

## IS “CHUKWU OKIKE ABIAMA” THE SUPREME BEING OF IGBO RELIGIOUS THOUGHT? QUESTIONING THE ASSUMPTIONS!

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### **Abstract**

*There is a spiral of confusion generated in Igboland by the apparent mixture of the nomenclature of the supreme being of Igbo religious thought and the anti-social deeds believed to have been inspired by a such supreme being. Before the emergence of IPOB and social media, the purity of the supreme being of Igbo religious thought was never in doubt. The supreme being God was generally identified as Chukwu or Chukwu Okike with other variables like Chineke or Olisa in different dialects. Christianity came and finding that name in the oral tradition of the people, adopted it as the proper equivalent of the Christian name for God. For deception for economic, cultural, religious, and political advantages as shall be shown, the people of Aro nicknamed their oracle Chukwu abiama. With its destruction by the British in 1901-02, the influence of Christianity and the passage of time, the name Chukwu abiama was almost forgotten until its resurgence thanks to IPOB and the social media propagating the hybrid version Chukwu Okike Abiama. By applying a multidimensional approach which includes ethnological and exegetical methods of analysis of the data, with special emphasis on historicity, this paper aims at dismantling the assumptions which present the hybrid version of god Chukwu Okike Abiama as the supreme being of Igbo religious thought.*

**Keywords:** Chukwu, abiama, Aro, Umuchukwu, kidnapping, ransom, Ibini Ukpabi

### **Introduction**

Ala Igbo is in a bit of confusion. One of the major causes of the confusion stems from the apparent mixture in the nomenclature of the supreme being of Igbo religious thought. Up until recently, the assumption has been that we call the supreme being of our belief and

worship *Chukwu* or to add some other qualifier, *Chukwu Okike* – the Creator God. When Christian missionaries arrived on the shores of Igboland on the 31st of July 1857, this name was already in the oral tradition of the ordinary people as manifested in their traditional worship and rites. By adopting this name *Chukwu* or other related equivalents like *Chineke*, and *Olisa*, as the Christian term for God, Igboland underwent major transformations because of the influence of Christianity. However, in the southeastern part of Igboland existed an oracle which exerted much influence beyond the shores of Igboland that many came to consult for various reasons. This oracle originally identified as *Ibini Ukpabi* existed at Arochukwu even before the arrival of Christian missionaries, nicknamed *Chukwu* and eventually *Chukwu abiama* by the owners and agents of the oracle. With the devastating attack on this oracle by the British in 1901-1902, the influence of Christianity and the passage of time, the name *Chukwu abiama* was no longer in use and almost got forgotten in the dustbin of history, until the rise of IPOB and the social media’s propagation of *Chukwu Okike Abiama*. The resurgence of interest in and the use of that name appears to have reignited a certain contemporary form of paganism growing in Igboland; we have seen the name used as a stamp of authority on the organized form of militant civil action imposed on the land; we have witnessed gangs of criminals kidnap, kill and maim innocent individuals; we have seen a great number of gun-carrying-youths covering themselves with charms and calling themselves ‘Umuchukwu.’ This latest renaissance of the name has generated major confusion as most Igbos no longer know which is which. Now, there is the tendency to blanket the supreme being of Igbo religious thought as the hybrid god *Chukwu Okike Abiama*. Our purpose here is to interrogate these assumptions and establish that there is a major difference between *Chukwu Okike* and *Chukwu Abiama*, as they represent two different and incomparable beings. Any hybridization of the two irreconcilable entities gives birth to a false god.

### **Is the name “Chukwu Okike” or Chukwu Abiama” or “Chukwu Okike Abiama?”**

The existence of the term *Chukwu* for the supreme being called God has been in the oral tradition of Igbos right from time immemorial. Igbos have generally and mostly prayed to the Creator God as “Chukwu Okike” or its equivalent “Chineke.” The appendage of “abiama” to “Chukwu Okike” seems to be a recent development following the rise of IPOB who inadvertently may have brought about the resurgence of the abandoned term by the constant use of the refrain “Chukwu Okike Abiama” in her dissemination of messages to her teeming followers. What this has done, is bring about a total loss of purity of meaning as regards the concept of *Chukwu* in Igbo cosmology. The other effect is the complete confusion reigning in the minds of Igbo people as to what or who exactly the

terms signify and apply to. Do we understand the terms to apply to the supreme being that is universally identified as God? Or do we understand the terms to apply to a local oracle of Aro people, which has long been known as *Chukwu abiama*? The third uncertainty is the recent attempt in so many quarters to deny the Aro oracular identity of the term *Chukwu abiama* and upgrade it to assume the authentic Igbo name for the supreme being God – *Chukwu Okike* with the qualifier *Abiama*. The implication of the third effect is the production and validation of a hybrid being as the god of Igbo religious thought. We attempt to bring some clarity, supported with historical and cosmological evidence, to this cloud of confusion generated and animated by the terms *Chukwu Okike Abiama*.

