

SUPREME BEING AS A STRANGER IN IBIBIO RELIGIOUS THOUGHT

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Abstract

This study examines the paradoxical conception of the Supreme Being, Abasi Ibom, in Ibibio religious thought, where He is revered as creator and sustainer yet remains distant from daily worship. Within the Ibibio worldview, the Supreme Being's transcendence necessitates the role of intermediaries—divinities (ndem) and ancestors (ekpo)—who mediate between humans and the divine. This estrangement, framed within the concept of Deus Otiosus, highlights the tension between divine transcendence and immanence. The Ibibio thoughts reveal a broader African religious pattern in which God is acknowledged as supreme but approached indirectly. The study also explores the transformative impact of colonialism and Christianity, which redefined the perception of God from a remote “stranger” to a more personal and immanent being, thereby creating a hybrid religious consciousness. Theologically and philosophically, the Ibibio case raises questions about divine hidden nature, mediation, and moral authority. It concludes that the “strangerhood” of the Supreme Being reflects not irrelevance but a cultural affirmation of divine transcendence, enriching African philosophy of religion.

Keywords: Supreme Being; Ibibio; Religious Thought

Introduction

The Ibibio people of southern Nigeria possess a rich religious worldview that reflects their understanding of the cosmos, humanity, and the divine. Central to this worldview is the belief in a Supreme Being, commonly referred to as *Abasi Ibom* or *Abasi Enyong*. This deity is acknowledged as the creator and sustainer of the universe, yet paradoxically occupies a distant position in the lived religious experience of the people. Unlike divinities (*ndem*) and ancestors (*ekpo*), who receive daily devotion and ritual attention, the Supreme Being is often regarded as remote, mysterious, and practically absent from routine worship (Brown, 2018:12). This paradox gives rise to the characterization of the Supreme Being as a “stranger” in Ibibio religious thought.

The concept of the Supreme Being as a stranger is not unique to the Ibibio but resonates with broader patterns in African Traditional Religions. Scholars have long observed that in many African cosmologies, the Supreme Being is acknowledged but rarely the direct focus of ritual practice (Idowu, 1973:52). Instead, devotion is directed toward intermediary forces—divinities and ancestors—who are believed to be more approachable and responsive to human needs. Within Ibibio thought, this religious structure reflects a deep-seated belief in transcendence, where the Supreme Being is considered too great or too distant to engage directly with human affairs (Ekong, 2001:97). Historically, the Ibibio cosmology demonstrates an intricate balance between reverence for the Supreme Being and reliance on mediatory spirits. The religious life of the community is deeply communal, centering on family shrines, ancestral veneration, and festivals dedicated to divinities associated with fertility, land, and water (Essien, 2010:43). In this arrangement, the Supreme Being exists at the highest point of the spiritual hierarchy but functions more as a background presence than an immediate participant in daily life. This religious distance is the foundation upon which the notion of “strangerhood” is built.

Theological interpretations of this phenomenon suggest that the Supreme Being's estrangement may reflect more than absence. Rather, it could embody a heightened sense of reverence. To the Ibibio mind, the sacredness of the Supreme Being places Him beyond the reach of ordinary ritual and sacrifice. Therefore, intermediary beings serve as accessible channels, safeguarding divine transcendence while ensuring that human concerns are addressed (Etuk, 2002:85). This structure demonstrates both the strength and the limitations of Ibibio religious thought—strength in its recognition of divine transcendence, and limitation in its apparent distance between humanity and the ultimate source of life.

This study, therefore, seeks to critically examine the conception of the Supreme Being as a stranger in Ibibio religious thought. It discusses the historical, cultural, and theological foundations of this perception, analyzes its implications for religious practice, and evaluates its significance within African philosophy of religion. By doing so, it will shed light on how the Ibibio people reconcile divine transcendence with the need for immanence in their daily religious experience (Ukpong, 2017:66).

