

The Religious Significance of the *Okuku* Totem of Akenpia- Epie, Yenagoa Local Government Area, Bayelsa State

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Abstract

This study examines the religious significance of the Okuku totem of Akenpai-Epie to the culture of the people. It is a critical study on the subject Totemism and it also views how the Okuku totem has helped to check-mate and control the social and spiritual lives of the individuals in the community. The study used phenomenological approach to examine the Okuku totem and its role in the Akenpai-Epie culture. This approach best suits the study because it abhors bias and discourages scholars from being judgmental. The researcher also used oral interview methodology to collect data for the study. Against this background, the study reveals that, Okuku as an Owl bird, and at the same the totem of the Akenpai-Epie people has helped tremendously as a tool of social control in the collective and individual lives of the indigenes of the community, for it is believed that it protects them from attacks from their enemies in the good old days when there was intra and inter community wars. It does that through warnings. It has also acted as a source through which togetherness, peace and tranquility reigned in the community. Because of its congregational worship by the people of the community, it had created bonding spirits among the indigenes of the community. The Okuku totem has helped to strengthen the norms and values of the Akenpai-Epie people because it punishes deviants among them, hence making the people to adhere strictly to their traditional ethics and moral codes. Against this backdrop, the researcher recommends that the worship of the totem be encouraged and also that the younger generation of the community be encouraged to acquaint themselves with the paraphernalia surrounding the Okuku totem, so that this part of the culture of the Akenpai-Epie people would not go into oblivion. We should avoid been judged by posterity.

INTRODUCTION

This study is carried out in order to document the religious significance of the *Okuku*, owl a totem to Akenpia-Epie community in Yenagoa Local Government Area of Bayelsa State. The *Okuku* totem that is still venerated by the Akenpia people that have served them in various ways is very important to them. It is believed that it has been responsible for the protection and preservation of the Akenpia people's life and its worship has helped in binding the people together religiously. This paper will bring back old memories on the values that this totem had always added to the people's life but yet, the new generation of Akenpai people have failed to identify with it, because of the advent of Christianity in the study area.

Man has been said to be incurably religious right from time immemorial. Humans have always seen themselves as inferior beings and that somewhere sometimes, there is something or some entities that are more powerful to them and superior and as such deserves to be appeased for man's continuity in order to make them have a sense of belonging. Man, due to this feeling cultivated the habit of worship and veneration of animals of all sort and kinds, trees, gods, things etc., whom he believed holds the key to his life and is superior and controls the affairs of man. This is what brought about the idea of religion, (Benneth, 2017,p1).

According to Sir Edward Tylor, (1832-1871): religion is the belief in spiritual beings and that the belief in numerable spiritual beings concerned with human affairs is capable of helping or harming human interest. This is what is termed animism. Animism encompasses the belief that there is no separation between the spiritual and physical or material world and that souls or spirits exist in animals, rock, rivers etc. In his work titled the *primitive culture*, (1871); he asserted that animism in religion is in its most minimal, most primitive and therefore in its broadest form prior to the development of organized religions. Although element of it still survive or exist in today's religion. This as was first competently surveyed by him, owed the continued currency of the term. Gradually, man then developed his form of worship to animal and that is totemism which is the focus of this study in relation to the Akenpia people.

1.2 Statement of problem

Due to the advent and development of organized religions, earlier practices of the religion indigenous to the Akenpai people have been neglected. Though the Akenpia people are still involved in some type of animal worship, it has not been recorded in any form. The veneration and worship of animals among the Akenpia people are important and very essential to their lives hence the desire of the author to document such, that is the *Okuku* totem.

Scope of the Study

Several animals are seen as totem animals amongst Akenpia people but this work is centered only on the *Okuku* totem leaving out the other sacred totemic animals that exist in Akenpia-Epie people's culture. The study covers only the *Okuku* totem of the Akenpia-Epie people and it is geared toward stating clearly its importance to the culture of the people and their every day's life activities.

Significance of Study:

This study will help to enlighten people that has heard of *Okuku* totem of Akenpia-Epie on how it is venerated or worshipped, the general characteristics and rites involved in its worship and the functions of *Okuku* that is; as a companion relative protector and helper of the Akenpia-people. Strangers coming into Akenpai-Epie, for the community is now urbanized as it is part of the seat of Bayelsa state government will also be made to know that the *okuku* bird a sacred and is a totem and so it is prohibited from being killed, eaten, harmed, or even touched by any person. It will also be of help to students who may desire to carry out further research on the aforementioned or related topic.

Research Methodology

Since a work cannot comprise or have only one methodology, this study adopts the phenomenological method, this is because it allows the fusion of several approaches. These includes Historical, sociological, theological, and psychological approaches. The Greek word

“historia” a root word to history, means searching to find out”. Whitney (1968) says that historical research interprets past trend of attitudes, and past events to give an account of what has happened in the past. More emphatically, historical research may be considered as embracing the Whole field of human past as broad as life itself. The data for this study must be viewed with historical perspective as part of the process of social development rather than as isolated attitude as regards the events of this work, how religion had develop from animism to totemism and so on.

