

# THE SOCIO-CULTURAL EFFECTS OF 'OPUADA Ogidiga' TOTEM IN NEMBE, BAYELSA STATE, NIGERIA

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## Abstract

*Religious beliefs and practices are essential aspects of every society. Societies are defined by their religious beliefs and practices. One of the key beliefs and practices in most religions is the practice of totems. A totem can be an animal, a bird, a plant, an object, etc. Totems are animals, plants, objects, etc that a group of people see as carrying sacred power and can even be seen as re-incarnation of the gods or ancestors. Totems are sources of blessings and carriers of mystical powers. Totems are revered and celebrated with feasts and festivals. Totemic animals are preserved and protected from destruction. This paper uses socio-historical and hermeneutics methods to examine totemic beliefs and practices concerning Opuada Ogidiga among the Nembe people. The paper finds that beliefs in totem are real among the Nembe people. The paper concludes that people should be aware of the socio-cultural effects of totems and be tolerant of the beliefs of others.*

**Keywords:** Social, culture, totem, Opuada-Ogidiga, Nembe, Bayelsa State, Nigeria.

## Introduction

Religion has a way of playing on lives (animates and inanimate objects) in every society, there are forms and objects of worship which the people may or may not be able to do without. The idea to acknowledge these objects as objects of worship or reverence may have developed with/from forefathers' experiences or encounters. For instance, most African societies today have one form of legend (story) or the other, that speaks of their ancient wars and how they were helped or rescued by one form of creature (in most cases animal, fish, or even trees) or the other. And thus it (the creature) automatically becomes a totem (an object of worship or reverence) to such individual or community.

What is a totem? It refers to natural objects, especially animals regarded as sacred to a people, clan, community, or village which could be traced back to the history of such a

people. They are held in high esteem (sacred) and forbidden to be killed, eaten, or destroyed. Some of such objects have developed over the years to become a stronghold for such communities or families. Some are believed to have brought progress and prosperity, while others are also believed to have brought pains and setbacks (lack of development). These experiences and beliefs have made African society a more complex society and unique in its style. Such experience has played deeply into the Nembe man's social life intentionally or unintentionally. For example, during the 2012 flood, the researcher was traveling from Delta State to Bayelsa State a journey which took her from the early hours of the morning to the dead hours of the night, at a point within the Ogbia axis; they came across a python crossing the road, and the vehicle came to a halt, while some passengers were suggesting the driver should roll over the creature, a man seated beside the researcher kept on shouting “Driver, reverse this car let's go back to Yenagoa! Without a word, the researcher was able to ascertain this co-passenger's identity and said, “oga go back to where everybody no bi from Nembe-o” (meaning sir go back to where we all are not from Nembe). The uniqueness of this little drama that played out that night is that; to some, the creature is a dreaded object of worship, while to others it is an enemy that should not be killed, and to others is meat for food, and also to others is a beautiful creature with very useful leather.

Vicki (2009) in his explanation of the aboriginal spirituality of the Australian people as earthly, states that, ancestors created order out of chaos, form out of formlessness, life out of lifelessness, and by so doing established a relationship of interconnectedness speaking of the interconnectedness of things. Seattle, of the Duwamish tribe, explained that “whatever happens to the beast, also happens to the man, because all things are connected in native American animal totems.

### **Description of the Study Area**

Nembe is in Bayelsa State of Nigeria. Bayelsa is located in the extreme south of the country (South-South of Nigeria). Nembe, though an ancient town which many scholars/writers have picked interest in writing about, information on the structure and components of this community is still lacking to an extent. Nembe is an island situated between longitude 6°15' E and longitude 6°19' E, and latitude of 4°30' N and latitude 4°45' N, sharing boundaries with Ogbia local government in the North, Rivers State on the East, Southern Ijaw on the west and Brass on the south. Palynological evidence extracted from a deep core of Ofuabo island (an ancient Nembe community that has gone into extinction) presented dating of man's occupation of this area at about B.C 2800 (Alagoa, 1968).

