

TOTEMISM IN IDOMA HISTORY AND CULTURE

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Abstract

This paper examines the breakthrough in the usage of totems in reconstructing the histories of village-size chiefdoms, of which the Idoma people of North Central Nigeria are an example. The construction of the early history of the Idoma, like most ethnic nations of Africa, has been made difficult due to the dearth of documentary evidence and a lack of archaeological data. This challenge becomes worrisome because of the heated debate over the utilitarian value of oral tradition as a source of history despite its worldwide recognition decades ago. The debate is yet to thoroughly simmer down. The emergence of totems as one of the methodological devices in handling pre-colonial history saves scholars of Idoma extraction from the Eurocentric absurdity of bastardising histories of the people as the society possesses a wide range of totems which are amenable to historical scholarship. This paper concludes that Totems remained one of the oldest forms of identification of a group and therefore a veritable tool in the reconstruction of local history.

Introduction

The Idoma people occupy the broad valley of River Benue in modern-day Central Nigeria. A Plethora of academic work exists on the origins of Idoma and as a result that will not be given attention in the paper. Idoma has early interactions with the diverse groups that inhabit the Nigerian State. One of the elements which demonstrate the Idoma relationship with some Nigerian ethnic groups in terms of origins, similarities and

differences is totems. Totem, therefore, where it exists is a useful instrument in the understanding of the history of preliterate people. However, studies on totems, have not been adequately exploited in writing the history of African pre-colonial society. The paper is structured into the introduction, conceptual clarifications, categories of totems, utilitarian value of totems in Idoma history, usage of totems in writing local history and finally, the conclusion.

Conceptual Clarifications

Totems attracted great scholarly attention in the 20th century, the flowering age of sociology and cultural anthropology. The concept is derived from *Ojibwa Algonkian*, an Indian word *ototeman*,ⁱ meaning: brother-sister relationships. In this sociological context, the term refers to varieties of relationships including genealogical, between social groups, animals or other natural objects; a kind of relationship that had existed between man and his material environment in the process of his territorial development. Totem should not be confused with an animal having a relationship with one person, whether as a guardian spirit or source of spiritual power; neither is the transformation of an individual into an animal, as in shamanistic possession by animal spirits, or supernatural owner of an animal to be designated as totems. Essentially, totems connote forbiddance (*Iho*) which could be an animal, a plant or a material object. Totemism among other things refers to the theory of origins and relationship of a group of people to nature.ⁱⁱ For the Idoma people, it is an emblem or symbol of the group's solidarity and the contrasting identity and relations to their immediate neighbours; Tivs, Igala and Igbo respectively. A totem may be a feared or dangerous hunted animal, an edible plant; or any staple food. Totem is hedged about with taboos of avoidance or strictly restricted contact the principal contributors to the discussion on totems are: J.F. McLennan, in his first significant theoretical

work; “The Worship Animals and Plants” published in 1869 and the first comprehensive work on totems was provided by James Frazer, in his work “Totemism” published in 1885 and republished as “Totemism and Exogamy” in 1910.ⁱⁱⁱ

Categories of Totems

Historians have identified three broad categories of totems. These are; primary or kinship type, secondary or political type and tertiary or economic totems type.^{iv} In the understanding of totemism, a totem becomes primary where a social group for instance holds, *Owa* snake totems or any other species of snakes regardless of their present geographical locations. The point is that if other groups have similar totems, it means they might have related to one another at one point. If the claim to a common ancestor or descent could be backed up with adequate genealogical connections between the various members of the groups, the *Owa* snake totem becomes the primary totem.^v This kind of totem is also referred to as the Baganda system. If the members of *Owasnake* totems, for instance, moved to another State ruled by red monkey (*Obagwu*) totems, and as a result of political allegiance to the new rulers, adopt the red monkey totem, the *Obagwu* becomes the secondary totem. This, on the other hand, is referred to as Banyoro system.^{vi} Instances also abound where in the course of migration several unrelated groups (mixed multitudes) dwell together or take one migratory route.^{vii} The category of totem taken by such a group is called tertiary or economic totem. Some Idoma and Igala groups that took the same migratory route from Kwara Kingdom to settle in their present locations are good examples of this kind of totem. It is against this backdrop that some Idoma group traced their ancestry to the Igala land because they were believed to have settled there as a bus stop during their migration before arriving and settling in their present abode.