The Ibibio Worldview and Religious Structure

The Ibibio worldview is deeply rooted in a holistic understanding of life, where the physical and spiritual realms are inseparably connected. In traditional Ibibio thought, existence is not compartmentalized into sacred and secular; rather, every aspect of life—birth, farming, marriage, death, and community relations—carries religious significance (Udo, 1983:24). This integrated worldview reflects the conviction that unseen spiritual forces directly influence human well-being and community stability. Thus, the Ibibio perceive the universe as a sacred order sustained by divine and spiritual powers. Central to this worldview is the recognition of a hierarchical spiritual structure. At the apex of this hierarchy is the Supreme Being, *AbasiIbom*, who is acknowledged as the ultimate creator and sustainer of all life. Beneath the Supreme Being are divinities (*ndem*), who are believed to govern natural phenomena such as rivers, fertility, and the land. Ancestors (*ekpo*) also hold a vital place in this spiritual order, functioning as intermediaries between the living and the divine (Ekong, 2001:41). This layered religious framework ensures that spiritual power is accessible to the community, even though the Supreme Being remains distant.

Another striking element of the Ibibio worldview is its communal orientation. Religion is not practiced in isolation but within the broader context of family and community. Ancestral veneration, communal festivals, and ritual ceremonies reinforce social solidarity while simultaneously invoking spiritual protection (Essien, 2010:36). The Ibibio believe that the well-being of the community depends on maintaining harmony with both the spiritual and natural worlds. As such, religion is less about personal salvation and more about the collective survival, prosperity, and moral order of the community.

Furthermore, the Ibibio worldview emphasizes balance and reciprocity in human-spiritual relations. The community maintains this balance through sacrifices, offerings, and rituals directed at divinities and ancestors. Illness, misfortune, or calamity is often interpreted as a disruption of this balance, requiring appeasement or ritual cleansing (Etuk, 2002:72). In this sense, the Ibibio religious framework operates not only as a spiritual system but also as a social control mechanism, guiding moral behavior and reinforcing accountability to both ancestors and divinities.

Lastly, the Ibibio worldview reveals an inherent tension: while the Supreme Being is acknowledged as the source of life and cosmic order, His perceived distance from human affairs necessitates reliance on intermediaries. This paradox forms the foundation of the idea of the

Supreme Being as a “stranger” in Ibibio religious thought. The framework thus reflects a dual reality—one of ultimate dependence on the transcendent creator and another of practical dependence on accessible divinities and ancestors (Brown, 2018:18). Understanding this tension is crucial for appreciating the unique structure of Ibibio religion and its interpretation of divine presence and absence.

The Conceptions of the Supreme Being in Ibibio Thought

The Ibibio people conceive of the Supreme Being primarily as *AbasiIbom* or *AbasiEnyong*, titles that emphasize His sovereignty over creation and His association with the heavens. The term *Abasi* conveys the sense of a great ruler, while *Ibom* signifies origin, source, or totality, pointing to God as the foundation of all existence (Udo, 1983:47). In some traditions, He is also called *AbasiObot*—the God of the earth—underscoring His role as both creator of the cosmos and sustainer of natural order (Essien, 2010:51). These names collectively highlight the Ibibio understanding of the Supreme Being as the originator, provider, and ultimate controller of life. As creator, the Supreme Being is believed to have brought both the visible and invisible worlds into existence. Myths of origin among the Ibibio often depict Abasi as the one who gave humans their first laws and provided them with resources for survival, including the land and its fertility (Ekong, 2001:63). Despite this creative role, Abasi is not typically perceived as actively involved in the daily affairs of humanity. Instead, He is revered from a distance, while lesser spiritual beings manage immediate interactions with the living. This perception reinforces the image of the Supreme Being as remote and transcendent.

The attributes of the Supreme Being further illustrate His uniqueness in Ibibio religious thought. He is seen as omnipotent, eternal, and morally perfect—qualities that distinguish Him from divinities and ancestors (Etuk, 2002:93). However, His moral perfection and greatness are paradoxically linked to His estrangement from human rituals. The Ibibio believe that ordinary sacrifices and ritual offerings cannot adequately honor such a transcendent being, and thus they are directed instead to divinities and ancestors who are closer to human concerns (Brown, 2018:22). In this sense, the very attributes that exalt the Supreme Being also distance Him from active worship. Nana (2021: 366) sees worship as “One reaching out to the transcendent and as embedded in human life. Worship is also used as a means of creating harmony to the world of human kind.

