

**RE-ECHOING THE PHILOSOPHICAL FOUNDATIONS OF AFRICAN  
TRADITIONAL RELIGION: THE IDOMA EXPERIENCE OF NORTH  
CENTRAL NIGERIA**

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**Abstract**

*The paper examines the existence or otherwise of the philosophical foundation of African Traditional Religion, from the Idoma experience of Nigeria. Hitherto to the present epoch, some of the pioneer scholars of Africans and her religion have made wrong assertions that the African man and mind is incapable of, comprehending the existence of the Ultimate Reality, God. Implicitly and explicitly denying the fact that Africans can rationalize and think about their existence and their interactions with the universe and the final end of man on earth. But facts and records available suggest the opposite, because Africans observed and pondered on issues of the universe and discovered that after night comes the morning, after the raining season comes the dry season and so on, including his own existence. If African Traditional Religion has a philosophical foundation, then the paper is a re-affirmation of the philosophical foundations of African. This is borne out of the natural instinct of all human beings, that sense of rationality that is imbued in all of humankind irrespective of faith convictions, ethnic affiliations and the like. Pondering and speculating are all part of the acts of philosophizing. So, African Traditional Religion was borne out of philosophical speculations as the man interacts with his universe, with the realization that a Being greater than himself is responsible for creation especially, putting in place that Divine Creative Order. The paper is analytical in nature drawing strengths from available secondary sources of data, to buttress the fact that African Traditional Religion is well grounded on sound philosophical foundations as against earlier wrong notions and contemporary wrong assertions stating the contrary. A denial of the philosophical foundations of African Traditional Religion both in the short run and long run would be an exercise in futility, because it would amount to an attempt at denying the humanity of the Africans.*

**Keywords:** Re-affirmation, Philosophical Foundation, African Traditional Religion, the Idoma Experience and North Central Nigeria.

## **Introduction**

The role of religion in African philosophical discourses can hardly be stressed enough. Kaunda cited in Makumba (2007: 166) makes a striking point when he says:

The African-ness which has its roots in the soil of our continent rather than the lecture rooms of Western universities is basically a religious phenomenon; we are who we are because of our attitude to the mysterious depth in life, symbolized by birth and death, harvest and famine, ancestors and the unborn.

Makumba states further that, one would say the religious experience is the gateway to the African heart and mind. By giving people a way of interpreting the world, a way of understanding their own existence, African Traditional [sic] Religion has equipped them emotionally, intellectually and culturally to go through life and face its many experiences. If this is the case, it would be expected that central philosophical issues also take on a religious form, especially in pre-colonial Africa. As a result, religion and philosophy were so intertwined that African Traditional [sic] Religion was seen to be the gateway to African philosophy and reason for which answers to most questions in philosophy took or have religious undertones.

Undoubtedly, taking a cue from the above, there is a presupposition to the fact that African Traditional Religion is built on a sound philosophical foundation and from this premise, the paper intends to make a re-affirmation of the philosophical foundation of African Traditional Religion from the Idoma experience of North Central Nigeria.

## **Theorizing the Problematic**

This research is partly a refutation of the different wrong notions by early scholars of Africa and African Traditional Religion and Culture, especially the denial of the philosophical foundations of African Traditional Religion. According to Kayode, God has not left Himself without witnesses; therefore, the article which appeared in a Berlin Journal in 1891 can now be declared a worthy example of falsehood and an attempt at running away from Truth in all its ramifications. He refers briefly to a part of the false submission thus: "Before the introduction of a genuine faith and a higher standard of culture by the Arabs, that natives had neither political organization, nor strictly spoken, any religion, nor an industrial development" (qtd. in Kayode, 1984: 1).

Ludwig would not want his observation put in print anymore since he must have regretted having said, "How can the untutored African conceive God? How can this be? Deity is a philosophical concept which savages are incapable of farming". All religions of the world could be likened to a tree, the root and the stem standing for God who sustains, and the

various branches and leaves as religions in the various directions, all deriving their vitality from the roots which hold the entire tree firmly (Emil Ludwig cited in Kayode, 1984:1).

