

# A COMPARATIVE ANALYSES OF SEVENTH-DAY ADVENTIST CHURCH DIETARY RULES AND TOTEMIC BELIEFS IN AFRICA: IMPLICATIONS FOR SPIRITUAL GROWTH

BY

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## Abstract

*In biblical tradition and even outside of it, dietary rules guide the food habit of man. While food and plants are for the nourishment of the body, it is an incontrovertible fact that some are harmful. This paper took a critical look at the Seventh-Day Adventist Church food habit and its leaning on clean and unclean things as contained in the Book of Leviticus (Chapters 11-14) which has a major implication on spiritual growth of members. This is compared with the totemic beliefs and practices of some African societies which set aside certain animals not to be killed and or if killed, not to be eaten by the very people who have such an animal as their totem. The aim of this paper is to undertake a comparative analyses of the Seventh-day Adventist church food habit and the totemic belief in Africa, for spiritual growth. The theory adopted for this study is based on the food taboo theory of Peter Altman and Anna Angelini 2020. The study employed the comparative phenomenological approach in data collection, presentation and discussion. It observed that the Seventh-Day Adventist Church teaching on food habit is not only for physical nourishment of the body but has so much to do with human spiritual growth. This without doubt, has a striking similarity with the prohibitive rules which govern totemic beliefs and practices in many African societies. The study concluded that this food habit practice by the Seventh-Day Adventist Church, should be made a family principle by all and sundry so that its observance will not be an imposition but by informed decision.*

**Keywords:** Food habit, spiritual growth, totem, prohibition, defilement.

## Background

It is no gain saying that the Adventist education is a veritable tool for shaping the life of its

members and other people of the world. Thus, Adventist education which involve teaching and learning from biblical foundation is a concept that is vision to add value to the lost hope of the contemporary society. Hence, this educational process of the Adventists church in the cause of ameliorating the challenges of the society, finds relevance in biblical principles which are in synergy to the cultural norms of Africa as a precursor. In recent time, the diseases that is common in the immediate societies mentioned above, which has severe effect on the mortality of society, is attributed to common negligence to health dietary rules which are applicable in the foundational biblical doctrines of the Adventist church and the cultural totemic norms of the Africans.

It is good to note that the tradition of dietary rules, is essential to guide the food habit of man in both the bible and the cultural or indigenous religion. As much as food (plant, animals, insects and creeping things) are good for the nourishment of the human body, it is also a known fact that some food and plant are dangerous to the body. Moreover, the Adventists demonstrate a strict adherence to the rule of diet in Leviticus 11-14 and Deuteronomy 14 as its biblical authority. At this juncture, the biblical focus of dietary rules resonates on the need for healthy living and worshipping God. 3 John 2 asserts that healthy living is a fundamental step to spiritual growth “I wish above all things that you may prosper and be in good health even as your soul prospers”. Following the above deduction, it is very important to observe that the biblical direction that supports the Adventist church dietary rules has far reaching impact on our contemporary society. Theoretical framework:

The theoretical framework of this article is based on the food taboo and biblical prohibition studies of Altman and Angelini (2020). According to these scholars, the practice of food taboo and biblical prohibition, is a symbolic and material repository that deals with the law of consumption in Leviticus 11 and Deuteronomy 14. Simply put, this concept has a driving force from the practice of Israel in their history and strengthens their desire for survival and spiritual sanctification. Thus, the different food and animal items which they isolate, serve as a way to regulate consumption arising from a divine enactment of dietary laws since time immemorial.

Altman and Angelini (2020) in this discourse, addresses some salient factors which regulate the Israelites relationship with nature concerning what to eat and those to avoid. Without mincing words, the Israelites place a high premium on spiritual growth, especially when these are spelt out in the Bible. As it were, this has a biblical background from the relationship between good food habit and spiritual growth among the ancient people of Israel.

Without over stating the obvious, certain factors explain the emergence of food taboo. This is with the tendency of attributing moralization or moral value on the pattern of behaviour and prestige-based transmission of better behavior strictly based on divine injunction. On the final note, the biblical dietary restrictions on the Israelites, delineates food taboo and the exercise of power by self-interest which was practiced by the people in

obedience to the will of God.

The relevant of this theory to the current study is premised on the understanding that the Seventh-day Adventist church based their teachings on clean and unclean food and animals on the same biblical passages. This suggests that the church aligns itself to the divine directions of God in the bible. Therefore, the church is one Christian denomination that is upholding the prescriptions of the bible. Juxtaposing the position of the Seventh-day Adventist church with the totemic beliefs and practices in Africa, this paper establishes what similarities that exist between the two religions.

The food taboo theory is aimed at regulating or synchronizing human dietary pattern.