Nembe is popularly known to be a dual quarter community (Ogbolomabiri and Bassambiri). However, from this research, the researcher was made to understand that it is a tri-quarter community (Oromabiri, Ogbolomabiri, and Bassambiri). Amazingly, Oromabiri is said to be about 100 years older than the Bassambiri quarter in the Nembe community (Interview with Ekekuro and Sam, January 2020).

### **Totem in Africa**

All around the world, there are diverse forms of totems observed by communities, clans' towns, villages, and families. Although our focus on this work is the Nembe community, for understanding, the work of other scholars should be viewed, and due to the diversity in what may be regarded as a totem by the communities, our focus may be on the word itself (totem) and the creature. In the words of Hornby (1974), the totem is seen as a natural object, especially an animal, considered to have a close connection with the family or a group of people (community). Otite (1980) states that totems, as a feature of the Urhobo religion vary from one community to another, and thus there is no generally accepted totem all through Urhobo land mainly because of the different historical experiences. Parrinder (1975) observed that taboos are linked with totems since totemic animals are taboo to their followers. Although Parrinder may be partially right, we must understand that not all taboos are connected with/to totem. For instance, in Urhobo land, some people do not eat snails because are taboo to them but not regarded as a totem thus they encourage others even their offspring to eat them and also sell them.

Elena (2008) held the view that in many cultures, snakes are revered as powerful totem representing the source of life. They are powerfully connected to life force and primal energy.

The snake totem also symbolizes protection, it serves as good luck, and abundance, also serves as a warning, etc. According to her, there are more positive things associated with snake totem than negative things (Green, 2019). Ouidah in Benin Republic has a historical temple for Python worship, this temple is also regarded as a basilica for voodoo worshippers in West Africa. Pythons are highly venerated and worshiped by this person like the Nembe people of Bayelsa State.

According to Onyeakagbu(2019), "Python is considered a totem" among the Nembe people, this assertion may be considered partially true as there is a slight difference between the actual totem and the incorporated one. "*Opu-ada*" (African Puff adder) is the actual totem while "Adagba" (Python) is incorporated as a result of confusion and killing of the actual totem by those who could not differentiate between the two creatures. Python known as 'Eke' in Igbo, is a respected deity, loved, feared, and worshipped by some parts of Igboland like Idemili in Anambra, and Imo state, as a result of experience and belief that this creature has helped them at one point or the other in time of crises and need. The beliefs on pythons among the above-mentioned tribes are similar to that of the Nembe people's 'Opuada and Adagba'

According to some other writers, a totem is a natural object, plant, or animal that is inherited by members of a clan or family as their spiritual emblem. Totems define people's roles and responsibilities, and their relationships with each other and creation. Graham (2020) states that totems are believed to be the descendants of the Dreamtime heroes or totemic beings.

There are group totems and individual totems. The focus of this paper is on group totemism or collective totemism, which is the most widely disseminated form of this belief system. It involves a single or several features, such as the mystic association of animal and plant species, natural phenomena, etc. Group totems are associated or coordinated based on analogies or based on myths or rituals (Josef, 2020). Graham (2020) explanation of the aboriginal spirituality of the Australians as animistic is closely related to the Nembe '*Opu-ada*' totem.

### **The Origin of *Opu-ada* Ogidiga Totem in Nembe**

History has it that warriors from Benin led by Alepe who lost battle escaped to Nembe alongside Oro their chief priest with their deity *Ogidiga* whose totem is '*Opu-ada*' (the African puff-adder). Their arrival coincided with the return of Kala Ekule the then king of the Nembe kingdom who with his subjects left Nembe for Ekuleama during a break-out of epidemic (Interview with Godgift and Tonye, 2020). Kala Ekule who had a dual function (a king and a priest) at that time settled with his people at Oboleama while he asked the visitors to move over to Oruamabiri which is across the river. This decision may be a result of the frightening (dreadful) nature of the *Ogidiga* priest (Interview with Ambrose and others, 2020).