Utilitarian Value of Totems in Idoma History

Among the Idoma people; *Owuna* bird, *Ogonopo* fish, *Agba* fish, red Monkey (*Obagwu*) black Monkey (*eka*), *Owa* snake, CivetCat (*Anwu*), Crocodile (*Ikwu*) and leopard (*Orgwu*) have been identified as totemic symbols. The following present-day kindreds observe the *Owuna* bird totems, *Ojentelle*, *ugboju*, *ai-oko*, *Entekpa*, *Orada*, the royal kindred of Otukpo. Genealogically, each group is unrelated to others going by kinship totems. The reverence of the *Owuna* bird totem has been largely explained in economic terms. Sources have it that after the 1630s, several ethnic groups left Kwararafa for the Benue South. The new homeland, also called Apa, was located in modern Makurdi towns. On their arrival, they were hosted by Ugboju chiefdom whose royal totem was the *Owuna* bird. Although not asked to pay tributes in the form of rent to their host to continue holding on to their land as new immigrants that came out of Kwararafa, they adopted the *Owuna* bird totem in addition to their different kinds of totems.^{viii} Details of Idoma group and their totems are furnished in a subsequent part of the paper.

The question that readily comes to mind is, what is the utilitarian value of totems in studies in early history particularly, Idoma? The following may serve as the answer; first, totemism as a theory of origin aid students of Idoma history in the analysis of the origins of various Idoma kindred groups. For instance, it was believed that the kindred group which observe the *Ogonopo* fish totem descended from a common ancestor, Ode. Although geographically scattered in several settlements in Idoma land, the *Ogonopo* fish totemic group refers to themselves as Ai-Ode (i.e. descendent of Ode, the founder of the group). Ode, according to traditions lived in Kwararafa, but left that cradle land C: 1625-1655, probably as a result of both centrifugal and the centripetal

forces from the East.^{ix} He later founded another settlement at the mouth of River *Muin* the present day Makurdi. It was there he died and left behind four sons whose names are; *Eje, Oguche, Ona* and *Ala*. These four separated; with three moving towards the modern Idoma land and *Ala* moved towards the upper area of the Cross River basin and founded his group.^x The other three settled separately but were later united in 1900 by the colonial administration into one division. The descendants of these three sons founded *Umogidi, Ugbokpo* and *Oglewu* settlements in the present Idoma land.

Secondly, studies in totems help students of Idoma history to assess cultural Nigeria at large in the dim past. Historical evidence abounds that there was a cordial relationship between the *Igbirra* chief and the leader of *Owuna* bird totems group, *Oga* between C.1625-1655. *Oga* was noted to be interested in trade in locally manufactured cloth-*Opa* in which *Igbirra, Oga*, was also believed to have borrowed *Igbirra* social institution called *ekwuafia*. Idoma historical tradition indicates that the *ekwuafia* was used by the *Igbirra* people in strengthening their chiefdom against internal and external attacks. It was equally used during the installation and burial rites of their *Igbirra* chiefdom.^{xi} This institution was later acquired by *Oga*, which he used in strengthening his chiefdom. Over time, the *ekwuafia* institution and *Owuna* bird became synonymous.

Third, totemism demonstrates the past social, economic and political setting a group of people, found themselves in the past. For instance, one of the characteristics of the group who once lived in ancient *Kwararafa* is that each of the group had its primary totems. Among the *Jukun* for example, the following are identified; manatee and *ahura* fish, while that of the *Idoma* are *Ogonopo* fish, *Agba* fish, the Civet cat, black and red Monkey and snails; all of which suggest the ecology in which the *Jukun* and *Idoma* ancestors lived and worked.^{xii} Politics comes in when, in the course of migration, groups come under the dominion of other

groups and out of compelling necessity and survival strategy adopted another totem which is often secondary.