Finally, the conception of the Supreme Being in Ibibio thought embodies both transcendence and immanence, though with a stronger emphasis on transcendence. While He is acknowledged as the source of life and the ultimate judge of human conduct, He is rarely invoked directly in prayers or rituals. Instead, His presence is implied through the activities of intermediaries and through natural order itself. This dual conception situates Abasi as both essential to existence and yet practically absent from religious devotion—a paradox that lies at the heart of His characterization as a “stranger” in Ibibio religion (Ukong, 2017:58).

Belief in the Absence of Direct Worship of the Supreme Being

One of the most striking features of Ibibio religious practice is the absence of direct worship of the Supreme Being, despite His acknowledged supremacy. While *AbasiIbom* is revered as creator and sustainer, He does not receive shrines, altars, or elaborate sacrifices in the same way divinities (*ndem*) and ancestors (*ekpo*) (Udo, 1983:55). Instead, religious attention is directed toward intermediaries, who are considered more approachable and effective in addressing human needs. This absence of worship has led many scholars to describe the Supreme Being as a “remote deity” or “stranger” within Ibibio religious thought (Brown, 2018:29). The reason for this lack of direct

devotion lies partly in the Ibibio conception of transcendence. The Supreme Being is regarded as too exalted, holy, and distant to be reached by ordinary ritual acts. In Ibibio cosmology, it would be presumptuous or even impossible for humans to attempt direct contact with Him, since their offerings could not match His greatness (Etuk, 2002:101). This understanding reflects a deep reverence for divine otherness, but it also reinforces the sense of estrangement between God and human beings. As such, worship is redirected to lesser beings who can serve as intermediaries. Moreover, the absence of direct worship reflects a practical orientation within Ibibio religion. Daily human needs—such as fertility, protection, harvest, and healing—are believed to fall under the jurisdiction of divinities and ancestors. These spiritual agents are closer to human life and respond more immediately to sacrifices and prayers (Ekong, 2001:72). Consequently, the Supreme Being is often perceived as delegating His authority to these entities, who manage the practical affairs of the community. This delegation further cements His role as an absent but ultimate authority, rather than an active participant in ritual life.

This pattern also reveals the communal and pragmatic nature of Ibibio religion. Shrines, festivals, and rituals are dedicated to *ndem* and ancestors because they foster social unity, provide visible religious symbols, and allow communities to act collectively in addressing misfortunes or celebrating blessings (Essien, 2010:61). The absence of similar rituals for the Supreme Being suggests that His presence is acknowledged intellectually and cosmologically, but not integrated into the routine rhythms of communal worship. Thus, the lack of direct devotion is not necessarily a denial of His existence, but a cultural way of expressing His transcendence and distance. Moreso, the absence of direct worship of the Supreme Being has theological implications. It highlights the paradox of reverence and estrangement in Ibibio religious thought. On the one hand, Abasi is exalted as the origin and sustainer of life, while on the other; He is practically excluded from the religious expressions of daily life. This paradox illustrates the dual nature of the Ibibio conception of the divine: God is both central in theory and marginal in practice. It is precisely this paradox that gives rise to the characterization of the Supreme Being as a stranger in Ibibio religion (Ukpong, 2017:64).

The “Strangerhood” of the Supreme Being

The idea of the Supreme Being as a “stranger” in Ibibio religious thought captures the paradox of reverence without intimacy. While *AbasiIbom* is acknowledged as the ultimate creator and sustainer, He remains largely absent from the daily religious life of the people. His “strangerhood” does not mean that He is unknown or irrelevant; rather, it reflects His distance from human affairs and the lack of direct ritual engagement with Him (Brown, 2018:35). In this sense, He is central and marginal—recognized in thought but absent in practice. This perception of estrangement is rooted in the Ibibio understanding of divine transcendence. Abasi is believed to dwell in the highest realm, far removed from human struggles and concerns. His greatness makes Him inaccessible, and as a result, ordinary people rarely invoke Him in prayers or sacrifices (Etuk, 2002:109). Unlike divinities and ancestors, who are familiar and relatable, Abasi is “too big” for human interaction. This distance creates the impression of a God who, though supreme, is a stranger to the practical realities of daily existence.