### **Separation of Power/Adoption of the New Deity**

There is no sufficient information on how the spiritual and physical government (kingship) was split however Livingstone (2006) states that, after Ogbodo II, the people clamored for separation of the kingship from the priesthood. Before this period, the people had their object of worship known as "*Ekagie*" (tortoise) (Interview with Cyril and Ovuru, 2020).

But due to the immense power of *Ogidiga*, the people through the approval of their oracle adopted and incorporated *Ogidiga* (whose totem is *Opu-ada*) as their new object of worship (Interview with Cyril and Ebi, 2020). Based on the decision reached by the king and his people with the priest of *Ogidiga* on the separation of power, the *Ogidiga* priest would wield greater power compared to the king. The choice of king making lies on the people while that of the priest lies on the god. (Livingstone 2006). According to Cyril, the priests are selected from the Bassambiri quarter. While both quarters (Ogbolomabiri and Bassambiri) have their separate kings, both are been headed by a singular chief priest. (Interview with Cyril, 2020). Some of the names by which *Ogidiga* is referred to are: *Nembe Nyana Oru* (the god that owns Nembe) *Kidopere*, *Ogidi kan oru* (the god stronger than machetes or weapons.) They signify his exalted position when compared to the king.

### **The Appointment/Emergence of a New Priest**

This period is marked by a couple of disagreements, followed by the sudden disappearance of the would-be priest for a period of three to seven days after the said days, he would appear first at the tira-tirigo of Nembe Creek rising above the water up to his belly-button (navel), producing the sound of *Abalakoko* (eagle). The news of his appearance is rumored by those who saw him appear. As he dived into the water, nobody saw him again until he reached 'Pu-Amgba' in Bassambiri, appeared for the second time, and produced the same

sound. He dives into the water again, and on his third appearance produces the sound of *Abalakoko* (eagle) again, after which he will hail himself with his different titles. After this ritual, he would glide on the water like a python until he gets to the shore at *Ogi-lolo* (the name of a creek where rituals relating to Ogidiga are performed) in Oruamabiri (juju quarter) (Livingstone, 2006).

Before the separation of powers, there were certain conditions agreed upon by the king and Ogidiga-ere that would make it conducive for the Ogidiga priest to make his journey from the river after being possessed by the god. These conditions include the provision of blood from two slaughtered or slain human beings by the king into 'Kugu' (keg) for ablution as soon as the spirit steps on land. Second the king must be 'Osunbo' according to Livingstone, this word has no English epithet. However, according to Ovuru and others interviewed, *Osunbo* is the assistant of the chief priest, he understands the language of the spirits. Thirdly, in old age, the priest must sacrifice his first son for Ogidiga (Livingstone 2006, and interview with Ovuru, 2020). Nevertheless, today all these human rituals/sacrifices are being replaced with animals (ox, oxen, or cows). (Interview with Ovuru, Ambrose, and Sam, 2020). The choice of these animals was made based on the fact that they also conceive and give birth within nine months like humans (Interview with Alfred and others, 2020).

#### **Its Festival and Other Affiliate Feast/Festival**

Annual feasts/festivals are usually held in honour of the celebration of this phenomenon and its totem at the beginning of year. Persons from all works of life and different communities converged at Nembe to give thanks for the blessings and testimonies experienced from calling on the name *Opuada*. Some of these persons sponsor the festival (Interview Ovuru, and Isaac, 2020).

Before the *Opuada* festival, a mini feast is held for '*esain*' (periwinkle). After this, they prepare an errand boy (a youth) who will go on a mission to cut *Angala*, (Chikoko or Mangrove tree). Before this time, the people consult an oracle to identify who is to embark on this special task. The fact that it has the power to protect them, it protects and shields the errand-boy, and on his return, he does not paddle the boat, all he does is just balance the boat, on approaching or getting close to the waterside (shore), he drops the paddle on the boat and watches to see if the boat will float on its own to the right direction (the place of the shrine) *Suotugu* – the place where the shrine was first located. (interview with Cyril and Crispin, 2020).