Kayode (1984:1-2) posits that, God manifests Himself in various ways and this is expressed by man in diversity of languages. It is only through the world that God acts upon us. The religious man must at least be conscious of his feelings as the immediate product of the universe. Any religious feeling is piety in so far as it is the result of the operation of God in us by means of the operation of the world upon us. He asserts further that, the traditional African peoples may not worship in the same way the Hinduists, or Christians, or Muslims, or Buddhists would, but they get the message of the Personality which manifests Himself to them in their peculiar situations. Bolaji Idowu, having studied the structure of African theology, suggests that the term “diffused monotheism” could be conveniently used for describing the religion of the people. The crucial reasonable point is that Africans recognize intermediaries in the similar notion of their social set-up where the King in the community is approached through lesser Chiefs, Princes and Princesses.

Another sphere of the traditional Religion of the Africans that supports the fact that it is hinged on sound philosophical foundations is that of revelation. It is an act of God and to the understanding of the African peoples, divine message can be obtained through the situation of things in the environment. Man has consciousness or awareness of the Divine Order. Without any hesitation, the African affirms that God has put this awareness in man and for this reason his traditional religion is found everywhere. His experience attracts him into religion. The works of Nature-rivers, hills, rocks, forests-instil the awareness in man that there is a Superior Force greater than himself. The experience derived from Divine Providence-abundance of food for human beings and animals, procreation, growth, and developments of plants and crops-instils in man the awareness of a Superior Force in the universe. Indeed, the experience of adversity in the form of epidemics, poor harvest, infant mortality, drought and so on also calls for religious awareness. At such times, people then turn round and blame their sufferings on some external force. There may be need to appease the Supreme Being, the divinities or the ancestors. When things go well and life is pleasant, Africans give praise and thanks to the Supreme Being from whom all blessings are supposed to flow. From their various experiences of life, people form their religious concepts and ideas and over a period of time, these concepts become established (Kayode, 1984: 2).

### **What is Philosophy?**

Philosophy as a word is got from two Greek words *philos* and *sophia* meaning love and wisdom respectively. Put together it would mean love of wisdom. Thus, a philosopher is a lover of wisdom. According to Omoregbe (2011: 1), philosophy has been conceived, described or defined in various ways by different philosophers. Plato described a philosopher as a man whose passion is to seek the truth, a man whose heart is fixed on reality. Aristotle rightly called it the knowledge of truth. Epicurus described philosophy as an activity which secures the happy life by means of discussion and arguments. For William James, philosophy in the full sense is only man thinking, thinking about generalities rather than particulars. John Dewey described philosophy as thinking which has become conscious of itself. The aim of philosophy according to Wittgenstein is the logical clarification of thought. Martin Heidegger conceived philosophy as the correspondence to the being of being.

However, Omoregbe (2011: 3), defined philosophy as “a rational search for answers to the questions that arise in the mind when we reflect on human experience or as a rational search for the answers to the basic questions about the ultimate meaning of reality as a whole and of human life in particular”. For the purpose of this research, these two definitions are adopted. Anyacho posits that generally, man is a thinking animal. He thinks about the forces of nature around him and how they help in making for or marring his comfort on earth. He asks question about essence of his existence. He seeks to know about life and man’s position in the universe. These reflections may make him ask the four fundamental questions which Kant said are central to philosophy. What can I know?, what ought I to do?, what can I hope for? And what is man. These in line with Nwala’s thinking cited in Anyacho (2004: 59) states that:

Philosophy may mean a worldview (*weltanschauung*) that is, the basic beliefs which a people have or a person has about the origin, nature and end of the universe, life or existence, whether the ideas are explicitly stated or implied in action. Stated in another way, it could be the basic ideas and beliefs which expresses people’s or a person’s outlook in life.

He adumbrates further that, philosophy could mean a way of life with definite ideas and conception of what life and existence means. It may mean that attitude to life which is characteristic of all genuine philosophers: that is, one of curiosity to know, maintaining a critical attitude to life, openness of mind on all issues and lack of dogmatic assertions or stands but an attitude of tolerance and readiness to examine everything without prejudice or pre-conceived notions. It may also mean a critical and conscious effort to understand the universe, its origin and purpose (60).

