Retrieving *Ebo* as Spirit: The Foundation of Authentic Christian Pneumatology Among the Igala, Nigeria

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Abstract

*Ebo* is divine Spirit. It is the creative and sustaining principle with which the Supreme Being—*Ojo* creates and re-creates the Igala universe. It is through *ebo* as spirit, that *Ojo* reveals God’s self through the earth deity—*anẹ*, the ancestors—*ibegwu* and other nature spirits. Therefore, as spiritual beings *ebo* have autonomous iconic existence apart from its physical representation in Idols, effigies and artifacts—*ode*. Through symbolic-ritual actions, *ebo* makes *Ojo* accessible and Beneficent to the human through the ministry of healing and charisma. In the 1920s, while recognizing the positive influence of the *ebo*—*ibegwu* cult among the Igala, the *Ajokodo* Bible translated the spirit as *ibegwu*. During the later missionary era, *ebo* was diminished and demonized. As a result, *ebo* lost its spirit connotation and dangerously become a synonym of idol—*ode*. On account of this pejorative association the 1970 translation of the Igala bible translated divine spirit as *afu*—wind, instead of *ebo*—*ibegwu*.

The appreciation of *ebo* as spirit has enormous implication for Igala Christian Pneumatology—science of the spirit and the Holy Spirit. The conception of any authentic Igala Pneumatology must first confront the reality *ebo* as divine spirits in the Igala world. In essence, the appropriation of the word *afu* for spirit constitutes not only an escapism, but a monumental hindrance to theological inculturation.

In this essay, I argue that there is an aspect of *ebo* as spirit of the divine obtainable only ritual action—worship, that is fundamentally lacking in the concept of *afu* as spirit. In that, among the Igala, *afu* has no cultic, or ritual significance. My take in this essay can be stated as follows: Unless we know what is spirit within the Igala world we cannot claim to know what the Holy Spirit is doing in the lives of the Igala Christian.

**Key words:** *Ebo*; *Ode*; *Afu*; Spirit; Igala Pneumatology; Igala worldview

INTRODUCTION

To the West African Igala, *ebo* means spirit; and *ode* means fetish effigy or idol. *Ebo* is the divine supernatural vital force and the power of the Supreme Being *Ojo* operating in the Igala world through the particular and participatory activities of humans collaborating with principal divinities and deities. Ukwedeh meticulously outlines the rule of *ebo* as nature spirits commissioned by the Supreme Being *Ojo* (Ukwedeh, 1987). As divine principle, *ebo* connects the Supreme Being—*Ojo*, the ancestral spirit *ibegwu* through the reincarnated human spirit *ọjọ* and the earth deity—*anẹ* (Boston, 1971, p.200). Within the Igala worldview, the Supreme Being *Ojo* has no direct cult and as such *ebo* serves both an ontological and phenomenological function. As ontological principle of creation, *ebo* connects *Ojo* the creator to both the created world symbolized by earth—*anẹ* and the ancestral incarnate human spirit—*ọjọ*. In the phenomenological sphere, *ebo* manifests the divine outpouring of intuition and inspiration of the Supreme Being. It is the basic participatory character of the human in the divine, without which the glimpse into the hallowed and holy becomes an illusion. Plainly put, *ebo* is the gateway to mystical experience and consciousness of the divine presence in the Igala world, creating the pathway for healing and wholeness through destiny—*okai* and charisma.
Generally, *ebo* is intrinsically linked to the anthropocentric conception of salvation—salvation from below—meaning that, it denotes the issues of human condition as it unfolds itself in the day-to-day realities and activities of the Igala from birth through death to the hereafter. In the words of Sydney R. Seton, “*Ebbo* in the case is the household god… is supposed to contain a spirit, specially sent by Ojo to look after that particular man and his family. It corresponds roughly to the idea of a guardian angel and patron saint combined” (Seton, 1930, p.150). As spirit, therefore, *ebo* occupies a higher position above the humans and function as protector and guardian of society. The Igala names like *oma-ebo*—child of the spirits, *ad’ebo*—servant of the spirits, *achebo*—adherent of the spirits, *oko-ebo*—husband of the spirits, *oya-ebo*—wife of the spirits, and the proverb *ebo* kiya gbẹ ẹki g’ule olemi nwu—(do not alter false supplication to the spirit that saves you), affirms the importance of taking heed to the inspiration and the urgings of the spirits. *Ebo* as symbolic-ritual action generates group identity and functions as the sole authentic source document for the understanding of Igala traditional religion (Uzukwu, 1997, p.44). Through the *ebo* rituals the Igala draws life and wisdom from the ancestral pool. In this essay, for the reason that there exists an intrinsic connection between *ebo* and *ibegwu*, both terms are used as synonyms to convey the Igala sense of the spirit of the Supreme Being that is contextualized and experienced through symbolic-ritual actions and within specific cultic settings.

This essay is a response to Fidelis E. Egbonu’s article titled, *Personhood (one) in Igala Worldview: A Philosophical Appraisal* (Egbonu, 2013, pp.30-38). Relying heavily on western philosophical categories, Egbonu established a connection between the Igala understanding of person—one and the concept of unity—*Udama* as foundational to apprehending of personhood. This essay agrees with Egbonu on subject-matter, but deviates considerable on methods and substance. It addresses two major concerns in Igala theology of religions. (a) The retrieval and reinstatement of *ebo* as the veritable Igala translation of “spirit”. (b) laying the foundation of an authentic Igala Pneumatology—Holy Spirit of God—on the operational principles of *ebo* exacting influence on/through the individual and personal spirit; bearing gifts, healing and destiny. Through inductive reasoning and relying on earlier biblical translations and extra-biblical manuscripts where the word ‘spirit’ was translated both as *ibegwu* and *ebo* this essay surmise that *ebo* is the human and divine principle through which *Ojo* generate life and bestow healing through vocations and destiny—*okai*. With this in mind, I contend that the translation of *afu*—wind as spirit of the divine is incidental to the Igala tradition, in that, among the Igala people, *afu* as a natural phenomenon has no ritual or cultic significance.

### 1. TRANSLATING SPIRIT AS AFU—WIND, BREEZE OR AIR: RŪACH AND PNEUMA

The 1970 Igala Bible translates Spirit as *afu* (*Otkada Ola Ojo*: The Bible in Igala, 1970, p.5). This translation has become normative among recent Igala scholars. For instance, Fidelis E. Egbonu while attempting to foster an Igala Ontology of being applied the classical Western philosophical concepts to decode the Igala understanding of *afu* as “vital force”. He asserts further that the “typical Igala person holds the notion that God created the human person; he filled him with *afu* (air, spirit or breath) which is life in itself” (Egbonu, 2013, p.33). Though this research agrees with Egbonu’s philosophical analysis of the Igala worldview, it nonetheless distances itself from Egbonu’s appropriation of western methodologies. Such attempt to build concepts of African traditional religion, (ATR) on western categories has received serious criticism among African scholars. Okot p’Bitek for one accused some African scholars (like Bolaji Idowu and John Mbiti) as “Hellenizers of ATR,” in that, “they dress up African deities with Hellenistic robes and parade them before the Western world” (p’Bitek, 1970, p.120). For the sake of methodological accuracy and consistency this paper distances from commitment to western linguistic and syllogisms that are opposed to the African language of God-Spirit-talk rooted in signs and symbols.

