

# **Totemism in Igboland and the Challenges of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century**

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## **ABSTRACT**

*Igbo mythology and belief system acknowledge the value and influence of natural creatures (plants and animals) on man. In the light of the aforementioned, man, plants and animals continually play friendly and symbiotic interactions. The value of plants is not only limited to their medicinal contents, but the spirituality and respect accorded to them as mediums and pathways to communicating with the gods and ancestors. The deification of 'sacred trees' and animals in Igboland marked the institution of totemism. The friendly nature of ominous animals in some Igbo communities is not only surprising but breathtaking. Nonetheless, the sacredness of Igbo totemism is fast vanishing, owing to socio-cultural, scientific and economic activities of man. The 21<sup>st</sup> century is a century of culture clash, as religion, alien culture, western education and developments not only relegate Igbo totems to the background, but forcing them to abrupt extinction.*

**Keywords: Totemism, Igboland, deification and environment**

## **Introduction**

Igboland is known for its sacred observance of culture and tradition. Traditional Igbo religion believes on the spirituality of plants and animals. Therefore, religious taboos and laws control the socio-political and religious activities of every Igbo community. Religious taboos, involved a great deal of what we could call asceticism. Whole communities deprived themselves of palatable and nutritious foods in religion's name- among them, the sacred fish of the Imo River.<sup>1</sup> Animals and plants constitute human food, and their importance is obviously great. African peoples and indeed the Igbo society are hedge round with myriads of norms most standing out expressly as taboos often having totemic force and penetrating deep down the fabric of the society at times manifesting in religious forms and bearing direct link with the concept of God. Creeping animals feature in religious concepts more than do other wild animals<sup>2</sup>.

Mystical trees feature in a number of stories. The bible tells us about God's admonition to man to respect and avoid the fruits of the sacred tree in the centre of the garden of Eden.(Gen 2:17 ).<sup>3</sup> Thus in the classic anthropological sense, totemism linked man into groups under an emblem of a common totemic species (animal or plant) and set them apart from groups claiming common origin under other species.<sup>4</sup> For Emil Durkheim, social order is primarily an assemblage of totems. In other words, totemism is among other things a theory of origins, a theory of relationship of group of people to nature.<sup>5</sup> It seeks to show the relationship between a particular group and their environment (here environment includes man, water(rivers/streams), animals and plants), and how such relationship influence the behaviour of the people compel their attention and obedience. The Igbo seem to revere certain plants, animals fishes and reptiles in certain streams/waters and deify them in their everyday dealings. Thus totemism in Igboland is a practice that is as old as the people. The paper therefore seeks to examine randomly the place of

totemism in Igboland and the challenges this practice has faced over time particularly in the contemporary order.

### **Conceptual understanding of totemism and its place in Igbo worldview**

One curious issue that usually confronts one when reflecting on the concept of totem is the manner with which it has been thought of and interpreted over time by scholars, especially in relation to Africa, leading to different approaches to its study and its impact on Africa which often time leads to unscrupulous generalizations.<sup>6</sup> This on its own has necessitated the production of varied definitions of the concept. Thus totemism as a concept is defined as the assertion of kinship between man and species of animals, or of some other animate or inanimate objects. In its strict sense, the concept of totemism possesses a dual character. It is a form of social organization and a magico-religious practice<sup>7</sup>. For Theoderson, totems in particular are a species of animals and occasionally a species of plants whose life is conceived to be bound up with the life of a tribe, and to be closely linked with the well being of the social whole.<sup>8</sup> According to Burton, totems are used to designate those things whose names the clan or family bears and reveres. The attendant belief in the respect for the totems and their rituals connected with their worship are termed totemism.<sup>9</sup> Sigmund Freud, on his own, sees totems as a series of socialized rules given a mystical sanction to guide individuals from committing acts for which they have unconscious inclination. In other words, taboos are used to guide the moral behaviours of people in the society.<sup>10</sup> On the part of Durkheim, while trying to build a nexus between man and his natural environment in an apparent attempt to define man's relationship with things around him, observed that the tribe religiously believes that an ultimate relationship exists between it and

natural phenomena, material objects or species of animals.<sup>11</sup> The definitions are plethora, and each builds a direct connection between man and his environment, interpreting that relationship from man's disposition to animals and plants under his control. Thus from the few definitions, one readily sees that the practice of totemism is essentially the veneration or deification of animals or plant species by man as a result of how the society has over time taken that animal or plant to be.