Definition of Terms

The caption of the easy as indicated on the cover page is religious significance of the *Okuku* totem of the Akenpia-Epie people. The phrase in question contains some terms for example. Totem or totemism, the *Okuku* of Akenpia-Epie community among others etc. One must be acquainted with these terminologies and phrases that are salient to the study.

Totem is any animal, plant or other objects natural or supernatural which provides deeply symbolic meaning for a group of or social group. In some cases, totems may imbue a particular person with a feeling of power and energy. In other cases, a variety of totem can serve to demarcate particular groups or clan subsumed with bigger tribes. Often totems are seen as representatives of desirable individual qualities, or the natural power from which a given social group has descended. Thus totem help to explain the mythical origin of the clan concerned, with reinforcing clan identity and solidarity as such, killing, eating, harming and even touching a totem is often considered a taboo. (Benneth 2015, p17).

The *Okuku* literally means Owl. The Owl is a bird from the order *Strigiformes* which includes about two hundred species of mostly solitary and nocturnal bird of prey typified by an upright stance, a large broad head, binocular vision, bin aural hearing, sharp talon and feathers adapted for silent flight. Owls hunt mainly small mammals and insects and other birds. Owls possess large forward-facing eyes and ear-holes, a hawk like beak, a flat face and usually a conspicuous circle of feathers like a facial disc around each eye. The coloration of the owl’s plumage plays a key role in its ability to sit still and blend into the environment, making it nearly invisible to prey’s. It tends to mimic the coloration and sometimes even the texture patterns of their surroundings. According to mythology, in Ancient times, for example Ancient Greece, the little owl was the companion of Athena the Greek goddess of wisdom, which is one of the reasons why owls symbolizes learning and knowledge in Greece’s mythology. But she was also a warrior goddess and the owl was considered to be responsible for armies going into war. If Greek soldiers saw an owl flying during battle, they took it as a sign of coming victory. It was also looked upon as a symbol of death, evil and a sign of impending death to some culture. Like many of the above cultures the owl *okuku* is very significant to the Akenpai Epie people’s culture, it guides and protects the people etc, from imminent danger.

Literature Review

The concepts Totemism and Totem animals are early concepts that have been in existence right from ancient times. The veneration or glorification of sacred animals and the kinship with a totem between individuals or groups existence is present in almost every sphere of the world. In every society, individuals or groups hold a particular animal, be it a domestic one or a wild one or a wild bird sacred because they are of a relationship with them, hence these animals or totem are as concentrated prohibited from been killed, eaten, harmed or sometimes even touched. These animals, sometimes are given more preferential treatment than humans. This is

because of the belief that in Totemism, the animal is explicitly the soul of the community (Adogbo, 2010, p 107). They are allowed to move about and are also well-fed and even properly addressed.

Totemism is a term derived from *Oteteman* from the language of the Algonkian tribe of Ojibwa in the area of the great lakes in Eastern North America meaning “brother- sister Kin”. The grammatical root *Ote* signifies a blood relationship between brothers and sisters who have the same maker and who may not marry each other.

In English, the word was introduced by a British Merchant and translated in 1791 who gave it a false meaning in the belief that it designated the guardian spirit of an individual who appeared in form of an animal, an idea which the Ojibwa clan’s do indeed portrayed by the wearing of an animals skin. It was reported at the end of the 18th century that the Ojibwa named their clans after those animals that lived in the area in which they lived and appear to be either friendly or fearful. The first accurate report about totemism in North America was written by a Methodist Missionary, Peter Jones, himself an Ojibwa chief, who died in 1856 and whose report was published posthumously. According to Jones, the great spirit had given to claims of totems to their clans, and because of this act, it should never be forgotten that members of the group are related to one another and on this account may not marry among themselves

Generally, Totemism is not a religion, but in certain cases, it can contain religious elements in varying degrees. Totemism can also appear conjoined with magic. It is frequently mixed with different kinds of soul, beliefs in powers and the spirits, such mixture make the understanding of a particular totemic form.

Totem animals plays very crucial role in the history of clans and communities in the Eastern or Southern part of Nigeria, in West Africa. The python is one of the totems found in most cultures in Nigeria. The python is a very sacred, a respected animal in the Eastern and Southern part of Nigeria. They are seen as their totem in both Idemili North and South Local Government Areas of Anambra State and in Nembe Local Government Area in Bayelsa State. It is also regarded as a hallowed creature in Uga and Aguluzechukwu communities in Aguata Local Government Area; Nri in Anaocha Local Government Area; Isseke, Okija and Uli communities in Ekuwusigo Local Government Area All in Anambra State, Ukpo and Uzubulu communities in Nnewi South Local Government Area. In these towns, if a python enters the house of anybody and climbs on top of his bed, the owner of the house simply collect the creature and drop it somewhere outside the compound without harming it. If a stranger deliberately kills a python in Okija in Anabra State and Yenagoa town in Bayelsa State, the natives would advise such a person to give a befitting burial to the creature and if the person refuses, he or she stand the risk of dying mysteriously within one year.