The strangerhood of the Supreme Being also reflects the Ibibio view of divine delegation. The people believe that Abasi entrusts the governance of human affairs to divinities and ancestors, who act as His representatives. Thus, when the Ibibio offer sacrifices or prayers to *ndem* or ancestors, they are indirectly acknowledging Abasi's ultimate authority (Ekong, 2001:79). However, because the intermediaries are more visible and responsive, Abasi appears withdrawn, like a king who rules from a distance but allows governors and chiefs to handle the affairs of the people. This political metaphor helps explain why the Supreme Being feels like a stranger in His

own creation. Yet, the concept of strangerhood should not be understood only as absence but also as reverence. To the Ibibio, the remoteness of the Supreme Being signifies His purity and majesty. Direct worship might even diminish His sacredness by making Him too familiar; in this way, keeping Him at a distance serves as a form of respect, ensuring that His uniqueness remains intact (Essien, 2010:68). Thus, His estrangement is paradoxically a sign of exaltation rather than neglect. Moreover, the idea of the Supreme Being as a stranger opens up profound philosophical reflections. It raises questions about the human need for both transcendence and immanence in religious life. On one hand, Abasi's distance underscores His otherness and supreme authority; on the other, it leaves a gap that is filled by lesser divinities and ancestors. This tension illustrates the dual nature of Ibibio religion: recognition of an ultimate source of being, coupled with a reliance on accessible intermediaries. It is within this tension that the Supreme Being stands as a revered yet distant stranger in Ibibio religious thought (Ukpong, 2017:72).

Role of Divinities (Ndem) as Intermediaries

1. Guardians of Natural Forces: The *ndem* are widely believed to control natural elements such as rivers, forests, and fertility of the land. Specific divinities are associated with particular locations or phenomena—such as water deities that regulate fishing, farming, and rainfall (Essien, 2010:75). Because the Ibibio people depend heavily on agriculture and fishing, these divinities are vital for their survival. By mediating between humans and nature, the *ndem* play a protective role, ensuring that resources remain abundant and accessible. This makes them indispensable in everyday religious practice. Accordingly, Nana (2016:168) avers that the traditional African understanding is that belong to the ecosystem and the environment is profoundly religious and many things on earth are held in high esteem for religions, especially, when they are thought to be dwelling place for the spirit.

2. Providers of Fertility and Prosperity: Another central role of the *ndem* is the promotion of fertility, both in human life and in agriculture. Fertility deities are invoked during planting seasons and during family rituals seeking children (Ekong, 2001:84). The Ibibio believe that barrenness, poor harvests, or economic hardship often result from the displeasure of these spirits. Sacrifices and offerings are therefore made to appease them and secure blessings of abundance. In this sense, the *ndem* act as custodians of prosperity, directly linking human welfare to divine favor. The African Traditional Religion is strictly linked with rituals, which are expressed in sacrifice, since it is in sacrifice that the Supreme Being is reached, the gods and the lesser divinities, appease for man's peaceful existence in the world. Nana (2018: 1-6).

3. Agents of Protection and Healing: The *ndem* also function as agents of protection against evil forces, sickness, and misfortune. Ibibio traditional healers often invoke specific divinities in rituals designed to ward off spiritual attacks or cure diseases (Etuk, 2002:116). By mediating divine power in healing practices, the *ndem* bridge the gap between the Supreme Being's ultimate authority and human vulnerability. Their role in health and protection reinforces their reputation as more approachable than the distant Supreme Being.

