



A CRITICAL LOOK AT TOTEMS AND TABOOS AS AN IMPORTANT ASPECT IN THE CULTURE OF IGBO SOCIETY

AKPAMGBO EUNICE U.
Anambra State University, Igboariam

Abstract

In Igbo land, it is a common knowledge that there are natural objects, animals that are regarded as sacred. Due to one reason or the other those things should not be tampered with. Those sacred objects or animals are regarded as totems. Traditional prohibitions against killing, eating or touching them are referred to as taboos. The study looks into the taboos and totems in Igbo tradition, the changes that have taken place and at the end recommendations are made on the way forward.

Key words: Totems and Taboos as an important aspect of Igbo culture and Possible Cases of Change.

Introduction

Igbo tribe is one of the major tribes in Nigeria. They are collectively called “**Ndi Igbo**”. Geographically Igbo land is located at Eastern and some parts of South South of Nigeria and situated in the West African Region. In the olden days they have their way of worship. The profound reverence to the Supreme God (Chukwu). They have different names they call Chukwu at different time and place. Apart from ancestral worship, there are also some animals they see as totems. In many parts of the world, various animals have been objects of veneration.

Igbo traditional religion recognizes the existence of totemic animals and inanimate objects in some communities.

In Igbo land, there is a belief that totems were chosen by their ancestors as an object to be worshipped and respected. The Igbo belief is that totem was specially chosen by their ancestors as convenient object to abide in with a view to repose and be worshipped.

In Onitsha, a tree is said to have been planted about fifteen generations ago by Chima, the

first king whose spirit still resides therein and to whom great honour and reference is paid by the entire community. Among the Igbo of Achi Division, the tortoise is the totem used by them. Since it is totem, the people of Achi do not harm it and in fact wail sorrowfully when they see it dead. Men can however take it away for harmless religious and ritualistic ceremonies.

Taboos are prohibited actions and violation of them attracts penalties. Bacon (1829:208) defines taboo as “prohibition applying to something that is forbidden or set apart because it is sacred, consecrated or unclean and therefore considered dangerous”. A place, a person, an object or an act can be considered a taboo. What is in uppermost mind of any African man in the olden days was how to keep the taboos of his community and also how to appease the land in case of violation and by so doing, helped the entire community to enjoy a peaceful environment. The Igbo people were not an exception. To achieve this, the Igbo man had to know the taboos in his/her town and ensured that he do not violate any of the taboos in the community.

Freud (1975) said “Taboo can be seen as forbidden acts or prohibitions against certain things”. Hornby (1924) defines taboo as “prohibition applying to something that is forbidden or set apart because it is sacred, consecrated, or unclean and therefore is considered dangerous.” This was to ensure that sacred things did not contaminate with profane and that anything that was unclean did not mingle with things that were sacred. According to Eyisi (2006) “Taboo is a highly forbidden act or behaviour”. Alutu (1963) says that “laws should be observed by people and whoever violates any of them makes himself unclean”. Ogbalu (1981) describe taboo as “... violation of the laws which the town instituted as regards their belief such as felling down sacred trees and killing sacred animals. Ayisi (1972) clearly brings out the consequences of breaking a taboo. He says “Once any of these taboos is broken a cleansing sacrifice follows immediately”. For instance in Francis Orji's novel, *The Outcase*, *Nwobi went contrary to the counsel of his parents and elders in the community and married an Osu*. He was excommunicated and this affected his family staying in the village because the people believe that Amadi (free born) and Osu (outcaste) have nothing in common.

Ndiokwere (1990) said, “For one to obtain favour from God, it is obvious that one should renounce one's evil ways”.

It was understood that every society had a moral standard and whoever went outside this is regarded as a deviant. Examples of Taboos in some town in Igbo land.

Totems and Taboos in some parts of Igbo land

IN OGIDI

- No woman should climb palm or kola nut tree.
- A woman and a man should not sit together on one seat.
- No woman should eat of the sheep (ram) used for any burial ceremony.
- Nobody should kill or eat domestic boar (eke).

IN ENUGWU-UKWU

- No widow should be seen after dusk.
- Nobody at Enugwu-Ukwu eats snake.

- No woman must tie a lion cloth across her legs (Iwa Akwa).
- This includes wearing of knickers. This taboo is common in all Igbo land.

IN OZOBULU

- No theft of yams or coco-yams.
- No killing of domestic boar (eke).
- No stealing of black banana (unere oji).