### **Adventist dietary Rules and scholarly reviews**

The Adventist principle on dietary regulation is factored on the basis of the distinction between the clean and unclean animals as Shea (1988) avers, this was demonstrated in the first book of the bible with reference to the event of the flood story in Genesis (7:2-9:4). Thus this does not only apply to the OT, but it is also found in the NT in the narrative of Revelation (18:2) in describing the new earth and the New Jerusalem. This biblical passages recognize the two categories of the separate description of the clean and unclean animal world which includes birds in the air, fishes in the water, four footed beasts, and creeping things on the earth. Furthermore, Deuteronomy 14 proscribes the regulation on eating habit and their sacrificial connection. He pointed out what the sacrificial items were meant for.

More so, the NT does not invalidate in dietary principle of the OT but rather gave strength to specific explanation of the subject in Acts 15 expounding the dietary laws. Roger Coon (ND) espousing the writings of Ellen G White and the Seventh Day Adventist church "Health messages" God's third priority for the first 20 years of vision (1845-65) opined that dietary regulation which are the health message of the Adventist church has a divine origin, which is a direct revelation of God. "I have had a great light from the Lord upon the subject of health reform. I did not study to obtain it; it was given to me by the Lord to give to other (CD 493 from Ms 29, 1897). Arguably, he suggests that the purpose of the message was given for practical reasons which are embedded in philosophy and theology. Hence, the Adventist health message which includes the dietary regulatory laws are not mere philosophies or theories that are meant to enhance man's intellectual capacity on discussion and debate, but rather a practical way of life, which is tangible and must be demonstrated to capture and benefit faithful adherents and others.

Hence, for good hygiene of food and safety, Dora-Liyana et.al (2018) avers that the neglect of regulatory laws to food consumption is the cause of a lot of illnesses, since there have been either contamination or consuming the wrong food. Moreover, for the Seventh-day Adventist church, Panoff (2019) opined that the way of eating should be

wholesome to promote health. However, it will be of great important that Adventists practice and promote vegetarianism as their diet avoiding meat that the bible deems to be unclean. It is of great essence to note that the Seventh - day Adventist church since 1863 have promoted variation of their beliefs that the body should be fed with the healthiest food. Thus, this health food are patterns based on the biblical consideration in Leviticus, which lay more emphasis on plant food. In this regard, it is worthy to note that the Seventh-day Adventist church discourages using products that the bible consider unclean. Therefore, the Adventist church, distinguishes between clean meat and unclean as defined in the bible book of Leviticus. Adventists in their conceptual belief, assert that the food that is consumed either clean or unclean has both spiritual and physical implication on the body. Thus, eating the right and clean food may reduce disease risk and improve health. Moreover, the Adventist's education principle advocates healthy living as well as spiritual growth which function as Siamese twins. According to Amazing facts, the Adventist's principles of healthy living is God's instruction. In Eden feeding began with vegetables and nuts, this was the original plan for human dietary plan "you shall eat the herb of the field" Gen 3:18. In addition, the introduction of animal flesh as food came as a result of the flood Gen 7. God introduced animal meal but gave prescription on the specific type as a rule to distinguish between the clean and unclean animals (Lev 11, Deut 14:3-21). Therefore, this was a clear provision for human enjoyment. Thus, in His plan, God selected clean animals to enter in the pair of seven while those unclean He made a pair of two to mark the end of the sinful world of that time (Gen7). More so, God gave specific instruction on avoiding meal made out of blood, since blood symbolizes the life of human beings (lev 3:17, 1 Samuel 14:32-33). Citing the Maasai who eat blood, studies have shown that they are part of the people that suffer from heart diseases and their live expectancy in modern times is between 42-45 years.

On the aspect of sanctity of food which the Bible proclaimed clean, the spiritual growth is of essence. Moreover, Akpa (2021) asserts that God thoroughly ensured that everything He created was good, this is the reason for the exclamation "And He said it was good ". Nevertheless, not everything was good for food. It must be noted that God drew an explicit boundary between the clean and the unclean food which include animals, birds, fishes and other creeping creatures which are concerned today in human nutrition. Akpa, further argues that the two dimensions of God's sanctification of humanity in Lev 11 and Deuteronomy 14 are summarized as permission to eat flesh of animals (Lev 11:2-3, Deut 14:4), which is optional and not a sin. Viewed from another perspective, it was clearly highlighted in Lev 11:8 that such unclean food are prohibitions which have imperative command not to eat of or from. Hence, it will be sinful to violate any instruction in this category or categories of creatures that are well sufficiently spelt out. The biblical language for it to be forbidden was so strong it added prohibition on ordinary touch. A common touch of even the carcass is considered defilement that requires cleansing rituals. To balance the biblical relationship of the OT and NT, Paul in the NT also agreed clean and unclean concepts of food for sanctification of the human body for spiritual upliftment in 1 Timothy 4:3-6.