In biblical exegesis, translating *Rūach-spirit* constitutes one of the most difficult conundrums for biblical experts. The studies on *rūach* does not form a coherence. Scholars are not agreed on the semantic and syntactic applications of *rūach*. However, within the context of biblical cosmogony, there is constant referencing to the spirit of God - *rūach-YHW* and the spirit of Life- *rūach-Hayim* as the two primordial concept at creation. Outside this perspective, the interpretation of *rūach* as wind is always metaphoric and onomatopoeic; more of a descriptive adjective of *YHW* attributes. The distinction between *YHW*’s attribute and His essence is the topic for another debate beyond the confines of this essay. The point being that, though problematic as the concept of *rūach* seems to be, there is a certain consensus among scholars within the Jewish setting in their interpretation of *rūach* either as wind, the spirit of God or spirit of Life. However, to catapult this understanding to other cultures without qualification raises serious exegetical concerns, if not flaws.

The earlier *Ajokodo* translation of the Igala bible renders spirit as *ibegu*. There are other extra-biblical evidence of linguistic similarities obtained from the Igala in Delta and the neighboring ethnicity of the Idoma and Igbo people that supports the translation. The following are quotes from the *Ajokodo* translation of the Spirit.

*Mtt 3:16*: Ojale mu bi te own, I yu *ibegu* e Ojo kbare. I gugu ogi wn daba okede…the heaven was opened, he
saw the Spirit of God descending, sitting on him like a dove.

Mtt 12:18: Na d’Ibegu min’Own… I will give my Spirit to him…


The above rendition of ibegu as Spirit relates more to the Igala worldview as portrayed in the latest works by the Igala anthropologist Tom Miachi. Miachi’s tripartite ordering of the Igala cosmology into God—ancestors—gods—(Ọjọ-ibegwu-ọjọ) supports the relevance of ibegu in Igala religious worldview (Miachi, 2012, p. 115-117).

Another opinion advocated by J. S Boston identifies God—earth—deity—spirits (Ọjọ-Ane-Ebo) as the three topmost spirits—beings among Igala. (Boston, 1974, p.350). In the ritual setting ebo intrinsically connects Ọjọ-ibegwu-Ane, and as such there can be no authentic worship of the divine outside the paraphernalia of the spirit-beings—ebo. The various nuances of ebo demonstrate its importance in both the moral and cultic life of the Igala. In a symbolic sense, ebo depicts the ritual face and phase of the Supreme Being. Strictly speaking, the ancestral cult—ibegwu qualifies as ebo per excellence because of these inherent revelatory characteristics. In a lesser manner, ebo refers to spirits with evocative influence when invoked through ‘just/innocent appeals’ and incantations—ofor kpai ule. Yet, this positive symbolism of ebo was not appreciated and appropriated by the interpreters of the 1970 Igala Bible. Parenthetically, there are actually sound reasons to believe that the translation of spirit as afu—wind or breeze in the presence of anthropological and psychological suited words like ibegwu-ebo, and olaye—life, Iśni—breath by the translators was not unconnected with the missionaries negative attitude towards Igala traditional religion.

The Ajokodo translation of the Holy Spirit as Ibegu desholo (ibegwu ọhiole)—Holy ancestral spirit intends to connect the Igala positive reception of the supportive role of the ancestral spirits and the Christian perception of the Holy Spirit. From the perspective of the Ajokodo translators employing the Igala word ibegwu even in its controversial form to translate the Spirit, signals continuity with and mutual respect for the source culture. This attitude depicts humility and genuine openness to dialogue with elements of Igala traditional religion. It is attention-grabbing to note that still among the Igala in Delta State, the word Ibegu translates ancestral spirit and the spirit as well. In essence, Ibegu is the term for spirit and not afu. More astonishing is the fact that this group of Igala migrated to their current geographical location prior to the 1970 translation of the Igala Bible which renders spirit as afu.

A similar attempt in translation was carried out by the neighboring Idoma and Igbo ethnicities. Among the Idoma, the Holy Spirit was rendered alekwu-ihọ—Holy ancestral spirits. In the Idoma culture, there is an interesting association between: alekwu—spirits, alekwu—ancestors and ekwụ—incarnate beings/masquerades. Correspondingly, among the Igbo, mmou—spirits is analogous to(m)munwu—incarnate beings of the ndi iche—ancestors. Both the Idoma and Igbo have a distinct expression for the wind as a natural phenomenon—ikuku for the Igbo and owo for the Idoma. The Igbo ikuku and Idoma owo are identical with the Igala afu. Yet, the Igbo and Idoma ethnicities retained the traditional concept alekwu and mmou in translating the divine spirit. Moreover, the Igala ibegwu ọhiole, Idoma alekwu ihọ and the Igbo mmuo nsọ belong to a similar semantic field, referring to the conceptual domain of the Supreme Being in relation to the human sphere. Whereas, among the Idoma and Igbo Christians the translation of the Holy Spirit as alekwu ihọ and mmuo nsọ is still in use within the cultic and liturgical settings, the Igala Christians dropped ibegwu ọhiole and adopted afu ina-Holy wind.

The question remains: what was the rationale behind the missionary’s intent for afu as a substitute for ibegwu-ebo in translating the Spirit among the Igala? The answer is not faretched. It relates to the prevalent notion that ebo in particular and the entire Igala traditional religion—Ogwuchekpo, has a subtle ontological continuity with animism. Evidence from ethnographic and anthropological studies reveals that the anthropological presuppositions and assertions of most pre-Vatican II missionaries were conditioned by the narrative enclosed in Edward Tylor’s Primitive Cultures. Tylor’s description of ‘non-great’ religions as animism is demeaning: “The theory of Animism…divides into two great dogmas; first concerning souls of individual creatures capable of continued existence after death or destruction of the body; second, concerning other spirits, upward to the rank of powerful deities” (Taylor, 1920, p.420). Kwame Bediako’s comparative analysis of the missionaries’ understanding of African Traditional Religion (ATR) as animism in the midst of other world religions is amazing.