Philosophy is essentially a reflective activity. To philosophize is to reflect on human experience in search of answers to some fundamental questions. As man takes a reflective look at himself or the world around him, he is filled with “wonder”, and some fundamental questions arise in his mind. When he reflects on these fundamental questions in search of answers, he is philosophizing. Both Plato and Aristotle tell us that this wonder is the beginning of philosophy. It is through wonder, says Aristotle quoted in Omoregbe (2011: 4), “that men now begin and originally began to philosophize”. Human experience is thus the source of the reflective activity known as philosophy. This experience could either be man’s own experience of himself (subjectivity) or his experience of the world around him (objectivity). Hence philosophy could start from subjectivity to objectivity.

Moreso, there is no part of the world where men never reflect on such basic questions about the human person or about the physical universe. In other words, there is no part of the world where men do not philosophize. The tendency to reflect on such fundamental philosophic questions is part of human nature; it is rooted in man’s natural instinct of curiosity-the instinct to know. Human nature and human experience are basically the same all over the world, and the tendency to philosophize is part of human nature. Hence the German philosopher Karl Jaspers quoted in Omoregbe (2011: 6), says that “ man cannot avoid philosophizing”. This means that men all over the world philosophize, and all peoples have their own philosophers.

### **The Concept of African Traditional Religion**

Gbenda (2006: 4), states that African Traditional Religion is the religious tradition of the African peoples that is based purely on their culture. The religion was initiated by the ancestors of the present generation thousands of years ago and is still being preactised today. Citing Ekwunife, Gbenda (2006: 5) defined religion in the Nigerian situation or understanding when he wrote that it is:

...living institutionalized religious beliefs and practices, which are rooted in the past.... religious culture; a religion that was transmitted to the present overt and covert votaries by successive...forebears mainly through oral traditions (myths and folktales, songs and dances, liturgies, rituals, proverbs, pithy sayings and names, sacred institutions like sacred specialists and persons, initiation rites, festivals, sacred spaces and objects and religious works of art; a religion which is slowly but constantly updated by each generation in the light of new religious experiences through the dialectical process of continuities and discontinuities.

Furthermore, the above definition is very comprehensive and all embracing. From it one can deduce that African Traditional Religion is a living religious tradition. The religion is not static but dynamic. The dynamic nature of the religion enables it to adjust to changes and new religious experiences, thereby leading to modification and the discontinuities of some elements. The religion “written” in all aspects of African or Nigerian way of life. The indelible stamp of the religion could be in the African organization of their political life, as their social, economic, and ethical values. In the same way, works of art- both tangible and intangible portray African Traditional [sic] Religion. It is in this vein that Mbiti (1999: 2), posits that:

Because traditional religions permeate all departments of life, there is no formal distinction between the sacred and the secular, between the religious and the non-religious, between the spiritual and the material areas of life. Wherever the African is, there is his religion...

### **A Historical Overview of the Idoma in North Central Nigeria**

According to Igboaka (2015: 12), the Idoma is one of the ten largest ethnic groups in Nigeria dispersed in a number of states in the country. But the focus of this paper is on the Idoma people of Benue State. By the 1963 National Population Census the Idoma people numbered up to 684,880. Based on that figure, the Directorate of information, office of the Governor, Benue State of Nigeria indicates that Idoma people are the second largest ethnic group in Benue State. They live in an area of 13,015 square kilometers, covering: Otukpo, Okpokwu, Oju, Ado and Apa Divisions, with Otukpo as their main town. Idoma land is bounded on the North by the Benue River, on the West by the Tiv, on the south by Nsukka and Abakaliki areas respectively. Also, on the East reside the Igala of Kogi State. Most of the Idoma area is inland South of the Benue, 72 kilometers East of the confluence with the Niger River.

