

RELEVANCE OF TOTEMIC CREATURES TO AFRICAN TRADITIONAL RELIGION

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Abstract

In African Traditional Religion, there are certain things they believe in. However, one of those things is Totemic animals. These are animals that are revered by some towns and villages in Africa because of what they stand for in them. These totems are very important, revered and play a very important role in their lives. This paper tried to look at how the different towns and villages select their totems and what qualifies each animal to become totem. It was discovered that for an animal to become totem, it must have played a very important role in the lives of the people. At times it might be saving them from inter-tribal wars or providing for them during famine. It was also discovered that once it is unanimously agreed by the whole community that an animal becomes their totem, automatically all the members begins to pay allegiance. It was also discovered that each village has a particular day they pay allegiance or homage to theirs inform of sacrifice. Socio-cultural approach was employed in the research study. The work recommends that totems, should be respected by everyone in the community. It also recommends that those from other religion should not see it as something bad rather a way of promoting one's religion and culture.

Keywords: Totem, Africa, Traditional Religion.

Introduction

The tradition of revering and preserving totemic creatures is not alien to the African community and it is one of the traditions that make them distinguished. Totemic creatures are often considered to be sacred and have much relevance in the African religion. While the Europeans talk about wild life preservation, the Africans talk of sacredness and worship of some creatures known as totems. What other culture or religion may take for granted, the African indigenous religion takes serious. There are therefore religious, cultural and historical sentiments associated with totems among the Africans. In Africa, the preservation of life or of some creatures may be hinged on the fact that some of these creatures have played historical, ecological and religious roles in the life of the people. Hence, if we must further appreciate the Traditional Religion of Africans, we must set for ourselves the task of evaluating the relevance of totemic creatures to African Traditional Religion. In achieving this aim, we shall carefully expose the terms: totemic creatures and African Traditional Religion and proceed to see what roles the former has to play in the latter. This research work employs an evaluation approach and it is neither a mere exposition nor a comparative analysis.

African Traditional Religion

There have been many misconceptions and misrepresentation of the African Traditional Religion by early Europeans, anthropologists and historians. Many misconceived African Traditional Religion in terms of heathenism, animism, fetishism, idolatry, paganism, juju, ancestor worship and what have you (Ugwu and Ugwueye, 2004, p. 12). Against these misconceptions and misrepresentations, many African authors and scholars have made their literary contributions to what African Traditional Religion stands for. Some have simplified the definition of African Traditional Religion by observing that "it is the way Africans worship their God. This religion is found in almost all the activities of the African man" (Nweke, 2017, p. 12). Extrapolating on this, we can agree that among the Africans, their activities are closely intertwined with their religion. It may therefore be difficult to easily distinguish between when the African is carrying out a religious action or a secular routing.

Believing that African Traditional Religion is found in all aspects of their lives, Mbiti (1975) proposes that "to be an African in the traditional context is to be truly religious. Hence, Africans are notoriously religious" (p. 27). It is a religion and culture that is based on the life of the Africans. This pattern of life has been handed down from their fore-fathers through successive generations of adherers. One of the most comprehensive and elaborate definitions of African Traditional Religion has been attempted by Ekwunife. Presenting Ekwunife's definition of African Traditional Religion, Ugwu and Ugwueye (2004) regard African Traditional Religion as:

Those institutionalised beliefs, and practices of indigenous religion of Africans which are rooted in the past African religious culture, transmitted to the present votaries by successive African forebears mainly through oral traditions (myth and folktales, songs and dances, liturgies, rituals, proverbs, pithy sayings and names), sacred specialist and persons, sacred space and objects and religious work of art, a religion which is slowly but constantly updated by each generation in the light of new experiences through the dialectical process of continuities and discontinuities.

The above definition touches on the nature, sources and modes of transmission, agents of transmission and the possible continuity or discontinuity of African Religion.

African Traditional religion is not the only religion found in Africa today. However, it is the only religion that can claim to have originated in Africa. Other religions found in Africa have their origins in other parts of the world. Meanwhile, Lugira (2009) holds that "African religion differs religions such as Judaism, Christianity, and Islam in a number of ways. Although individual peoples may remember legendary figures from their history, African religion has no single founder or central historical figure" (p. 15). No one can lay claim to being the founder of African Traditional Religion. It is a religion that evolves out of the people's culture and closely intertwined with it.