“Aanimism” therefore, to all intents and purposes, constituted in the missionary understanding, a religious system like the other categories treated: Chinese religions, religions of Japan, Islam, and Hinduism. However, of all of them, Animism was probably the most difficult for the missionary to penetrate since it had neither literature nor scholar to expound its mysteries to the European mind. It is understandable therefore that many missionaries were hesitant to suggest that there exist any “preparation for Christianity” in this form of religion, while some even concluded that there was “practically no religious content in Animism.” (Badiako, 1992, p.231)

As a result of this association with animism, ebo was diminished and eventually demonized (Meyer, 1999), reducing it to the status of ode—the physical effigies and man-made idols associated with the ritual worship. Thus, used interchangeable with ode—ids, ebo eventually lost its spirit connotation, and then acquired a pejorative
meaning, and subsequent appellation for the adherents of Igala traditional religion—ama chi ichebọ—those who act like /adhere to the ways of the spirits. The seemingly negative undertone given to ebo by the missionaries greatly influenced the later translations of Igala bible and prayer books.

Thus, in order to justify the negative nuance given to ebo the missionaries made two important transitions in translation: (a) Denigrating ebo as mere ode (idol); and (b) Justifying the translating Spirit as afu in line with the biblical—rūach—Hebrew tradition. Perhaps in a way, the connection between ebo and animism was done to avoid associating the Holy Spirit with the nuances of evil spirits which in the belief of the missionaries the Igala word ibegwu-ebo represents. As if translating the spirit as afu will quell the menace of evil spirits fiat accompli. This belief ignores countable biblical references where the Hebrew word rūach and its Greek cognate pneuma encompass negative nuances that are complicated and controversial with reference to the Spirit of Yahweh. Strange as it may seem to the modern reader, the Hebrew word rūach like the Igala term ebo connotes ambiguity and sometimes could be dangerous; it “ranges widely in meaning from breath to breeze to wind to angel to demon to spirit” (Levison, 2013, p.17). In most cases, the ambivalence resulting from the use of rūach/pneuma does not convincingly address the issue of theodicy. In the Hebrew scripture for instance rūach translates both the Spirit of Yahweh, and also an evil spirit of or from “Yahweh.” The biblical passages of Judges 9:23; 1 Sam. 16:15ff; 18:10, depicts Yahweh as the ontological source of evil spirit. This view was advocated by Walther Eichrodt the 20th century German biblical scholar, in his Theology of the Old Testament (Eichrodt, 1961).

Similarly, according to Kirsteen Kim, “pneuma occurs at least 250 times in the New Testament as a reference to the Spirit of God. On about forty other occasions, pneuma is applied to evil spirits of some kind. On about forty other occasions, “spirit” is identified as referring to “human spirit” or at least the dimension of the human being that interacts with the divine or “breathe of life” (Kim, 2007, 16). Consequently, an understanding of the words rūach and pneuma and their application to other culture must acknowledge these ambiguities and admitting that these terms themselves are the product of a particular culture’s long history of attempting to fathom and penetrate God’s activity in creation. As a result, the biblical understanding of spirit cannot be unilaterally implied, applied or imposed on other cultures without further qualifications or sound exegetical analysis—rigorously interpreting the text in con-text and sub-text.

Although afu like other natural phenomenon like rain—omi, thunder—akpabana and sun—olu, figuratively describes the activity and attribute of the Supreme Being, one must emphasize that the Igala people mostly do not accord these phenomena the cultic and ritual considerations given to the domesticated spirits the ebo—ane, and the ancestral spirit ebo—ibegwu. The Igala have no cult for the worship of gods like the Igbo sun god—ananyanwu or the Yoruba orisha or thunder god—ogun. This amounts to, as Boston pointed in 1971 that, “…the main emphases of Igala religion are slightly different from those of Yoruba religion... Ancestors and the earth cults play a more direct and central role in Igala than in Yoruba” (Boston, 1971, p. 200). In other words, there are cults and rituals for the earth spirits- ebo ane, for the ancestral spirits ebo-ibegwu and nature spirits, but scarcely do one find erctions for non-cultic phenomena like afu, omi, akpabana relating to Yoruba orisha and Igbo anyanwu. Without overlaboring the point, I submit that, there is an aspect of ebo as spirit of the divine obtainable only through and within the ritual actions that makes Ọjọ accessible and beneficiary to the human through healing and charisma that are fundamentally lacking in the concept of afu as divine spirit.

In the metaphorical sense, afu describes the omnipresence attribute for Ọjọ—that cannot be confined or localized. But such an indeterminate characteristic risks placing the divine outside the realm of rituals. And without rites and rituals—ucholo-ebo, the Supreme Being—Ọjọ becomes a dues otiosus—a God that is idle, hidden and disinterested in the affairs of humans. Uzukwu opines that, ritual studies underline that beliefs, practices and values at their deepest level are revealed through ritual. Rituals are source documents of any society. Through them people express “what moves them most” (Uzukwu, 1997, p.41). The concept of afu—spirit—lacks the ritual dimension that defines and reveals the Supreme—Ọjọ’s presence as present in space, time, person or thing. Ritual actions through sacrifices—ohidaka, constitutes the fundamental means of communication between spirits and the Supreme Being. As such, faceless deities or spirits that have no ritual are considered unfriendly and violent. Subsequently, the non-cultic characteristic of afu as a natural phenomenon presupposes that it can neither be worshipped nor placated through sacrifices. In short, among the Igala, afu has no sacrificial rite—ucholo, no priest—atama, and no adherents. For the most part, such unidentified spirits are believed to be dangerous and malevolent. In what follows, I argue that because of its indeterminate trait, afu as natural phenomenon has no relevance in the cosmic re-ordering of the Igala universe. This position is defensible alongside a reconsideration of the role of ebo as divine spirit within cultic and ritual settings.

2. IGALA SPIRIT WORLD: ỌJỌ, ANE, IBEGWU AND EBO

After these preliminary exegetical observations, it is time to address the main crux of this essay, namely, the retrieval
and reinstatement of the term *ebo*. Essentially, this exercise serves an etymological function. I admit, that the knowledge of spirits in general and the human spirit in particular is a prerequisite for understanding the Spirit of God. The Igala world is a universe that is saturated with Spirits—*ebo*. There are multiplicities of Spirits—*ebo* pervading and parading the Igala universe with the Supreme Being—*Ọjọ* as their source and fount. Among the Igala, there is the belief of the Supreme Being—*Ọjọ* who is the creator God and rules the universe—*ane*. According to the Igbo theologian Elochukwu E. Uzukwu, “the creative and life-giving dimension that defines God as Spirit is structured to ATR” (Uzukwu, 2012, p.137). Uzukwu’s depiction of the West African cosmology as “Spirit-oriented and spirit-embedded” (Uzukwu, 2012, p.138) nicely encapsulate the Igala Spirit-world. Earlier on reference was made to Miachi’s tripartite structuring of the Igala cosmology into Supreme Being—*Ọjọ*, Ancestors—*ibegwu* and reincarnated personal spirits—*ọjọ* and Boston’s identification Supreme Being—*Ọjọ*, the earth deity—*Ane* and spirits—*Ebo* as the three topmost spirit-beings among Igala.