In addition, Armstrong cited Igboaka (2007: 12), states that “the country is nearly all ‘Orchard bush though changing into the forest at the beginning of the rain, along the southern fringes of the territory’. It is very fertile and hence, there is an annual cycle of hoe farming during the rains and hunting and bush fire during the dry season. In the southern part of the region bordering Enugu and Cross River States stretches of thick forest with palm trees, and many other economic trees, which provide timber for commercial purposes. But currently, the Idoma people are spread across nine big local government areas of Benue State comprising Ado, Okpokwu, Ogbadibo, Agatu, Apa, Otukpo, Ohimini, Obi and Oju.

The language of the Idoma people is known as Idoma as stated by Armstrong, belongs to the *Kwa* language groups. The Idoma language is very rich, with five main dialects, which are categorized into the following: The central or Otukpo dialect spoken in Otukpo, Adoka, Ugboju,

Oglewu, and Onyangede districts; The Igumale dialect spoken in Igumale and Agila districts; The Agatu dialect spoken in Agatu and Ochekwu districts; The Okpoga dialect spoken in Okpoga district, (It is closer to the Igumale – Agila dialects, but not the same), and the western dialect spoken in Otukpa and other districts in Ogbadibo (Igboaka, 2007: 13).

The geographical spread of Idoma people is indeed very wide and diversified. The Afor in the Nasarawa, the Akweya-Yachi in both Akpa and Ogoja districts, as well as the Igede, all speak a language relatively close to that of the Idoma. Taking into account the fact that these groups are linguistically very near to each other, one can affirm that people speaking Idoma are spread from Keana, North of Benue River, to the region of Ogoja, and even further south to the bank of the Cross River, north of Ikom. The Etulo (*Utur*) also represent another isolated group near Katsina-Ala, in Tiv country. The Idoma people, as already mentioned are divided into numerous clans each with its particular history. Therefore, the Idoma unity is essentially a linguistic unity, and not a political one, as is the case with the Yoruba or the Igala, united into large kingdoms, whereas the Idoma language is essentially composed of many and varied dialects, as stated by Armstrong (Igboaka 2007: 13).

Similarly, historically the Idoma people are said to have migrated from the Old Kwararafa Empire to their present location, though settling at Apa. Erim's study, enables us to follow step by step the settlement of each Idoma group at its present day location. This historical research calls for some observations. In the first place one can consider the pressure exercised by the Fulani of the north as being the deep underlying cause of the intermixing of these populations. This Muslim influence was particularly strong in the beginning of the 19th century. Secondly, these historical considerations explain the fact that today's Idoma society consists of a heterogeneous number of population, speaking the same language. Hence, we are able to comprehend more clearly, the symbolic and cultural world of the Idoma. The basic unit of the Idoma cultural structure was the compound. Armstrong shows that the compound comprises the man, his wife, their children and his sons. The family (*ole*) occupied a group of huts around an open space, one hut for each wife, one for the owner of the compound. There were various other huts consisting of club houses, granaries, grinding table and so on. These facilities were necessary to make the compound, *ole* a self-supporting unit. This setting is in line with what is obtainable in other African societies, the family does not consist of only parents and children, but rather, it includes the grand parents, uncles, aunts and others. These also include brothers and sisters who have their own children and other immediate relatives which anthropologists call the extended family (Igboaka, 2007: 15). The father or the head of the family exercised responsibility in the social, political, economic and religious life of the associates. Nzanuwa in Igboaka (2007: 15), rightly points out with regard to the people of East of the Niger that:

The nuclear family is the smallest or lowest unit of political organization. The father or the elder male is the head politically, socially, economically and religiously. ...As the custodian of the family tradition and ancestral cult, the head acted as the intermediary, between the family's ancestors and the living members.

Armstrong stated that Idoma land comprises twenty-two districts. Districts could be called true areas or regions whose lineages and clans feel they are related genetically and they are of the same people or belong together. This relationship is very strongly and formally expressed by the totemic animals associated with a district which the people involved are forbidden to eat (Igboaka, 2007: 16-7). Similarly, Erim (1981: 141) maintains that: "in pre-colonial Idoma land, there were variety of totems". The Idoma regard such an animal as *iho*-forbiddances. The totems are bird or fish, which the people use as a symbol of their oneness or express their genetically relatedness. Such totemic animals include the civet cat (*anwu*) the leopard (*eje*), the black monkey (*eka*) the mud-fish (*egbe*), among others.