In the history of religious ideas, the belief that the earliest gods were animal or plants is very old, and it has been persistent, tenacious and adaptable as well.<sup>12</sup> Igbo mythology and religious ontology have a strong belief that animals have their *chi* (personal god). An animal may become the *chi* of a man. It is said that the children of hunters are liable to have the *chi* of animals slain by their fathers. In this way, animals revenge themselves on men.<sup>13</sup> A survey of Igboland has shown the ubiquity of totemic laws, deification of animals and trees, sanctions and retributive actions guiding man, animals and trees. In Ezioha, a village in Mgbowo (Awgu area) for instance, the Amegugwu family (an exogamous unit within the larger clan), are forbidden to harm, eat or kill a specie of brown monkey called *Utobo*. It is the family's belief that *Utobo* are representatives of the kindred, and bear a direct link between the living and the dead. Every male in the family is represented by his own *Utobo*. Therefore, the death of the animal will eventually crystallize in the death of a man in the family, vice-versa. Amegugwu family is reputed to have the powers to summon, command, ward off or invoke *Utobo* into an enemy's farm<sup>14</sup> to ravage crops planted in such farm, and as result, they are feared and even respected by the people in that community.

In Eha-Amufu (Nsukka Division) for instance, *Ebe* (the spirit of the river) controls the fish in that particular river. The big fishes are the counterparts of the principal men of the village-group,

while the fry are the counterparts of persons of no consequence or significance in the society. When a villager dies, a fish dies, and when a fish dies a villager dies. It is a taboo, therefore, to fish in that river.<sup>15</sup> writing on the religious taboos and the inter-dependency of man and animals in pre-colonial Igbo society, Equiano enthused:

we have serpents of different kinds, some of which are extreme ominous when they appear in our houses, and there we never molest. I was desired by some of the wise men to touch these (snakes) that I might be interested in the good omens, which I did, for they were quite harmless<sup>16</sup>

Similarly Chinua Achebe lucidly pointed out the centrality of sacred pythons in riverine communities of Igboland thus:

the royal python was the most revered animal in Mbanta (Things fall Apart) and all the surrounding clans. It was addressed as 'our father' and was allowed to go wherever it chose, even into people's beds<sup>17</sup>.

Deification of pythons is a common heritage and religion in Idemili area of Anambra state. Charles Ejimbe of Akwukwu community in Idemili argued that royal pythons are representatives of the gods and guardian of the children of Idemili. Python seldomly bites people, if it does, it will sigh, and thus retrieving the venom from its victim.<sup>18</sup> This reverence for python is also observed in Nnewi, and Igboukwu areas of Anambra state. Similarly, in Afikpo area of Ebonyi state, the *Oziza* cultural group deifies crab. Consequently it is an abomination for anybody in that community to capture, kill or eat crab, lest the anger of the gods would strike the person. More so, Amankwo community is widely known for her unalloyed allegiance and respect for kites (Egbe).<sup>19</sup> In Akpugoeze in Oji River area of Enugu state, they revere and honour inanimate and animate things. Here, the people deify a particular specie of monkeys, and they are not harmed or killed neither do they allow hunter from neighbouring communities to hunt them. The same reverence applies to the fishes and crocodiles in Ajana stream. These animals in the stream are

