

Totems in Idoma History

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Abstract:

This paper examines the breakthrough in the usage of totems in the reconstruction of the histories of village-size chiefdoms which, Idoma people of North Central Nigeria are examples. The reconstruction of Idoma's early history like most ethnic nations of Africa has been made difficult due to the dearth of documentary evidence and a lack of archaeological data resulting from inadequate support. This challenge becomes worrisome arising from the heated debate over the utilitarian value of oral tradition as the source of history despite its worldwide recognition decades ago. The debate is yet to fully simmer down. The emergence of totems as one of the methodological devices in handling pre-colonial history saves scholars of Idoma extraction from the Eurocentric absurdity of bastardizing the histories of the people as the society possesses a wide range of totems which are amenable to historical scholarship. This paper notes and concludes that where totems have not undergone fundamental changes it remained the oldest form of identification of a group and therefore a veritable tool in the reconstruction of local history.

Keywords:

Totems; Idoma; History; North Nigeria; Traditions; Reconstruction;

Introduction

Idoma people occupy the broad valley of River Benue in modern day Central Nigeria. Plethora of academic work exists on the origins of Idoma and as a result that will not be given attention in the paper. Idoma have early interactions with the diverse groups that inhabit Nigerian State. One of the elements which demonstrate Idoma relationship with some Nigerian ethnic groups in terms of origins, similarities and differences is totems. Totem therefore promises a great deal in the understanding of the history of the people. However, studies on totems, has not been adequately exploited in writing the history of African pre-colonial society. The paper is structured into the introduction, conceptual clarifications, categories of totems, utilitarian value of totems in Idoma history, usage of totems in writing local history and finally, the conclusion.

Conceptual Clarifications

Totems attracted great scholarly attention in the 20th century, the flowering age of sociology and cultural anthropology. The concept is derived from *Ojibwa Algonkian* Indian word *ototeman*,ⁱ meaning: brother-sister relationships. In this sociological context, the term refers to varieties of relationship including genealogical, between social groups, animal or other natural objects. That is, relationship that had existed between man and his material environment in the process of his territorial development. Totem should not be confused with animal having relationship with one person whether as guardian spirit or sources of spiritual power. Neither is transformation of individual into animal as in shamanistic possession by an animal spirits, or super natural owner of animal to be designated as totems. Essentially, totems connote forbiddance (*Iho*) which could be an animal, a plant or material objects. Totemism among other things refers to the theory of origins and relationship of group of people to nature.ⁱⁱ For the Idoma people, it is an emblem or symbol of group's solidarity and the contrasting identity and relations to their immediate neighbours; Tivs, Igala and Igbo respectively. A totem may be a feared or dangerous hunted animal, an edible plant; or any staple food. Totem is hedged about with taboos of avoidance or strictly restricted contact. Of the principal contributors to the discussion on

totems are: J.F. McLennan, in his first significant theoretical work; "The Worship Animals and Plants" published in 1869 and the first comprehensive work on totems was provided by James Frazer, in his work "Totemism" published in 1885 and republished as "Totemism and Exogamy" in 1910.ⁱⁱⁱ

Categories of Totems

Historians have identified three broad categories of totems. These are as follows: primary or kinship type, secondary or political type and tertiary or economic totems type.^{iv} Primary totems refers to a situation where a social group holds to say, *Owa* snake totems or any other species of snakes regardless of their modern geographical locations within the stays and can at least be thought to have related such with other group at one point in time in the past. If the claim to a common ancestor or descent could be back up with adequate genealogical connections between the various members of the groups, the *Owa* snake totem becomes the primary totem.^v This is kind of totem is also refers to as Baganda system. If the members of *Owa* snake totems for instance, moved to another State ruled by red monkey (*Obagwu*) totems, and as a result of political allegiance to the new rulers, adopt the red monkey totem, the *Obagwu* becomes the secondary totem. This is on the other hands, is refers to as Banyoro system.^{vi} Instances also abound of where in the course of migration several unrelated groups (mixed multitudes) dwell together or take one migratory route.^{vii} The category of totem taken by such group is called tertiary or economic totem. Some Idoma and Igala groups that took the same migratory route from Kwararafa kingdom to settle in their present locations are good example of this kind of totem. It is against the backdrop of this some Idoma group traced their ancestry to the Igala land, because they were believed to have settled there as bus stop during their migration before arriving and settling in their present abode.