Within the Igala world, *ebo* are spirits with a face; a face made manifest through rites, rituals and taboos. This distinctive characteristics differentiates *ebo* from unknown spirits that cannot be placated. As stated above, translating the Spirit as *ebo* has the *humana-pneuma* advantage of particularization and individuation which also includes the principle of participation. Because of its cultic relevance, *ebo* equally serves a relational function. It bridges the divine with particular adherents, groups and communities. For example, the *ebo Akpidi Iyanna* Ejule, the *ebo Okwuta* Ijoji, Egume and the *ebo Iyanna* Oyibo Ojah and Ayiba of Agala-Ate in Anyigba, demonstrates how the ministration of a particular *ebo* draws communities together with a sense of service and identity. The following was an ethnographic note recorded in 1929 from a descendant of *ebo Akpidi Iyanna*.

The Ebbo is a spirit. Each has a name. My Ebbo is Okiti. It rests in an image made from an iron spear with cloth round it. It lives in the cloth. It came from my ancestors. Akudi, or Akodi Yama, a woman of Ejuli, heard about the Ebbo in Ifa and went there many years ago. She became an Atama and could foretell the future. My grandmother obtained my Ebbo from her. Before that there were no Atamas in the land. (Atama = Atah Ma, the father of many things). (Seton, 1925, p.45)

Also, in 1968 according to oral tradition, the *ebo iye-unyẹjima* was deployed from the Okolo Ichakolo center at Agbeji to combat smallpox disease in Agala-Ateh. (Ejiga, 1995)

More to the point, within the context of naming ceremony the Igala people bear the name *oma-ebo*—child of the spirits, *ad’ebo*—servant of the spirits, *achebo*—adherent of the spirits, *oko-ebo*—husband of the spirits, *anya-ebo*—wife of the spirits, and *Ifihi*—Life. Since Igala names evoke and extrapolate reality it is difficult to find adherents who bear names resulting from the dedication to *afu* as spirit. No where among the Igala do people bear *oma-afu* or *eyulefu*—a child that is wayward like the wind; totally outside the rhythm of Life. Spirits are thought of in anthropomorphic terms. The existence of these names suggest a symbiotic relationship between the spirits-world and the human race. This affinity is constantly renewed through rituals and worship. For this reason, Igala names like other African names are extension of symbolic-ritual actions and not just “tags,” but an important tool to grapple and unravel the mystery of reality. As E. Ifesieh rightly puts it, “these names as religious symbols, evoke and provoke, extrapolate and eternalize, elevate and sustain, permeate and prepare, and finally in an unconstrained and contemporaneous manner, disposes the mind to embrace the meta-physical domain” (Ifesieh, 1969, p.126).

The existence of this transcendent *Ọjọ* is expressed in its dynamic immanence in the company of and through the assistance of other principal divinities, spirits and gods. In the generic sense *ebo* is the divine manifestations of *Ọjọ* in the world; the ontological and phenomenological vital force behind humans and the deities. In simpler terms, *ebo* is the greatest supernatural force among the Igala, the condition of the possibility of human deification, and the sympathy of the human and divine life. Through reincarnation, the personal *ọjọ*, “the personal spirit that embodies individual destiny” (Uzukwu, 2012, p.193) participates in the divine life of the Supreme Being—*Ọjọ*. In this sense one can argue that *ebo* both translates supernatural vitality and also the personal spirit *ọjọ* in its individuation. In Igala anthropology, each individual before birth or fourteen days—*egwẹle* after birth through the process of *ifá* divination is given a personal god called *ọjọ*. This personal deity is always a re-incarnated family member; an ancestor or ancestress (Miachi, 2012, pp.222-224). And these personal deities or spirits through the principle of re-incarnation are believed to be mode of God’s “creative and life-giving action in human beings” (Uzukwu, 2012, 193). In the strict sense, the *egwẹle* ritual of identifying the personal *ọjọ* of the individual is the beginning of personhood among the Igala.

In the phenomenological and linguistic sense, *Ọjọ* also means “day”—today, yesterday and tomorrow.’ It is exciting to note how the Igala concept of *Ọjọ* as the returning face of the Supreme Being dawns on humanity through the participatory ritual actions of *ebo*. This view relates to Victor Manfredi analysis of the dawning *chi* among the Igbo of Ehugbo Afioko (Manfredi, 1997, pp.174-178). That means, in the Igala concept of daybreak—*Ọjọ ma nwa, God dawns; God unfolds*. The Igala people conceive the day as the phenomenological opening of God’s face to humanity through the various activities of the spirits. *Ọjọ*’s presence at daybreak implies the giving of Life through the spirits. And for those who are alive to behold *Ọjọ* (the day), it is an answered prayer
to the request of the previous night. The normal response to a goodnight wish in Igala is the short ejaculatory prayer: “ich’ene k’ojo buwane”—if God permits one to rise; literally meaning to behold God’s dawning in the morning. Thus, the supreme God—Ojo—dawns in the morning and bestows life—ola ye in the ebo—spirit through the individual personal ojo.

The Igala land is saturated with spirits—ebo as a result of its strategic geographical location as a people surrounded by the great seven rivers—Oju, Okura, Omala/Bagaji, Yimua/Benue, Mabolo, Anambra, and Niger. For this reason, among the Igala there exist a mutual relationship between the earth deity—anę and the great river spirits—alijenu. Customarily, water-omi/ohimini has become the greatest symbolic gesture of welcome among the Igala. On one hand, the imagery of the running-waters signal peace, generosity, reciprocity and continuity in the on-going flow of life, and on the other hand, the calm but insurmountable nature of omi/ohimini describes the defiance of the Igala to neighboring ethnicities and colonial authorities. The symbolic position of the city of Idah—the ancestral home of the Igala—bears testimony to this point. The proverb… olagenyi jagenyi, una jo kere b’etutu, igba anyi, ijo kere b’ohimini I mowo da (the fire that burns the dry wool-grass with delight is curtailed by the waters of the sea), denotes the spiritual potency exuding from the Igala-spirit-world. According to oral traditions, neighboring ethnicities and kingdoms who sought both political and spiritual refuge found relief at the shores of the Igala waters. Boston made allusion to the “Ibo who send men to Igala Country to found relieved at the shores of the Igala waters. Boston (1971, p.200). It is not an understatement to assert that the activities of ebo were among the factors that brought a glare of publicity on the Igala kingdom.

Before moving on, some clarification of the various nuances of the term ebo among the Igala is appropriate. Etymologically, ten different meanings are identified.