not harmed and it is forbidden to fish in that stream. In the same Akpugoeze, it is forbidden to hunt or kill eagles. The honouring of these animals is equivalent to the worship of deities, and the close affinity is viewed by them as something that has supernatural powers;<sup>20</sup> this is the manifestation of the powers of totemism in the area. Ominous animals are not worshipped but deified. They are the ambassadors of deities and spirit forces in Igboland. *Ngeleishi* deity of Mgbowo maintains a cordial link with black snakes, butter flies, bees, snails and millipedes as her agents and emissaries. The family of Umudegbo (priestly family of *Ngedeishi*) is in symbiotic relationship with black snakes, they have the exclusive religious powers to command snakes, owing to their exalted position in *Ngeleishi* temple.<sup>21</sup>

In Okpanku area of Aninri local council of Enugu state, the male members of the village have no *chi* symbols, but they believe that their spirits reside in the fish of the river, *Ivo*, and that each fish is part of a man's *Obi* (heart) or vital essence. When a man dies, his soul goes to *Ivo* and *Ivo* gives it back to *chi-okike*.<sup>22</sup> Continuing on his survey of totemic laws, Meek observed that in Lokpanta, leopards are sacred to the kindreds of Umu-Ago and Umu-ohe. It is believed that any member of these kindred's can turn into a leopard, and in this guise steal the goats of anyone he dislikes<sup>22</sup>. Comparatively, domestic animals dedicated to the deity as living sacrifices are automatically totemic. Francis Arinze posits that:

some animals are offered in sacrifice without being killed. The sacrificial animal is given a special mark that will make everyone know that it has been consecrated. The ceremony is called *igo anu n' alusi* (consecrating an animal to a spirit). Then such as animal is let go in *liberty*. It is created with great reverence.<sup>23</sup>

A clear example of Arinze's description was the obstinate *Mkpi Ajali* (*Ajali* He goat) and *Ehi Eguta* (*Egunta* Cow) in Ndeaboh. The aforementioned were noted for their destructive

tendencies and uncommon obstinacies in the late 1980s and early 1990s. The driving force of the animal's stubbornness was largely due to their spiritual attachment to *Ajali* and *Egunta* deities respectively.<sup>24</sup>

Animals are not the only totemic and sacred features of Igbo tradition; trees occupy veritable position in Igbo religion, hence the observance of some trees as spirit, mediums and curative elements. Evidences abound of Igbo priests making sacrifices under a particular tree. The Iroko tree *Oji* is revered as *okosis* in Igbo tradition and a tree with spiritual force. The *Ogirisi* tree is a spiritual tree revered by *Eze Ji* (king of yam) and used in surrounding yam bans of an *Eze ji* in Mbaise area of Imo state. Mythical trees are not peculiar to Igbo society. Several African societies make reference to trees as a medium and source of life or even God. The Herero speak of their 'tree of life' said to be located in the world beyond and believed to be source from which all life emanates. Some, like the Nuer and Sandwa hold that man originated from a tree. There are sacred grooves and other trees, including the sycamore and the baobab, used for religious purposes or associated with God and other spiritual beings.<sup>25</sup>

In Mgbowo, the *Akpu Onyima*, a prominent silk tree, located at Obodo Ikoro (Ezioha) was sacred and highly deified. The shading off of any of its branches was generally believed to be a determinant act, capable of inflicting danger on the community as a whole. The branches of *Akpu Onyima* depicted virtues, prominence, value system and greatness.<sup>26</sup> Deification of trees (totems) was given a firm description by Ogbalu; he averred that:

some species of plants are held sacred or are actually worshipped or sacrifices offered to them. Example of such trees held sacred in some places are *Akpu* (silk-coton tree), *Iroko*, *Ngwu*, *ofo*, *ogirist* etc. such plants are used in offering worship to the idols.<sup>27</sup>