Utilitarian Value of Totems in Idoma History

Among the Idoma people; *Owuna* bird, *Ogonopo* fish, *Agba* fish, red Monkey (*Obagwu*) black Monkey (*eka*), *Owa* snake, Civet Cat (*Anwu*), Crocodile (*Ikwu*) and leopard (*Orgwu*) has been identified as totemic symbols. The following present-day kindred observe the *Owuna* bird totems, *Ojentelle*, *ugboju*, *ai-oko*, *Entekpa*, *Orada*, the royal

kindred of Otukpo. Genealogically, each group is unrelated one to other. The reverence of the *Owuna* bird totem has been largely explained in economic terms. Sources have it that after 1630s, several ethnic groups left Kwararafa to the Benue South. The new home land, also called Apa, was located in modern Makurdi towns. On their arrival, they were hosted by Ugboju chiefdom whose royal totem was *Owuna* bird. Although not asked to pay tributes in form of rent to their host in order to continue holding on to their land as new immigrants that came out of Kwararafa, they adopted the *Owuna* bird totem in addition to their different kinds of totems.^{viii} Details of Idoma group and their totems are furnished in subsequent part of the paper.

The question that readily comes to mind is, what is the utilitarian value of totems in studies in early history particularly, Idoma? The following may serve as the answer; first, totemism as a theory of origin aid students of Idoma history in the analysis of the origins of various Idoma kindred groups. For instance, it was believed that the kindred group which observe *Ogonopo* fish totem descended from a common ancestor, Ode. Although geographically scattered in several settlements in Idoma land, the *Ogonopo* fish totemic group refers to themselves as Ai-Ode (i.e. descendent of Ode, the founder of the group). Ode, according to traditions lived in Kwararafa, but left that cradle land C: 1625-1655, probably as a result of both centrifugal and the centripetal forces for the East.^{ix} He later founded another settlement at the mouth of River *Mu* in the present day Makurdi. It was there he died and left behind four sons whose names are; *Eje*, *Oguche*, *Ona* and *Ala*. These four separated; with three moving towards the modern Idoma land and *Ala* moved towards upper area of the Cross-River basin and founded his group.^x The other three settled separately, but were later united in 1900 by the colonial administration into one division. The descendents of these three sons founded Umogidi, Ugbokpo and Oglewu settlements in the present Idoma land.

Secondly, studies in totems helps students of Idoma history to assess cultural Nigeria at large in the dim past. Historical evidence abounds that there was a cordial relationship between the Igbirra chief and the leader of *Owuna* bird totems group, Oga between C.1625-1655. Oga, was noted to be

interested in trade in locally manufactured cloth-*Opa* in which Igbirra, Oga, was also believed to have borrowed Igbirra social institution called *ekwuafia*. Idoma historical tradition indicates that the *ekwuafia* was used by the Igbirra people in strengthening their chiefdom against internal and external attacks. It was equally used during the installation and burial rites of their Igbirra chiefdom.^{xi} This institution was later acquired by Oga, which he used in strengthening his chiefdom. In the process of time, *ekwuafia* institution and *Owuna* bird became synonymous.

Thirdly, totemism demonstrates the social, economic and political setting a group of people found themselves in the past. For instance, one of the characteristics of the group who once lived in ancient Kwararafa is that, each of the group had its primary totems. Among the Jukun for example, the following are identified; manatee and *ahura* fish, while that of the Idoma are *Ogonopo* fish, *Agba* fish, the Civet cat, black and red Monkey and snails; all of which suggests the ecology in which the Jukun and Idoma ancestors lived and worked.^{xii} Politics comes in when at the course of migration groups come under the dominion of other group and out of compelling necessity and survival strategy adopted another totem which is often secondary.