4. Enforcers of Justice and Morality: Some *ndem* are associated with the enforcement of justice and communal morality. They are believed to punish wrongdoers, uphold truth, and preserve the moral order of society (Udo, 1983:62). In traditional Ibibio communities, oaths are sometimes sworn in the name of a deity to prove innocence or sincerity, with the belief that falsehood would bring swift punishment. Through this role, the *ndem* ensure that human conduct aligns with communal values, making them critical arbiters of justice and order. Consequently, just persons manifest a commitment to both justice and fairness, the equal treatment of persons, open

mindfulness, tolerance for and recognition of diversity. They ensure that justice and fairness are crucial part of decision making. Nana & Udom (2024:153).

Role of Ancestors (Ekpo) in Ibibio Religion

1. Custodians of Moral Order: The ancestors (*ekpo*) are revered as moral guardians who uphold the values and traditions of the community. They are believed to monitor the living, ensuring that individuals respect customs, maintain honesty, and act responsibly toward others (Etuk, 2002:124). Wrongdoing or disobedience is thought to invite ancestral displeasure, which may manifest in misfortune or sickness. Through this role, the ancestors function as invisible enforcers of morality, preserving social harmony and cultural continuity. According to Nana (2023:3) he avers that the ancestors are prayed to for there is always communication between man and his ancestors. Man always seeks help from his ancestors through prayer.

2. Protectors of the Living: Ancestors are also regarded as protective spirits who watch over their descendants. Families often call upon them during crises, seeking safety from danger, warfare, or spiritual attacks (Essien, 2010:82). In return for libations and sacrifices, the ancestors are believed to provide guidance, ward off evil forces, and ensure the well-being of the family. This role highlights their intimate relationship with the living, making them accessible guardians compared to the distant Supreme Being.

3. Mediators Between Humans and the Spiritual Realm: Like the divinities, ancestors serve as intermediaries between humans and the Supreme Being. However, their role is more personal and familial, since they once lived among the people and understand human struggles (Udo, 1983:73). When prayers or sacrifices are made, they are believed to carry these petitions upward to the higher deities or ultimately to *Abasi Ibom*. This mediatory function strengthens the perception that the Supreme Being is a stranger, since daily communication is routed through ancestral spirits.

4. Preservers of Lineage and Identity: The ancestors embody the history and identity of the Ibibio people, linking the present generation to the past. Rituals of remembrance—such as annual feasts and offerings—reinforce family lineage and ensure continuity across generations (Ekong, 2001:91). Ancestors thus serve as cultural anchors, reminding the community of their roots and traditions. By venerating them, the Ibibio affirm their collective identity and honor the values passed down through generations.

The Supreme Being and the Concept of *Deus Otiosus*

The concept of *Deus Otiosus*, which translates to the “idle god” or “retired god,” is useful in understanding the Ibibio perception of the Supreme Being. In many African religious traditions, including that of the Ibibio, the Supreme Being is acknowledged as the Creator but is often perceived as distant and not directly involved in daily human affairs (Idowu, 1973:58). This theological interpretation suggests that once the Creator established the universe and its moral order, divine responsibility for daily life was delegated to lesser spiritual entities such as ancestors, divinities, and nature spirits. The Ibibio worldview thus embodies this duality: recognition of God's supremacy alongside a practical detachment in everyday religious practices.

The *Deus Otiosus* framework helps explain why rituals, sacrifices, and petitions are directed not primarily to the Supreme Being but to intermediaries like *ndem* (spirits of water and land), *ekaabasi* (ancestral mothers), or personal ancestors. These intermediaries are believed to be more accessible and responsive to immediate needs such as fertility, protection, health, and prosperity (Brown, 2018:94). The perceived distance of the Supreme Being therefore shaped the religious imagination of the Ibibio, where divine authority was acknowledged but religious energy was

focused on spirits considered closer to human life. However, the characterization of the Supreme Being as “idle” does not imply irrelevance. Among the Ibibio, God (*AbasiIbom*) remained the ultimate source of life, morality, and cosmic balance, even if He was not the first recourse in daily worship. People invoked God in moments of crisis, oaths, or ultimate appeals for justice—circumstances that surpassed the perceived power of intermediaries (Mbiti, 1991:74). Thus, while the Supreme Being was a “stranger” to regular ritual life, He was still understood as the final recourse in matters of destiny and the unseen order.

