

TOTEMISM IN AFRICA: A PHILOSOPHICAL EVALUATION OF ITS SIGNIFICANCE IN A WORLD OF CHANGE

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Abstract

Totemism has to do with the veneration of some natural objects, namely, animals, plants and other physical objects. Totems are believed to have some spiritual or supernatural powers. In this regard, the mishandling or killing of totemic animals is considered a taboo in most African cultures. Belief in totems is a common practice in the traditional African society. African people have deep sense of reverence for either their personal or group totems. This study focuses on Igbo society. The study is guided by the following questions: What is the rational basis for belief in totems? Does belief in totems have any significance in Igbo society in the world of change? Or can we say that belief in totems is now obsolete and without any practical significant value? Therefore, employing the philosophical methods of critical analysis and hermeneutics, the study argues that totems in themselves have no inherent powers and as such, belief in them can best be regarded as irrational and superstitious. However, it further concludes from a functional perspective that totemism has some significance in the areas of ecology and tourism.

Keywords: Totemism, African, Igbo Society, Culture, Change

Introduction

The idea of the sacred in African society is as old as the African. Faced with the puzzles, wonders and mysteries in nature, the African had no choice than to consider certain objects and plants as sacred. These objects and places are seen from the perspective of the divine. And as such, they are not to be toyed with; they are given special reverence especially as objects of worship. "The sacred", in the understanding of Roberston, "is to

be treated with a certain specific attitude of respect.”¹Africans believe that spirits inhabit the sacred objects and places. This understanding also gave rise to the reality of totems in African ontology. For sure, belief in totems is an existential fact among African people. Certain trees, animals, places and individuals are regarded as totems. They are seen as sacred objects that symbolize something real for the people that entertain such belief. Totems are also believed to possess some spiritual and supernatural powers. The thrust of this study is to expose the belief and practice of totemism in Africa and also to ascertain the significance of such belief and practice in a world of change. The focus of this study is on Igbo – African society.

Totemism: A Brief Exposé

Generally, the notion of totem is associated with the idea of kinship between certain animals, animate or inanimate beings and a particular individual or group of individuals in a given society. It shows that there is a spiritual link between a totemic object and the person or persons concerned. The concept, totem, is derived from the Ojibwa² word *ototeman* which simply means a brother – sister blood tie. The grammatical root *ote* actually signifies a blood relationship between brothers and sisters who have the same mother and who, according to custom, may not marry each other.³The Dictionary of Beliefs and Religion sees totems as objects that serve as a representation of a society or person, and from which the members of that society are thought to descend. This implies that totems are symbolic in nature. Various scholars have varied views on the concept of totem. In the understanding of Burton as cited in Nwashindu and Ihediwa, “totems are used to designate those things whose names the clan or family bears or reveres.”⁴In this sense, the kind of name of a person or a particular clan or community can be traced to their totems.

Amirthalingam observes that “totemism denotes a mystical or ritual relationship among members of a specific social group and specie, of animals or plants.”⁵ Theoderson sees the notion of totems as a kind of spiritual bond that exists between a particular animal and a tribe which accounts for the wellbeing of the people.⁶One thing to note from the various views of scholars is that totemism is an expression of a relationship that exists between particular human beings and their natural environment. This relationship could be between the people and a particular animal, plant or place. For the simple fact of the relationship

that exists between a totemic group and the totem, there is a deep reverence for the totemic being. There are rules and regulations to ensure the protection, preservation and reverence of the totemic beings. In most African societies, it is a taboo and a violation of cultural and spiritual life to hurt, mishandle or kill a totemic animal. Totems are handled with utmost respect and care. "Totemism implies respect for and prohibition against the killing and eating of the totemic animals or plants. Underlying this practice is the belief that the members of the group are descendants from a common totemic ancestor and thus are related."⁷Nwashindu and Ihediwa related that a survey of Igboland shows the ubiquity of totemic laws, deification of animals and trees, sanctions and retributive actions guiding men, animals and trees.⁸The point here is that totems are very much respected by the totemic group. This deep respect may also stem from the belief that totems protect the totemic group from enemies and dangers.

Totemism in Africa

The reality of totems or the belief in totems among Africans is not something that is new to the African. Africa is well known for the belief and practice of totemism. The African people believe that the human person can be related in two ways. First, a person can have blood relationship. This type of relationship shows that the persons in question have the same father or mother. This is a type of relationship that can be traced by blood. The second understanding of relationship is the totemic relationship. This means that the people in question share the same totems. This can be seen from the perspective of a clan, village or a whole community or even people from different communities with the same totemic being. So human relationship in African perspective can be consanguineous or totemic.

Without mincing words, belief and practice of totemism is a well-known fact in African thought and culture. The world of the African is not only the world of human beings alone; it includes both living and nonliving things. This position is amplified by Onwubiko: "Ideologically speaking, the African world is a world of inanimate, animate and spiritual beings. The African is conscious of the influence of each category of these beings in the universe. Their existence, for the African, is reality; so also is the fact that they interact as co-existent beings in the universe."⁹ Totemism in Africa constitutes part of the cherished cultural values of the African

people. The nature of this study will not allow us to expose everything about the belief and practice of totemism in Africa. However, we shall focus on totemism in Igboland as a unit of African society.