Fourthly, totems a kind of national emblem and symbol served as identification marks in the analysis of group's solidarity and differences. Durkheim and his adherents rightly maintained that social order is primarily an assemblage of totems.^{xiii} Totems therefore, demonstrate the differences and the commonality between Idoma, Igala, Tiv, Igbos, Yoruba, Hausa and other Nigeria groups. Erim cited in Usman and Odeh, agrees with this position that: ... totems often provided the basis for variety of social, economic and political links in the pre-colonial period between the various State and people which were natural predecessor of modern States in Africa...It was this network of pre-colonial ties which over the centuries created a solid basis for the development of modern nationality in Africa .That these nation states today lived within ill-defined boundaries is dictated primarily by the consideration of European power politics as well as the process of 'modernization'.^{xiv}

The above underscores why a revered or feared animal and taboo are sometimes similar with those

of other ethnic groups in Nigeria. For instance, there are various similar food and sex prohibitions across Nigerian cultures today that are indicative of Nigerian unity.

Fifthly, totemism renders obsolete the so called pure tribe theory. Although pre-colonial African historians have rejected the “pure tribe” phenomenon, it has not been easy for them to demonstrate that modern African nations are amalgam of diverse ethnic and linguistic group. With the emergent of totemism, pre-colonial historians have been to prove that modern African ethnic groups were created out of a multi-ethnic community. The Idoma case has shown that the various groups that today answer the name Idoma, came from various sources and directions as showcased by existence of western and eastern routes at the course of migration from Kwararafa kingdom.^{xv}

Finally, totems can be use in conjunction with other sources of historical writings to generate knowledge about Idoma past. In other words, when other sources are inadequate in the analysis of the past, totems may be used. Based on linguistic evidence, Armstrong, the Idoma linguist rejects the position that Idoma and Jukun are ethnically related. He contends that:

...it must be realized that the Idoma are not Jukun...the two languages are related to each other only in the sense that most of the languages of the southern and central Nigeria are distantly related.^{xvi}

The argument here is that a situation where a writer rely completely on one source, particularly the one that favours his people potent a serious danger to historical enterprise. Thus, it is advisable diverse sources are jointly use to have a balance picture of the past.

Totems in the Writing of African Local Histories: Example from Idoma

Totem is a welcome development in the writing of African local histories, which Idoma has demonstrated its usage. In East Africa setting, primary totems means kinship tie. From Idoma experience it is obvious that primary totems connote political as well as economic ties. The fact remains that it is not the order in which totem is adopted that

is of historical significance, but the circumstances surrounding the adoption of it that is crucial. The thing circumstances determine what is primary and what is not.

Besides, whatever degree of success that attended the use of totems as a historical device in reconstruction of the past, either in East or West Africa, it is necessary to remind ourselves that much still remain to be done in the direction. In the first place, evidence does not yet abound of systematic collection of totems over a wide area in any part of Africa. As a consequence, it is difficult at this stage among Idoma scholars to categorically classify crocodile totems as either primary or secondary without detail information from other ethnic groups that once lived side by side in the Kwararafa kingdom. The table below contains Kindred and some totems in Idoma land.

Conclusion

This paper has looked at the concept of totem and totemism, categories of totems in history and its utilitarian value in pre-colonial history of Africa with particular emphasizes on Idoma has been examined. Steps towards effective utilization of totems in historical reconstruction have been suggested. It is the contention of the paper that while totemism is a welcome development in the writing of local African histories, it should not be undertaken mainly with the sole aim of legitimizing the history of one group over another. In writing a history of people like Idoma for instance, integrated approach should be adopted rather than a parochial perspective which may only cause disunity. This does not mean local differences should be suppressed but, situated within the overall context of the larger Idoma society. Along this line of argument, Smith, cautions that when writing about pre-colonial period where written sources are deficient, conditional statement such as “it would appear’ or “probably” should be adopted.^{xvii} If this is adopted, contending issues in writing pre-colonial histories would be minimized. Conclusively therefore, totems when properly utilized assists the pre-colonial historian to destroy the myth of the “pure tribe” in African history.

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