### **Philosophical Foundation of Idoma Traditional Religion**

Generally, African experience giving credence to the fact that African Traditional Religion is built on a sound philosophical foundation, the paper brings to bear in the Idoma experience. The Idoma worldview is basically a religious worldview like any other African society, meaning there is the belief in the existence of two worlds. In the Idoma worldview, *Owoicho*, God is transcendental, all excelling, supreme. He is also looked upon as *Owo no fie owo**dudu*, omniscient. But since He is too physically removed from the world, there must be an intermediary. It is the Oche who is therefore invested with god-like qualities and made the ruler of the community. Evidence indicates that the Oche was the Chief Priest of nearly all the religious cults in the community. The Idoma religion consisted of three essential elements. The first was the *Owoicho* (the Supreme God), the second *aje* (the outstanding earth), and the third *alekwu* (ancestral spirits). Although the *Owoicho* was recognized as the creative supernatural force, yet because of the physical distance between the Idoma and God, the people thought it necessary to look for a substitute which acted as an intermediary between them and the Supreme Being. This intermediary was the *aje* through which God transmitted his force. In time, *aje* became sacred to the Idoma (Erim, 1981: 98-101).

Erim (1981: 101), posits that so important was *aje* in the Idoma religious belief that each kindred group established an earth shrine within its *ojira* (kindred playground). The chief priest of the *aje* was the Oche. In this capacity he is referred to as the *adalekwu* (father of the dead). In Idoma belief, the dead members of the kindred group were paradoxically alive. In other words, death in the corporeal sense did not remove the dead from kindred membership as such. Rather, certain classes of the ancestors were considered vital and



living members of the community. Consequently, they were endowed with certain rights and responsibilities. The Oche, in his priestly role, was considered a vital link between the *alekwu* and the living community.

The Idoma people must have speculated on the origin of things in the universe such as the onset of the raining season and the beginning of the dry season, night fall and the breaking of the day, human existence and life hereafter and the like. There exist rhythms and patterns of life that the Idoma person and mind cannot explain. This led to wonderings about the existence of these things which led to attempts at rationalizing their existence through philosophical questions and proffering answers to such questions. If we go by the classical idea of the beginning of philosophy, we come to the realization that it started from 'wonder' about some of the events enumerated above. The Idoma person and mind speculated on many of these and other sundry issues of life and human existence with a long history of the employment of some of these philosophical understandings of life to bring to bear on their religious beliefs and practices handed over from one generation to another through the word of mouth, otherwise known as oral traditions. A classical example of the Idoma religious belief in the life hereafter could be seen in the belief in *alekwu*, ancestral spirits.

When an Idoma person dies after living a morally sound life, died at a ripe old age and have been giving complete funeral rites, he or she transmigrates and joins the communion of ancestors. Of all spitual realities, ancestors are the closest to the Idoma people through which they offer worship to *Owoicho*, God the Supreme Being. Ancestors, contrary to the postulations of the pioneer scholars of African Traditional Religion, are not worshipped but venerated and they are channels through which the Idoma person and mind can reach out to *Owoicho*, God the Supreme. *Alekwu*, ancestors are referred to as the living-dead because of the physical ceasation of life and the continuation of life in the spiritual realm. This of course buttress the fact that the Idoma people believe in the immortality of the soul and the existence of life after our physical stay in the universe.

