



Imperatives and significance of Igbo traditional practices of ancient Bende indigenes of Abia State, south-east, Nigeria

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Abstract

The overriding concern of this paper is to highlight that *Okpukpere-chi* has a critical mandate in the affairs of respective Bende communities, and represents a solemn communion with *Chineke* the supreme power as the creator of everything (visible and invisible) and the source of other deities. How truly involved are the people in the practice of *Okpukpere-chi*? And, to what extent has its practice guarantee social stability within the Bende communities? This study articulates the idea of that *Okpukpere-chi* anchors its existence on only, but one Supreme Being: *Chineke* (God) and many lower supernatural beings or deities (*Arusi*). The world view of *Okpukpere-chi* cements relations among the various Bende communities. This assertion is clearly reflected in the way and manner that, *Okpukpere-chi* practice in more ways than one, served as an umbilical cord which connected and coordinated all other facets of life. All activities in the society, whether farming, hunting, marketing, social relations, and even recreation are governed by laws and taboos, and all blend inextricably in a complicated ritual with a view to throwing light on its structure, functions and *modus operandi*. Among the findings, is the fact that *Okpukpere-chi* practice tries to locate, regulate and control human relations in the society for the realization of the good life for all. In the course, they feel at home in the universe around them; come to terms with their environment; evolve codes of behaviour among them and the spiritual and natural environment. The study is qualitative in nature and approached from a socio-religious perspective. Data were sourced from both primary and secondary sources within a functionalist framework.

Keywords: Okpukpere-Chi; Chineke; Super-Natural Esoteric Powers; Bende; Pantheistic Faith; Taboos

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1. Introduction

The practice of various religions has fascinated scholars for decades. The Bende people of the larger Igbo extraction like any other people of Africa have their own religious system, belief and practices prior to the advent of Christianity in Igboland in 1857. The daily life of the Bende man is never separated from his religion as he holds to it and believes in it more than he believes in himself. Despite the influence of Christianity in every nook and cranny of Igboland, traditional religion is still practised by strict Igbo fundamentalists (Harniet-Sievers, 1996). Since the norms which direct actions do not condone isolated standards of behaviour, the Bende people are so much enshrined and embedded in their religion as well as in their daily living to the extent that the cultural system provides more general guidelines for action in the form of beliefs, values and systems of meaning. Principally, the people are so integrated and patterned by the values and beliefs provided by the cultural system by the singular reason that their actions are directed and controlled by norms provided by the social system in such a manner that their religious beliefs provide guidelines for their actions and standard against which their conducts can be evaluated. By establishing general principles and moral beliefs, the Bende traditional religion helps provide the consensus which Talcott Parsons upholds as being necessary for order and stability in the society. In appreciating this order and stability without any input from Christianity, Ugwu (2012) asserts that the entire Igbo traditional religion provides and involves all the beliefs, practices and ritual elements handed down from one generation to another. Consequently, questions as to what traditional religion is and why the Bende people practise it as they do and which doubtless dates back to the emergence of the human race itself is less pondered about. This is not necessarily because of the fact that a means of adjusting and coming to terms with unknown or uncontrollable factors which can threaten a successful outcome is taken care of through rituals, but that Bende traditional religious practises act as 'a tonic of self-confidence' in guaranteeing order and stability in the society. Succinctly put, social stability is maintained through traditional religious practises by allaying the tension and frustration which could disrupt social order. Be it as it may, totem and taboos anthropological theories, functionalism of sociological theories, optimal adaptation of evolutionary theories or of course, biological investigations of the religious minds, according to Gilat and Ronny (2006), are just notable examples of the many attempts to comprehend the foundation of religion including its significance in every human society

1.1. The critical importance of traditional religion

The critical importance of traditional religion in human societies as a unified system of beliefs and practices that are relatively and uniquely the property of religion, as opposed to other social institutions ways of thinking cannot be overemphasised (Durkheim([1912]2001). Concurring, Anarado (2010) says it is a people's belief in supernatural being(s) which demands some kind of reverence from the individual and the community, failing which repercussion looms. To this, the charter for interpreting and controlling the environment and for establishing the socio-political institutions is provided. One could assert that the Igbo traditional religion aside other provisions, serves as an invaluable guide for assessing, predicting and controlling behaviours, expectations and visions. More so, it is the fundamental key to their values as their worldview herein offers an explanatory set of concepts for viewing behaviour, presenting a relatively clear

and related set of intervention techniques through which the people could be helped in times of distress or confusion. Based on this, the people, from time to time recognise the relation between their personal actions and uncertain events, but as they begin to modernise their beliefs based on their own experiences, the effect of a shock on their beliefs started depending on the actions they are taking at the time of the upset.

From the foregoing, it has, therefore, become an irrefutable fact that of all the functional institutions that obtain in any human society, religion stands out as dominant, influencing the totality of a people's worldview. The domineering influence is hinged on the fact that in any balance, all religious members in any given group have similar beliefs, and in any cohesive faith such as among the Bende people, all members believe that on average they are more likely to be punished when they defect rather than cooperate. Fundamentally, this singleness of purpose rests on the fact the people are a profoundly religious who believe in a benevolent creator, a Supreme Being, whom they usually refer to as *Chineke* (God).