Totemic Creatures

According to Diawuo (2015), "the term '*totem*' comes from a North American Indian language, which refers to vegetables or animals that are revered by individuals, particularly group of people as holy and sacred" (p. 117). Totems are symbolic creatures that points to the special identity of a group of people which sometimes distinguishes them from other groups. This makes Goswami (2018) to claim that, "the spirit or sacred object, or symbol or emblem of a group of people, such as family, clan, lineage, or tribe, is termed as totem. Totems are considered as emblems of tribes that reflect the lineage of a tribe" (p. 2). He further contends that "each totem of the tribal clans has distinct identity with regard to their habitat and physiology. Anthropologists, classified them into different types such as land animal totem, water animal totem, air animal totem, reptile totem, insect totem and vegetable or plant totem (Goswami, 2018, p. 4). In a unique way Clamence and Chiminge (2015) consider a totem to be "an animal, plant, or natural object (or representation of an object) that serves as the emblem of a clan or family among a tribal or traditional people. A totem, represents a mystical or ritual bond of unity within the group" (p. 9). To say this in another way, a totem is a physical object with ritual significance of a symbolic representation of such an object, especially a type of animal plant or natural structure representing a clan in certain cultures.

Some Selected Creatures and their Totemic Significances

Monkeys: This is a totemic animal in Igboland. The people of Awka in Anambra state value monkeys. Hence, it is a taboo to hurt or kill a monkey in Awka. It is a belief 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 (Ndubuisi, 2021, p. 138).

Snake (Python): Some have observed that in communities like Idemili, Enugwu, Ukwu, Abagana, Nnewi, Ogidi, Oguta, Mgbidi, Njaba, Urualla, Awo-Omamma, etc python is very much revered and cared for. Deification of python is a common heritage and religion in Idemili area of Anambra state (Ndubuisi 2021 p. 138). Meanwhile, Adeg (2019) identifies a particular type of green snake called Ikyarem as very helpful to the Tiv people during their migration from Katanga, a region in southern Africa. Ikyarem is regarded as totem in that when the Tiv people came across a river, Ikyarem helped them to cross the river (p. 142).

Tortoise and Crocodile: Most communities in riverine Ogbaru local government area of Anambra state treat tortoise and crocodile as sacred animals. In some parts of Delta State, their history portray tortoise as one of the animals who helped them during the war while among the Kaduna people, crocodile is a totem and the name Kaduna is

derived from crocodile. The local term for crocodile means kada, the plural being Kaduna (Oral interview)

Ram: According to Ndubuisi (2021), 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 (p. 138).

Relevance of Totemic Creatures in African Traditional Religion

Exposing Totems in African Traditional Religion and their relevance, Ndubuisi (2021) holds the following:

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 (p. 136).

The above lay hold to the fact that the reverence of totems is part and parcel of the African religion and that aside being related by blood, humans, in a typical African community, are also related through totems. We may assume that all those who share a particular totemic creature probably originate from the same place. Accordingly, "the totemic character, sign, mark, letter, ideogram or any other identity, etc. serve as a reminder of the ancestry or mythic past of such groups of people. It signifies a spiritual, religious, social and cultural association between a clan or lineage and a bird, animal or a natural phenomenon" (Goswami, 2018, p. 2).

Ndubuisi (2021) further proposes that "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" (p. 136). It implies respect and injunctions such as prohibitions against killing or eating the totemic animal or plant, or against interfering with the totemic animal or plant. Preservation of totems in African traditional religion is a religious and cultural undertaking. Many authors hold that there is a relationship between totems and taboo in the sense that there are certain prohibitions or restriction given to favour the totems. Many cultures prohibit the killing or destruction of totems. In the same vein, Gaswomi (2018) is of the opinion that "in certain tribes, the prohibitions or taboos are sometimes cultivated to such an extreme

degree that they believe eating, killing, or destroying them may lead to occur unrecoverable loss to the clan" (p. 4). This is why certain punishments are attached by the community to anyone who harms a totem.

Supporting the above with an example, in some places where Pythons are revered as totems, anyone who either by mistake or intentionally kills a python is mandated by tradition to conduct a funeral ceremony for the python coupled with other punishment as dimmed fitting by the community. The protection of totemic creature is the collective responsibility of the community. As a result of this a totemic creature is "avenged in the most energetic fashion by the whole clan, as though it was a question of averting some danger that threatened the whole community or some guilt that was pressing upon it" (Freud, 1913, p. 5). This type of punishment often serves as deterrent to other defaulters and to reassert the value placed on totemic creatures. Totems help to convey pieces of information about African Traditional Religion. Some totems express what Africans believe in. As such totems tell the observers of the African Tradition Religion about the nature of the religion. One can even denote that African Traditional Religion is a religion that values life. For if the ethics of the religion requires the preservation of animal lives, how much more would it do to cherish human lives. Thus, from the way Africans treat totems we can denote that the religion holds in high esteem, lives in general. In addition, and as earlier seen, totems could serve as the source of information for the history of a particular tribe or clan.

Religious Relevance

Totems are religiously significant in tribal life. Many tribes inscribe the sign or figure of totems on some specific location of their body or on the wall of their home or prayer room. Even the shape or figure of the totem is developed and kept at their sacred places. It is perceived that blessings of the totem animals protect the tribal people in all difficult situations and at all hard times. It warns the members about the any possible danger and predicts about the future (Goswami, 2018, p. 5). Africans also use totems to reach the divine since they are sacred. Hence, some totems are mediums of worship, prayer and adoration of the deities.

