

The Concept of the "High God" in Traditional Igbo Religion

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How applicable is the Old Testament to reaching particular unreached people groups? In the following article, Mike Bews demonstrates—through an analysis of the Igbo understanding of Chukwu, the "High God"—that not only has God prepared the way for the presentation of the gospel in the Igbo culture, but also that the key to such a presentation may come through use of the Old Testament.



The Igbo (or Ibo) are a people group numbering approximately five and a half million who occupy an area of some 15,800 square miles in southeastern Nigeria, bordering the Niger River. Most are traditional African horticulturalists, subsisting on a staple of yams, which thrive in this fertile area of tropical rain forest.

Igbo cosmology closely resembles that of other traditional animistic religions. There is a wide range of personal protective deities and malevolent spirits, as well as the ancestors and protective household and compound spirits, all of which figure prominently in the Igbo pantheon. As in all animistic religions, the Igbo worldview is one in which there is a constant interaction between the spirit world and the world of man, the world of the living and the world of the dead. It is a world in dynamic equilibrium in which man must constantly struggle to maintain cosmological balance. This balance is always being threatened by natural and social calamities such as drought, famine, disease, sorcery, litigation, homicide, and taboo. Man must manipulate his world through social realignment, divination, sacrifice, and appeal to the ancestors. The Igbo epithet, "The world is a marketplace and is subject to

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Mike Bews
The "High God" in Traditional Igbo Religion

The Igbo observe that "the world is a marketplace and is subject to bargain."

bargain," illustrates the Igbo belief that man can, and should, alter his own destiny.

Despite these animistic elements, the Igbo religious worldview also has the concept of the "High God," who is called *Chukwu*. Is this concept of a High God something integral to the Igbo cosmology over the past centuries, or is it something which developed after the introduction of Christianity into the area? The data from which this article was prepared was gathered during the period 1965-1971. By this time, Igboland had received a witness of Christianity for some 80 years, yet the traditional Igbo animistic religion continued to prevail. Conclusive evidence from these sources shows that the ideas of the High God, or *Chukwu*, as presented here, are not the result of the introduction of Christianity to the area, but are indeed woven into the fabric of traditional Igbo cosmology (cf. Arinze 1970:10 and Shelton 1971:226). Thus, *Chukwu*, the High God, occupied a central place in Igbo cosmology before the introduction of Christianity and continues to do so to this day.

What is the significance of this? It is the contention of this author that Almighty God placed within the Igbo culture a seed of truth concerning Himself, a bridge to acceptance of the specific revelation of the truth of the Judeo-Christian scriptures. The dissemination of God's general revelation to all of mankind, in preparation for the acceptance of the special revelation of Jesus Christ, has been well documented for numerous other cultures by Don Richardson (1981). In this article specific comparisons will be made between the Igbo's High God, *Chukwu*, and *Yahweh* as presented in the Old Testament. It will be shown that the Igbo concept of the High God, if used with care, can pave the way to an understanding of the one true God of the Bible.

ATTRIBUTES OF CHUKWU, THE "HIGH GOD," IN IGBO THOUGHT

To *Chukwu* are attributed numerous virtues congruent with the character of *Yahweh* as portrayed in the Old Testament. *Chukwu* is supreme and omnipotent (cf. Gen. 17:1; Job 42:2), omniscient (cf. Prov. 15:3; Jer. 23:23-25), completely benevolent (cf. Ps. 145:9,15,16), the giver of life (cf. Gen.

2:7), and the creator of all spirits (cf. Eccl. 12:7). The fact that Chukwu is entirely good logically implies the existence of a devil, and this concept is indeed found in Igbo cosmology (Uchengu 1965:94). Chukwu is also appealed to in times of despondency (cf. Ps. 61, 64, 69).

Like Yahweh in the Old Testament, Chukwu has numerous names which reflect various aspects of his character. *Chukwu* is literally translated "High God" (cf. *El Elyon*, Gen. 14:18-22). *Chukwuokike* is translated "God the Creator" (cf. Eccl. 12:1; Is. 40:28). *Ege eniugwe* is translated "the King of heaven" (cf. Ps. 24:7). *Olise bi n'enu* is translated "Lord living above" (cf. Is 40:22). Francis A. Arinze (1970:9) gives nine other Igbo names for God.

Another parallel to the religion of the ancient Hebrews is the Igbo practice of incorporating the name of God into names given to their children. (Here again Arinze [1970:9,10] gives a lengthy and most interesting list.) A few examples are *Chukwunyelu*, "God gave" (cf. the Hebrew name *Elnathan*, Ezra 8:16); *Chukwuna*, "God knows" (cf. *Eliada*, 1 Chron. 14:7); *Chukwuzoba*, "God saves" (cf. *Joshua*). Numerous other examples can be cited, and their similarity to examples in the Old Testament is remarkable.

Ideas about Chukwu which run counter to that of the God of the Old Testament, however, are also numerous. Chukwu is envisioned as a god who is "withdrawn," one who keeps watch from a distance but who rarely takes an active role in human affairs. He can be reached, but not without great difficulty on the part of the human supplicant. He is a satisfied god who does not require sacrifice—he is not jealous of man's prosperity. The Igbo call upon him in times of despondency, but meet with no immediate success. Thus a sense of alienation is often the result.

Yahweh, on the other hand, is actively involved in the lives of men and women throughout the Old Testament, and He states explicitly that He takes an active interest in the affairs of humanity (cf. Ps. 139). Yahweh requires sacrifice to Himself, and indeed prohibits sacrifice to any other gods (Ex. 20:5,24). Chukwu allows the malignant spirits to harm the Igbo, who believe that no spirit can do anything without Chukwu's consent. Such a belief parallels that of Job 1, 2

Mike Bews

The "High God" in Traditional Igbo Religion

Chronicles 18:18-22, and 1 Samuel 16:23. Yet the idea in Igbo culture is much less developed, suggesting a sort of existentialism—a God who has set things in motion and then withdrawn his hand, leaving the host of malignant spirits free rein to wreak havoc upon man.