Among the Bende people, there is always some reference to Supreme Being as the centre of the all authorities. In a bid to christen God in their own traditional concept, they refer to Him basically in two distinct names. These, according to Basden (2006), are Chukwu (Great/Supreme God) and *Chineke* (Creator). Apart from two basic names, there are several other names such as *Onyeokike* (the person who creates), *Obasi di n'elu* (the God who resides above), *Igwe ka ala* (heaven-dweller who is above the earth), *Ama-ama-amasiamasi* (One who is known yet never fully known). These names tended to align with an earlier position that the entire Igbo ethnic group had had an in-depth knowledge about the existence of God prior to colonisation. Expatriating further, Basden (2006) states that the people articulate their concept of God through the two dominant names, Chukwu and *Chineke* and this could be traced etymological to two Igbo words Chi (god) and ukwu/neke (great) which both imply "the great god". In the same vein, some names ascribe praise to this 'Supreme Being' like *Chukwudinma* (God is good), *Ekenediri Chukwu* (thanks be to God). Some of these names talk about God's greatness, knowledge, power, or gratitude and joy, such as: *Chukwuka* (God is the Greatest), *Chukwunweike* (all power belongs to God), *Chukwuemeka* (God has done so much), *IfeanyiChukwu* (Nothing is impossible with God), *Chukwuzoba* (God saves or protects), *Chukwunyendu* (it is God who gives life) (Ogunniyi Olayemi et al., 2016). Earlier, Ifesieh (1989) had argued that "the Igbo recognise that almighty God, by virtue of His being, as the greatest and the Creator of all things." By this, it is meant that an average Bende man believes that among all the gods and deities, *Chukwu* holds the highest place and is superior to others. Interestingly, as a 'Supreme Being', *Chineke* is the centre of the all authorities, and aside from controlling the world, both in heaven (*Elu-igwe*) and earth (*Elu-uwa*), the people perceive *Chukwu* as a person with all the attributes of a divine personality in the transcendental, absolute and eminent degree and they believe strongly in his immanence in creation (Iwe, 1988).

A deep reference to this "Supreme Being" as the centre of the supreme authority that controls the world cannot be over emphasised amongst the people due to the fact that there is an element of *Chineke* found in their day-to-day living. Corroborating, Ugwu (2002) asserts that the traditional Igbo believe that Chukwu is so high above and beyond human cognizance. According to him, Chukwu cannot be worshipped uncomplicatedly or beseeched except for matters that are urgent and of critical importance to the extent that they are beyond human power. In this connection, the value of *alusu* or the intermediaries in the Igbo traditional religion becomes vividly distinct for all and sundry to appreciate. Basically, they are not the ends

to the worship but a means to the ends, in that they are not worshipped or served per se but to intercede with the almighty Chukwu on their behalf (Ogunniyi Olayemi et al., 2016). Put differently, the idea of intermediaries was borne out of the fact that the Bende people are in search of how to fully comprehend and worship God. Despite this strong and unequivocal hold and belief in the supremacy of God (Chukwu) as just, great, benevolent and almighty, the Bende people still believe that He has an eternal enemy or rival called Ekwensu (the Devil) who is capable of causing havoc and unpleasant circumstances (Basden, 2006). This rival, according to Basden (2006) is believed to be the inventor of every wickedness and evil and he is to be hated and despised by the people. Nonetheless, Arinze (2008) avers that the Igbo are never doubtful of almightiness of *Chukwu* to defeat the devil (*Ekwensu*) at all times, hence, they are not sure of the proper way to ascribe honour due to this 'Chukwu'(Supreme Being) or better way to worship Him. Substantiating, Arinze (2008) writes:

[Chukwu's] awe and majesty perplex them. Hence they think it more courteous and more within man's range to appeal to the spirits to obtain requests from God. But the Igbo need no one to tell them that without God, not even the strongest alusi (spirit) can do anything.

Accepting the foregoing as correct, we cannot but conclude that the religious belief system of the people is one of their richest cultural heritages not necessarily because they are obdurately religious people, but because one cannot but be impressed by the fact that there is a stronger belief of this "Supreme Being" among the people to the extent their daily life is never separated from their traditional religious system, belief and practices. The people, despite the advent of Christianity over a century and half ago, still practice their religious faith unequivocally, and believe in it more than they believed in their selves (Harniet-Sievers, 2006). In a nutshell, the people believe that God created the world, the non-human spirits assist God in the preservation of the world, while the ancestors aid the shaping of things and events that are capable of influencing the destinies and actions of mankind. However, of all these three objects, the Bende people hold God at high esteem (Awolalu and Dopemu, 1979; Ifesieh 1989; Udobata, 1990).

1.2. Research design

Data for this paper were obtained from three major sources. Firstly, data were collected ethnographically by being a participant in the worships of ancestral gods over a period of three years since 2013 despite the researcher's early embrace of Christianity. Secondly, focus group discussions and interviews were conducted using other devoted adherents and active participants as subject after practices and worships of the ancestral gods. Finally, secondary sources-documented works on related study was also utilized to complement data.

1.3. Anthropological and Geographical Location of the Study

Ancient Bende people reside in South east Nigeria. They are culturally conservative; less title conscious, while comprising *Umuahia Ibeku, Arochukwu, Ohafia, Abiriba, Uzuakoli, Ntalakwu, Umuhu, Nkporo, Itumbauzo, Umunna* and other autonomous communities in Abia State, Nigeria. They live in community and share a communal life. To them, isolation is a reproach and for only those infected with terminal diseases and those

who are regarded as impure (Ogunniyi Olayemi et al., 2016). An Igbo proverb affirms that *Onye galaba, so ya ayili*, meaning, “a proud man will go alone” and that solitude is held to be a mark of wickedness. Igbo people love communication especially using proverbs (Ogunniyi Olayemi et al., 2016). The Bende people believe that talking without the use of proverbs is talking like kids, hence their proverb *Atualu oka omalu, ma atualu ofeke o fenyé isi n’ohia*, which means “When a wise man is talked to in proverbs, he understands, but when a foolish man is talked to in proverbs, he throws it away.”

The primary occupation of the Bende people is agriculture. The standard farming implements are the special type of hoe, made of large circular blade and measuring a foot or more in diameter, cutlasses, and diggers. Bende land is fertile, the major products being yam, cassava, maize, melon, palm oil, pineapple, plantain and rice. Bende land is located in the rain forest belt of Nigeria. The farming practice of leaving extensive tracts of exhausted farmlands fallow for a number of years to regenerate their fertility has encouraged the systematic search of virgin land.