After the landing of the boat, the next festival is '*Idumagi*' (meaning banana). The '*Angala*' (the mangrove woodcut) will be pegged by a standing banana sucker, it will be cut while men run to and fro until it falls. (Interview with gospel and others, 2020).

According to Cyril and Maxwell (interview 2020), before the advent of Christianity, there had been the practice of male circumcision as part of the people's custom, and whoever is not circumcised must not touch the banana (it is a taboo for the uncircumcised to touch it).

When an uncircumcised male touches the banana or eats from it, there will be great calamity for the person (even death). Women do not go close to it (the banana). After the banana celebration, they proceed to the main festival (the banana celebration ushers them into the '*Opuada*' festival proper which lasts for seven days).

### **Sacrifices/Rituals Involved**

In ancient times human sacrifice was preferable, but today '*Ovin*' (Ox or Oxen) is used because, like human, they also give birth within nine months. (Interview with Ovuru, 2020). The festival lasts for seven days with a ritual dance known as "*Piritua*" while the cutting of the Ox is known as '*Peripele*' (the neck of the Ox or Oxen must be hacked just once). (Interview with Ovuru and Fred, 2020). While this celebration goes on for seven days there is a group of priestesses regarded as the puff adder's *swives* that also had their separate dance and display. Before this stage, these priestesses carry out a ritual called "*Tendefe*" (meaning lap), this ritual must be performed to allow their physical husband to approach them after the festival (a kind of permission ritual that will permit the human husband to come close to his wife after the celebration). (Interview with Rachael, Ayebainemi and others, 2020).

"*Opusuo*" (cutting of banana), this is done by the '*Idu*' (Banana) Priest(s). These groups are very important; they are in charge of ritual performance without them nothing can be done. Their performance depends on the decision of the oracle (interview with Crispin, 2020).

'*Kamo*' ritual (breaking of glasses ritual)/ It is a ritual performed at the death of the '*Idu*' priest. After his burial, *Kamo* is done for seven days. The ritual is performed as follows; the first son of the priest stands straight with both hands stretched out, standing still while the drummers play their drums, and another person comes to pour local gin (Ogogoro) into the glasses, as this is been done, the drummers will be mentioning the names of all late priest(s) one after the other, and anyone mentioned his spirit incite the bearer ( the one holding) of the glasses and he turns to the direction where such (that) priest is buried and will be sprinkling the drink till the glasses are empty. (Interview with Crispin and Kesiefaye, 2020). After this, the spirits incite him in a violent move causing him to sustain injury as a result of the broken glasses (hundreds of glasses may be broken in the process of the ritual). Another head son takes over after his performance until it is rotated within that family for three generations before it is shifted to another family. (Interview with Crispin, Ovuru, and others, 2020). All the spirits of the past late chief priests incite the individual to offer him directives (Interview with Cyril and Ovuru 2020).

### **Social Cultural Implications of this Belief**

During the festival, there are numerous social-cultural displays by worshippers, some of such displays are music/dance of different steps, magical performances, and all kinds of signs and wonders (miracles) performed by the descendants and wives of *Ogidiga (Opu-ada)* from a different direction. (Interview with Jacob, Ovuru, and Rachael, 2020).

According to Lady (Interview, 2020), women are not permitted to wear trousers during the festival. Action groups are inaugurated during the festival to checkmate the girls' and women's dressing codes, this group consist of male and elderly women. All females are forbidden from putting on short clothes, transparent wear, and trousers, and the innerwear must not be exposed or seen outside. (Interview with Crispin, Cyril and Pele, 2020). The women are not also permitted to stand while in the boat (paddling or not paddling), they either sit or squat where there are no vacant seats. (Interview with Ovuru and Rose, 2020).