Fourth, totems a kind of national emblem and symbol served as identification marks in the analysis of the group's solidarity and differences. Durkheim and his adherents rightly maintained that social order is primarily an assemblage of totems.^{xiii} Totems, therefore, demonstrate the differences and the commonality between Idoma, Igala, Tiv, Igbos, Yoruba, Hausa and other Nigerian groups. Erim cited in Usman and Odeh, agrees with this position:

... totems often provided the basis for a variety of social, economic and political links in the pre-colonial period between the various States and people which were natural predecessors of modern States in Africa...It was this network of pre-colonial ties which over the centuries created a solid basis for the development of modern nationality in Africa. That these nation-states today lived within ill-defined boundaries is dictated primarily by the consideration of European power politics as well as the process of "modernization".^{xiv}

The above underscores why a revered or feared animal and taboo are sometimes similar to those of other ethnic groups in Nigeria. For instance, there are various similar food and sex prohibitions across Nigerian cultures today that are indicative of Nigerian unity.

Fifth, totemism renders obsolete the so-called pure tribe theory. Although pre-colonial African historians have rejected the "pure tribe" phenomenon, it has not been easy for them to demonstrate that modern African nations are an amalgam of diverse ethnic and linguistic groups. With the emergence of totemism, pre-colonial historians have been to prove that modern African ethnic groups were created out of a multi-ethnic

community. The Idoma case has shown that the various groups that today answer the name Idoma, came from various sources and directions as showcased by the existence of western and eastern routes in the course of migration from the Kwararafa kingdom.^{xv}

Finally, totems can be used in conjunction with other sources of historical writings to generate knowledge about Idomast. In other words, when other sources are inadequate in the analysis of the past, totems may be used. Based on linguistic evidence, Armstrong, the Idoma linguist rejects the position that Idoma and Jukun are ethnically related. He contends that...it must be realized that the Idoma are not Jukun...the two languages are related to each other only in the sense that most of the languages of southern and central Nigeria are distantly related.^{xvi}

The claim to Jukun-Idoma common origin is further disregarded by the different totems among the two people. According to Webster, none of the Jukun totems are present among the Idoma.^{xvii} From available historical evidence, none of the groups in modern Idoma land belongs to *aputse* fish totem. Reliance on one source alone, therefore, is not sufficient. Philips Stephens Jr. buttresses thus:

...finally, he must use oral traditions (totems inclusive...*Emphasis Added*) as a guide for comparative research. Element in traditions must be cross-checked with other traditions, with anthropological studies, with archaeological data, with results of linguistic methods such as glottochronology, and with written records.^{xviii}

The argument here is that a situation where a writer relies completely on one source, particularly the one that favours his people portends a danger to historical enterprise. Thus, diverse sources should be jointly employed to have a balanced picture of the past.

Totems in the Writing of African Local Histories: Example from Idoma

Totemism is a welcome development in the writing of African local histories, which Idoma has demonstrated its usage. In East Africa, primary totems mean kinship ties. From Idoma experience it is obvious that primary totems connote political, social as well as economic ties. The fact remains that it is not the order in which the totem is adopted that is of historical significance, but the crucial thing is the circumstances of its adoption. The circumstances determine what is primary and what is not.

Besides, whatever degree of success attended the use of totems as a historical device in the reconstruction of the past, either in East or West Africa, it is necessary to remind ourselves that much remains to be done in that direction. In the first place, evidence does not yet abound of systematic collection of totems over a wide area in any part of Africa. As a consequence, it is difficult at this stage among Idoma scholars to categorically classify crocodile totems as either primary or secondary without detailed information from other ethnic groups that once lived side by side in the Kwararafa kingdom. The table below contains Kindred and some totems in Idoma land.