(i) Ebo as the principal pervading spirit of the Supreme Being Ojo in nature (Ukwedeh, 1987). In this sense ebo relates to the personal reincarnated spirit—ajo as derivative from Ojo.

(ii) Ebo as the natural spirit of individual deities like the earth goddess—anę and the ancestral spirit—ibegwu. In this respect and to a greater degree, the Atta Igala qualifies as ebo with proper rites, rituals and taboos.

(iii) Ebo as the inner voice of conscience in human, explicitly responsible for discretion, discernment and decision-making. It serves as a gauge for morality.

(iv) Ebo as security surveillance device; protecting items, goods and services. Through the process of ebo edu d’ęnwu—setting the spirit as guard over items—such goods, be it a piece of land, economic trees and crops etc. The said items automatically become sacred and untouchable. Trespassers and culprits are generally apprehended by the ebo in question.

(v) Ebo as symbol of blood covenant of “brotherhood and sisterhood” among members and across clans and communities. Through the concept of enę-eko—spiritual/mutual friendship, people not biologically related become natural family with all rights and privileges accruing from the bonds of consanguinity and affinity. Generally, marriages and acts of war are prohibited between such covenanted families.

(vi) Ebo as lie dictator and oath-taking. In the process of ebo-emo members of society, especially traditional and religious leaders enter into a contractual relationship involving the responsibility of trust and duty of care. Also the events of dispute and allegations of falsehood and foul play among families and neighbors are generally settled through ebo-emo—truth simulation and guilt knowledge test. The ebo Enyi Ejeh of Ofakaga and the ebo Okolo Ichakolo of Agbeji are typical centers for these rituals.

(vii) The concept of ebo-ego—invocation the spirits. It has both positive and negative consequences. Positively, ebo-ego within the context of ritual through incantations—ofor kpai ile-ego can be a form of prayer. Conversely, ebo-ego outside ritual setting carries a negative connotation of cursing or ill-wishing.

(viii) Ebo-edu—individual participation in particular cultic services…iya mana, igbegochi, ichekpa, etu, ọye-unyejima, owalika, akpoli, okwuta-ifoji, egbunu, ikpakachi etc.

(ix) Ebo eta—spirit self-deployment from place of abode to the destination of ministry—ile ogoli hobo. The resounding alarm of Okaheje (Okaheje kiya togba ebo onwu aj’ede ebo n’egbasi) among the Igala announces the ritual time and space of the particular ebo. During this exercise, non-initiates are warned to keep their distance.

(x) Ebo emutula…as the gauge of the lantern that controls the density of light. The ebo of the lantern is considered the life—ola ye of the lamp.

To put the issue of ebo in a more critical perspective, it is informative to highlight the comments of Boston on this subject.

A western observer would tend to rank the various spirits in terms of their order of magnitude or degrees of power. At the top of the hierarchy would come Ojo, the Supreme Being and creator. Another spirit with wide powers in Igala belief is Anę, the spirit of the earth. Then there are various oracle spirits known generically as ebo, with the function of giving protection against witchcraft. Their congregation may be large or small according to the success of the spirits in unmasking witches by striking them with illness and making them confess to their wrongdoing. Operating within a more restricted range are the Ancestors spirits who are guardians of wellbeing in particular clans, lineages, or lineage segments. Within the complex of ancestor worship falls the dyadic relationship between an individual and his personal ojo or guardian spirit. The guardian has responsibility for the destiny of its ward. Finally there are fetishes, ode, which are made and worshipped by individuals, and which are believed to ensure success in daily life by affording protection against the misfortunes that witchcraft and sorcery can bring. (Boston, 1974, p.350)
This connection of *ebo* to the Supreme Being *Ojo* and the reincarnated spirit *ọjọ* within the ritual and cultic settings makes *ebo* relevant as a Spirit—deity that is contextualized, identifiable and worshipped by families and communities. However, Boston’s functional categorization of *ebo* together with *ode* as a kind of antidote to witchcraft is confusing and misleading. This simplistic association of *ebo* with fetish—*ode* later contributed to the misconception harbored by missionaries and other Igala Christians, that depicts *ebo* as idol—*ode*—man made idols—the work of human hands...with mouths but cannot speak, and eyes that cannot see (Ps. 135:16). But *ebo* is Spirit. And as Spirit *ebo* it has a wider modus operandi within the Igala worldview than the mere policing of witches and wizards. *Ebo* is the creative and sustaining principle with which *Ojo* creates and re-creates the universe. It is through *ebo* as spirit, that *Ojo* reveals God’s self through the earth deity *ane*, and the ancestors—*ibegwu* and other oracle spirits. Therefore, as spiritual beings *ebo* have autonomous iconic existence apart from the physical representation in *ode*—Idols, effigies and artifacts.

From the colonial time to date, *ebo* has been dangerously associated with *ode* and in some cases used interchangeably. This has done grave harm to the practice of inculturation. Similarly, Sydney R. Seton’s symbolic description of Ebbo [*ebo*] is fascinating. Seton asserts that *ebo* is a spirit sent by *Ọjọ*.

The “Ebbo” in the case is the household god and is generally represented by a piece of wood with a cloth round it. It may be roughly carved in the semblance of a man or woman. Aches from the white iroko are put in a hole in the chest of the figure. Everything given to the “Ebbo” must touch this iron, and when any prayer is made to it the iron is struck to drive the prayer home. There are cowries tied round the figure and the red hair style worn by adherents of the *ichẹkpa* cult connotes a symbolic covenantal agreement and mutual relationship.

Although, the Supreme Being *Ojo* is one, it is always in communion with other deities, especially the earth goddess *ane* and the ancestral spirits—*ibegwu*. The earth goddess—*ane* and other deities are Spirits—*ebo* and they are approached and worshipped as such. In the cosmology of the Igala Traditional Religion humans are integral part of the created universe, co-existing and sharing the same sacred space with other vital forces and spirits—*ebo*. Most of the *ebo* especially the ancestral spirits function as a pillar and foundation members of societies. Because of this fundamental linkage between ancestral spirits as founding fathers/mothers of societies, *ebo* cannot be expelled by its adherents for supposedly lack of performance. Comparatively, the incident recorded in Chinua Achebe’s *Arrow of God* (Achebe, 1964, pp.207-216) in which the people of *Umuaro* deserted and subsequently declared the deity—*Ulu a persona non grata* for failing to meet the general wellbeing of the people will be considered outrageous among the Igala. Unlike the Igbo, the Igala people do not practice the strict *do ut des* contractual relationship with the spirits. Human beings occupy the lower status with respect to the spirits and deities. And since nature itself is saturated with the
spiritual presence of the divine, all natural phenomena like the rivers, forest, and land are all pervaded by the Spirits: no land or water is a no man’s territory among the Igala.