According to the observation of some of the earliest missionaries in Igbo land, the oral tradition has never recorded anything like “abiama” in the general Igbo concept of *Chukwu* as the Supreme God. Archdeacon G. T. Basden (1921), was an early missionary who spent almost fifteen years in Igbo Land after his sojourn, published 1921, his undiluted experiences and impressions about the Igbos. According to his records:

Among the Ibo people, there is a distinct recognition of a Supreme Being—beneficent in character—who is above every other spirit, good or evil. He is believed to control all things in heaven and earth and dispenses rewards and punishments according to merit. Anything that occurs, for which no visible explanation is forthcoming, is attributed either to Him or His eternal enemy Ekwensu, i.e., the Devil. But *Chukwu* (as He is called) is supreme, and at His service are many ministering spirits whose sole business is to fulfil His commands. It is interesting to note that Death is spoken of as one of the servants of God. This Supreme Being is designated by different rites, the chief of which is *Chukwu* (Chi-ukwu) i.e., the Great God; *Olisa bulu uwa*, usually shortened to *Osebulu uwa*; or *Olisa* simply. The underlying name is, “God who fashions the world.” In the southern districts, *Chineke* (God the Creator) is the prevailing name. The knowledge of the Supreme Being is practically confined to the name and the interpretation thereof. Besides the recognition of a Beneficent Being, there is a profound belief in an Evil Spirit. The two are eternally opposed to each other, each striving to influence mankind for good or evil, but *Chukwu* is always classed as superior to Ekwensu. (pp.215-216)

Surprisingly, Basden did not record a single instance of “abiama” in the Igbo understanding of the Supreme Being called *Chukwu*, if such was the case in early Igbo oral tradition. There could be many hypothetical reasons for such an absence. One could be that he never heard of the such term “abiama” in the areas of Igbo land he ministered. This leads to the second and most probable reason that “abiama” was a localized term, that is, a term used within a specific locality by a particular people. Whichever it is, the general use of the term as is happening today could commonly be assumed to be a recent development.

Or could it be that the Igbo as a nation, borrowed their concept of God from a local shrine? In some quarters, especially in the Southern part of Igbo land, it has been a big contention, that the Igbo nation expressed the concept of God with the simple term *Chi* as Supreme God; or *Chineke* as the Creator God. Another variety of the same idea is *Osebuluwa* as the Lord of the Universe. The use of term *Chukwu* is said to have been adopted from Arochukwu where it is specifically the name of the oracle served by the people of Aro. Is there any validity to the claim? Prof. Echeruo (1979), in his inaugural Ahiajoku lectures, argued for the fact that the term *Chukwu* was borrowed from the Aros and imposed on Igbo theology by the missionaries. According to him:

Whatever the exact history of this oracle, we cannot avoid noticing its name as a compound formed from *chi* and *ukwu*, a compound which, translated into English, would become *the Big Chi*. There can be no gainsaying the fact that, for all its excesses, the oracle gave the Igbo people a new name for God and a name which, as I hope to suggest in a moment, they were quite happy to accept. That achievement was made possible by three considerations, namely, the integration of *chi* into this religious system, its avoidance of conflict with *Ala* and, finally, its decisive separation of *Eke* from *Chi* in the Igbo metaphysics. (p.20)

Another Igbo scholar Nwoga (1984), in his *The Supreme God as Stranger in Igbo Religious Thought*, seems to have also held the view above, according to which *Chukwu* was the name for the Arochukwu oracle, *Chukwu abiama*, and was imposed on the rest of Igbo by the missionaries who found it the best term to translate their own Christian idea of God. Nwoga (1984) observes that the adoption of the Aro cult name *Chukwu* by catholic translators "was why the Protestants changed to *Chineke* though the Catholics who came later to Onicha still used *Chukwu*" (p.26). Whether it was the invention of Aro people or not, it still goes to confirm that the term *Chukwu abiama* referred essentially to the localized deity honoured by the Aro but which eventually, as a result of circumstances, expanded its reach and influence to a greater part of Igboland and beyond. However, reacting to the suggestion that it was the Aro who gave the Igbo her concept of the Supreme Being, Msgr. Prof. Okere (1995) avers:

As to the adoption of *Chukwu* into Igbo parlance, it is gratuitous to suggest that it was the Aro who lent or imposed the name of their God on Igbo theology and not the other way round, or that they necessarily had to have a different supreme God from the rest of the Igbos of which they formed an integral, though admittedly privileged, part. It is rather likely that the concept has its origin in Igbo religious development. From *Chi* the personal god and guardian, it is but a short and natural step to *Chi-ukwu* (or vice-versa), the great *Chi*, the God creator of all. Not being *muo* or *agbara* and not having altars like the other deities, this god

generally is detached and withdrawn from human affairs. The Aro may have, for their purposes specially appropriated him, given him a cult, a shrine and an oracle that became a Delphi and a Mecca for the Igbo; but they did not create him. The concept and name seem to have been thoroughly, universally, and primordially Igbo. (p.141)

Further, there is the existence of some documented, historical pieces of evidence conserved in the story of the expedition into Igboland and in the study of the Igboland by the earlier voyagers to the Niger, one of which was William Balfour Baikie (1854). He noted that “the Igbos all believe in an Almighty-being, omnipresent and omnipotent, whom they call Tshuku, whom they constantly worship” (p.311). He was very clear on the fact that belief in *Chukwu* (written *Tshuku* by the European explorer) had been in the religious system of the Igbos. Thus, the voyagers found that name already in use by the Igbos before the establishment of Christian missions in Igboland. According to the findings of Prof. Afigbo (1981), the key to determining the truth about the Igbo cultural heritage can be sourced from two major clans ‘whose oral traditions hold a lot of information about the Igbo past’ (p.3). These two clans are the Nri and the Aro clans. These two clans according to Afigbo, had the most elaborate cosmological systems that rise to a deity which acted as the “ordainer and guardian of morality, the source of law and custom, etc” (p.9). Before we delve into examining the part of the formative story of the Aro, let us listen to what Prof. Afigbo (1981) recorded about the existence of *Chukwu* in Igbo traditional cosmology:

Concerning the growth of the characteristic Igbo cosmology the Nri corpus of myth makes mention of *Chukwu* (*Chiukwu*) who after creating men, sending smiths to dry the land, making the land bring forth food and instituting the market days and marketing was never mentioned again as playing any part in the daily life of the people. On the other hand, it was *Ani* or *Ala* that now became so important to the Igbo that it became one of the most vital functions of the *Eze Nri* to preside over its worship. This development is in accord with the otiose character of *Chukwu* (the High or Supreme God) in Igbo cosmology, and the domination of the Igbo world by the Earth goddess. (p.9)