The above presents Seventh-day Adventist church food taboo as a divine injunction. Its purpose being to enhance human spiritual upliftment. In this area, this practice shares some similarities with the African traditional religious belief relating to totemism which the succeeding discussion shall reveal.

### **Totemism as a belief system:**

The term 'totem' is understood to have come from a North American Indian language, which refers to vegetables or animals that are revered by an individual or group as sacred. Totems are considered as an emblem consisting of an object such as an animal or plant that serves as the symbol of a family or clan. (Adu-Gyamfi, 2011). According to Ninian Smart (1984) totems may refer to animals, plant or object considered related to a kin group and view as sacred. This definition however briefly conveys the idea of worship and veneration by a group. Sigmund Freud argues that the basic idea conveyed in his work *Totems and Taboos* as quoted by Ninian Smart (1989) affirms that: It is the belief in and practice of a sacramental relationship with some animal species or other entities on the part of diverse segments of a group. Haekel (2013) characterized totemism as an arrangement of faith in which people are said to have connection or enchanted relationship with a soul being, for example, creature or plant. Tylor (1832-1917), expanded the argument relating to totemism beyond the worship of plants and animals, claiming that it was actually an early exercise in the instinct within humans to classify their surrounding world. Ethnologist like Sylvio and Yahaya (2007) contend that there are key territories where a totem can be noteworthy to man and its environs (both social and physical condition). Durkheim's work, *The Elementary Forms of a Religious-Life*, first distributed in 1912 has likewise lit up the uncovering comprehension of totemism as rehearsed by Australian Aboriginal social orders. In his contention, totemism speaks to religion in its most 'rudimentary' or straightforward shape. A totem was initially a creature or plant taken as having specific emblematic noteworthiness for a gathering. In many instances, eating the totemic creature or plant aside from on exceptional stylized events, is normally illegal, and as a hallowed question the totem is accepted to have divine properties which isolate it totally from different creatures that may be chased, or harvests accumulated and devoured (Giddens, 2001).

As Elkin (1938) cited by Nnamuku(2017), holds that, totemism "is a perspective of nature and life, of the universe and man, which joins them with nature's exercises and species in an obligation of common nurturing". As indicated by him, the terms 'totem' and 'totemism' pass on three fundamental implications in New South Wales (NSW). The first is a personality meaning - the 'totem' is a non-human species or marvel that stands for, or speaks to, the gathering. The second is a relationship meaning - the 'totem' and the individual or gathering share their physical substance, and offer a family relatedness. The third is a perspective which means - the connections are installed in a perspective of the world in which availability is the establishment of all life. The totemic group has ideological, mystical, emotional, reverential and genealogical relationship with the

totems. It is necessary to differentiate between group and individual totemism (Encyclopedia Britannica). Totemism can also be defined as a complex of varied ideas and ways of behavior based on a world view drawn from nature (Dagba, et.al. 2013).

As per Sylvio and Yahaya (2007), totemism assumes a noteworthy part in work holding, however couple of researchers have inspected its part in the advancement of natural assurance. In most conventional African societies, it was unlawful to murder or damage a totem. It was similarly illicit for a relative, for example, spouse, who may have hailed from an alternate clan and in this way had an alternate totem, to hurt the totem of a spouse or child. This was essentially on the grounds that totems were seen as a major aspect of the related kins, and it was trusted that these totems imparted blood to the progenitors. To hurt a totem in any case, was equivalent to harming the network' of predecessors. In the event of a violation, expulsion, hard work, or passing, were unleashed on defaulters.

#### **Totemism and food taboo:**

The affinity which various kin groups in Africa and other parts of the world makes the killing and eating of a totemic animal or plant sacrilege. Many cultures in Africa forbid the killing or eating of their totemic animal. Within such societies, anyone who does, violates a standing social rule and is severely punished. In some cultures, such as Ogba, Nembe, Okrika, Nnewi and Egbeda, such an individual was summarily ostracized. In the view of Ohia and Onyedibia (2003), the different totemic animals in Ogba originated from the different charms made by different kindreds and put in different animals with which to fight the Aboh war. The practice of totemism is linked with the inter-communal wars which Ogba fought with their neighbours. In this war oral tradition has it that charms were prepared and put into the various objects and animals by the families. These were used to invade the enemies. It is believed that after this exercise, human beings will metamorphose into the various animals to fight their enemy.