The Igbo believe the spirits to be superior to man but subordinate to Chukwu. The spirits are all created by Chukwu, and the good spirits, as Chukwu's messengers, are given much liberty. Herein we see parallels with Biblical doctrine. But from this point the similarities break down rapidly, for the foundational concept of Igbo practical religion is that because Chukwu is so far removed, he wills that we should worship the created spirits. Such behavior is explicitly forbidden by Yahweh (cf. Ex. 20:4-5, 23-25). Nonetheless, in the Igbo mind Chukwu stands as the final court of appeal.

In matters of morality, Chukwu is ranked as supreme, but is viewed as being removed from the moral decisions which man must make.

Sin is not looked on primarily as an offense against Him. It is true that there is a feeling of guilt and repentance, but [a person] fears more the punishment which will unfailingly descend on him or his relatives unless he makes the necessary sacrifices (Arinze 1970:31).

The Biblical injunction, in contrast to this, is that since God is a holy and righteous God, man ought to reflect his character (Gen. 17:1; Lev. 11:44; Lev. 20:26).

CULT OF CHUKWU

Vague reflections of Old Testament religious practices can be found in the Igbo ritual approaches to Chukwu. Chukwu does have an honored place in prayer, most notably in the morning prayers, and he is commonly invoked for protection and prosperity. In most prayers and sacrifices Chukwu is mentioned first before prayers to ancestors and spirits. These prayers, complete with a libation and offering of kola nut, usually proceed somewhat like the following:

God, eat kola
Let my life continue

Today is (name of day)
(cited in Shelton 1971:86).

Such requests for protection and prosperity abound in the Old Testament, although not usually in so curt and simplistic a form. Moreover, there are numerous suggestions of a personal morning sacrifice and prayers (cf. Job 1:5; Ps. 5:3; Ps. 88:13). The other most common form of prayer to Chukwu comes in the form of short interjections, when one is in distress: "In times of unexpected and unprecedented prosperity or in dire distress when all else has failed, one sees the Igbo pagan as having a spontaneous recourse to God" (Arinze 1970:11).

Both Francis A. Arinze (1970) and Austin J. Shelton (1971) mention a rare *Aja Eze Enu*, "Sacrifice to the King of heaven." However, it is maintained that most traditional Igbo do not even know about it. But the fact of its existence is unquestionable, having testimony from a number of different sources. In this rare sacrifice—described as a "simple rite" and a "sacrifice of joy"—a pure white fowl or other bird is offered up alive on a long pole. Petitions are offered. The bird is left to die and rot. Sometimes the sacrifice is instead a pure white egg. In both cases, there is a parallel with the Old Testament concept of purity in one's offerings to God (cf. Ex. 12:5; Lev. 1:3).

In summary, parallels can be drawn between the Igbo worship of Chukwu and the worship of Yahweh in the Hebrew scriptures, but the differences are significant. Prayers offered to Chukwu are choppy and stilted, seemingly pat phrases requesting protection and prosperity. They are followed by prayers to the spirits and ancestors, practices strictly forbidden in the Old Testament. Some sacrifices are offered to Chukwu, yet most are offered to the spirits. Since Chukwu is wholly good and does no harm to man, there is no urgency to appease his disfavor. Writing of the rare "High God shrines" found in the Naukka district of Igboland, Shelton writes, "People are... more or less nonchalant about the High God shrine.... Because such gods do not deliberately cause diseases, 'accidents,' infertility, or other misfortune, they are not feared under ordinary circumstances and their shrine areas, although sacred precincts, do not arouse much awe among the villagers" (1971:64-65).

Mike Bews
The "High God" in Traditional Igbo Religion

The Igbo man believes that he is offering sacrifice to God through his sacrifice to the spirits. Such a practice is seen repeatedly in the Old Testament in times of Israel's disobedience (cf. 2 Kings 12:2-3), and the prophets reserve more condemnation for this kind of syncretism than for perhaps any other sin in the Old Testament.

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS FOR CROSS-CULTURAL EVANGELISM

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As we have seen, the Igbo, though animists, have a highly developed concept and cult of the "High God." Evidence strongly suggests (expounded more fully in the works cited) that these elements of Igbo religion are indeed indigenous, and *not* due to the influence of Christian teachings. Can we see in Igbo culture a built-in bridge for the introduction of the gospel message? I believe that the answer is a resounding "yes!" In agreement with the ideas of Richardson (1981), I believe that God's general revelation has permeated the Igbo culture. Additionally, there are within Igbo religion strong parallels to ancient Hebrew traditions, most notably the remarkable similarity in the various names attributed to God. The Igbo concept of the nature of God is, on the whole, remarkably orthodox. Also, potential can be seen in the "Sacrifice to the King of heaven" for a clear "redemptive analogy" (cf. Richardson 1977).

All of this is not to suggest that the traditional Igbo religionist is any less lost, or any more enlightened, than a member of another animist people. On the contrary, he remains "without God in the world" and "in bondage to beings that are by nature no gods." The traditional Igbo does not know the true God, nor does he believe that God can be known. He is without the specific revelation of "salvation history." What this article does affirm, however, is that among the Igbo, and, indeed, among all the unreached peoples of the world, God "has not left himself without witness" (Acts 14:17; cf. Rom. 1:18-20). It is up to us to find these parallels and use them to bring all these unreached peoples to a knowledge of Jesus Christ.

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