From the foregoing, it is obvious that the term *Chukwu* was already in existence in Igbo theology though the being was regarded as very distant from the daily life of the people. A former Igbo slave, Olaudah Equiano (1745-1797) confirmed in his writing the belief among the Igbos, in the existence of a sky God distant from the people: “As to religion, the natives believe that there is one Creator of all things and that he lives in the sun...” (Equiano, 1789, p.9). God, apparently became distant from the people because of the innovations that revolutionized the life of the Igbo people during the Eri period of our

existence. Such innovations include the introduction of agriculture and the growth of crops like yam and cocoyam; the development of tools by Awka smiths; and the introduction of fertility cults by Nri priests to take care of the needs of the agricultural communities. These cults had their deities. Metuh (1985) observes:

Thus, as Igbo communities moved from nomadic life to sedentary agricultural life, they adopted many fertility cults in addition to the belief and cult of the 'High God.' Consequently, Igbo cosmology became populated with many fertility deities, and Chukwu, God, became remote. (p.378)

However, in a kind of counter-narrative to the *Deus otiose* belief, Arinze (1970) referred to a form of direct sacrifice called *Aja Eze Enu* to the supreme being *Chukwu* who enjoyed some form of cult in certain areas like Maku, Ogidi, and Achina (p.112). Ikenga-Metuh (1973) has written about the existence of a direct cult offered to *Chukwu* called "Iruma Chukwu" among the Oguta Igbo group and the "Onu Chukwu" shrines in the Nsukka area of Igboland (pp.1-11). He later wrote a book where he studied the four types of direct sacrifices to God found in different parts of Igboland: "the rites of *Igba Mkpụ Chukwu*, celebrating God's mound; *Aja Eze Enu*, sacrifice to God, King of Heaven; *Iruma Chukwu*, installing the altar of God and *Ikpalu Chukwu Ugbo*, making a sacrificial boat for God on marriage" (Metuh, 1981, p.129). All these forms of direct cults mean there is a form of relationship with this God and the subjects. However, given the general belief that *Chukwu* is a distant and uninterested God, Aro people perhaps capitalized on this supposed gap, and to bridge it created their oracle with a personality cult and gave it the functions the distant God could not discharge.

If it is established that *Chukwu* is the universal title for the supreme being in Igbo cosmology, and thus belongs to the oral tradition of the people, the same should be applied to the qualifier *Okike* which is the more complete form of explaining not only the nature of this Supreme Being but one of His major attributes. *Chukwu Okike* simply means the Creator God or the God who creates. The Nri corpus of myths makes mention of this creator God as shown in the citation above. Given the findings above, did the Aro oracle assume the name *Chukwu Okike Abiama*? And if yes, how did it come to be known as such?

The answer to the above questions may not be definitively in the affirmative nor in the negative because of the paucity of recorded evidence. However, most of the recorded evidence, including ones dating to the middle of the 19th century when the transatlantic slave trade was still on, only attributed "abiama" to the *Chukwu* of Aro. There was no mention of "Okike." John Clarke (1848) while referring to the Aro, mentioned that at



“Aaru, the Ibos say their God Tshuku ob yama, resides” (p.73) and William Balfour Baikie (1854) also mentioned that there at Aro “the people say Tshuku ab yama” (p.311). While not ruling out the possibility of one person copying the other, the deliberate recording of what they heard spoken of at Aro, is a pure delight to the inquiring mind. On the other hand, though this is not a popular alternative, one of the probable explanations for saying “Chukwu Okike Abiama” could be from the etymology of the Aro oracle itself. The oracle that became built up to the status of *Chukwu* of Aro has its origin in the people of Ibibio in the Eastern part of Nigeria. It has been suggested that the oracle was taken over by the Aros after the fall of the Obong Okon Ita kingdom. (Retrieved from [http://twitter.com/akwa\\_crossfacts/status/1283745477301862400?lang=en](http://twitter.com/akwa_crossfacts/status/1283745477301862400?lang=en)) The original name of the oracle was “Ibit Ukpabi” or Ibini-Ukpabi, which in the Ibibio language is translated as “Drum of the Creator God” (Unegbu, 2013, p.18). It would be supposed that the Aro immediately *Igbonized* the name as “Chukwu Okike” since that captures the original name from its source, but it never happened. We know that Metuh (1981) has a different meaning for Chukwu’s “praise-name *Ibinokpabe*, ‘one who receives you kindly and fills your baskets’” (p.80). It must be recognized that it was with the Aro, according to Afigbo (1981), that the concept of “Chukwu” achieved its “maximum development and manipulation” (p.51). On good authority, we can say that the concept of *Chukwu Okike* was not part of the oral tradition of the Aro oracle. ‘Like the neighbouring towns—Ututu, Ihechiowa, Abam, Ohafia and others, Aro knew the Supreme Being God as *Obasi di elu*’ (Ukpong, 2015, p.130). It was Baikie (1854) who made a very clear distinction between what was obtainable at Aro – its oracle and the God believed in and worshipped in other parts of Igboland. In his writing, he notes:

The Ibos all believe in an Almighty being, omnipresent and omnipotent, whom they call Tshuku, whom they constantly worship, and whom they believe communicates directly with them through his sacred shrine at Aro. But they speak also of another and a distinct Deity, who at Abo is known as Orissa, but throughout other parts of Igbo, as “Tshúku-Okéke,” “God the creator, or the supreme God.” (p.311)

Baikie would not have given different names if the deities were not different. Yes, Aro called their deity “Chukwu,” but it was not “Chukwu Okike” (written as Tshúku-Okéke by the European visitor). That distinction was very clear in the mind of the people. “Abiama” probably have become a marker to distinguish the Aro oracle from the Supreme God of Igbo religious thought, since having the same name, creates a problem of identification in the mind of the people. With the elaborate and sophisticated scheme of deception, the oracle turned out to be, it should not be ruled out that the intention was to confuse the people into believing that the oracle was indeed the real Supreme Being God.