However, scholars like Ellah (1995), Obodoegbulam and Da-Wariboko (2010) hold a contrary view. They argued that these animals, fishes, ants, etc may have given the families an assistance in the past. As a result, the families decided to adopt them as their totem. For instance, the totem animal helping to save a drowning person in the river. Similarly, they must have been helped in other ways that they chose to respect and spare the species as totem never to kill or eat them. Obodoegbulam and Da-Wariboko (2010), writing on the totemic animal and food taboo in Ogba, stressed that animals like

Buffalow, tortoise, rabbit, iguana, alligator, bush pig, bush dog, bitch are not killed by some kin groups who may share affinity with such animal. Birds such as eagle, kite, king fisher, pyrot, guinnie-fowl, peagen are also preserved as totemic. Fishes like electric fish, tilapia, skilaria, mud fish among others are equally set aside as totems. Plants such as Ofor tree, oha, and iron leave are equally totemic.

In Ogbaland, mythic narratives surround these totemic animals and plants. Some kindred hold that in their migration history, one of these animals helped them to either cross difficult terrain, or river or escape danger. Among the Umu-Mgbra kindred of Oboburu in Ogba/Egbema/Ndoni Local Government of Rivers State, it was a serious violation of social order for any member of the kingroup to eat the buffalo. It is a taboo for any member of the Umu-Mgbra kindred to even view the carcass of the Buffalo. The above is because the Buffalo is their totem. In Ndoni, Whyte (2023) argued that Iguana is the totem of Ndoni people. Here, this animal is neither killed nor eaten. Even strangers are obliged to keep to this rule. In Ndoni, ignorance is no excuse. Anyone who kills the Iguana whether knowingly or otherwise, is not left to go scotch free. Similarly, no Ndoni person allows the killing of the animal. Anyone who does, whether by dint of accident, was required to give the animal a feating funeral due a grandfather. In Ndoni, the Iguana is called “Nnadi” meaning grandfather. In Egbeda, the bush dog (Eduabali) is observed as a totemic animal. According to Nnamuku (2017), the bush dog is not killed by all egbeda indigens. Similarly, it is a taboo to sell its meat in their market by strangers. It is also a taboo for a pregnant woman to see the meat of the animal. Perhaps, this may be responsible for outlawing its sale in the market.

### **Religious Significance of Totemism among the People of Nnewi.**

According to Rachea Amegatse (2019) Totems are revered by members of a particular social group because of a mystical or ritual relationship that exists between them. The totem may be regarded as a group symbol and as a protector of the members of the group. In most cases the totemic animal or plant is considered as an object of taboo. peter (2018) as cited by Ejefobiri, (2019), asserts that in Nnewi community, the OFO tree is not in use

till date but only in building sacred house like shrine and in performing rituals also it is used as a as symbol of staff of authority by the igwe's and the obi's of Nnewi community. Ejeforbiri (2019) asserts that the Nnewi totem python (eke).

**Serves as an object of revelation:** The Eke totem in Nnewi is mostly viewed as a messenger when seen in a dream it could be an impending or indication that there is an impending danger or probably death. Thus, it is required of the indigene of Nnewi to go and meet a chief priest for proper clarification and accurate interpretation of the dream so that the right rituals are performed to overturn the danger. Ugochuku, (2015) opined that Nnewi people revered their totemic animal to the point of not killing it because" it is regarded as a taboo for killing such animals or mishandling such objects in communities in which they are used, believing that killing or eating them would bring curses or calamities on them.

According to Ezenwa (2000) In Nnewi community, it is believed that there is a mystical or ritual relationship that exists between them that made their totemic animals to protect them against their enemies or they are being protected by the powers in such objects. In some cases, people try to emulate or exhibit the qualities of their totems. For instance, Nnewi African star apple (udara) serves as their totems of fertility, believed to be pregnant through the use it's leaves or by staying under the udara tree. Hence, the rationale behind this is that, there are many African star seed on its branches indicating fruitfulness.

**Conclusion:**

In the light of the above discussion, it is apparent that in as much as there exists some relationship between the seventh Day Adventist Church dietary rule and totemic beliefs on food taboo, some differences equally exist. While the Adventist church maintain their dietary rule purely on grounds of spiritual development, the food taboos which relates to totemic animals and plants are not exactly on the same ground. The restrictions which

feature in the case of totemic animals and plants more or less relate to clan rules rather than a definite religious body.

While the dietary rules which members of the Adventists church observe are spelt out in the holy Bible, the food taboos in the case of totemic animals are purely cultural and not inscribed in any holy writ. Having critically looked at this two observances, one can conclude that the relationship which exist between the two practices are so close and serve the same purpose.

In Africa as is the case in other parts of the world, totems communicate important messages from the ancestors to individuals and save them from calamities. No individual or group molests or kills them. This without doubt, has a striking similarity with prohibitive rules which govern dietary rules in the Seventh-day Adventist church. The study concludes that this food habit practice by the Seventh-Day Adventist Church, should be made a family principle by all and sundry so that its observance will not be an imposition but by informed decision to enhance their spiritual growth as faithful adherents.

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