The Spirits are the rightful owners of nature and as such through the Ifa (Ifa m'abo ma li enwu, m'abo enwu omun al' ijan), divination process permission is sought from specific spirit to share portions of such sacred space—land or water—as a guest with the host spirit. The ecological import of such a worldview is immense; namely that humans are the steward or custodian of nature. Thus, through ritual actions, individuals and society respect the sacredness of the abode “places,” of these spirits while at the same time observing their “times,” and maintaining ceremonies and festivals. For instance, during ritual of ebo eta—spirit self-deployment from place of abode to the destination of ministry—children and young adults who are non-initiates are generally warned to stay off the path of the spirit. Various taboos and prohibitions are laid down by society to respect the sacredness and dignity of the atama—priests and priestess; the [ayibo] sacrificial items and shrine objects. All these restrictions and prohibitions around the sacred places, time, persons and objects/items are prescribed according to custom and traditions for the sole purpose of maintaining cosmic balance—but not dominion—over nature and to avert the wrath of the ebo.

Closely related to ebo in meaning are the words breath—imini, life—olaye and shadow—ojiji. According to Uzukwu, “shadow is the being or person as invisible, as spiritual being...the principle of empowerment for self-deployment beyond the body, enabling the person to act beyond corporeal spatial constriction…” (Uzukwu, 2012, p.155). As a philosophical concept, the human shadow—ojiji one forms the basis for the Igala belief in ‘appearance and disappearance’—the possibility of conceptualizing reality outside or beyond the physical (meta-physics). Consequently, the phenomenon of witchcraft and sorcery—ochu and inacha are made possible through this process of capturing and manipulating the human shadow—emu ojiji one. According to Miachi, the perception of ojiji reinforces in a positive way the Igala belief in re-incarnation (Miachi, 2012, p.116).

On the supra-mundane level, ebo as spirit, imini as breath, olaye as life and ojiji as psyche/soul translates the meta-physical dimension of person—one; whereas on the mundane sphere, blood—ebie and body—angola or flesh—oroela represents the physical reality. What constitutes the human person—one among the Igala is the above combination of the physical and meta-physical dimension. The Igala sense of duality between the physical and the metaphysical realities is relational and at times impositional.

In the moral sphere, ebo also functions as the source and seat of wisdom. Together with the human head/brain—oji/okoto—and the heart—edo, ebo is stressed as the physical seat of rationality and decision making. The Igala name egogbo which literally translate the virtue of courage or spiritedness shows the psychological connection that exists between the human heart and ebo as the driving force behind human activities. In an integral sense, oji, edo and ebo function together in dictating the inner voice of conscience that prompts decision making. For instance, an Igala can suddenly decide to cancel an already planned journey, a project or discontinue negotiations for the simple reason that the heart—edo, the head—oji or the spirit—ebo no longer consent to such an endeavor, (edo migban, oji mi dun, ebo mi dun) (Egbunu, 2013).

In the event of death, the breath is let go, the soul wanders away/around, the blood unites with the body, and only ebo as spirit persists after death, thus forming the ontological basis for continuity between the human and the divine realm. In this sense, ebo becomes the surviving and the persisting principle of the dead okwu one incarnating into egwu-incarnate being (Miachi, 2012, p.116). In brief, ebo constitutes the invisible manifestation of Ojo—alive and active—in the living and the living-dead. In general, all incarnate beings—egwu viewed from this perspective as the visible representation of the living-dead are ebo in the fullest sense. Each incarnate being have their respective rites and rituals depending on the degree of ritual items—ucholo kpai ayibo. Miachi succinctly equivocated the incarnate being Amuda-Iledeba as both egwu and ebo (Miachi, 2012, p.197). Identically, Boston referred to the incarnate being Obajeadaka as nature spirits—ebo (Boston, 1960, p.223). Both positions are consistent with the Igala conceptual framework; however, one still question Miachi’s rationale for the singling out of Amuda-Iledeba and not the totality of the incarnate beings. Since what incarnates in the human form is the spirit—ebo and this spirit is referred to as egwu among the Igala, any distinction between the latter and the formal nonetheless seems superfluous if not unnecessary.

The phenomenon of evil spirits exists in two different ways among the Igala: (a) in the events of manipulating the spirits and (b) in cases of indeterminate spirits (Uzukwu, 2012, p.62). The concepts of ebo-bibi—perverted Spirit or afu-bibi—bad wind translates either a manipulated Spirit or the Spirit behind some natural disaster that is beyond any human placating through sacrifice. For instance, the goddess, ebo iye-unyejima a protective deity of a particular community can on some other occasion be termed a dangerous spirit if the atama manipulates the ebo to cause harm to individuals or the community. Sometimes, the ebo can equally inflict a just but merciless punishment upon culprits of a particular crime or taboo performed against the mores and ethos of the land.
In this particular incident, the *ebọ* ended up entering a deal with the Tortoise to avoid public scandal. This folklore is a good example of a perverted and manipulative *ebọ*. In most cases since *ebọ* is spirit, the blame is normally put on the *Atamas*—priests and priestess—for some kind of foul play. There is a lesson to be learnt from this folklore; namely, that accountability is demanded from those who uphold the law and secondly, that the Spirits in anthropomorphic sense are negotiable beings. In a sense, *ebọ* can be manipulated and in the process become perverted. Yet, these spirits are open to reconciliation through sacrifices. But the case is not always the same with the second category of evil spirits—the indeterminate spirits. They are dangerous and violent because they do not allow themselves to be known. Therefore, the possibility of either placating or appeasing them are very limited. This category of spirit beings do not have a cult, a ritual, time or priest or priestess. A milder example of such indeterminate spirit is the occult practice of witchcraft. In this perspective, *ebọ* has no metaphysical connection with moral evil. By the same token, one cannot ignore the existence of perverted spirits. More important, however, is the distinction between the Igala conception of perverted spirit and the western understanding of evil spirit—properly personified devil. Evidently, there is no Igala word that translates a metaphysical being—such as the devil or Satan—responsible for evil prior to the advent of Islam and Christianity. The Igala word *ebili*—devil is a borrowed entity from the Arabic Islamic word *Iblis*. This brings us to the very important question of the existence of witchcraft and the function of *ebọ* in the Igala society. The Igala proverb: *Ochu ali’kpada ṣi*ebo* (witches do not travel the path of the Spirit) shows that *ebọ* does not tolerate the activities witches among the Igala people. Generally, the Igala *Ocho* festival takes care of the purification and prevention of the land from the menaces and attacks of witches. The main function of the *Ohajeada*ka nature spirits (*ebọ*) is to identify witches and make them confess and repent (Boston, 1960, pp.223-232).