## **Igbo Totemism and the Challenges of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century**

It is a popular aphorism that twenty first century is a century of change and revolution. These occur in various ways namely: biologically, technologically, scientifically, socially, religiously and through cultural revolutions. Animals and plants face challenges daily, and those (challenges) are multifaceted, thus: predatory attacks, deforestation, radical Christian evangelism poor governmental policies, chronic poverty and hunger all affect the continued maintenance and observance of totem animals and the practice of totemism in Igboland. Tom Regan sketched out the tripartite institutions that abuse the existence of animals. These institutions are: agriculture, fashion, and the allied sciences.<sup>27</sup>

The challenges of Igbo totemism can be categorized into three segments thus:

- (a) Biomedical Research and Biotechnology
- (b) Indiscriminate Hunting and Trapping and
- (c) Hyper Evangelism in Christendom.

### **Biomedical Research and Biotechnology**

Biomedical researches and technology have undermined the potency of totemic animals and plants in Igboland. It will be noteworthy to mention that biomedical research violates the rights of animals. Regan gave a clearer view of the effects of biomedical on animals as follows:

Through the past sixty years, one common toxicity test conducted on animals is the LD<sup>50</sup> “LD” stands for “Lethal Dose”, “50” for 50%. As the words suggest, the LD<sup>50</sup> seeks to established at what dosage the test substance will prove lethal (that is, will kill) 50% of the test animals. LD<sup>50</sup> works this way. The test substance is orally administered to the test animals, some of whom are given the substance in more, others in less, concentrated forms. In theory, anything and everything has a lethal dose. Even water has been

shown to be lethal to 50% of test animals, if enough is consumed in a short period of time. In order to control variables and because the animals themselves will not “volunteer” to swallow such things, a measured amount is passed through a tube and down the animals’ throats. Observation of their condition may last up to two weeks, during which time the requisite 50% normally die, after which the remaining animals are killed and their dissected bodies examined.<sup>28</sup>

Biological and scientific research institutes in Igboland and elsewhere are not exonerated from the aforementioned abuse of nature. The routine animal hunts by biological and research institutions are a clear indication of the abuse of animal rights. Onyekelu pointed that students often go for hunting during biology and agricultural science practical exams. These students, most of them ignorant of the culture and totemic practices of the town, desecrate sacred creatures by either destroying their habitat or killing them in the name of searching for biological specimens.<sup>29</sup> Similarly, biological and scientific improvements on herbicides and its general acceptance by Igbo farmers in the wake of 21<sup>st</sup> century has been a challenge to wildlife and totemic plants. Orji Ibe argues that the gradual disappearance of some species of animals (totems) from the ecology could be attributed to the ceaseless use of chemicals in agricultural activities by Igbo farmers. He expressed deep worry fearing that the age of naturalism has gone.<sup>30</sup>

### **Indiscriminate Hunting and Trapping**

Hunting is an aspect of Igbo socio-economic and recreational activity. The importance of hunting is evident in Igbo political structure, where distinguished hunters are accorded uncommon titles such as *ogbuagu*, *dinta*, *ogbugo* and the likes. Northrop maintains that hunting was decidedly an important activity by the early fifteen century in Igboland.<sup>31</sup> Hunting in Igboland has undergone series of transformative stages, from the use of stone tools to the 21st century use of sophisticated guns and arms. Indiscriminate hunting of totemic animals has been intensified in the twenty first century. Esom Ogu noted that the influx of Fulani herdsmen in Igboland as a major threat to totemism and totems preservation in recent times. They (Fulani herdsmen) know nothing about the cultural and traditional laws and norms of Igbo society, hence they embark on hunting for both sacred and non-sacred animals in Igboland.<sup>32</sup> The activities of Fulani herdsmen contravene Section 42, sub-sections A,C,E,J of 1966 Eastern Nigeria Forest Laws and regulation which states as follows:

Whoever, in a forest reserve, except with the authority in writing of a forest officer not below the rank of Assistant Conservator-

(a) Takes any forest produce;