Table 1: Totemic Kindred Fleeing from Kwararafa between C. 1535-1745

S/N	Kindred Location	Kingship Totem	Political First	Totem Second	Point of Departure	Date of Departure
1.	Adogoji Oje (Agatu)	-	Leopard			1625-1655
2.	Adagba (Agatu)	-	“			“
3.	Abogba (Agatu)	-	“			“

4.	Ai-Agbo (Olokam)	-	“			“
5.	Oju (Oju)	Hawk	“	Bat	South Of Idaha	“
6.	Osiroko (Agila)	Snake	“	-	“	“
7.	Onwa (Agila)	Snail	“	-	“	“
8.	Angbetta (Agila)	“	“	-	“	“
9.	Angbetta (Agila)	“	“	-	“	“
10.	Ogboloko (Agila)	“	Dog	Lizard	Ankpa	“
11.	Idogbodo (Agila)	-	Leopard	-	“	“
12.	Onyegede (Onyagede)	Civet Cat	“	Bird	“	“
13.	Ai-Agbo (Ichama)	Snail	Dog	Lizard	“	“
14.	Okoto (Ugboju)	Civet Cat	“	“	“	“
15.	Ai-Oche (Okpaga)	Civet Cat	Leopard	Bird	“	1655-1685
16.	Ingle (Edumoga)	Crocodile	“	Snake	“	“
17.	Amuda (Edumoga)	Dogs	“	-	“	“

Table 2: Totemic Kindred Fleeing from Apa I, 1685-1805

S/N	Kindred Location	Primary Totem	Secondary & Tertiary Totems	Point of Departure	Date of Departure
1.	Ugboju Royal Kindreds (Ugboju)	Bird (Owuna)	Civet Cat (Anwu)	Modern Tiv Land	
2.	Adoka Royal Kindreds (Adoka)	Black Monkey (Eka)	-	“	“
3.	Ologba (Agatu)	Monkey (Red & Black)	-	“	“
4.	Ojigo (Edumoga)	Crocodile	-	-	“
5.	Amejo &	Red	-		

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	Okonobo (Edumoga)	Monkey			
Phase II					
1	Aku (Agatu)	Black Monkey		Modern Tiv Land	1715- 1745
2	Ooji (Ochekwu)	“		“	“
3	Agbaduma (Agatu)	Crocodile		“	“
4	Ai-Agaji (Oglewu)	Red Monkey	Bird (Owuna)	“	“
5	Ojantelle (Ochekwu)	Civet Cat	“	“	“
6	Ugboju Ai- Omaga	“	“	“	“
7	Ai-Oko (Olokam)	“	“	“	“
8	Egba (Agatu)	“	“	“	“
9	Ai-Ede (Onyagede)	“	“	“	“
10	Ajobe (Ugboju)	“	“	“	“
11	Agadagba (Onyagede)	“	“	“	“
12	Ai-Agbo (Ochobo)	“	Black Monkey	South Of Alagoland	“
1.	A-Onyilo (Ochobo)	“	“	“	“
2.	Ai-Agabi (Ochobo)	“	“	“	“
3.	Ai-Ogbebeche (Ochobo)	“	“	“	“
4.	Ai-Ajibo (Igumale)	“	“	“	“
5.	Ai- Agboidogwu (Igumale)	Leopard	“	Modern Wakari	“
Phase III					
1	Entekpa (Adoka)	Civet Cat	Bird (Owuna)	Modern Tiv Land	1745- 1775
2.	Auke (Ochekwu)	“	Leopard	“	“
3.	Okpagabi (Ochekwu)	“	Civet Cat	“	“
4.	Ijaha	“	“	“	“