Owing to the significance of agriculture, land plays a key role in the life of the Bende. The earth spirit (*ala*) is the most prominent deity in Bende communities. Almost every community has its own earth deity in whose name laws are made and oaths sworn, thus, providing the ritual and political focus for the unit. Certain conducts such as homicide, kidnapping, suicide, and yam stealing are regarded as offences against *ala* and have to be ritually cleansed to avert disasters in the form of bad harvests and famine or premature deaths in the community (Okonkwo, 1985). Apart from the role of agriculture and land in Bende religion, they also have largely determined the settlement patterns. Most Bende villages are made of homesteads clustered around a centrally located market place with their backs to the farmlands. The idea behind this pattern of residence is to provide enough land for subsequent habitation and farming with increasing population, and thus curtail friction among neighbouring communities arising from encroachment on territorial rights. The synopsis of the Igbo people in perspective rests in Awolalu and Dopemu (1979) who observe that:

The Igbo have always been active and progressive people. In economic, cultural, social and political affairs, they had already attained; an enviable standard before the [arrival] of the British.

This is true of the people as they are a very enterprising people, they are marketing and business inclined prior to the arrival of the colonial masters in Igboland. It will be more appropriate to say that there already exists a unified indigenous trading system among the people before colonisation (Ogunniyi Olayemi et al., 2016).

2. Literature review

2.1. General Description of Bende Worldview

The Bende people view the world as an intricate co-penetrating and highly structured two realities - the visible and invisible. The visible sphere consists of whatever can be perceived with human five senses in the

heavens and earth (Chukwu et al., 2013). The invisible is the sphere of the ultimate reality - God, the deities or divinities, ancestors, innumerable spirits – good and evil ones. These two sphere realities are hierarchically structured with the Ultimate reality at the helm of affairs, while human beings are at the centre, beneficiaries, priests but ever absolute controller of the two realities. Rather the invisible sphere dictates the pace, regulates and influences what happens at the visible sphere. It is therefore a spirit filled world at the visible reality; a world where all activities are interpreted in terms of the intricate interactions of these realities (Chukwu et al., 2013).

2.1.1. Origin of religion

When did religion begin? No one knows for sure. Nevertheless, any statement about when, where, why and how religion arose or any description of its original nature can only be speculative. Putting it somewhat differently, it has been difficult from time past to guess and even when speculations are made, they are always inconclusive as to when really religion first began and penetrated all the nooks and crannies of the society. However, the inability to pinpoint a period when religion began has not deterred consensus being reached that religion must have

Begun from creation in order to assist man understand and find explanations to problems and issues that disturb him in his peculiar environments in which he lives and the social forces that impact on him both positively and negatively.

Nevertheless, the inability to pinpoint a period when religion began has not deterred it from being defined with a view to understanding the concept. Admittedly, religion has been variously defined. Each definition comes to envelop a given school of thought, while another wraps up this thought or that thought. In other words, specific beliefs and practices vary widely. Some groups attribute religious powers to ghosts and ancestors; others, to supernatural forces. Some believe in one supreme deity; others, in many gods. Some see their gods as benevolent; others view them as mischievous, hostile, or indifferent. Some seek affirmation of their faith in solitude wilderness; others erect pyramids, cathedrals, or other monuments, and maintain hierarchical priesthoods to intercede with the divine (Bassis, Michael; Gelles, Richard; Levine Ann, 1984). Be it as it may, religion is said to be a set of institutionalised beliefs and practices that deal with the ultimate meaning of life and by extension also provides a blueprint for social behaviour based on a divine, supernatural, or transcendental order.

At this point, it is important to acknowledge the fact that religion comes from the Latin: *religio* (respect for what is sacred) and *religare* (to bind, in the sense of an obligation). From this perspective, Durkheim (1915) perceive religion as a “unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things, that is to say, set apart and forbidden, beliefs and practises which unite into one single moral community. Substantiating, Durkheim contends that religion is about community as it binds people together (social cohesion), promotes behaviour consistency (social control), and offers strength for people during life’s transitions and tragedies (meaning and purpose). Fundamentally, religion is the collective mind-set of the society and the cohesive bonds of social order result from the common values in a society. In a nutshell, Durkheim contends that these values need to be sustained to maintain social stability in the society.

Aside Durkheim, other nineteenth-century thinkers addressed the concept of religion from different perspectives. Sir James Frazer, Edward B. Tylor - were interested in the historical origins of religion, and speculated on its evolution from "primitive" beliefs. That is, they viewed religion as a relic of earlier stages of human social evolution. Others including Sigmund Freud and William James were more concerned with the psychological origins and functions of religion, and probed individuals motives, purposes, and religious experiences. In other words, these two scholars saw religion as springing from a psychological need.

Thus, if religion begun in order to assist the *Bende* man understand and find explanations to problems and issues that disturb him, then, religion is, indeed, a serious and social attitude of individuals or communities in Bende towards the power or powers which they conceive as having ultimate control over their interests or destinies. Basically, religion in Bende is an expression in one form or another of sense of dependence on a power outside of individuals or communities in Bende, a power of which the people may speak of as a spiritual or moral power.

Elder Chukwu Okorie Odua (2012), 85 years old respondent and a retired member of Oji ogo nta age grade in Amakwu (Ezeukwu) averred that:

This power outside of us must be understood as God because he is the omnipotent and transcendent being. In essence, the religious attitude towards the Determiner of Destiny must have some faint touch of social quality for us to feel in our relations toward anything that can respond positively to us at all times (Elder Chukwu Okorie Odua, 85 years old respondent).

Prior to the advent of the missionaries in Bende, it was difficult for the outside world to comprehend the psyche of the people in relation to religion. Europeans, for sure, at this point in time failed to recognize that, there was, indeed, a Bende cosmology. In this cosmology, emerged the traditional religion (*Okpukpere-chi*). Substantiating further, Elder Chukwu Okorie Odua (2013) upheld that:

Okpukpere-chi is a religion that resulted from the sustained faith of our forebears; practiced today by the majority of their children in various forms and various shades and intensities. Okpukpere-chi is simply a body of knowledge, a system of beliefs, system of relationships and practices which guides the relationship between our people and the supernatural; it is concerned with the supernatural, a being or force which is superior to what exists naturally and could not be seen or touched (Elder Chukwu Okorie Odua, 85 years old respondent).