(c) Sets fire to any grass or herbage, or kindles a fire without taking due precaution to prevent its spreading;

(e) Pastures cattle or permits cattle to trespass;

(f) Hunts or fishes,

Shall be liable on summary conviction to a fine of one hundred pounds or to imprisonment for twelve months or to both such fine and imprisonment and, in

addition thereto, may be required by the court to pay a sum equivalent to the fees and royalties payable on any forest produce removed or damaged.<sup>33</sup>

### **Extreme Christian Evangelism and Man's expansionist tendency**

The coming of Christian missionaries to Igboland had far-reaching effects on the Igbo. Apart from the pervasive ideology of spreading western education, Christian liturgy and norms, the customs and practices of the people were considered primitive and pagan<sup>34</sup> and consequently came under pervasive attack. The continuous Eurocentric description of African religious mode of worship as paganism and primitive changed the psyche and mentality of some overzealous and fanatical African Christians towards impiety on sacred objects, taboos and religious ethics. Tagbo Ugwu captured the wave of cultural and ethical changes in the peoples' antagonistic attitude towards traditional sanctions and taboos.<sup>35</sup> This new wave of traditional apostasy was highly manifested in Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, where the newly converted Christian extremist (Enoch) killed the sacred python. Achebe described these new radical Christian devotees as "the outsider who wept louder than the bereaved."<sup>36</sup>

Similarly, the first quarter of the year 2014 witnessed an unhealthy religious turmoil in Mpu (a community in Enugu State), following the killing of 'aka' a totemic green snake by a Catholic priest. *Aka* is notable for its socio-religious and sacred identities in Aninri and Awgu areas of Enugu State.<sup>37</sup> Totemic animals are not the sole victims of this new wave of antagonism, but totemic trees. The quest for expansion and acquisition of land has led to the desecration of

ancestral bushes, grooves, trees and sacred artifacts. Specific example could be found in Mgbowo, where notable sacred grooves have been turned to avenues and layouts overnight.

### **Recommendations**

The socio-environmental impact of totems to the society cannot be over-emphasized ,apart from the natural calmness and eco-friendliness of totems, they also create a sense of cultural identity.As medium of worship and veneration of the almighty,there should be an urgent need for the preservation of totems in Igboland. A notable means for the preservation of some of the distinct animals from going extinction is by maintaining a viable and ultra-modern game reserve in the five Igbo states.The gradual reclaiming of totems from the forest and domestication of totemic animals in confinements will no doubt preserve these cultural heritage. Government and private individuals should embark on game reserve as a tourist attraction and as means of revenue generation.

Similarly,the media should owe it as a point of national assignment to educate the public on the negative effects of deforestation and bush burning.Awareness should also be intensified on the arbitrary use of herbicides by farmers. A joint regulatory/monitoring team of Veterinary Association of Nigeria and the Ministry of Culture and Tourism should be established specifically for the protection of animals.

Animal rights have been a neglected affair especially in Africa.This paper recommends a stringent penalty to indiscriminate haunting in Igboland and Nigeria in general.This will serve as a counter measure to the anthropogenic activities in the ecosystem.

The influx of Fulani herdsmen should be monitored and if possible curtailed in Igboland. The “invaders” are not acquainted with the sacrosanctity of most animals in the society, hence the unwarranted hunting and killing of totems in their habitats.

## **Conclusion**

What the paper has done is merely to examine a few of the areas in Igboland where totemic culture pervades the society and produce restraining attitudes that show respect and reverence to certain animals and trees. These societies over time have lived with the knowledge that these objects have deep meaning in not only their traditions, but in their personal lives and relationships with the objects and one another. Totems and totemic practices still exist in many Igbo areas notwithstanding the negating of these by the so-called born again Christians and ‘over’ educated individuals in the society. The preservation of these totem animals, trees and streams should be done to avoid complete dislocation from the traditions of the past.

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