Leonard (1906) of the colonial era, mentioned Aro as one of the theocracies that "boldly transferred the Supreme God from the sky above to their earth below; the best examples of this are to be seen in the Tsuku Ibiama of the Ama-Ofo or Aro, and the Egwe or Sky God of the Egwe community..." (p.374). It is again clear from this report that the god of Aro was called *Chukwu abiama* and not *Chukwu Okike*.

Apart from the historical evidence of Baikie and Leonard as given above, there is other documented evidence to support this motif of demarcation. One came from the research reportedly carried out by Arazu in his hometown of Ihembosi in Ihiala Local Government Area of Anambra State. It was while trying to find out if *Chukwu* the supreme Being had any altars and cults and was as such very close to the people prior to the evangelical activities of the missionaries. The result of his findings is very enlightening. As reported by Mbaegbu (2010):

And to clear the ambiguity and the disharmony that might arise from the *Chukwu* (God) worship connected with the Aro oracle Ibini Ukpabi, Arazu made it clear that his people refer to the god of that oracle as *Chukwu Abiamayi* to differentiate it from *Chukwu* proper worshipped in the town. (p.37)

Another is the evidence given by Msgr. Prof. Theophilus Okere (1995), in his examination of names as the building blocks of African Philosophy. Igbo people do not take or confer names on someone by chance. Every name they take upon themselves is influenced by the context or event in their lives, summarized by the meaning of the name adopted. According to him, "in traditional Igbo life, there is a lot in a name. The name is more than just a tag or a convenient badge of identity" (p.133). Sometimes, it can be given to mark a historical event. Some of these oracles had traditional Igbo names taken from them to signify their importance among the Igbos of those times. According to Okere (1995):

Names also make historical statements. Nwaorgu—Son of War—designates someone born in wartime; Nwigwe, and Nwachukwu are names of boys whose conception and birth are attributed to the intervention of great oracles Igwekala of Umuhoja and Chukwuabiam of Arochukwu. (p.134)

What is very clear from the historical usage of the term as attested to by Prof. Okere, is that "abiama" as attached to "Chukwu" was particularly identified with the localized oracle of Arochukwu which was famous for its deeds some of which included settling of disputes between parties and applying immediate sanction to the guilty party. Even before the articulation made by Prof. Okere, the confirmation of "chukwuabiama" as the name of the localized "god" of the Aro people of Igboland was noted by one of the earliest Igbo anthropologists I. Chukwukere (1983). He writes:



It is reasonable to postulate that 'Chukwu' derives its meaning as well as primary Igbo conceptualization of it from a simple amalgamation of 'chi' and 'ukwu' ("big," "a great") ...the evidence from the earliest recorded accounts of Igbo religious belief and practice seems to confirm that 'Chi' was the dominant and commonest Igbo corresponding term for the general European notion of "deity." Igbo informants at times gave (and still give today) Chukwu as a synonym, but many a time explicitly qualified as "Chukwu Oke Abiame," the all-powerful oracle and "god" of the Aro-the most widespread and influential Igbo sub-group in living memory. (p.527-8).

Chukwukere in the above quote, notes how informants introduced "Chukwu Oke Abiame" as specific to the oracle of Aro people. As written here by Chukwukere, "Oke Abiame" more than anything captures the unique way Aros massaged their ego, "Aro oke-Igbo" (Oriji, p.121) to mean "Aro the great or male Igbo." Hence "Chukwu Oke Abiame" could also be a way of signifying that this "Chukwu" is great or male." That means that "Oke Abiame" never had an original place in the oral tradition of the general concept of God in Igbo land.

A good number of oracles in Igboland were believed to have exercised some form of control and authority over the local people. Some of them were the Igwekala of Umunohia, the Ibini Ukpabi of Aro, the Agbala of Awka, the Ogbunorie of Ifakala, the Amadioha of Ezianya and the Kamalu of Ozuzu (Njoku, 2016, p.42). However, it was only the Ibini Ukpabi oracle of Aro, or the Long Juju as called by the British colonialists, which was far more sophisticated and "powerful" than all the other existing oracles. Nwoga (1984) Correctly observed that "the biggest oracle which pervaded Igboland from the 17th century was the Ibini Ukpabi of the Aro" (p.36). On the surface level, it was purportedly a dwelling place of a god who through the human agents, acted on the triple capacity of executive, legislative and judiciary powers. The Aro were itinerant and adventurous people who, for business, found their way into various communities and had a "blood covenant" with the communities to assure them the safety of passage and their wares. What made Aro a fearsome lot was her part in the transatlantic slave trade, a trade which gave them a three-pronged advantage over the rest of the Igbos: commercial, diplomatic, and oracular (Njoku, 2016, p.31). Their natural geography lying around the Enyong Creek contributing to the Cross River gave them an advantage over the rest, and they were the first point of contact with the European merchants. According to Afigbo (1972), this advantageous location provided the Aro "the highway by which 'light and civilization' would penetrate the remotest recesses of the *terra incognita* inhabited by the Ibo, the Ibibio and the Ogoja people" (p.21). As a result, they took their wares into the hinterlands in exchange for slaves; created alliances with some communities, consequent

upon which they protected themselves mutually; and spread the power of and instituted Ibini Ukpabi oracle in the non-Aro communities they dominated by diplomacy or by conquest. It was this Ibini Ukpabi that became Igbonized as *Chukwu abiama*. The oracle was one of the institutions that gave the Aro an upper hand in their dealings with the rest of the neighbouring towns and villages. Under the pretence of adjudicating between quarrelling parties, the agents of the oracle dubiously sold people presumed to be guilty before the oracle, into slavery and off to the Americas. The blood of an animal or something of that colour would be poured into the stream surging out to where waiting for communities or family members of the litigants were, to signal that the guilty parties had been devoured by the mighty oracle. While the parties sorrowfully went home, Aro agents pocketed heavy "sums of money" made from the sales of their fellow ethnic men and women.