The concept of *Deus Otiosus* in Ibibio thought reveals the paradox of divine presence and absence. God is acknowledged everywhere yet approached sparingly. This tension underscores why the Ibibio Supreme Being can be described as central and marginal, intimate and distant, revered yet estranged. Ultimately, the framework illustrates the complexity of Ibibio religion: a faith system in which the Creator's transcendence and remoteness coexist with divine indispensability in the moral and existential foundation of human life.

Theological and Philosophical Implications of the Concept of the Supreme Being

1. The Paradox of Transcendence and Immanence: In Ibibio thought, the Supreme Being (*AbasiIbom*) is seen as both highly transcendent and yet somehow immanent through the activities of divinities and ancestors. This dual role creates a theological paradox: while God is acknowledged as the ultimate source of life, the actual religious life of the people revolves around intermediaries. Philosophically, this tension raises questions about whether transcendence necessarily excludes active immanence, or whether divine remoteness is a cultural way of preserving God's sacredness (Brown, 2018:92).

2. The Problem of Divine Hiddenness: The perception of the Supreme Being as a “stranger” in Ibibio religion highlights the broader theological issue of divine hiddenness. If God is the creator and sustainer of the universe, why is He not the central figure in daily worship? For philosophers of religion, this raises debates about the accessibility of God and the epistemic distance between humans and the divine. The Ibibio case provides a unique example of how divine hiddenness is not equated with atheism but with mediated worship through spiritual hierarchies (Ekong, 2020:47).

3. Moral Authority and Ethical Foundations: Even though *AbasiIbom* is distant, His existence establishes the moral fabric of Ibibio society. God is often regarded as the guarantor of justice, order, and cosmic balance. For example, oaths sworn in God's name carry deep moral weight, showing that divine authority anchors social ethics. Philosophically, this suggests that morality in Ibibio culture does not require constant divine intervention but rests on the belief that the Supreme Being underwrites moral order (Essien, 2016:103).

4. The Role of Intermediaries and the Question of Mediation: The Ibibio reliance on ancestors, divinities, and nature spirits to reach God introduces a significant theological implication: the necessity of mediation. This structure resonates with the “chain of being” concept in classical philosophy, where lower beings mediate between humans and the divine. It raises questions about human limitations, divine accessibility, and the legitimacy of indirect worship. Theologically, it parallels debates in Christianity about Christ as mediator, suggesting points of convergence and divergence in religious philosophy (Idowu, 1962:88).

Conclusion

The study of the Supreme Being within Ibibio religious thought reveals a paradox that underscores both the grandeur and remoteness of divinity. While the Ibibio people recognize *AbasiIbom* as the

ultimate source of creation, life, and order, this deity often appears distant from the practical affairs of everyday existence. Instead, intermediaries such as ancestors, divinities, and spiritual forces take center stage in religious devotion and ritual. This detachment constructs the image of the Supreme Being as a “stranger”—present in belief yet absent in practice. This paradox points to a deeply philosophical worldview. The Ibibio religious structure reflects a layered cosmos where the Supreme Being's transcendence is preserved by withdrawal from mundane concerns, while lesser deities and spirits mediate between humanity and the divine (Essien, 2019:87). Such an arrangement suggests that the Ibibio people perceive the divine in gradations, respecting the sovereignty of the Supreme Being while relying on more approachable spiritual agents for immediate needs.

Colonial and Christian influences further reshaped this conception, emphasizing God's immanence and personal relationship with believers. Missionary teachings criticized the Ibibio tendency to distance the Supreme Being, replacing it with doctrines of divine accessibility. However, this transition has not erased the underlying Ibibio worldview; rather, it has created a syncretic religious landscape where both distance and closeness of God coexist in tension (Brown, 2018:45). Theologically, the notion of a “stranger God” raises questions about the nature of divine transcendence, human dependence on intermediaries, and the challenge of maintaining reverence while seeking accessibility. Philosophically, it illustrates the limitations of human understanding in bridging the gap between the infinite and the finite.

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