In Umokahia community in Obi Ngwa Local Government Area of Abia State, a particular python is held sacred. The python known as *Okporo Okahia* lives in the community’s shrine *Ihuala* and is believed to be as old as the community itself. The python guides the community and reside in the shrine. It goes round the community making itself seen by some people possibly to assure them that it is doing it’s duty. Also, in Nembe Local Government in Bayelsa State and Yenagoa community, the seat of Bayelsa State as earlier indicated, the python is seen as their totem and forbidden from being killed or touched.

The Akenpai people: Akenpai-Epie is a town located in Epie-Atissa clan, Yenagoa Local Government Area, which is the capital territory of Bayelsa State in the south-south part of Nigeria. It lies in the forest plain that has been describes by scholars as the Northern Fringe of the Niger Delta. The Epie-Atissa territory in turn occupies an area that is roughly between longitude 6° 16 and 6° 240 East of the Greenwich Meridian and latitude 4° 50 and 5° 2' North of the Equator. (Albert, 2017 p5).

The Akenpia- Epie people is said to have migrated from the Ancient Benin Kingdom. They migrated through Isokoland, crossed the River Niger and drifted into Orashi or Engenni River and landed at a place called Oguan named after the man Oguan, the son of Avein the founder of Epie-Atissa Kingdom.

HISTORY OF *OKUKU* TOTEM OF THE AKENPAI PEOPLE.

Okuku is a sacred animal to the people of Akenpia-Epie because it is their totem and therefore held with high esteem. According to Chief MacLean Bennett (2015) (oral interview) the origin of the belief in the *Okuku* as a totem dates back to the founding of the community. When Pai and his family the founder of the community tried to occupy the Ovelemini confine that was the former name, now Akenpai. The *okuku* tried severally to scare them away. For several days and weeks, each time they tried to enter the place, it scared them off especially during the night, since owl hunts at night. They constantly tried to move in at night and saw numerous owls hunting and hooting and their eyes were so big and scary, so they often retreated back to their former place of abode. Little did they know that because of its ability to hunt during the night, the *okuku* often rest at day time.

On a faithful day when Pai went there during the day, the owl was not seen by him. Although they were there, Pai did not know because owl had the wherewithal to camouflage and blend with it's environment. Pai returned and reported back to his family that the *Okuku* were no longer there. They then decided to move in while *okuku* were not around so that when they notice that humans have occupied the area, they will run off and so will not harm them, little did they know that owls don't hunt larger animals or fight any creatures except for their preys.

After moving in and setting up tents and erecting structures, at night, they heard owl *okuku* making noise and when they came out, they saw flocks of owls all over the surrounding. Since it did not harm them, they decided to let them live their lives and they lived theirs as well.

They, that is the Owls, began to migrate on their own free will away from the area until very few of them remained. These remaining ones, that is the Owl were now regarded as part of their religious life, hence it's veneration.

Conclusion

We have been discussing the *okuku* totem of the Akenpia-Epie people and the survey encompassed the general meaning and origin of the term Totem and totemism, general Features of an Owl, the symbolism of *Okuku* Totem and the religious significance of the *Okuku* totem to the Akenpia-Epie people. In essence the essay has dealt with how people ought to address or consider the *Okuku* totem when moving into the community and the implications of killing, hurting, eating or even touching the *Okuku* to both foreigners and indigenes.

Having known the origin of the belief on the *Okuku* totem of the people of Akenpia-Epie, that was discovered to have help the Akenpai community, especially on the religious significance

role that the *okuku* had play in the life of the people its documentation is not something to be overlooked. The totem is an important factor in the life of the people as it helps in strengthening their moral value system and the role it has played to help bind or bond the people of the community together. This had created cohesion among the people and it has also acted as a tool for social control and spiritual synergy to them. Its importance makes it a point of necessity for the people not to ignore *Okuku* in their everyday life.

In summation, the *okuhu* totem is very important to the people especially as it played numerous religious functions to the life of the Akenpia-Epie's man and as such, it's veneration or worship be encouraged.

Recommendations

Sequel to the positive impact of the totem to the Akenpia-Epie people, the author recommends that the worship of the *Okuku* Totem be encouraged and that it should not be ignored or overlooked. The rites and rituals that are associated with it's worship that are gradually fading away should be reviewed and resuscitated. Younger generations of Akenpai community should be taught on the subject matter and be made to know, the relevance of the totem to the Akenpai people. Indigenes that are no longer resident of the community should also be schooled about the totem as part of their culture for instance, the reason for certain laws and prohibitions that they were not aware of, that originated from the worship of the *Okuku* totem. This will enhance the strength of the laws and norms of the community and this will in turn make the law stronger and more efficient and by implication, peace and tranquility will reign in the area of study.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

PRIMARY SOURCE

S/n	Name	Sex	Stateus	Age	Place	Time
1	Chief Alagoa L.	M	Fisherman	80	Agudama-Epie	8:00am
3.	Chief MacLean Bennett	M	Farmer	65	Akenpai-Epie	12:30pm

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