Their military alliances with warriors from the towns like Abam, Ohafia, Abiriba, and Edda made them a military force to be reckoned with, an advantage they used to a devastating effect in raiding villages in their search for slaves and new markets for European goods. In various villages where they had settlements, their major allegiance was always to their motherland Arochukwu. Today, those migrant communities have become towns of their own. Some examples in Anambra and its environs include Aro-Ndizuogu, Ndikelionwu, Ndiowuu, Ndienu, Ndiokpaleke, Ajalli, Atani, Ihiala and a host of others. It is very logical to assume that these dispersions spread, over and above every other Aro institution, the name of the Aro high god *Chukwu abiama*, to the Igbo hinterlands. According to the observation of Njoku (2016):

Although Aro migrations and settlements had various long-lasting effects, the most prominent result is the permanent geographical dispersal of the Aro in various parts of Igboland and beyond, encapsulated in what is popularly referred to as the "Aro Diaspora." (p.34)

The agents of the oracle implanted their oracle in various host communities and took effective control of the religious and legal needs of the communities. These agents who have become the Aro diaspora "advertised and promoted the oracle, manipulating information and local people's fears" (Nwokeji, 2010, p.77). How could the influence and the name of the oracle not have become very common among the local communities? With the destruction of the Aro oracle by the British in 1901-1902, and the passage of time much influenced by Christianity and colonisation, the usage of the oracle probably waned in importance in the Igbo hinterlands and the name *Chukwu abiama* became a memorial relic in the dustbin of history, until its recent resurgence thanks to IPOB and the social media.

**The Origin of the Aro Oracle *Chukwu Abiama*:**

It may be very interesting to note that even at the importation and foundation of the Aro oracle, there was no “abiama” attached to its name which transmuted from *Ibini-Ukpabi* to *Chukwu*. A lot has been written about the origin of the oracle. Arochukwu as a chiefdom is a mixture of three ethnic groups—the Igbo, Ibibio and Akpan (Nwauwa, 1995, p.353). It is said that Ibibio were the host who got overpowered by Aro and their allies the Akpan. Those three groups interacted and mingled and eventually metamorphosed into the Aro State or chiefdom (Arochukwu). According to Nwauwa (1995):

Before the formation of the chiefdom, an oracle of very local significance, *Ibini-Ukpabi*, was controlled by the Ibibio. It has been pointed out that during the Aro strife, Nachi, the itinerant Edda priest-doctor whom the Igbo invited to make war medicine against the Ibibio, initiated and “developed it from a comparatively local oracle to the widespread power which it attained” (Matthews 1927a:9). Shortly, *Ibini-Ukpabi* drew a large population towards Arochukwu from far and wide. The oracle became famous it was believed, “because of the precision with which it detected crimes, deciphered the unfamiliar and forecast the unknown” (Dike and Ekejiuba 1978:273). The Delta people consulted it. The Igbo and Ibibio venerated it. The Igbo came to regard the oracle as their *Chukwu* (High God). To them and neighbouring peoples, the oracle was an impartial external arbiter. The Aro came to be regarded as the children of the “High God” (Umuchukwu, p.359)

It is very enlightening that today, some militant factions of certain groups claiming adherence to IPOB, identify themselves as “Umuchukwu” with the belief they are under the special protection of *Chukwu*. We know that IPOB is a group avowed to the protection and realization of the freedom of Biafra. However, the evidence of incivility associated with these militant groups demarcates them totally from the avowed goals of IPOB and makes us doubt the veracity of their claims of adherence to IPOB. One of the major trademarks of these groups or those claiming to be their members, is the presence of “juju” or “charms” all over their bodies, as they believe they are invincible to weapons of death. Even the evidence of fallen members, at the hands of security operatives, has not deterred them from blindly putting themselves and every other person in harm’s way. Today we see some similarities between the Aro of old who travelled far and wide inflicting fear into the hinterlands and taking captives for her oracle, and the so-called faceless “Umuchukwu” of today who, some say, are freely destroying, kidnapping, maiming, killing and striking fear into people they judge in opposition to their ideology.

The same miseries suffered by the Igbos at the hand of their brothers in the late 18th century under the auspices of *chukwuabiama* of Arochukwu have reappeared in the 21st century and continue to be perpetrated partly by allegedly those who identify themselves as "Umuchukwu" or those claiming adhesion to them. Let it be noted that all the unrest and the kidnappings taking place in our land today, may not all be caused by the same group but perhaps by some criminal elements or organized gangs cashing in on the circumstances and making profits therefrom. During the slave trade championed by the Aro in Igboland, societies either were ravaged from without or exploited from within for captives. Njoku (2016) relates that Igbo land belonged to the second group:

At no time did any neighbouring non-Igbo group directly raid the Igbo for captives? Together with their allies, the Aro did. They masterminded the raiding of communities and sub-groups, especially in the Igbo hinterland, but were themselves never raided. To fall into the hands of an internal group of predators was, for all intents and purposes, worse than to be raided by outsiders. Aro-led internal exploitation of their ethnic group proved quite disastrous for Igboland. Thus, by the middle of the 18th century, the area had become one of the most important sources of slaves for the Euro-African trade. (p.41)