In *Okpukpere-chi*, the Bende people concept of supernaturalism is tied to something that is beyond their human comprehension and therefore super-organic. God, Chineke, the creator, is at the apex of the hierarchical pyramid as the ultimate source of all existence, followed next by a plethora of deities through whom Chineke can be accessed. Thereafter, a plethora of deities and ancestors come next in that chain of command followed by men occupying the lowest ebb in the hierarchical order.

Just as it is difficult to separate religion from culture, the Bende people view their religion as part of their culture and, therefore, as a social phenomenon because their beliefs carry with them social obligations of the people. It is tough trying to dissociate the Bende people from that aspect of their culture that has religion

servicing as glue to make their society unified and functional because doing so would amount to squeezing water out of stone. It is their religion which, as part of their culture, gives direction and complexion to their schemes of life.

2.1.2. *The two worlds in Bende religious cosmology*

As earlier noted, there are two worlds – the world of man peopled by all created beings and things (e.g. the world of the animate and inanimate things); and the world of spirits which is separated from the physical world. There is belief in a supreme God, who is all good, omnipresent and omniscient. The good God is referred to as *Chineke* (Creator); *Chukwu* (Great God); *Obasi di n'elu* (God above) and all else, depending on the virtues proclaimed, is distinguished from the devil (*Ekwensu*). *Chineke* is not worshipped directly, but through intermediaries – the deities. The world of the spirits is the abode of the creator, the deities, the malignant and the ancestral spirits. This is the world to which every living person goes after death. There is belief in a continuous and constant interaction between these two worlds. The dead constitute the lineage system; they form part of the genealogy of the living. Ancestors, like the living, are reprimanded and scolded when they fail in the duties to the living.

Among the Umunna kindred (*Alayi*, *Igbere*, *Item*, *Ezeukwu* and *Ugwueke*) of old Bende, *Okpukpere-chi* is synonymous with religious beliefs system. Thus, *Okpukpere-chi* rarely deals directly with the force called *Chineke* (Supreme God) because in the people's beliefs system and folklore, there are deities which serve as ancillaries, agents or intermediaries, between the Supreme Being and the people. The deities in *Ezeukwu*, one of the communities that constitute Bende include *Ala*, *Amadioha*, *Offiaukwu*, *Agwu*, *Ngelema*, *Nnenike* and others. The belief in the spirits of these deities is so much rooted in the life of Bende, particularly *Ezeukwu* to the extent that the people often make clay altars and shrines of their deities, usually with figures being featured in them. As a result, their activities such as worship, farming, healing, justice and administration are inextricably bound to these deities. Typically, only men are allowed to make representational figures, however there are exceptions.

2.1.3. *Worship of super-natural power (Chineke)*

The Bende, particularly the Umunna kindred believe in super-natural powers. Most supreme of these powers is the God whom they call *Chineke*, or *Chukwu*. Sequel to this, *Okpukpere-chi* is a pantheistic faith, having a strong central deity at its head. All things spring from this deity. Pantheism holds that *Chineke* is not a 'separate Being' from the created universe hence, He is the universe. He is the entire natural order, is everywhere and in everything. *Chineke*, the supreme power is the creator of everything (visible and invisible) and the source of other deities. He is referred to as the unknowable, and too great of a power to be approached directly save by the manifestations that exist in the world (the land, the skies, and the Sea).

As the creator of everything (visible and invisible), the people posit that God personally exists, interpenetrates every part of nature and timelessly extends beyond it. Such interpenetrations in a spiritual view occur as lower deities or *Arusi*. Thus, *Okpukpere-chi* anchors its existence on only, but one Supreme Being: *Chineke* (God) and many lower supernatural beings or deities (*Arusi*). The world view of *Okpukpere-chi*

cemented relations among the various Bende clans before the advent of other religious beliefs systems such as Christianity and Islam. This assertion is clearly reflected in the way and manner that, *Okpukpere-chi* practice in more ways than one, served as an umbilical cord which connected and coordinated all other facets of life in Bende. . All activities in the society, whether farming, hunting, marketing, social relations, and even recreation are governed by laws and taboos, and all blend inextricably in a complicated ritual. Through *Okpukpere-chi*, the traditional Bende man tries to locate, regulate and control human relations in the society for the realization of the good life for all. In the course, he feels at home in the universe around him; come to terms with his environment; evolve codes of behaviour between him and the spiritual and natural environment.

2.1.4. The veneration of departed ancestors/ Ancestral worship

It is believed that laws and customs are sent down to the people through the deities and ancestors hence, their belief in life after death. By this, the dead ancestors are said to maintain life communication with the living world. The ancestors are never dead, but only have a change of abode; that is, from the mortal world to the immortal world. And any effort made to exclude the presence and power of ancestors renders the Bende traditional societies lifeless. Thus, the Umannato kindred, therefore, believe that their lives are profoundly influenced by their ancestors.

The veneration of departed ancestors (*Ndiichie*) is an important aspect of *Okpukpere-chi* belief system. The *Ndiichie* are given physical and outward representation in the form of clay or wooden status. Appropriate sacrifices are made to them to secure their continued goodwill and protection. In *Bende* cosmology, it is believed that the dead ancestors are invisible members of the community; their role in the community, in conjunction with *Ala*, is to protect the community from all kinds of conflicts and epidemics.

The religio-cultural belief in life after death occupies a prominent place in Bende mythology. The Bende people believe in reincarnation (*ilua uwa*). This is the ability of man to return to life human form after an interregnum called death. Since the Supreme Deity, *Chineke* had completed creation, the dead constitutes a pool, a reserve from which life is drawn, regenerated or recycled to replenish terrestrial existence. Life therefore is continuous cycle, a cyclic process. Life is eternal, expressed in alternating realms or forms. Death is merely a conduit to transit to another sphere of existence and thus seen as a necessary step towards a new life, towards reincarnation. It is the transmutation from this terrestrial after sometime. Only humans and deities possess this quality of a cyclic pattern of existence. Among the entire Bende Societies, this is the foundation of their belief in reincarnation.