The question of theodicy is normally addressed by positing a worldview that is in support of the existence of a hierarchy of Spirit and spirit-beings. The phenomenon of evil spirits has to do also with the level of familiarity with a particular *ebọ*. The cultic Spirits more often than not are placated through rituals and sacrifice to reduce their potency and propensity to do evil. Thus, the concept of evil in this sense connotes occult practices, magic and ill-gotten wealth. For this reason, repentant witches and sorcerers will lose their possessions to the *ebọ* that hunts them down. In some cases, the entire family of culprits become dedicated cultic servants to the *ebọ*. These restored items are displayed for public view to show the vanity that accompanied ill-gotten wealth through sorcery and magic.

The process of the discernment of Spirits in the Igala culture begins first and foremost with the identification of the particular kind of spirit that is behind an utterance, possession, obsession, dance or other gestures. This is normally done by the *Ija*—diviner priest/priestess. The process of discernment yields dual results. In the first place, the outcome of spirit possession for instance, can result in the discernment of good and positive spirit which bears gifts and charisms to the society through the possessed. Though the discernment questionnaires varies according to different *Ija* priest, the generally include questions about (a) place and location of the patient prior to attack, (in the forest, by the stream); (b) the time the attack occurred (ritual time like during the *Ane* festival, or ordinary time—mid-day or mid-night); (c) and person, being or objects that the patient was in contact with prior to attack (contact with some masquerade, touching or staring at forbidding objects in the shrine). Answers to these questions will aid the *Ija* priest decipher whether the patient was possessed by either the domestic—*ebọ* unyi—or forest spirits—*ebọ* oko. The second step after identification of the particular spirit is the attempt to enter into a dialogic covenant with the *ebọ* in question to depart in peace through the offering of sacrifice. Some *ebọ* compromise and depart, but in other cases, they remain. This leads to the third stage of discernment; exorcism. Note that exorcism is always the end product of the discernment process not the beginning. The discernment process begins among the Igala with the identification of the spirit. Thus, any spirit that cannot be identified is normally considered dangerous, wild and evil, and *afi*—as spirit—in its indeterminate and un-cultic nature runs the risk of being identified with evil.


I will now return to the central question of this essay; namely how does human *ebọ*—spirit, serve as the basis for understanding the supernatural *ebọ*—spirit of the
Supreme Being Ọjọ? In a purely theological term, how does the human spirit relate or participate in the creative and redemptive act of God in creation? In answering this question, references will be made to the pneumatological presuppositions of Elochukwu Uzukwu (Africa), Paul Tillich (Western) and Gregory Palamas (Eastern). In the final analysis, I will relate the Igala principle of ọjọ—reincarnated ancestor—as the condition of possibility for the indwelling of the Holy Spirit in the human. Thus cementing the argument, that, in the cultic and ritual sense there can be no essential difference between Ebo—Spirit and Ilimi—Life.

Kirsteen Kim questions, if “the theology of the Holy Spirit is a study of God’s involvement with the world?” (Kim, 2007). Correspondingly, how can the Igala Christian see the activities of ebo/Spirits as the handiwork of Ọjọ in creation? In the realm of Christian theology, can a theology be termed orthodox and authentic when its pneumatology acknowledges the existence of evil spirits and understanding them as that part of the Spirit’s activity and energy in the world that is still unknown? The appreciation of ebo as spirit has enormous implication for Igala Christian Pneumatology—science of the spirit and the Holy Spirit. My take in this essay can be stated as follows: unless we know what spirit is, we cannot claim to know what the Holy Spirit is doing in the lives of the Igala Christian (Tillich, 1963). The conception of any authentic Igala pneumatology must first confront the reality of the Igala ebo/Spirits-world. In essence, the appropriation of the word afu for spirit constitutes not only an escapism, but a monumental hindrance to such in-depth endeavor. Thus, providing an answer to the question of the role of ebo in the personal life of the Igala Christian is a prerequisite for understanding what the Holy Spirit is doing in the Igala cosmos. For this purpose, I submit that the characteristics of ebo as divine-human agent opens an interpretative framework for understanding, discerning and appreciating the gifts of the Holy Spirit—healing and wholeness—in creation (Uzukwu, 2012, p.88). Thus, one can argue that because of the inherent spirit—ebo which constitute the ontological condition of one, the human ebo is open to the transcendent realm of the Spirit. This approach differs substantially from Egbunu’s subscription of western philosophical category to interpret personhood—one in Igala worldview (Egbunu, 2013).

Elochukwu Uzukwu’s pneumatological position solidly affirms God as mystery and Spirit (Uzukwu, 2012). As a mystery, Uzukwu surmise that no one human culture, language and logical category can lay claim and authority to full mastery of God. In the same way, as Spirit, God’s Activity in the universe is carried out in a participatory fashion through the medium of and in collaboration with other spirits, deities and divinity. In his appropriation of Gnuse’s (Gnuse, 1997) thesis of the mutual coexistence of gods and the heavenly beings in pre-exilic Israel and the becoming of monotheistic Elohim, Uzukwu distanced himself from “the militancy of Deuteronomistic history” (Uzukwu, 2012, p.131). He further asserts that the conception of an absolute mono-Yahweh that is based on the “rhetoric of exclusion” and intolerance is both Life-threatening and “Life-denying.” (Uzukwu, 2012, p.131). Heavily influenced by Origen’s pneumatological principle of individuation Uzukwu develops a principle of Relationality in which the human spirit participates in the Divine Spirit. The concreteness of this relationality is brought to bear on the principle of individuation of spirits as the giver of gifts and charism; all for the purpose and in the service of human Life. Uzukwu endorses Origen’s pneumatology as the methodological reference point for his discourse on the Trinity and the economy of spirits. He argues further that the concept of deities in the West African universe is hinged on the dual principles of relationality and individuation. Uzukwu agrees with Teresa Okure’s interpretation of the Johannine definition of God’s Spirit meaning not His nature “as such, but the mode of his creativity, life-giving actions in human beings” (Okure, 1988). This mode of thinking resonates and aligns with the West African conception of the transformative and dynamic power of the Spirit in the world. Uzukwu notes that Origen’s doctrine of the Spirit as the condition of possibility of ascent to divinization is both similar and different in some ways from the “West African mysticism of descent.” He then relates Origen’s pneumatological principle of individuation to West African humana-pneuma manifested in personal spirits as bearer of destiny (Uzukwu, 2012, p.140).