With much enlightenment, we certainly know that *Chukwu* the Supreme God of Igbo religious thought, could not have commissioned people to be killing and destroying their brothers and sisters in His name. The transatlantic slave trade has long been abolished but a new form of the slave trade has taken its place—internally-induced "slave trade" of captives taken from one village of Igboland and exchanged in trade for heavy ransom or reckless murder. This new form of slave trade nicknamed kidnapping for ransom is an internally masterminded form of exploitation where supposedly innocent, wealthy, or ordinary members of families or villages are suddenly waylaid and carried off, by unknown bearers of weapons and charms, believed to be members of the same Igbo society. Like in the 18th century, Igboland has once again become the most important area for slave raiding and captive under the code name kidnapping. These continuous raids for captives have unfortunately made Igboland very unwelcoming for most of her illustrious children, as fear of the unknown has become the order of the day.

The get-rich-quick mentality of the slave-raiding days has made itself manifest again in the kidnapping-for-ransom business. Regrettably, human beings have become mere commodities and life has become an object for commerce whose value is calibrated by bags of naira. Wasted and mutilated human bodies and lives, which get thrown up from time to time, on the streets of many Igbo villages, are evidence of some unfortunate captives who could not be ransomed for bags of naira. The latest revelation by the security

forces has shown where stolen cars are dismembered in Azia in Anambra State and sold off in parts to interested dealers. Some or most of those cars could be cars from kidnapped victims or cars stolen by gangs of arms bearers terrorising the land in the guise of enforcing civil action under the name of the so-called *Chukwu Okike Abiama*.

From the days of our forefathers to this day, the strong belief about God is as recorded by Afigbo (1981), that “The Igbo Supreme God was just and would allow every good man to attain a grand old age—the ripe and proper age for making the transition from this world of men to the world of the spirits” (p.181). That the contrary is happening predominantly today in Igboland shows that there is a different god at play. The missionaries had to intervene through the executive arm of the colonial government to fight the menace of Aro raiders and the slave trade through the oracle of Ibini-Ukpabi or the Long Juju of Arochukwu. It is well documented that the colonial masters committed men and resources to fight the slave merchants of Arochukwu and officially but forcefully ended both the trade in slaves and the hegemony of the Aro oracle (Afigbo, 2006).

### **Questioning “Abiama” and “Chukwu Okike Abiama” Assumptions**

One of the words that have divided opinion among the Igbos is *abiama*. Unlike the majority of Igbo words, this word elicits divergent ideas ranging from different meanings to discussions about its belongingness to the Igbo family. Normally, Igbo words are self-revelatory and self-explanatory, that is, they reveal their meaning in the word or words themselves. Unfortunately, “abiama” is quite different as it would require some form of word exegesis to draw out its meaning. The reason for this probably could stem from the fact it is a corruption of a different term or that it is a word that is borrowed from a different related language. The second option should not be quickly dismissed given the mixture of the tribes that eventually came to make up the Aro confederacy. This suspicion is founded on the fact that there is some form of Ibibio language’s influence on some of the words that have “merged” as Igbo. In Ibibio, the word for God is *Abasi*, while in Aro, it is *Obasi*. Aro and Cross River are both neighbours in the southeastern part of Nigeria. According to Nwoga (1984):

When the Ibibio want to refer to the Great God, they use a qualifier: Thus ‘Abasi Ibom’ is the God whose greatness, ability, etc are beyond human knowledge. In other words, ‘Abasi Ibom’ is ‘Supreme being’ (Supreme God). (p.57)

Is there any probability that *abiama* could be a corruption of a more meaningful word *Obuyama* translated as “it is He who knows?” This later opinion is seen in the 19th century (1848) writing of the missionary Rev. John Clarke on the various specimens of dialects in Africa. His is one of the earliest written documents that has confirmed the usage of the semblance of “abiama” along with *Chukwu* by the Aro. We recall that even

the modern writing "Aro" used to be pronounced and written "Aru." Nwoga (1984) repeatedly spelt the town as Aru (p.36). As noted by Clarke (1848): "A place called Aaru, is near to Egbo Shary country; and at Aaru, the Ibos say their God Tshuku ob yama, resides" (p.73). Clarke has documented that according to the Igbos, their God known as *Chukwu abiama* (*Obuyama*—if we put in what is more meaningful) resides at Aro. This at least, puts to bed the argument of whether the oracle at Aro was ever known or called *Chukwu abiama*. The other early written evidence confirming the existence of an oracle that went by the name *Chukwu abiama* is found in the 1854 diary of Baikie, '*Narrative of an Exploring Voyage up the Rivers Kwora and Binue.*' As it is noted by Dike (1956):

In 1854 Baikie wrote of the 'noted City of Aro where there is the celebrated shrine of Tshuku (God), to which pilgrimages are made, not only from all parts of Igbo proper, but from Old Calabar, and from the tribes along the coast, and from Oru and Nembe. The town is always mentioned with great respect, almost, at times, with a degree of veneration, and the people say "Tshuku ab yama", or "God lives there." (p.38)

The major knot remaining now is to make headway on the meaning of the word that has become very divisive in opinion. We have seen it variously written as "Ob yama" translated as "it is he who knows" and "ab yama," or even "Ibiama" if we include the 1906 publication of Arthur Glyn Leonard. Presently, there is an attempt to rebrand it as "Obioma" meaning "kind-hearted," to present the oracle as "Chukwu Obioma" (Ukpong, 2015, p.130). —"kind-hearted God" who saved thousands of Igbos by choosing to send them abroad instead of killing them. However, given that these other equivalents (apart from 'obioma') were written by foreigners who barely understood the Igbo language and her many dialects, it is proper to assume that they were all corruptions of the word "abiama." So, what does the word mean?