The various chiefs have their different tables during the celebration where entertainment and donations of different sortstake place. (Interview with Kelly and Priye, 2020). As a result of their cultrate nature, they also believe that encountering the *Opuada* while traveling has some social-cultural effects depending on the direction it emerges from. If it comes from the right crawling to the left, is a kind of warning from unseen or imminent danger while from the left to the right signifies a good omen or good fortune. (Interview with Ovuru, Crispin and others, 2020).

There is an increase in population and business flow during the festival. Nembe becomes a tourist center during the festival. Someterritories are highly prohibited to strange and women from the environment (Interview with Ovuru and Spiff, 2020). The practice cuts across all people from and within the community not minding their religion. If anyone feels he/she cannot participate because he or she is a Christian, such a person has the liberty to travel out of the community while the celebration/rituals last to avoid it. (Interview with Timi and Ovuru, 2020).

### ***Opu-ada Taboo***

*Opu-ada* taboos have immensely affected the people's social-cultural lifestyle. The people relate to *Opu-ada* (puff-adder) as a fellow human, even highly esteemed by some persons then human. *Opu-ada* is always welcome in the Nembe man's home, for instance, if you want to sleep and you have no pillow, and you desire to have one, *Opu-ada* presents itself as the nearest available pillow for you to enjoy your sleep with. (Interview with Mary and Full-James, 2020).

Anyone who kills it intentionally might end-up being killed in return. (Interview with Ebiyu and Ovuru 2020). On the other hand, those who accidentally kill the *Opu-ada* (Puff-adder) will bring a woman from their family as a means of exchange for the dead *Opu-ada*. But for one who comes across it dead in a trap or net, goes straight to the shrine, and report his/her encounter, there he/she will be charged some amount of money, but if the person enters his house before coming to report, he will be fine to buy Ox or a cow, bottle of local gin (Ogogoro), coke, Kola-nut and additional sum of N500, then the priest will libate and pray for such victim of circumstances. However, if such a person has the information to himself and refuses to confess, his/her family (descendants) will be

completely wiped out by a mysterious death tour (Interview with Crispin, Ovuru and others, 2020). According to Ekekuro, it is prohibited for a woman (women) to go around the building where the shrine is established, any woman who breaks this law and refuses (or fails) to confess to the priest will have ceaseless menstrual flow. (Interview with Ekekuro, 2020).

### Disadvantages

There are some demerits observed in the practice.

1. Human sacrifice was prominent in the practice in ancient time
2. The belief attracts tribal war because as long as you have protective charms or medicine against machetes and guns, you become power drunk.
3. It encourages false stories because people who are power drunk tell lies and falsify stories as such telling their children or relatives that this land belongs to their forefathers whereas they know it is not true etc. (interview with Crispin and Ovuru, 2020).

### Findings

There are some findings made from this research work.

1. Some of the people especially the chiefs (or some historical custodians) use the opportunity of this belief to extort others. For example, during one of the researcher's field trips to the Nembe community, during an interview session with a particular chief, a worried woman came in, to find out from the chief what it entails to settle the taboo of walking into a scene of a dead puff-adder or seeing a dead python. The chief charged this woman thirty-five thousand naira (N35,000) and other items like goat, and local gin. However, the researcher was surprised to know that settlement or fine for such taboo is just a token of five hundred nairas and some little items such as kola-nut and local gin.
2. They (the chiefs and priests) create unnecessary fear in the people through this belief. Moreso, its shrine has been the headquarters of '*Egbesu*' (Ijaw war god) militants who go there to acquire power for their evil missions (such as kidnapping, sea piracy, etc).
3. Despite the level of Christianity and the social standard of people, no one dared to conceive the thought or idea of abolishing the practice.
4. Some persons are ashamed of this practice among their people
5. The finding also reveals that this totemic practice by the Nembe people is a means of preserving species such as; puff-adder, python, eagle, etc.