In the Igala world, Ọjọ created all—the spirits, the deities and the humans—to be in communion for the propagation and protection of Life. Life is generated through the reincarnated ebo/spirits of the ancestors and it is the same Spirit that brings forth life that equally saves it. Uzukwu’s description of the primacy of the human Spirit and its desires for divine participation through the principle of relationality serves a dual function for the retrieval of the Igala understanding of ebo. First, it grounds and solidifies ebo as the divine desire of the Supreme Being—Ọjọ to give Life and secondly, through the principle of reincarnation, it also captures the ontological reality of ebo as the human principle for Life. Uzukwu maintains that:

The spirit dimension of the person linking the individual from pre-existence into life in this world is strategic to the notion of person. This spirit carries or reflects individual destiny providentially assigned by God, the origin of origins, and/or democratically chosen by each pre-existent. It constitutes the acknowledged and unacknowledged link with God in the evolving destiny of the individual or in questions asked about the fortunes and misfortunes by the individual and community. One should not underestimate the cosmological and anthropological
positions of this structural determinant of destiny, the embedded spirit, the original gift and guardian from God that humanizes the person. The description of the human pneuma by Origen as life coming from God puts the West African principle on the same pedestal as the Greek pneuma—both are humanizing principles that come and return to God: God is Spirit, “breath of Life” (Uzukwu, 2012, p.190).

In the Igala worldview, although, olaye translates Life in its biological form, the word iñmi—breathe—gives an anthropological and ontological reason for which humans are alive or living. For the most part, the crimes of suicide or homicide rank the topmost among the prohibitions against life or shed blood on the earth. This is so because among the Igala, the issue of Life as Breathe is the prerogative of the supreme deity—iñmi d’ọọọ Ojo translates this reality.

It is an incontestable fact that Paul Tillich’s “correlative method” in theological investigation forms one of the pillars of theological methodologies in modern and post-modern times. At its core, the correlative method draws insights from theology to address philosophical and cultural issues facing man/woman. In his critique of Cartesian dichotomy between body and spirit, Tillich posited a fundamental question that guided his entire work: can the word “spirit” designating the particular human dimension of life, be reinstated? (Tillich, 1961). The necessity for the reinstatement “spirit” in the day-to-day affairs of the society for Tillich serve a practical epistemological purpose, that is; “without knowing what spirit is one cannot know what Spirit is” (Tillich, 1961, p.23). The concept of “Spiritual Presence” in this sense is the correlative of Life as spirit. The understanding of one leads to a better understanding of the other. So, for Tillich, the philosophical, existential and ontological questions posed by the various ambiguities surrounding man/woman and their quest for meaning of life and death are best addressed in the understanding of “Life” that is the spirit which is not detached from its source i.e. Spiritual Presence. Life as such becomes the grounding and vital force for living in the Spirit. Furthermore, Tillich’s explanation of the relationship of Spirit to spirit draws out the ontological connection that exists between them. The Divine Spirit “breaks into the human spirit; this does not mean that it rest there, but that it drives the human spirit out of itself” (Tillich, 1961, p.113).

Furthermore, Kirsteen Kim distinguishes between Western and Eastern epistemological presupposition to the subject of the Trinity: “Western Trinitarian doctrine, as developed by Augustine and the scholastics, aimed to solve metaphysical questions about the nature of God in God’s self, ad intra. Eastern concern, on the other hand, had been mainly with explaining the way in which the members of the Trinity work together ad extra to bring about the salvation of the world” (Kim, 2007, p.42). This paper cannot fully address the various contributions of the Orthodox theologians to the pneumatological debate. By and large, a claim that the Eastern Orthodox Pneumatology begins and revolves around the concept of the “Economy Trinity” is defendable. For the time being, I will only focus on one of the outstanding Orthodox thinker: Gregory Palamas, stating briefly the central thesis of his Triad. According to Aristotle Papanikolaou, “Palamas’s thought is characterized as the culmination of Eastern patristic thought” (Papanikolaou, 2002, p.239). This assessment is plausible in that, “the councils held in Constantinople in 1341, 1351 and 1368 all affirmed the Palamite distinction between the invisible essence and the self-revealing energies” (Reid, 1997, p.51).

My interest in the Palamite synthesis is simply to argue for the humanizing principle of ebo as divine energies of Ojo who bestows gifts and charisma for the service of the community. Palamas’ greatest achievement in Orthodox theology was his synthesis of the problem concerning the knowable and unknowable God. His elaborate citation of the preceding Greek Patristic fully demonstrates that the theology of the unknown God and the issue of the divine attributes of such God was altogether not a new phenomenon in the Orthodox tradition. Palamas’ elaborate citation of Basil and Gregory of Nyssa proves this point better.

As Basil the great says, the guarantee of the existence of every essence is its natural energy which leads the mind to the nature. According to St. Gregory Nyssa and all the other fathers, the natural energy is the power which manifests every essence and only nonbeing is deprived of this power; for the being which participates in an essence will also surely participate in the power which manifests that essence. But since God is entirely present in each of the divine energies we name Him from each of them, although it is clear that He transcends all of them. (Meyendorff, 1983, pp.95-96)

Palamas agrees with the fathers that God’s essence—the sometheness of God—in its inner structure is unknown to human, but humans can know God through the manifestation of God’s energies, “since energy can be participated in...we have a proof that the eternal glory of God is participable for that which in God is visible in some way, is also participable (Meyendorff, 1983, pp.97-99). It is this principle of participation of energies in essences that makes enhypostatic—deification a possibility. Since “according to the fathers, deification is an essential energy of God,” Palamas argues that “the deified received energy identical to that of the deifying essence” (Meyendorff, 1983, pp.86-89).

CONCLUSION

All along, this essay subscribes to and intends to contribute to the research of Elochukwu Uzukwu—The Pierre Schouver endowed Chair on Mission, at Duquesne University. This essay fundamentally agrees with Uzukwu stance, that we can know God through rituals and participate in God’s spirit through worship. And
that God is “alive and active” in the African universe through the actions of benevolent spirits...bearing gifts, healing and charisma. This essay argues, that a translation of spirit as ẹbọ instead of afu resonates well with the ritual and cultic setting of the reincarnated Igala ancestors—ibegwu. The Ajokodo Biblical translation of the Holy Spirit as ibegu desholo properly demonstrates this connection. Accordingly, the Igala principle of reincarnation serves a dual pneumatological function. (a) It ushers the Divine Spirit into the realm of the human pneuma. Borrowing from Tillich’s phrase, the divine Spirit of Ọjọ “... breaks forth into the human spirit.” (b) The human spirit once leavened by the divine energy is thus opened to transcendence.

In order to clear the ground for the above argument, I proposed that an understanding of ẹbọ as the divine principle connecting the Supreme Being—Ọjọ and the reincarnated human spirit—ọjọ as can be the starting point of pneumatology. In this connection, the relationship between ẹbọ as personal spirits participating in the divine spirits can be compared to the Palamitan principle of spirits as energies proceeding from the divine essence of God. Therefore, ẹbọ becomes the principle of particularization and individuation with which the Supreme Being—Ọjọ creates and constantly re-creates the Igala universe. Thus, in light of all the above, the present pejorative reference to ẹbọ as man-made and devilish and the scornful appellation given to adherents of Igala traditionalist—ogwuchekpo as ama chi ich’ẹbọ needs further re-evaluation.

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