	(Ochekwu)				
5.	Umogidi (Adoka)	Fish Ogonopo	Civet Cat	“	“
6.	Ugbokpo (Ochekwu)	“	“	“	“
7.	Ijami (Oglewu)	“	“	“	“
8.	Idabi (Oglewu)	“	“	“	“
9.	Alaglamu (Oglewu)	“	“	“	“
10.	Eboya (Oglewu)	“	“	“	“
11.	Adana (Oglewu)	“	“	“	“
12.	Akpeko (Agatu)	Fish (Agba)	“	“	“
13.	Ikpele (Agatu)	Bird Okohokpa	“	“	“
14.	Ikpari (Akpa)	Leopard (Eje)	“	“	“
15.	Ifu (Akpa)	“	“	“	“
16.	Mbo (Akpa)	“	“	“	“
17.	Ijaha (Oglewu)	Civet Cat	Bird Owuna	Southern Alagoland	“
18.	Ijaha (Akpa)	“	“	“	“
Phase IV					
	1 Iga (Agatu)	Fish (Agba)	-	Southern Alagoland	1775-1805
2.	Iga (Ochekwu)	“	Black Monkey	“	“
3.	Adija (Ochekwu)	“	-	“	“
4.	Ugboju (Ochekwu)	“	-	“	“
5.	Ochuekwu (Ochekwu)	“	-	“	“
6.	Otukpo Royal Kindress (Otukpo)	Red Monkey	Civet Cat		“
7.	Otada (Olutpo)	“	“		“
8.	Ataganyi (Ochekwu)	Civet Cat	-		“
9.	Akpachi (Ugboju)	Bird	Civet Cat		“
10.	Akpachi	Crocodile	Civet Cat,		“

	(Otukpo)		Bird		
11.	Ijaha (Onyagede)	Civet Cat	Bird (Owuna)		“
12.	Ai-Agboke (Oglewu)	Snake (Idili)	-		“
13.	Ai-Oga (Oglewu)	“	“		“
14.	Anwule (Oglewu)	“	-		“
15.	Otada (Otukpo)	Civet Cat	(Bird Owuna)		“
16.	Okpailo (Otukpo)	Bird (Iwele)	-		“
17.	Ajobe (Otukpo)	Snake (Idili)	-		“

Table 3: The Earliest Western Immigrations from Igala Land C. 1625-1685

S/N	Kindred Location	Kingship Totem	Political First	Totem Second	Point of Departure	Date of Departure
18.	Adogoji Oje (Agatu)	-	Leopard			1625-1655
19.	Adagba (Agatu)	-	“			“
20.	Abogba (Agatu)	-	“			“
21.	Ai-Agbo (Olokam)	-	“			“
22.	Oju (Oju)	Hawk	“	Bat	South Of Idaha	“
23.	Osiroko (Agila)	Snake	“	-	“	“
24.	Onwa (Agila)	Snail	“	-	“	“
25.	Angbetta (Agila)	“	“	-	“	“
26.	Angbetta (Agila)	“	“	-	“	“
27.	Ogboloko (Agila)	“	Dog	Lizard	Ankpa	“
28.	Idogbodo (Agila)	-	Leopard	-	“	“
29.	Onyegede (Onyagede)	Civet Cat	“	Bird	“	“
30.	Ai-Agbo (Ichama)	Snail	Dog	Lizard	“	“
31.	Okoto (Ugboju)	Civet Cat	“	“	“	“
32.	Ai-Oche (Okpga)	Civet Cat	Leopard	Bird	“	1655-1685
33.	Ingle (Edumoga)	Crocodile	“	Snake	“	“
34.	Amuda (Edumoga)	Dogs	“	-	“	“

Source: E.O. Erim “Cultural Totemism and Idoma Pre-Colonial History,” 63-72

The tables above show varieties of totems in Idoma early historical development particularly before and after migration from Apa land on the one hand, and her relations with other cultural groups in the Nigerian region. It demonstrates some elements of cultural, social, economic and adaptation as they tried to adjust to the realities of the time.

Conclusion

This paper focused on the concept of totem and totemism, categories of totems in history and their utilitarian value in the pre-colonial history of Africa with particular emphasis on Idoma has been examined. Steps towards effective utilization of totems in historical reconstruction have been suggested. The paper contends that while totemism is a welcome development in the writing of local African histories, it should not be undertaken mainly with the sole aim of legitimizing the history of one group over another. In writing a history of people like Idoma for instance, an integrated approach should be adopted rather than a parochial perspective which may only cause disunity. This does not mean local differences should be suppressed but, situated within the overall context of the larger Idoma society. Along this line of argument, Smith cautions that when writing about a pre-colonial period where written sources are deficient, conditional statements such as “it would appear” or “probably” should be adopted.^{xix} If this is adopted, contending issues in writing pre-colonial histories would be minimized. Conclusively, therefore, totems when properly utilized assist the pre-colonial historian to destroy the myth of the “pure tribe” in African history.