In Bende, the process of communicating with the ancestors is referred to as "ancestral worship." Ancestral worship is based, as earlier observed, on the people's belief in life after death. There are two cycles of life herein, namely, cycle of the life in the present world (often referred to as the outer call, a call to harmonize with one's destiny), and the life hereafter in the spiritual world (the inner call, a call to co-work with *Chukwu* in the spiritual world). As previously stated, death is merely seen as a physical departure of the individual from the land of the living to the land of the dead. Thus, life is seen as a pilgrimage, and death, a transition to another realm from where the dynamics of life on earth would continually be influenced with greater

potency. The departed ancestors continue to be members of the lineage, and between them and their living kin, there is an existing relationship involving mutual obligations. This explains d'être reasons they are buried with items such as clothing, utensils and machetes, among others, which they would need in the world beyond. By and large, life is a continuum. From this perspective, it is obvious that the Bende world is one of visible and invisible forces concerning the living and the dead.

Ancestral veneration in the Bende religion has its roots in the performance of the second burial ceremony. The belief in life after death and in reincarnation require that the dead be formally ushered into the new realm of existence as ancestral spirits by funeral rites of passage referred to as second burial, the spirit of the deceased is believed to be restless until the second burial is accorded it. The second burial is of spiritual significance because it confers full citizenship rights of the world of the great beyond on the deceased. In this capacity, they intercede for their living by blessing and prospering their children, granting longevity, health, wealth and prosperity; protecting and assisting them in times of trouble, and above all, punishing perpetrators of injustice or any vicious crime against them. In Bende, the realization of these blessings are anchored on regular consultation and appropriate placation through libations, offering of kola-nuts and offering of food on occasion of births, marriages, good harvest and the like to the ancestors both as a mark of deference and to keep their spirits going until they reincarnate into humans again. Physical death does not terminate a father's social usefulness; he lives in the memory of his devoted son, who carries on with the good work to which his life was dedicated. Thus, in Bende, the good that men do lives after them and only their bones lie buried. But failure to accord it a second burial may provoke it to return to haunt those whom it had left behind for abandoning it to roam about restlessly without an abode. In essence, this belief in reincarnation confirms as it were, the age-old Bende view that necessitates the consultation of oracles and offering of sacrifices to the gods for the birth of the children in order to be blessed with a visit via reincarnation. Fundamentally, the Bende religious world is governed by self interest which demands cooperation in order to survive. It is a world of change – a world which can be manipulated either to an individual or others advantage; a world of constant struggle and status advancement; and a world in which ancestors are respected.

Another cultural aspect of life being a continuum is the belief that the reincarnating soul has re-predestined its life by declaring a more propitious destiny for itself, taking into consideration the reverses it experienced in the previous life. Thus, the dead reincarnates in the form of new babies. The dead can reincarnate as many times as possible and can even change sex. As a rule, there can be only one reincarnation at a time. Two spirits cannot reincarnate at the same time through one birth; neither can one spirit multiply itself in one birth. In the former case, it would mean that there was a struggle for passage between two or more spirits in which none yielded to the other. This war in the spirit world must not be carried over into this terrestrial world, and if done, the resultant effect is the birth of twins, triplets and what have you. The phenomenon accounts for the killing of the new reincarnates (twins or triplets) and the offering of sacrificial appeasement for the abomination. Put differently, the spirit of a deceased can reincarnate twice or more and such reincarnation must be orderly, one at a time, through the same or a different mother, but never at once through the same mother as in twins or triplets.

But where it is ascertained that these ancestors have reincarnated in some newly born babies, such babies are given the names of the ancestors who are thought to have reincarnated them. Obviously, this accounts why parents consult a traditional diviner to confirm who amongst the ancestors has resumed life (reincarnated) in the form of the new baby. Since the spirit of a deceased can reincarnate twice or more, there abound the repeated recycling of names within and among families. One striking feature of this repeated recycling of naming system is that, often the new baby grows up to exhibit physical and character traits in tandem with its named predecessor. Science may dismiss this as genetic or heredity factors but a close study of the spirituality of this Bende phenomenon reveals otherwise. Genetics or heredity cannot explain the enigma of a Bende child living up to the unattained but desired aspirations of a predecessor he never met.

2.1.5. Totem worship

In Bende, the principal features of *Okpukpere-chi* practice are belief in God, in the divinities, the spirits and the ancestors. The great force that is *Chineke* is infinitely powerful that no human being approaches this force directly or can work with or deal with it directly without passing through the many intermediary deities. Succinctly put, *Chineke* is rather far removed physically from the people, but manifested himself through equally powerful representatives who are designated as deities (gods). Deities *are* thus regarded as agents and dispenser of blessings from the supreme God; they are obviously lower forces, the outflows from the main stream and sparks from the supreme force. In *Okpukpere-chi*, these lower forces are identified and a collective term *Arusi* is used to describe them. As earlier averred in the preamble, the whole world and everything including man was created and owned by *Chineke* who is thought to live in the sky from where He sees and judges all human actions, rewards all good deeds and punishes bad ones. When an individual offers a sacrifice and prayer to these agents, in principle he is offering them to the Supreme Being, who could not be approached directly by mortals because it is believed that the day to day administration of the world was handed over to them. These deities *are* believed to have some astonishing powers which they could use, sometimes to the advantage, and sometimes to the detriment of men. They are believed to inhabit some natural phenomena such as hills, rivers, streams, trees, rocks, animals and mountains. Some of them are venerated by the entire village, while others are kept and venerated by inhabitants of another village. For example, *Agwo* (snake) is associated with *Ndiama* family in *Ezeukwu*. This totem, no doubt is not unconnected with the outstanding prowess this family is said to have had in wars. Likewise in Umuagbala Amautazi Amakalu community in Alayi which is boarded by Ndiotai and has what is known as (Ikwo) which are Ndiokereke, Ndiotai, and Umuachom. Their forebears worship an idol god known as Ogbaegbu. However, the influence of Christianity has reduced the allegiance to the deity. There is also the general belief in Bende that some selected trees such as *Orji* and *Akpu* are the living abodes of certain benevolent spirits. They are believed to possess the spirits that account for fertility in women and as a result, barren women are always advised to frequent the surroundings of these trees so as to become fertile. In most cases, according to some elders, they are usually gratified. Nevertheless, it should be noted that the traditional Bende man pays his respect not really to the totem itself, but to that spirit believed to be resident in it.