TORTOISE (MBE) IN ACHI

There is a deity called “*Ogbuokwa ngwongwo*” in Achi (one that kills, and also packs property) whose symbol and spiritual messenger is tortoise. Tortoise is held so sacred and respected more than even humans that worship it. You don't harm it, let alone killing it. Instead you praise and call it names any time and wherever you see it. It is either an honour or a problem for it to come to your house. When it comes, to appease it becomes a problem when the person has nothing like yams, goat, fowls to appease the deity and if nothing is done to rectify the problem, it will kill the person that committed the offence and every member of the family, then all the properties belonging to the person will be brought to its shrine.

IN IDEMILI

In Idemili clan, they have pythons as totem. It is a taboo to harm or kill them. In a situation where the incident occurs, the person that committed the crime is compelled to accord the Python a befitting burial like that of human being. To the people of Idemili, the killer of the Python has committed a sacrilege.

IN IHIALA

No theft of kola nut (offender is given to the Chief to be sold). Nobody should keep poison or kill anybody especially fellow Ihiala citizen with poison. This taboo on human life is common in all Igbo land. Nobody should clean his buttocks after easing himself on a kola nut tree.

IN UMUCHU

No woman should take her husband's hand away from his food while he is eating. A woman under her menses does not cook for her husband nor eat in the same dish with him. Nobody reveals what a masquerade is to the uninitiated. For example of taboos in town mentioned in the work, it shows that every community provides its particular code of taboos. It is the belief of the Igbos that their ancestors are always supervising their moral lives. That is why they always try to live a righteous life by keeping all the societal norms, values and taboos bequeathed to them. According to Anizoba (2001), “Those reasons ranged from protection of indigenes, efficacy of sacrifices, control of diseases, effective fertilization of the land”. There was no taboo instituted without prior reasons and they all worked together unto good.

TOTEM AND TABOOS IN THE PRESENT IGBO LAND

Today violation of some taboos, which is regarded as a serious offence is no longer regarded as serious. There are constant cases of killing and disrespect to human life as it is observed in

present Nigeria today. There was a story of a father who killed his one and half year old daughter. Also, a married woman was stabbed to death over illicit affairs with another man. People's attitudes towards protection of life have drastically changed.

Edeh (1985) said that life especially human life is sacred that which only God (Chineke) can give and take that is why it should be protected. In Ihiala, when somebody involves himself/herself in stealing kolanut, the crime is regarded as totem; it is also a totem for one to clean his/her buttocks on a kola nut tree.

POSSIBLE CAUSES OF CHANGE:

Christianity had helped greatly to reduce the observance of totems, taboos and expiations in Igbo land. With the coming of western religion, the traditional pattern in Igbo land became disturbed.

According to Ilogu (1974) "Plurality of beliefs and value concepts appeared for the first time to start the social change that has been going on in Igbo land.

Such taboo like giving birth to twins is no longer regarded as an offence. Neonate coming out with leg first is no longer a serious offence. Giving birth without getting married is still a very serious offence, irrespective of the western religion.

Urbanization also contributes immensely to the changing pattern of taboo and expiation among the Igbos. In the urban areas people are very far from home, and therefore greatly removed from the taboo guarding their social life in their village. As a result of this, nobody knows who is "Osu" (outcaste) in those cities so as to observe the taboos guiding it.

Adultery is common; abortion is now the order of the day. Eating of totem items are no longer regarded as an offence in urban area because they are not from one area. Christianity does encourage totem eating as we can see in the Act of Apostle (10:13-15).

SUGGESTIONS

Having examined the taboos prevalent in Igbo land, the following suggestion will help to encourage their observation.

Igbo cultural revival should be made practical rather than theoretical. Now that government is making effort to introduce Igbo language in all levels of education in Eastern part of Nigeria, Igbo traditional religious should be introduced alongside with the language.

Some of the taboos that are evil such as murder, adultery, stealing, abortion should be reported in the customary courts.

Igbo people as a nation should try to revive their useful cultural heritage especially the observance of totems and taboos.

According to Nkwoh (1984:9) "The old men of Igbo land are dying away and with them the pride and heritage of our people" We should not allow it to be so.

CONCLUSION

The recommendations if applied should help to reduce immorality and improve the conditions in the society. The best way to improve moral values is by adopting the existing norms in the society. For the growth of Igbo culture, Igbo people should not disregard their fundamental norms. They should endeavour to sustain their useful cultural heritage.

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