If it is a self-revelatory word as some people are making us understand, "abiama" could as well be understood as derived from *abia* and *ama* meaning "he who comes and knows." Though Nwoga (1984), who noted that he learnt of that meaning, has some reservations as to the linguistic evidence, he would think that *Chukwu abiama* then becomes "coterminous with that of the Omniscient God" (p.59). Could that be the reason for the addition of the qualifier – *abiama* – if the said interpretation is the meaning of the word?

The word "abiama" does not seem to enjoy a universal meaning among Igbos especially as some do not think that it has any known meaning. As a result, attempts have been made to ascribe to it different meanings according to convenience. One of those meanings of convenience is to read *abiama* as a corruption of the Jewish name 'Abraham'



whereas *Chukwu Abiama* has been understood as a corruption of *Chukwu Abraham*. (PacketTracer, Retrieved from <https://ng.opera.news/ng/en/religion>. Accessed 01.12.22) That is one of the effects of IPOB, the growing tendency to read the origin of the Igbo race in the light of Jewish history, though it did not begin with IPOB. The first or the only surviving recorded account of the origin of the Igbos by an Igbo man before the colonial era, a former Igbo slave to the West Indies, Olaudah Equiano, seemed to make references to the Jews as being of the same stock as the Igbos as both practised circumcision and feasted on that occasion; “like them also, our children were named from some event, some circumstance, or fancied foreboding at the time of their birth” (Equiano, 1789, p.10). Archdeacon Basden (1921) of the early 20th century missionaries in Igbo land, traces some of the cultural practices of the Igbo to the Jewish race (p.31-2). According to him:

There are certain customs which rather point to Levitic influence at a more or less remote period. This is suggested in the underlying ideas concerning sacrifice and the practice of circumcision. The language also bears several interesting parallels with the Hebrew idiom. (p.81)

In our times, many people of the Igbo race hold on to the belief that the Igbo race is one of the lost tribes of Israel. These assumptions though unhistorical, have, unfortunately, derailed the research in Igbo ethnography.

Another interpretation has come from a well-respected Igbo Cosmologist John Anenechukwu Ume (1998). His interpretation of “Chukwu Abiama” begins with the Igbo word “Dibia.” According to him:

*Dibia* is made up of two words *Di* husband and *Abia* knowledge and wisdom. So, while Chukwu is *Abia Ama* the Knowledge and the Wisdom that reveals Himself, *Dibia* is the Adept in Knowledge and Wisdom. (p.73-4)

In another place of the same book, Umeh (1998) makes the explanation even clearer in these words:

The terminology *Dibia*, in the demotic Igbo language, is made up of two words namely *Di* and *Abia*. *Di* means, husband, Adept or Master. *Abia* means knowledge and wisdom. So, while the Igbos call *Chukwu* (God) *Abia Ama*, that is, the Knowledge and the Wisdom that reveals Himself, they call *Dibia* the Adept or Master of Knowledge and Wisdom. (p.76)

While Ume’s reading looks very emphatic, it begs a lot of questions as to how he arrived at that conclusion. How can “abia” mean “knowledge and wisdom” for him while it refers to “he who comes” in another? If we go to the etymological formation of the word, it is very clear that the root is – *bia* – which means – *come*. Words could be formed out of that root denoting ‘stranger or visitor’ - *Obia*. It could be the sense that Manfred (2004) means

when he noted "Chukwu abiaama ri elu" as 'God the stranger who is in the sky' (p.258). At least, the etymology has a say in the meaning of the word. In that case, Ume's reading of "knowledge and wisdom" looks like an imposition on the word. It could perhaps be one of those meanings of convenience given to make the word say what he wants it to say, and therefore justify its attachment to *Chukwu*. In addition to that, he is giving us the impression that the word as derived from *Dibia* has long enjoyed the validation of oral tradition. Unfortunately, he did not provide any evidence. Our take then is, even if the word *abiama* is coterminous with "knowledge and wisdom" characteristic of God, it has never been understood like that across Igboland. In 1858 recorded activities of the missionaries in Igboland, *Chukwu abiama* featured in the prayer of a certain Wamah of Abo (this could be Nwamma) and was understood and interpreted differently from what we are being made to understand. According to Crowther and Taylor (1859):

Biko Tshi, mere'm ihoma, ngi wo ndu, biko kpere Tshuku Abiama, gwa ya obi'm dum ma-biko wepo ihinye ojo di na ndum, tsufu Amusu, mekwa akku bia'm, lekwa ehu ngi, maya ngi, i.e. "I beseech thee, my guide, make me good; thou hast life. I beseech thee to intercede God the Spirit; tell Him my heart is clean. I beseech thee to deliver me from all bad thoughts in my heart; drive out all witchcrafts; let riches come to me; see your sacrificial goat; see your kola-nuts; see your rum and palm wine." (p.348)

In the prayer above, it is seen that *Chukwu Abiama* was understood as "God the Spirit." How they came to that understanding is very difficult given that the writer of the incident was Rev. John Christopher Taylor, the son of former Igbo slaves, trained in Sierra Leone and brought back home as an agent of evangelization by the C.M.S missionaries. It is very difficult now to know whether the people at that time understood "abiama" as "spirit." In two different passages, Metuh (1981) gave two different but related meanings for *abiama*. In one, he interpreted *abiama* as 'providence' and *Chukwu Abiama* as 'the Great Provider of the whole universe' (p.36). In another place, he emphasizes 'the providential care of God for men and all creatures as a characteristic feature of the Igbo worldview,' and thus "God personally sustains and rules the universe, hence he is *Chi oke Abiama*, 'creator, guide and ruler of the world'" (p.41). Most recently, *abiama* has taken a different meaning. According to Okoro (2020), *Chukwu Okike Abiama* means "God the creator of wonders" (p.6). Hence, *abiama* takes the meaning of 'wonders!' These instances raise a lot of questions and show, above all, the lack of agreement on the real signification of the word *abiama* and how the interpretations have settled on the meaning of convenience until the later consensus on 'infinite knowledge and wisdom.'