Giving credence to the above position, Quarcoopome (1987: 43), adumbrates that ancestors are the heroes and heroines of the different African societies. They are believed to have acquired extra-human power in the afterlife. They are able to intervene in the lives of the living members of society. They act as intermediaries. They are the unseen presidents at family and community meetings. They are the custodian of morality of the African communities and they are venerated and not worshipped. They are venerated but not worshipped. It was a misconception from the pioneer scholars and researchers that they are worshipped. Of all spiritual realities they are the closest to man and they act as

intermediaries. Worship and prayers are offered to the Supreme Being through them. They are remembered periodically at festivals. They are the closest to man and they act as intermediaries between God and man. They are the custodian of morality and they enforce morality through rewards and punishments. They are the unseen chairmen of family meetings. They are concerned about a sane society. They are the police men of traditional African Societies. Ancestors are remembered in diverse ways. They are persons that have lived morally sound lives. As a result of the good lives they have lived those living physically remember them by giving names of their children to them. Giving names to children of ancestors is a sign of appreciation to them for living a good life and encourage those living to do the same. These names convey religious earnings. There is a relationship because they are the custodians of morality. They are interested in a morally sound society. They are the ones that enforce morality in society, the worldview of the Africans as it relates to the universe could believe in them as the enforcers of morality.

The Idoma people have the awareness that *Owoicho*, God the Supreme Being is the Creator of the visible (universe) and the invisible worlds (spiritual) worlds. He created everything therein in the universe including human beings, and we look up to Him for provision and sustenance. Conversely, according to the Idoma religious belief, *Owoicho*, God the Supreme Being depends on the visible world for manifestations. For instance, if an individual is said to be blessed by Him because of the individual's good deeds how do we know? It can only be known through such benevolence from *Owoicho*, God the Supreme Being as it regards bumper harvest, procreation, good health, longevity and a host of others which are all physical manifestations of the power of God's providence and sustenance.

In support of the above views about the philosophical foundation of Idoma Traditional Religion, Mbiti cited in Makumba (2007: 166) notes that Africans are 'notoriously religious' and religion has such a grip on their entire life that it is not always easy to isolate it. Consequently, an understanding of the people requires knowledge of their religion. This applies even to their thinking because, he maintains:

Philosophy of one kind or another is behind the thinking and acting of every people, and a study of traditional religions brings us into those areas of African life where, through word and action, we may be able to discern the philosophy behind.

Makumba (2007: 166-167), citing Mbiti insist that religion:

has dominated the thinking of the African peoples to such an extent that it has shaped their cultures, their social life, their political organizations and economic

activities... religion is closely bound up with the traditional way of African life, while at the same time, this way of life has shaped religion as well.

Religion therefore, according to this position, occupies a special place in African ontology for it defines the world of the African man and woman. People apply their religion to their social, emotional, economic, intellectual and spiritual life. It is for this reason that religion has been understood to give African peoples a way of understanding the world in which they live and is responsible for cultivating the whole person. And under the influence of religion, the great ideas of the people concerning moral life, cultural achievements, social organization and institutions, political systems and the building of their past civilizations were enunciated. The expression of this thought and ideas are [sic] to be found in proverbs, riddles and sayings of the people. These are the ones in which the wisdom of the people is enshrined and many of them are also religious.

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion, the paper re-affirms the philosophical foundation of African Traditional Religion because there is no religious tradition in the world that is devoid of this, since men and women in all age, epoch, race and the like have the consciousness and rationality of engaging in philosophizing. A denial from any quarters of this assertion in respect of African Traditional Religion, is a denial of the philosophical foundation of any religious traditions anywhere in the world. And if we agree that religious traditions cannot be devoid of philosophical underpinnings, this also holds true for African Traditional Religion because of the fact that Africans pondered about existence in the universe, where does a person go to after physical cessation of life?, who is responsible for creating man and woman and all that are therein the universe? etc.

All the above is intertwined with the religious traditions of the Africans, giving credence that the religion is based on a sound philosophical footing coupled with the fact that there are sources of the religion replete with philosophical underpinnings such as proverbs, pithy sayings, legends, folktales, folklores, songs, wise sayings, myths etc that buttress the subject-matter. Any denial of these is the denial of the humanity of the Africans whose philosophical mind cannot be questioned, for existence of any man or woman anywhere in the world cannot exist without engaging and bringing to bear their reflective activity called philosophy to all spheres of their life, including their religion. On the final analysis, African Traditional Religion is based on a sound philosophical foundation and constantly being updated in the midst of continuities and discontinuities.

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