In Bende, the members of a given family have an identity of shared fate which is distinct from the fate of another family or clan(s). Every clan, and in most cases, every lineage, and most extended families have shrines for the corporate group. Some have totemic trees, or animal as the messenger of their deity. For some, it marks the sacredness of the place where their founding ancestors settled. This kind of corporate religion which is limited to the community is an ingenious devise to maintain the unity of the community. Furthermore, some communities forbid eating certain foods and animals because of the mythical linkage between them and their history. Amongst the people, shrines are meeting places for religious worship in the community. Most extended families have shrines as locations for their common spiritual force which bind them as one. Loyalty to one's nuclear family or extended family is no longer sufficient to guarantee communal peace, but devotion in the shrines.

In fact, totemism, to some extent, is an indispensable element which features predominantly in the *Okpukpere-chi* practices as well as other social experiences of the Bende people. The totemic organization expresses the idea of society being sacred. The totem animal or bird acts as a symbol of unity and token of solidarity among the people. The totem binds members as one people belonging to one another. At any rate, the god of the family is regarded as the immediate protector of the household and all its members, their property and animals among others.

2.1.6. *Chi (personal guardian angel)*

Chi, being the personal guardian angel directs everyone on the way to one's destiny (*akaraka*). Realizing one's destiny entails relating *chi* to humanity on earth, thus answering the first call. The pattern of life chosen after meeting one's destiny determines the level of one's acceptability after death as one of the *Ndiichies* (a hallowed ancestor spirit or saint) in the spiritual world. Basically, it is believed that those who lived worthily and respected the laws of the land (*iwu ala*) died in their old age are buried accordingly, and accepted in the spiritual world.

Looking at the other side of the coin, the philosophy of individualism stands strong and articulate among the Umunna people as indeed among the Bende as a whole. 'First, underlying Bende social organization is an individualistic principle, which is in fact, a pervasive trait in Igbo culture. This principle is clearly institutionalized in the concept of *chi* or "personal god" which is a pronounced aspect of Igbo religion '

The *chi* has often been wrongly taken to mean a pagan deity, and some scholars would easily misapprehend its wide and profound connotations. *Chi* may have arisen from animist conceptions but it has surely superseded particularized usage. It is best understood as the sum total of an individual's life history, his fate and destiny, his life cycle charted by providence which, in addition to his *modus agendi*, combines to give every man his behavioral personality and make him personally responsible and calculative in his life and actions. In political life, *chi* includes one's charisma for action and undertaking, and the unity between one's past history. Present endeavours and future results. Thus the individual becomes the last irreducible unit of responsibility who must originate and automate' his own behaviour and guard it judiciously against all undue imitation and blind compliance: for men's destinies (*chi*) are not the same.

The community reciprocates a standard attitude to each an individualistic stance. People learn to respect the individual. Even when he poses his will against their convictions they finally commend him to his chi. that is abandon him to his fate and halt all molestation. In the life cycle of Igbo men *Chi* is a towering factor.

The sense of individualism enters into family life to chart different paths for children of the same parents. The idea is rightly brought out in the saying: *Ofu nne na a mu ma na ofu chi a di eke*—children are born of the same mother but they are guided differently by their chi. No one may therefore presume to goad an individual to a decision point at which he surrenders his full responsibility. 'Chi is a Bende social fact; its dynamics highlight a strong element of individualism which is a marked feature of Igbo social structure.

The Bende people are hard fighters and they possess a tenacity of purpose that makes them relentless in pursuing their sworn objectives. But when those objectives elude them or when the fight degenerates to pointless punches, the Bende people do not despair, they rather find inexplicable solace in their maxim: *Ka m babe m, or Ka m noru ka m ha*—let me return to my house, or let me know my limit and keep within it. The belief is strong that one finds better rest in containing one's own situation. The success of that containment is not measured with an established set of common and universal indicators; rather success is viewed within the context of each person's circumstances. Thus a man's aim may be at the heights, he is nevertheless satisfied with a modicum of accomplishment. The attempt to soar higher continues but it is effectively guided and regulated by the belief that 'everyone is the architect of his own fortune.' In the end, individual adventure submits to mutual tolerance. The, people freely say: *Onye ara na uche ya so*—a mad man has his own sense; *Uche bu akpa*—one's mind is like his private bag; *Onye na nke ya, onye na nke ya*: everyone to his lot; *Okuko adighi akpanye n'afọ enyi*: a chicken does not feed into the stomach of a cow; *Onye buru nke ya na anyigbu ya*: everyone, has his own personal cares.

Okpukpere-chi is based on the belief in the supreme God (*Chineke*), the lesser gods (deities) and the ancestor spirits (*muo*), serve as a potent force in the maintenance of law and order in Bende. Also, it is an instrument of social control as well as a unifying factor among the various Bende societies. In sum, *Okpukpere-chi* acts as the driving force that systematises and co-ordinates political and social institutions for societal benefit.

In *Okpukpere-chi*, every individual is assigned a personal providence called *Chi*. *Chi* is the personal spiritual guardian of an individual that takes care of any *mmadu* (individual) assigned to him or her in the lower world. As a personal providence, it is a divine agent assigned to each human being from cradle to the coffin. *Chukwu* will assign *Chi* to everyone at one's birth and it remains with one throughout one's life in the world (*Uwa*). This is why the Bende kindred use the phrases: '*chi awu otu*'-- 'personal guardians are not the same for everybody'; '*ofu Chukwu*'--'only one God'; '*Chukwu ebuka*'--'God is great' and '*mu na chim*'--'me and my godly guardian'. Unlike *Chukwu* that is sexless, *Chi* can take either a feminine or masculine gender. *Chukwu*'s divine love is like an ocean that is endless and takes form on the lower world. It is the sparks of *Chukwu* and the right of any *mmadu* in the main stream.

