

WE ARE NOT ENEMIES OF AFRICAN CULTURES: CHALLENGES OF TOTEMS & TABOOS TO CONTEMPORARY CHRISTIANS IN EBONYI STATE

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Abstract

The work we are not enemies to African Cultures: Challenges of Totems & Taboos to Contemporary Christians in Ebonyi State, studied the conflicts between church and cultural expressions. The work adopted a purely phenomenological approach. Findings show that the Christian task of inculturation (bringing Christ into new cultures) in the different communities in Ebonyi State ought to strive at recovering Christianity and African Traditional Religion core values (i.e., respect and dignity of the human person) of their cultural institutions which are guarded by the use of totems and taboos as a sine qua non for mutual religious co-operations.

Keywords: African Cultures, Totems and Taboos, Christianity, Ebonyi State

Introduction

The poetic views of the world by the Greek great epic poets Homer and Hesiod (ca. 800 CBC), related the life of the gods to the life of humans. Through this “gods–humans” relationship, Homer and Hesiod sought to describe the various ways in which the gods intrude or interfere with human affairs and the different ways and means men sought to interpret their dealings with God/gods. God’s interference with human affairs is a religious and anthropological aspect of God’s participation in human history which informs the religious belief that God or the gods intervene in the affairs of men (Mbiti: 1969:47). When the Ionian philosophers came upon the query, “*Ex qua materia constituiti mundi?*” (Out of what material is the world constituted?), they sought not only to propose a response to the challenges and problem of the “one and the many” but also aimed at

offering to mean to the enquiry into the being of man and his relationship with the deities and the Maker of the universe. From this standpoint, Idowu (1973:58) perceives the burgeoning of religion as “belief in the existence of a supernatural ruling power, the creator and controller of the universe, who has given to man a spiritual nature which continues to exist after the death of the body.” In fact, most philosophers of the medieval epoch were wont to believe that the sky hung low, suggesting a rapport and a close bond between heaven and earth, i.e., between philosophy and theology, between faith and reason and between men and the gods. It is in this perspective that the poetic philosophical presentation of the gods and their interference with human life and activities by Homer and Hesiod paved the way for a religio-cultural understanding of the mysterious powers and fatality of fate surrounding the simply religious, the culturally and traditional religious and even the irreligious man. To query the challenges of religion and philosophy and the ways they affect and influence man, many philosophers arose and toed different lines of thought on the question of man and his relationship with his God/gods.

The Greek philosopher Plato (ca. 428-348 C.B.C) came upon the philosophical enterprise and culminated his thoughts as an idealist while Aristotle (384-322 C.B.C) came up with the “thinking thought” and was tagged a realist. Other philosophers emerged in the platform of this philosophical discourse on man and his relations with his God/gods and became either disciples of Plato like the Egyptian-born Roman philosopher Plotinus (205-270 A.D) and the Church father and bishop of Hippo St. Augustine (354-430 A.D). Others were followers of Aristotle like the Italian philosopher and theologian St. Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274), the Islamic philosopher Avicenna (980-1037) and the Arabian philosopher Averroes (1126-1198). Although all these philosophers were influenced by the line of thought of their masters on the interrelationship between God/gods and men, they appeared to have a common consciousness and emphasis on philosophy and religion, and the challenging idea of God not only as the Supreme Being but as the Sustainer of man. The penchant to this view Arinze (1970:8) argues freely that religion is the very consciousness of dependence on a transcendent being and man’s subordination to him coupled with the challenge and the propensity or inclination to worship him. Ekarika (1986:vii) is of the view that the knowledge and understanding of God and the gods have distinguishable marks from other theories and practices claiming divine origin and basis. For him, some religious criteria are in themselves intrinsic and are dealing with the message of religion itself since they do not oppose sound reasoning and moral goodness, i.e., mystical experience, prayers, visions, dreams, and moral codes such as totems and taboos. Other religious criteria are extrinsic since they are outside religion itself though they bear witness to God’s omnipotence and infinite knowledge, i.e., divine revelation

through miracles and prophecies. One must at once come upon the truth that philosophy and religion have both remained an epochal challenge to man.

As much as philosophy challenges a man to know himself and his environment so does religion challenge man to know himself concerning his Creator and Sustainer. The knowledge of the Known and the Unknown God that St. Paul grapples with among the Athenians in the Council of the Areopagus (cf. Acts 17:23ff) is not only a philosophical challenge but more so, a religious challenge to man. This religious challenge is not whether God/gods exist/exist but whether God or gods can be known and are knowable. The knowability and unknowability of God/gods are the bedrock of the challenges of totems and taboos in African Traditional Religion.

Totems and taboos in African Traditional Religion have both *a priori* (deductive or known by experience) effects and *a posteriori* (inductive or known by observation) cultural effects in the religious society. In their *a priori* effects totems and taboos serve as cultural etiquettes or emblems for religious development, moral consciousness and upbuilding of the young in the different religious societies they apply. The *a posteriori* implications of totems and taboos intend to hold that, in so far as the cultural know-how of African religious children informs the tomorrow of African Traditional Religion, then the religio-cultural development of our African cultural society depends largely on the standard and quality of traditional and cultural education of the youth. The *a posteriori* effects indicate that there is a need for a religio-cultural continuity, i.e., a handing over to the next generation of the totems and taboos in African Traditional Religion. Ugwu and Ugwueye (2004:127) postulate that sentimental attachment to Traditional Religious beliefs and practices is at once a probable *a posteriori* factor for its promotion given that many African Christians and Muslims are mentally attached to the Traditional Religion and only extra-mentally profess these foreign religions.