Totemism in Igbo Worldview

The Igbo people are an ethnic group native to the present day southeast and south-south Nigeria. Igbo people constitute one of the largest ethnic groups in Africa.¹⁰ As one of the ethnic groups in Africa, there are many totemic animals and plants in Igboland. These animals and plants are seen as sacred and as such, are accorded deep reverence. Below are some of the totemic animals and plants in some parts of Igboland:

Python: A python is a large reptile found in many communities of the Igbo cultural area. Some clans and communities see python as a totem. Among those communities are Idemili, Enugwu Ukwu, Abagana, Nnewi, Ogidi, Oguta, Mgbidi, Njaba, Urualla, Awo-Omamma, etc. In these communities, python is very much revered and cared for. Nwashindu and Ihediwa observed that “deification of python is a common heritage and religion in Idemili area of Anambra state”¹¹ In the communities that have python as a totem, it is a taboo to hurt or kill a python. If consciously or unconsciously one kills a python, the person is expected to carry out burial rites for the python as if it is a human being. This view is in line with the submission of Adibe as cited in I. A. Kanu: “No one makes the mistakes of killing it [python] voluntarily or involuntarily. When it is done accidentally, it is buried with the appropriate religious rituals and rites accorded to it. If it is killed knowingly, it is considered an abomination.”¹²

Monkey: This is another totemic animal in Igboland. The people Awka in Anambra state do not joke with monkey. It is a taboo to hurt or kill a monkey in Awka. It is believed among the people that monkeys possess some spiritual and supernatural powers and they were quite instrumental to Awka people in the time of war. Following the instrumentality of the black monkeys in helping Awka people defeat their enemies, there is an annual Imoka festival in Awka which is linked to the myth of the black monkey. Also brown monkeys are seen as totems in Ezioha in Mgbowo community of Enugu state. The people “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.”¹³ Among the people of Akpugoeze in Enugu state, monkeys are also seen as totems. They are regarded as sacred and no one dares challenge them. Any attempt to hunt or kill a monkey in Akpugoeze is seen as abomination.

Ram: This is another totemic animal in some parts of Igboland. The people of Umuanya Nwoko kindred of Itungwa in Abia state regard ram as a totemic animal. Every member of the community is forbidden from hurting, killing or eating ram. The people can have rams as domestic animals but they are not allowed to eat it. Anyone who eats the meat of a ram automatically falls sick which will certainly lead to the person’s death.

Tortoise and Crocodile: These reptiles are regarded as totemic animals in Agulu community of Anambra state. Also most communities in riverine Ogbaru local government area of Anambra state treat tortoise and crocodile as sacred animals.

Tiger: This is an animal that is generally dreaded by people. But in Umulelu in Obingwa of Abia state, tiger is a sacred animal. It is not harmful to the people. As a totemic animal among the people, tiger is neither eaten nor killed among the people of Umulelu. Oral history has it that some members of the community transformed themselves occasionally into tigers and performed some assignments as tigers and later changed back to human beings. There is a close tie between the people and tiger. There is a story of a man who quarreled with his wife; but when the wife, out of annoyance, parked her baggage to go back to her father’s house, the husband did not resist. But no sooner had she left his house than the husband transformed into a tiger and pounced on her along the road and in the process, the woman, out of fear, changed her mind and returned to her husband’s house. It is a taboo to shoot, harm or kill a tiger among the people of Umulelu.

It is important to note at this point that there are many totemic animals in Africa generally and Igboland in particular. The above are simply highlighted as a foundation for this study. We have also to note that totemism in African is not all about animals; there are some plants and trees that are regarded as totemic in Igbo – African ontology, namely, *ogilisi, akpu, ofo, udala, ngwu, oji*, etc.¹⁴ F. C. Ogbalu opines that “some species of plants are held sacred or are actually worshiped or sacrifices offered to them. Example of such trees held sacred in some places are *Akpu* (silk-cotton tree), *Iroko, Ngwu, Ofo, Ogirisi*, etc. Such plants are used

in offering worship to the idols”¹⁵

Significance of Totemism in Africa in a World of Change

There is no doubt about the belief and practice of totemism among the African people. It is part of the everyday experience of the Traditional African. In the Traditional African Society, no one ever toyed with totems of a given community. This is not the case in our cotemporary African society. In this regard, some questions disturb the questioning mind of the researcher: What is the significance of totemism in Africa in a world of change? Put differently, what is the place of totems in our ever-changing world? Experience has shown that belief and practice of totemism does not have the original meaning and understanding in our contemporary society as against what existed in the Traditional Africa society. Kanu submits that the influence of western education, cross-cultural influence, Christianity and Islamic influence has actually brought about a decline in the original way and manner our people accorded reverence to totems in Igbo - African ontology. He noted that some totemic animals are being killed while totemic plants are being cut down for economic purposes.¹⁶ However, one can say without mincing words that belief in totems can have some significance in the areas of ecology and tourism.

