal God of Christians. However, at the ontological level, that is, God or the Ultimate Being in Himself, and of Himself, the Supreme God is the same for a traditional Ibani as well as for a Christian believer. Therefore the Supreme God of the traditional Ibani, the Ultimate Being (*Opu Tamuno*) really exists among the traditional Ibani from time immemorial. It is Christianity that really helped the Ibani to come to a logical conclusion about the precise nature and existence of this phenomenal God. This is possible for Christianity because it has or enjoys a monopoly of Supernatural revelation in Jesus Christ which no traditional religion enjoys. It was not the Christian missionaries and Ibani Christian theologians who imported the idea of the Supreme Being and there are hints of him in their traditional outlook.

For the Ibani, God is God as comprehended and as functional in the consciousness of the traditional Ibani. It has come to be regarded as the generic name for the Supreme Being and other spirits that are worshipped in Ibani Land before the arrival of Christianity. This Ibani God is not only a heritage from the past; it also forms the link with the past with the present, and even the future depicting the Ibani traditional religionists as capable of conceiving Deity: God and gods. This is in contradistinction to the Christian God, the one essentially revealed in Jesus Christ in the sacred books.

There can be no question at all about the reality of the gods. They appear Supreme in their own spheres of influence and authority. But theirs is that of relative Supremacy and are assigned duties by God.

In conclusion, the traditional Ibani man addressed almost all the issues of the God-question but vaguely. They remained engrained or enshrined in oral tradition in a crude form only to be clearly expressed by Christianity because it enjoys the advantage of literal tradition and supernatural revelation in Jesus Christ who is revelation *par excellence*. It would therefore seem untenable or even spurious to think or even to suggest that the Ibani did not have a basic concept of God before the arrival of Christianity.

Recommendations

Based on this argument, the researchers made the following recommendations:

1. That more rational arguments or studies on God-being in African culture and traditional belief be carried out.
2. That traditional/native Ibani names acknowledge the supremacy and power of God though they lack scientific proof but remain orally documented. This implies that measures should be taken to document African cultures for posterity purposes.
3. That African names (Ibani native names) be encouraged rather than Western names.
4. That African tradition, culture, religious practices and beliefs be upheld and valued as God-given cultural heritage.
5. That the tradition of Ibani people if encouraged will help in stirring developmental initiatives and creativity among people since the traditional Ibani man is known for creativity and initiatives.

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