### Conclusion

This seminar work on the social-cultural impact of *Opu-ada's* totem was carried out in the Nembe community and its environment. It is an ancient practice that has established a great foothold in the Nembe social life not minding the religion anyone claims to belong. *Opu-ada* totem is a general community totem, an emblem of the '*Ogidiga*' phenomenon. A phenomenon highly dreaded and revered by the Nembe people. *Opu-ada*, though entertaining and accommodating, yet very dreadful. Today as a result of the social

implications some persons seem to be uncomfortable with its presence.

### Recommendations

Although the people believe that the worship (totem) is profitable to them, research has shown that this notion is untrue. It is rather a source of destruction and setback to the community; therefore, it should be abolished.

The people should be enlightened on the detrimental effects of this belief.

The people should be enlightened on the economic usefulness of this totem.

The government can help to create some kind of tourist center, by creating a game reserve, zoo, and another wild-life conservative center in the area.

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### ORAL INTERVIEWS

S/N	NAME	OCCUPATION	AGE	SEX	PLACE	DATE
1	Alfred Eto (Chief)	Civil Servant	72	Male	Nembe	Jan. 2020
2	Ambrose Otuma	Priest	80	Male	Nembe	Jan. 2020
3	Chief D. Ayodele	Civil servant	67	Male	Nembe	Jan. 2020
4	Chief Full-James Yousou	Curator	72	Male	Nembe	Jan. 2020
5	Chief G. Ebifa	Civil servant	70	Male	Nembe	Jan. 2020
6	Chief O. Kelly	Curator	68	Male	Nembe	Jan. 2020
7	Chief O. Maxwell	Civil servant	79	Male	Nembe	Jan. 2020
8	Diepreye C.A Ovuru	Civil servant	60	Male	Nembe	Jan. 2020
9	Dr. Cyril Ovuru	Civil servant	54	Male	Port Harcourt	Jan. 2020
10	Dr. J. Iruo	Civil servant	70	Male	Yenagoa	Jan. 2020
11	Ebi Tomson	Lumber	46	Male	Nembe	Jan. 2020
12	Fred Ayibatwon	Lumber	47	Male	Nembe	Jan. 2020
13	Godgift Oweifa	Civil servant	54	Male	Nembe	Jan. 2020
14	Gospel Aye	Civil servant	62	Male	Ogbia	Feb, 2020
15	Kesiefaye Ayibaton	Priest	73	Male	Nembe	Jan. 2020
16	Kuratogutogu Ebiye	Priest	78	Male	Nembe	Jan. 2020
17	Lady A. Oguara (Mrs)	Business	60	Female	Nembe	Jan. 2020
18	Mary Kesiefaye	Farmer	65	Female	Nembe	Jan. 2020
19	Michael Spiff	Civil servant	57	Male	Nembe	Jan. 2020
20	Mrs. R. Ifiebi	Priestess	72	Female	Nembe	Jan. 2020
21	N. Ekekuro	Priest	82	Male	Nembe	Jan. 2020
22	Opuada Sam	Priest	81	Male	Nembe	Jan. 2020
23	Ovuru E. Crispin	Civil servant	52	Male	Nembe	Jan. 2020
24	Ovuru I. Ovuru	Civil servant	58	Male	Nembe	Jan. 2020
25	Pele Nimiworio (Mrs)	Trader	45	Female	Nembe	Jan. 2020
26	Priye Kesiefaye	Trader	54	Male	Nembe	Jan. 2020
27	Rachael O. (Mrs)	Business (Trader)	54	Female	Nembe	Jan. 2020
28	Samson Ayebanimi	Business	48	Male	Nembe	Jan. 2020
29	Spiff Tonworio	Civil servant	52	Male	Yenagoa	Feb, 2020
30	Timi Ifiebi	Business	51	Male	Nembe	Jan. 2020
31	Tonye Ayibapriye	Business	56	Female	Nembe	Jan. 2020