Chi determines a person's successes, misfortunes and failures throughout his life time. It serves as an intermediary between *mmadu* and *Chukwu*. The Bende people believe that their success in life is determined by their *Chi*, and that no man can rise above the greatness of his or her own *Chi*.

Among the Bende, particularly the Umunna kindred, Chukwu (the Almighty God) cannot be manipulated. The people's destiny is etched on their palms, and unfortunately, they cannot decode it, but can only derail it. Chi, the personal godly guardian, can be coerced to help here: '*onye kwe chi ya ekwe*' (whoever believeth, achieveth). By implication, Chi, as personal spiritual guardian of an individual is therefore a lesser might of Chukwu and the only means through which an individual could get transformed. Therefore, to survive spiritually, one must establish and appreciate a special relationship between oneself and one's godly angel. In this context, it is unambiguous that a person's *Chi* is comparable to the concept of a guardian angel in Western Christianity, the evil spirit of Greek myth, and the intellect of Roman myth. This essentially places the human person at the forefront of interlinked activities that involve other cosmic forces. Thus, it is said: if one runs faster than one's godly guardian, one runs the race of one's life '*Onye buru chi ya uzo, ogbagbue onwe ya n'oso*'.

There is a general spiritual law that one (an individual) must pass through these lesser supernatural forces who serve as the agents of purification before one can make one's ways to eternity. There are various routes through which one can proceed on this spiritual journey. No matter the route chosen, one would definitely encounter these forces severally on one's journey through life and in most cases; they make one's path narrower thereby making the journey more difficult and stressful. These lesser supernatural forces may even close the road to eternity and cause individuals to continue running in cycles and confronting *ekwensu*, a deity with a convoluted identity that opposes the supreme God- *Chineke*.

2.1.7. *The spirit of Ala*

The immortal world is the earth, the spirit of *Ala*. *Ala* is the most important of the ever-living spirits of the ancestors. *Ala* is the earth goddess who is also responsible for morality and fertility and also for the burial of the dead ancestors who are resting in the womb of the other world. *Ala* translates to 'earth' in Igbo as she is the ground itself, for this reason taboos and crimes are known as *nsọ ala*, "desecration of *Ala*". As the highest *Arusi* in the *Bende* pantheon, she was among the first to be created by Chukwu almighty. Chukwu's incarnations in the world are the *Arusi* and they spring from *Ala* the earth goddess who embodies the workings of the world. In *Bende* cosmology, there are four basic *Arusi*, namely, *Ala*, *Igwe*, *Anyanwu*, and *Kamalu*. There are also lesser deities, all of whom, as elements of Chukwu; each has its own specific purposes; each of which is responsible for a specific aspect of nature or abstract concept. According to *Bende* folklore, these lesser *Arusi*, exist only as long as their purposes are required. As result, many of these lesser *Arusi* die off except for the four basic ones. Besides, *Ala* also harbours *Ahajoku* or *Ajoku* – This *Ahajoku* is grouped into two— *Ajoku Ubi* the yam deity, regarded as fertility god and protector of farm crop and *Ajoku Ulo* which sees to the people's moral traditions, laws or ethics which when broken, the *Bendena* call *nsọala* or *ihe arụ*.

In the cosmological hierarchy is also *Kamalu* or *Amadioha*, equivalent to *Shango* in the Yoruba tradition, the patron and guardian of the judicial system, which is rooted in the "free will of the people". As the god of thunder, it fights for those who come to him for justice. Its governing planet is the Sun with red as its colour and white ram as its symbol. Metaphysically, *Kamalu* represents the collective will of the people and is often

associated with *Anyanwu* (sun) and has *Afor*, which is the second day of the Bende four day market week as its day. As the head of the sky, it also has in its possession all the forces of nature such as rain, wind, etc. It is the belief of the people that lightening never strikes anyone unless one has committed an offence. Succinctly put, it never strikes any location unless something inimical and dangerous to the well being of the people is lurking therein.

2.1.8. *Ala sacredness*

Basically, *Ala* is sacred in its entirety, and the *Umunna* kindred have high esteem for the *Ala* and all its spirits. At this point one must be careful to distinguish the universalistic and benevolent Spirit-of-Nature, *Ala*, from the harsh earth-bound Earth-spirit called *Aja-ala*. Confusion of the two is a source of problem. *Ala* simply means Nature in the *Umunna* mind. *Aja-ala* is one of many Nature-Spirits that are in charge of different departments of Nature. These '*Spirits*' are, in fact, *enshrined knowledge-system*. *Dibia* (medicine men; creators and propagators of Igbo culture; *Chukwu were oke, Dibia e were!*) articulate them as needs arise. This is why '*agbara kpawa ike enye ya ihe onaeri*' ... when a deity becomes tough, he is fed accordingly!

From this viewpoint, it is clear that Bende cosmology is more complex. It is able to distinguished God (*Chineke*) from Nature (*Ala*): and their laws. *Iwuchukwu* is different from *Nso-ala*. Outsider anthropologists for example have not been able to solve this problem hence, the never-ending debate between creationists and evolutionists, which originates in the confusion of Nature and God. Behind the order pervading the world, the Bende conceive of '*Chineke* (God) and his system of absolute laws, *Iwuchukwu*. But they rule out the possibility of direct access to the mind and, so laws of God (*onye ma uche Chineke?*). What they assume possible is access to the law reflected

By virtue of their sex, the women's influence on certain traditional festivals is quite minimal. This is most apparent in the Bende masking traditions. It is unheard of for women to wear masks or be masks' attendants. In *Ezeukwu*, the only mask-involving festival in which women play prominent role is the *Ohuba* festival (*Chukwu et al., 2013*). Of course, the festival is for married women; men are not involved. Beside this, other things prohibited for women by the *Umunna* tradition are the climbing of palm trees, tapping of wine and urinating in *Ezi-a* family meeting place. Others are the ownership of some family gods such as the *Obasi*, meeting another man in mourning clothes and initiation into traditional cults like *Aku*, *Ariso*, giving birth to twins, and among others. The scope of this analysis does not allow for a close examination of the place of women in the entire veneration of the deities in the entire Bende, but it would be safe to assume that there are as many deities as there are human occupations and human institutions to which sacrifices are made at given periods. What seems common to all of them is that only the male members are allowed to slaughter a fowl or a goat in sacrifice to the gods and the ancestors. The females do not do this.