It is our considered opinion, given the availability of the evidence above, that what came to be elevated to and arrogated the power of the Supreme Being God, was an ordinary local deity of Ibibio converted to *Chukwu* oracle of the Aro. The deity in the understanding of the African mind is not God, but rather a non-human spirit subject to the power and dictates of God. The observation of Metuh (1981) becomes very pertinent here:

The Igbo deities form the great circle of non-human spirits, who come next to God in the ontological hierarchy and are believed to be his agents, helping Him to shepherd different sections of His creation. Some have their abode in the sky and are believed to be very near *Chukwu*; others live below and come under *Ala*, the Earth-mother. However, the deities are more often conceived concerning the services they render to man; *Chukwu* who created them, assigned them specific functions. (p.54-5)

Though all the dots have not been conclusively found, this local deity was given the name of *Chukwu* to convince or rather deceive the rest of the Igbos that this erstwhile distant God was present and active in Aro, as a result of which the oracle became a rallying point for those searching for answers to their numerous questions. Other malpractices that followed because of this grandiose deception, are well documented. Metuh (1981) avers that the “crafty Aro sacrilegiously renamed their oracle *Chukwu* to enhance its prestige among the other Igbo groups. It had previously been known as *Ibinokpabi*” (p.160). By so doing, the Aro became the first religious impostors in Igboland, laying the foundation for using religion as a tool for deception and commerce. The evidence is there to be seen as Igboland and its environs have today, become the major market for all forms of religious scams. Let us not go to the assumption that the naming of their oracle *Chukwu* was a ploy to supplant the Nri cultural and religious priority in Igboland. Though the Aro assigned the name *Chukwu* to their deity, they never, of all the functions assigned to it, claimed it to be a creator god. The awe it inspired according to our records, could not be unrelated to the manipulation of information by the Aro diaspora and agents, the site of its location in a cave with undulating walkways, and the sophisticated system of deception which the agents of the deity set up and operated to maximum effect. Its many functions, some of which we have already touched upon, included arbitration and adjudication of disputes, clairvoyance, purported healings of diseases, and “execution” of human beings found to be guilty of offences, a sham execution which turned out to be an organized business of human trafficking into slavery. If it were *Chukwu* as claimed, why did the deity die as it is no longer operational today having served its treacherous purposes for setting it up? Why did it allow itself to be identified and destroyed in its abode by the forces of the colonialists? This is very contrary to the Igbo Supreme Being that cannot be localized nor

destroyed. Its destruction confirms that it was only an ordinary deity or a medium of "local nature spirits" (Dike & Ekejiuba, 1990, p.130,134).

Over and above all, the Aro knew the oracle was not for the Aro herself. The Aro would say that an Aro person does not summon another Aro person on behalf of the deity. As reported by Nwokeji (2010):

The adjudicative role was specifically for the non-Aro. This is why there was a saying to the effect that *Nwa Aro a nahu a si ib' ye na Ibiniukpabi na-aju ya* (An Aro person does not summon another Aro person on behalf of Ibiniukpabi). This meant, on the one hand, that an Aro person know better than to expose himself to the Ibiniukpabi ruse and, on the other, that Ibiniukpabi was "a prescription of a code of conduct which specifically means that Aro group identity, internal fidelity, coherence as well as external aggression and imperialism [were] the *raison d'etre*, the lifeblood of Aro hegemony." (p.77)

That supports the supposition that the oracle was *ab initio* a deliberate scam set up to give some form of religious, political, cultural, and economic advantage to the Aro. It was not because they were more religious or closer to God than the rest of the Igbos. Ekejiuba (1970) confirms that "the Aro did not believe in the oracle as the Supreme God, neither did it feature in their religious and judicial system as it did in that of the rest of the Igbo" (p.4). The Aro called the Supreme God *Obasi di n'elu*, (Metuh, 1981, p.160) but for the purposes already mentioned above, named their local oracle *Chukwu*. The fact they did not name it 'Obasi' is very suspicious. *Abiama* could have been added along the way when their god was also assumed to be omniscient since they said it knew everything to be known. It was Nwoga (1984) who noted what he heard was the interpretation of *Chukwu abiama*.

I have also heard an interpretation of *Chukwu Abiama* which postulates that it is derived from *abia* and *ama* meaning "he who comes and knows." By this derivation, the concept of *Chukwu Abiama* becomes coterminous with that of the Omniscient God. (p.59)

Hence, the Aro proudly propagated their meticulously prepared scam god as *Chukwu abiama* while making the rest of the Igbos to believe it was the real Supreme Being of their religious thought. That explains why most people, in their ignorance, describe the God of their belief and worship as *Chukwu abiama*, and worse still, *Chukwu Okike Abiama* as it is happening today. Nothing could have been farther from the truth. *Chukwu abiama* is the name for the scam god of the oracle of Aro, while *Chukwu Okike* is the name of the Supreme Being, God the Creator, the Great Spirit of the universe accepted and worshipped by all the peoples of the world who accept an all-powerful and all-

knowing Being, God. To even go the way of *Chukwu Okike Abiama* would suggest an effort towards hybridizing the two different and irreconcilable entities into a new form of an inexistent god.

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cf [http://twitter.com/akwa\\_crossfacts/status/1283745477301862400?lang=en](http://twitter.com/akwa_crossfacts/status/1283745477301862400?lang=en)