Endnotes

ⁱYeshua Ilan et al: *The New Encyclopedia Britannica* Vol.11, 15th Edition, London 1768, 864.

ⁱⁱ E.O. Erim: “Cultural Totemism and the Idoma Pre-colonial History” *The Calabar Historical Journal* (2) 2, 1978, 56. G O.Odeh,*The Creation of Ohimini Local Government and its Impact on Okpiko Clan, 1996-2006*. (Unpublished B.A. Project, Department of History, Benue State University, Makurdi), 2007, 33-34.

ⁱⁱⁱ Yeshua Ilan et al: *The New Encyclopedia Britannica* Vol.11, 15th Edition, London 1768, Pp. 864-865.

^{iv} E.O. Erim: “Oral Tradition and the Development of Nationality” *Perspectives and Methods of Studying African History*. Enugu: Fourth Dimension Publishing Co. Ltd, 1984, 40.

^v E O. Erim: “Cultural Totemism and the Idoma Pre-colonial History” *The Calabar Historical Journal*, 57. Itodo Ejembi, c90 years, an elder;interviewed at Okpiko-Ukpobi Anyuwa, Ohimini Local Government Area of Benue State on 3rd April, 2007.

^{vi} E O. Erim: “Cultural Totemism and the Idoma Pre-colonial History” 57.

^{vii} E O. Erim: “Oral Tradition and the Development of Nationality” *Perspectives and Methods of Studying African History*....40.

^{viii} E O. Erim: “Oral Tradition and the Development of Nationality”45.

- ^{ix} E.O. Erim: *The Idoma Nationality 1600-1900 Problems in Studying the Origins and Development of Ethnicity*, Enugu: Fourth Dimension Publishers 1981, E.O. Erim “Cultural Totemism Idoma Pre-Colonial History”, 61.
- ^x Olo Antayi, c80 years, an elder interviewed at Ukpobi-Ipiga in Ohimini LGA on 2nd April, 2007, E.O. Erim “Cultural Totemism and Idoma Pre-colonial History”... 61.
- ^{xi} J.I. Elaigwu: “Self-Regulation in a Traditional Society: Integration and Orders in Pre-colonial Otukpo of Nigeria” in *Benue Bulletin*, n.d. 13.
- ^{xii} T.N. Tamuno (ed), “People of the Niger-Benue Confluence” *A Thousand and Years of West African History*, Ibadan: University Press, 1965, 201-202.
- ^{xiii} O. Erim: “Cultural Totemism and the Idoma Pre-colonial History”...,56.
- ^{xiv} A.F Usman, and G.O.Odeh, “When Contact is not Enough: Issues in a Century of Intergroup Relations in Nigeria” *Police Academy (POLAC) International Journal of Humanities and Security*, (1)1, (Maiden Edition), 2015, 84.
- ^{xv} R.G. Armstrong: “The Idoma Speaking Peoples” in *The Peoples of the Niger-Benue Confluence*, London, 1955, 97.
- ^{xvi} J.B. Webster: “Animals of the Kingdom: Crocodiles and Hippos, Manates and Fishes” *Benue Valley papers cited in E.O. Erim Cultural Totemism and Idoma Pre-colonial History*, 60.

^{xvii}E.O. Erim: *The Idoma Nationality 1600-1900: Problems in Studying the Origins and Development of Ethnicity*, 23.

^{xviii}Z.D. Goshit, “Some *Controversial Issues and Problems in Ngas History, Plateau State*” *Essay in Honour of late Dr. C.C. Jacobs*, presented at the Benue State University, Makurdi on 30th May, 2005, 3.

^{xix} R. Smith, “Explanation in African History: How and why” *Tarikh, Historical Method* (6), 1, 1978, 9.