2.2. *Uwa* (the Unfolding world)

Uwa means, literally the unfolding world! The most fundamental characteristic of the world is dynamism. A logical consequence of this is an ever-changing world! *Uwa bu mgbanwe, mgbanwe!* A further logical consequence of an ever-changing system is the difficulty of predicting the next turn, hence, '*uwa bu ahia* or

'uwa bu okwe!'- the world is a market; a realm of probabilities; (we must note that 'ahia' and 'okwe' are interchangeable in such 'games-of-chance' as soccer and ludo). Asserting his position, Osuagwu (2008) submitted that this probabilistic nature of uwa (world) leads, logically, to the proposition that natural knowledge can only be statistical... 'o meje-emeje n' ala'... repeating pattern in Nature.

2.2.1. Nsoala (taboo against Ala)

In the Bende traditional context, a family does not limit itself to the immediate nuclear group of father, mother and children, but involves the extended family system which embraces the hundredth cousin. All these must not inter-marry unless the taboo is waived after nullifying some aspects of iwuala, laws governing Ala. This may happen if by mistake the two relatives had had a conjugal relationship that resulted to pregnancy which compels marriage.

In the Bende world, knowledge is a great forest which can never be exhaustively probed (*Amamihe bu ofia ukwu; anaghi epiecha ya epiecha!*). This world defines the pattern of the Igbo culture and practises (Osuagwu, 2008). For instance most taboos are violation of repeating pattern of this world. For example, if the predictable pattern of a hen is laying many eggs but hatches one egg leaving the rest unhatched, the hen is killed for violating natural law and eaten by old men. Similarly, it is an abomination for a hen to crow, crowing is masculine therefore should be reserved for Okeokpa, the cock. Thus, if any hen that does thus is slaughtered and devoured communally among the family members in their ezi (compound). However, if cocks crow at dawn, then anyone of them that is careless enough to crow at midnight dies, for committing *ARU* (abomination). If cows and women bear singletons, those that bear twins pay for violating the preferred patterns of Natural or natural laws (Osuagwu, 2008).

Again, it is an abomination for a maiden to lose her virginity before marriage. Thus, to ascertain that she has not been deflowered in the traditional society, she is compelled, within her first week in her husband's house, to swear by her husband's ancestral staff, the ofo, that she has not known any man while a spinster. In some communities, this is an aspect of marriage ceremony, the last and the determinant factor to a girl's marriage. It is believed that any girl who, out of fear, swears falsely by this ofo is liable to die on her first child-birth. In related development, a wife, while in her husband's house, is supposed to remain honest, sharing her sexual experience only with her husband, but where she violates this oath of allegiance and commits adultery: Igba okwa, this attracts humiliation and dehumanization as her residence is besieged and trodden upon by Nkwa ime agboghọ - a group of individuals consisting of youths and middle age men and women. The group is best described as a mob, highly disorderly and wild group. They make music and sing derogatory songs about the offenders. Depending on how wild and irritated the group is, the offender's house is either demolished to a pile of earth or littered with all kinds of garbage.

A fundamental significance of traditional religion (*Okpukpere-chi*) amongst the Bende people essentially explains the link between the two most observed aspects of religion, the individual aspect and the social aspect. Similarly, writing elsewhere, Gilat and Ronny (2006) aver that the relations between these observed attributes widespread in African traditional religion are not instantaneous as one would deem. According to them, the individual aspect is usually referred to as beliefs of the individual about the power or abilities of

some supernatural entity, while the social aspect refers to the observations that most religious ceremonies are performed collectively to the extent the behaviour of individuals in social interactions are clearly stipulated to the know of all and sundry.

Having known that Chineke is astoundingly and immeasurably mighty (*Okasiakasi*), and the huge world around [which makes] incomprehensiveness outside the phenomena of nature (in addition to) the traditional and cultural mode of respect among the Igbo from time immemorial (*nsopulu dibalu gboo*), the Bende people, just like the larger ethnic group, have learned to worship *Chineke* through intermediaries (Ifesieh, 1989).

3. Conclusion

Unquestionably, the acknowledgment of God as the Almighty and the creator of universe well as worshiping and adoring Him has been in existence among the Bende people long enough before the advent of Christianity. This assertion alone reaffirms the fact that the Bende traditional religious system which, existed before the emergence of Christianity still exists today. Despite globalization, the Bende people still have great value for their religious belief system and this value must as a matter of certainty continues to be transmitted from one generation to another. In other words, the society today notwithstanding the wind of change, still possesses essential features of Bende religious practices that unite them. By this unity, the Bende people hold at high esteem communality, hence their belief that isolation is a sign of reproach and it is only meant for those infected with terminal diseases and those who are regarded as impure. That is why one of their prominent proverbs prescribes that solitude is a mark of wickedness.

The Bende traditional religious practice otherwise called *Okpukpere-chi* is a pantheistic faith and, has a strong central deity as head. All things spring from this deity. As a result, the faith holds that *Chineke* is not a 'separate Being' from the created universe hence, He is the universe; He is the entire natural order, is everywhere and in everything. Furthermore, He is unknowable, and has too great of a power to be approached directly save by the manifestations that exist in the world (the land, the skies, and the Sea). In all, *Okpukpere-chi* has a critical mandate in the affairs of respective Bende communities, and represents a solemn communion with *Chineke* the supreme power as the creator of everything (visible and invisible) and the source of other deities. Essentially, the Bende people believe that God really exist as the greatest superior being and the creator of everything, hence the names Chukwu and Chineke respectively to reference God and other names such as Chukwuneke, Chukwuka and Chukwuemeka given to children to express the benevolence of God.

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