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Guardians of the Land: *Totemism, Identity, and Spiritual Kinship in Igbo Culture*

By Chukwunwike Ossai

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GUARDIANS OF THE LAND

Guardians of the Land: Totemism, Identity, and Spiritual Kinship in Igbo Culture

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Totemism is a type of belief that connects people or groups with some kinds of animals, plants, or other natural things, as if they have a spiritual link. To the Igbo people of Nigeria, totemism is well shown in their culture and how they view life.

In Igbo land, totemism is not a big church or religion you can find in books, but inside their beliefs that are mixed with animism, saying everything has a spirit, whether trees, rivers, or animals. They believe that most animals or plants have special connections with their families or clan, like their guard or a sign that shows who they are. It might be that one animal is their “head”, which protects them, or maybe they have the same origin as the animal in the past.



Ball python. Photo Tye-Dyed Iguana

Also, python deification is common in Idemili, Anambra State. It is generally believed that pythons are representatives of the gods of Idemili.

In most Igbo areas, many clans have animals or plants they consider their own. Like, python (which they call (“eke”), leopard (agui) or eagle (ugo), these can serve as a family logo. Python is a big deal in most places, and it can not be killed or eaten because it is believed to bring blessings and protection. A particular clan can say, “It is python that saves their forefathers in the forest years back,” so they take it as their totem, like a family member who is looking out for them.

Iroko Tree. Photo Linda DV [Flickr] The leopard is also a powerful animal that means power and kingly rule. In places like Agbor or Igbuzor, where great chiefs and warriors are present, the leopard can also be a totem in most families, and it can be seen in masquerades or stories being told. The tortoise (mbe) can also be a totem to most people because it means wisdom and long life. And it can never be

eaten.

How They Conduct Rituals and Taboos If an animal or plant is a totem, it can not be killed or eaten in any way; it is a taboo. If you do so, then trouble awaits you in the form of sickness or bad luck. For example, if it is a clan's totem, it will be respected and not hurt. During festivals or ceremonies, they may dance with a mask that looks like their totem animal, or perform a little offering to give thanks to the spirit guiding them. The Organization for the Advancement of Anioma Culture (OFAAC) celebrates this kind of festival yearly, and totem signs can be seen in their dance or play.

How The Land And River Join Together Anioma and other Igbo areas situated close to River Niger, and the water including bushes around it has helped in shaping their totem beliefs. The river can also be a totem in most places, as it gives life in place of fish, crocodiles, or other aquatic animals. Bushes also have sacred trees like (ochia) that can be used as totems or medicines and protection. All these explain the closeness of Anioma and nature, and totem is a way of respecting the land that produces for them.

Totem And How the Society is Being Arranged

Totems help the people of the Igbo race to know who they are and whom they can marry. Suppose a particular clan has an eagle as a totem and another has a python. In that case, the totem can be used as a restriction on marriage so that a particular village will remain strong without mixing much with other communities. It is just like a family card that makes everyone know their place.

Old Ways And Present Day Before the introduction of Christianity by the whites, totemism was strong among the Igbo people. Even when part of the Igbo fought the Ekumeku war with the British (1883-1914), the unity given to them by the totem must have helped them unite. Presently, most people have become Christians, but totem is still in stories, proverbs, and minor traditions

Totemism in Igbo is a deep belief that is mixed with their lifestyle, how they view the family, nature, and spirit. Pythons, leopards, rivers, and trees are all totems that show who they are and where they come from. Even though Christianity has covered many traditions, the belief still exists a little, which shows that the people of Igbo know how to hold their roots very well, no matter what time offers. And that is how they live with their good land.

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An enthusiast in tech with deep passion for studying and showcasing the vibrant cultural heritage of southern Nigeria . Combining my skill with my obsession towards African history and traditions to create contributions that impacts the digital space.



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