There is no gainsaying the fact that the belief and practice of totemism can foster the growth and preservation of totemic animals and plants in the areas where they are considered as sacred. It is an existential truism that animals relax, procreate and survive more in the areas where they are not treated with hostility. The friendly expression makes it possible for the different species of the animal to multiply within the totemic community. In this regard, one can say that the preservation of totemic animals and plants is a way of maintaining the ecosystem. It is the responsibility of every person within the totemic society to care and feed the totemic animal. This is a traditional way of environmental conservation. This is actually what is needed in our contemporary society. Chemhuru and Masaka as cited in Chakanaka Zinyemba are of the view that the belief and practice of totemism have been institutional wildlife conservation measures to preserve various animal species so that they could be saved from extinction due unchecked hunting.¹⁷

Furthermore, the belief and practice of totemism can be said to be very significant in the area of tourism. Tourism is a good source of revenue for

many countries of the world. People like to travel for fun and also for sight-seeing. Tourism attracts both local and international tourists. This is what the preservation of totemic animals and plants brings to a totemic community. There are certain animals that are going into extinction in some communities because the people engage in hunting and killing of animals without restrictions. Also, in some places, people engage in cutting down trees without any form of restrictions. But as we have state earlier, the belief and practice of totemism brings deep reverence for the totemic beings coupled with rules and regulations to that effect. And so with the preservation of totemic beings, it will certainly bring about large amount of income to the local economy since the community will be the centre of attraction for both local and international tourists.

Concluding Reflections

The belief and practice of totemism in Africa has to do with the culture and tradition of the African people. However, the idea that totemic beings possess some spiritual and supernatural powers can best be described as superstitious. The claim cannot stand before the *Court of Reason*. The researcher witnessed in a community where python was regarded as a totem but was killed by a man in that community. The man was asked to carry out the burial rites as demanded by their custom or else he will be visited with strange sickness and die. The man refused and till today he is still hale and hearty. There are instances of this kind in many other places as experience has shown. In this regard, one can say that there is no rational basis for totemic practice. It is simply a matter of belief without any rational justification for its claim.

On another note, this paper submits that in our ever-changing world, the basis for the belief and practice of totemism can only be viewed from its ecological and tourist significance. There is need for people to be encouraged to preserve animals and plants. Indiscriminate hunting and cutting of trees should be highly frowned at. Forest reserves and game villages should be encouraged by both the governments and non-governmental organizations. Governments in Africa should step up their lukewarm attitude in this regard. The media should also be involved in sensitizing our people about the need for preservation of animals and plants in order to maintain the ecosystem and more so to ensure tourist attraction. The federal and state ministries of culture and tourism should set up monitoring agencies to ensure the protection of animal rights.

There should be stringent penalty for those that violate the rights of animals and forest reserve.

In sum, this paper submits that totems have no inherent spiritual and supernatural powers in themselves. The belief and practice of totemism in Africa in a world of change can only be encouraged on the basis of its significant roles in maintaining the ecosystem and also bringing about revenue generation through tourist activities.

Endnotes

1. R. Robertson, *Sociology of Religion* (London: The Chancer, 1971), p. 55
2. *Ojibwa* is the language of the Algonquian-speaking North American Indian tribe.
3. Josef Haekel, "Totemism" retrieved from: <https://www.britannica.com/topic/totemism-religion> (Accessed: 17/ 7/ 18)
4. Burton as cited in V. Nwashindu and N. C. Ihediwa, "Totemism in Igboland and the Challenges of the 21st Century" *Bassey Andah Journal*, vol. 7-8, (2014 - 2015), p. 47.
5. M. Amirthalingam, "Significance of Totemism among the Tribes of India" *ECO NEWS* vol. 19, No. 4, (2014), p. 22
6. Theoderson et al., *Modern Dictionary of Sociology* (London: Allen and Union Press, 1975), p. 845.
7. Amirthalingam, Op. Cit. p. 22.
8. Nwashindu and Ihediwa, Op. Cit., p. 47.
9. O. A. Onwubiko, *African Thoughts, Religion and Culture*, vol. 1 (Enugu:: SNAAP Press, 1991), p. 3.
10. L. Williams, as cited in *Wikipedia*, retrieved from: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Igbo_people (Accessed: 17/7/18)
11. Nwashindu and Ihediwa, Op. Cit., p. 48.
12. Adibe as cited in I. A. Kanu, *A Hermeneutic Approach to African Traditional Religion, Theology and Philosophy* (Jos: Augustinian Publications, 2015), p. 297
13. Nwashindu and Ihediwa, Op. Cit., p. 48.
14. Cf. I. A. Kanu, Op. Cit. Pp. 292 - 296.
15. F. C. Ogbalu, *Igbo Institutions and Customs* (Onitsha: University Publishers Company, 1983), p. 56.
16. Kanu, Op. Cit., p. 299.
Chemhuru and Masaka as cited in Chakanaka Zinyemba, "The Role of Totemism in Traditional Ecosystem Management and Its Potential Role in Current Conservation Practices" retrieved from:
<https://www.google.com/search?q=role+of+totemism+in+environmental+management+&ie=utf-8&oe=utf-8&client=firefox-b> (Accessed: 19/7/18)