Historical Relevance

Some Totems Engender the History of the People. In African Traditional Religion it is believed that "the mystical animal from which a tribe relates its origin is its totem" (Goswami, 2018, p.3). Totems sometimes serve as aids to teaching the history of the people and explaining their historical past. It has also been discovered that "in prehistoric societies, totems were key symbols of religion and social cohesion; they were also important tools for cultural and educational transmission" (Clamence and Chimininge, 2015, p. 9). In the words of Ndubuisi (2021), "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" (p. 138). It is in this respect that we can say that the preservation of monkeys among the natives of Awka significantly reminds them of their history.

Related to the above, totems are pedagogical aids in the sense that they can be used to teach inquisitive young ones. When an inquisitive child, brought up in Awka sees monkeys roaming around freely without being harmed he may be tempted to make enquiry by asking questions. The elders on their part would utilise the moment to teach the child the history the land. Freud (1913) though a psychologist, holds that, "the members of the totemic clan often believe that they are related to the totemic animal by the bond of a common ancestry" (p.118). It would be reasonable to say that when one come in contact with people who share the same totemic creature they are probably historically connected. The tendency to make such conclusions stems from the fact that they may even attribute the same significance to those totemic creatures.

Ecological Relevance

Apart from religious relevance of Totems, there is also ecological relevance derived from preserving totems. In a community where some creatures are not killed, there is a great tendency that those creatures would be in abundance. This is a traditional way of environmental conservation. It is obvious that in areas where some animals are not being harmed there is a great tendency that those species would not be easily extinct. Imagine if monkeys were being killed and eaten in Awka; the result may be a rapid extinction of monkeys in the area. Meanwhile, Ndubuisi (2021) corroborates this by positing that "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" (p. 140).

Sociological Relevance

Totemic creatures in African Traditional Religion have contributed relevantly in a sociological dimension to the African traditional community. On this account, Goswami (2018) writes that:

In a sociological perspective, the totem animals keep the tribal people in bonds of unity and brotherhood. It brings social and community consciousness among the tribal people They consider that totem protects the clan of the tribe in difficult times. Mourning is observed on the death of the totemic animal. As the members of the same totemic clan consider themselves to be bound by blood relationship and strictly follow the rule of exogamy (p. 4)

The African society cherishes fraternal relationship and the sharing of common totemic creature aids Africans in emphasising communal relationship. The "we" feeling is being portrayed in totemism. Those who share the same totems would have a feeling of a sense of belonging. Moreover, since it is the collective responsibility of the members of the community to protect and defend their totems there would be a tendency of working towards achieving a common interest. By so doing the social bond is further strengthened. A sense of solidarity could also be developed from sharing the same

totems. If a community could mourn the demise of a totem, they would do more for the demise of a kinsman.

Totems as Object of Tourist Attraction

Totemic creatures also play the role of attracting tourists to the regions where they are revered. Many foreigners may be interested in seeing a sacred tree, python or tortoise that is well spoken of. By so doing tourists pay to see these creatures and generate revenue for the region and the government.

Conclusion

The foregoing has been an attempt at considering the relevance of totems in African Traditional Religion. This is one of the practices that make the Africans different from many of their European counterparts. When the Europeans preserve some creatures they do so, not in the same manner as Africans. For the Europeans, it is a case of wildlife preservation for the purpose of saving some species from going into extinct while Africans place spiritual and religious sentiments to totemic creatures. In as much as totems are relevant in African Traditional Religion, it must also be pointed out that some totems are dangerously harmful and capable of inciting fear among adherers and strangers. Pythons, for example, are dangerous creatures with venoms which can poison, harm or kill anyone bitten by them. Although testimonies from some natives of where some of these creatures are found have proven that these creatures are not harmful to those who revere them, some totem still arouse fear in strangers. There have also been some claims that the belief in totems are superstitious and should not be accepted.

This is an attempt at denigrating the status of African Traditional Religion, championed by ignorant people who rather than seeking to be enlightened, would criticise all that makes African Traditional Religion unique. Those who cast aspersions on the belief are not really fair enough on the African culture and are not open minded. It is therefore recommended that an attitude of epistemic flexibility must be employed when one study some elements of other people's culture and religions. Meanwhile, the strict adherers of the religion are historically, religiously and culturally convinced that the belief in totems is not superstitiously formed. The stand of this research work is to emphatically state that totems in African Traditional Religion are very significant and valuable. Their relevance in African Traditional Religion informs the attitude of the people towards them. When an African reveres a totemic creature, he does that bearing in mind that that totem is part of the history of his people. By also attaching taboos or prohibitions of harmful attitude towards certain totems, Africans further acknowledge that totems are significant to their culture, religion and tradition.

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