Granted that many Christians are still sentimentally bound by African Traditional Religious totems and taboos, and precisely because others still secretly consult diviners and medicine men as a subterfuge relief from witchcraft and destructive forces, one may make bold to contend that it is in this *a posteriori* belief in the need for a cultural hand over that the challenges of totems and taboos arise among contemporary Christians. In line with this view, particular reference is made to Christians of Ezza, Izzi, Akpoha and Afikpo socio-cultural extractions in Ebonyi State as religious cogitation in African Traditional Religion. One may have to acknowledge that some scholarly research has been credited to this ambit of African Traditional Religion in support of the *a posteriori* credibility of African Traditional Religion. For instance, Mbiti in his “*African*

Religions & Philosophy” (1969:47) demonstrates that the African traditional people’s constant turning back to God/gods in various acts of worship, constitute as a matter of fact, man’s response to God’s interest and active part in human affairs. Quarcoopome in his “*West African Traditional Religion*” (1987:193) avers that the study of Traditional Religion has recently appeared on the school curriculum to keep and preserve the religion of our forefathers. Ugwu and Ugwueye, “*African Traditional Religion: A Prolegomenon* (2004:127) argue that the *a posteriori* result is that the elites have at last come upon the rediscovery of our valuable heritage lost by ignorance, prejudice and missionary propaganda. Awolalu and Dopamu in their work, “*West African Traditional Religion*” (1979:283) confirm that traditional indigenous religion is so much radicalized in African lifestyle that severance and disconnection from it is impossible. However, if at all there is any academic attempt in this regard, there has not been any definitive scholarly work on this particular aspect of African Traditional Religion not only as a subjective Christian pastoral challenge but more so, as an objective contemporary religious and cultural challenge to African Christians.

The work, “The Challenges of Totems and Taboos to Contemporary Christians” proposes a “*fides quaerens intellectum*” (faith seeking to understand God/gods) which applies the phenomenological research method in its inquiry into African Traditional Religion. In itself, phenomenology is a branch of philosophy descriptive of the formal structure of an object of awareness and the consciousness itself as abstracted from any claim concerning the existence of the said object. The term phenomenology alludes to the perceived intrinsic meaning one attaches to an event contrary to the event as it is extrinsically perceived. The method of research applies the phenomenological approach precisely because, when one talks about totems and taboos in African Traditional Religion and their challenges to contemporary Christians, the attempt is focused on the exposition of the experiences of the people regarding the said phenomenon. The phenomenological research method, therefore, delves into an analytic description of the given data, i.e., totems and taboos as found in African Traditional Religion in an attempt to discover their convergent or divergent views.

The Concept of Study: Clarification

The iconoclastic attitudes of European anthropologists, ethnologists, and historians with their opprobrious interpretation of African Traditional Religion and our cultural beliefs in totems and taboos attempted a discrediting of African traditional religion and culture. That the European scholars’ procedure of study of African Traditional Religion was biased *ab initio* is fully supported by (Ugwu and Ugwueye: 2004:13), who argue that their prejudiced approach led them to coin unpleasant labels and terms to describe African Traditional Religion and culture. It is placed on record that a good number of European

scholars could not make claims of meeting and knowing the West African peoples about whom they wrote. This informed their preconceived notions and also beclouded the facts about African Traditional Religion and culture they ought to have known (Awolalu and Dopamu: 1979:11). The word “totem” primitively came into use in about the year 1776 and originally referred to “*Ojibwa oto.te.man*” i.e., his totem. It was originally signifying an animal or plant accepted as a family or tribal symbol, especially among the Native Americans. Totems came later to assume the nature of a carved or painted figure representing a symbol (Merriam – Webster Dictionary, 1828). The word “taboo” signifies sacredness or forbidden to be profane on account of an object believed to possess supernatural powers.

Mbiti (1969:50) perceives a natural religious link between God, man, animals and plants. In light of this perception, he surmises that God ordained that animals and plants should constitute human food in a higher grade of importance and that African traditional people have many religious attachments to animals and plants some of which are linked with the concepts of God. Totems and taboos are therefore enshrined with myths which bespeak domestic animals as originating at the same time or in the same way as humankind. One may rightly observe that African Traditional Religious beliefs arrogate to some specific religious objects certain conventional capacities to unravel the invisible supersensible world. African traditional religious worldview, therefore, conceives certain natural objects and places as having peculiar religious significance. Such natural religious objects and places are dedicated to divinity (Awolalu: 1979:136). Ugwu (2014:40) opines that totems derive their meaning, purpose and significance from and among all races, tribes and people of mankind and in various religions across the globe, where there are animals, plants and places that are kept sacrosanct and their regular uses are usually abhorred pending on the individual or collective religious affinity to them. Ugwu’s position provokes the consciousness that one must come upon the truth that human existence has an ultimate significance and meaning which has both ad intra and ad extra (given from inside and from outside and beyond man) religious implications. Kant (1976:56) in his natural search for knowledge argued that man through his reason is capable of reaching beyond this empirical world to contemplate transcendental ideas which are “objects of metaphysics”. In this line of thought, totems and taboos may rightly be perceived as traditional religious metaphysical objects which connote both ad intra and ad extra significance and implications that assist man in his religious enquiries. Igbo (2000:53) postulates that the word totem is a nomenclature given to an animal, object or natural event with its special religious or spiritual attachment to an individual or collective person. Given that totems conjure taboos as deterrence against their violations, taboos

then are prohibitive measures to safeguard totems. In light of this, it is a religious taboo for any ethnic individual or collective ethnic person to kill or eat any religious animal that serves as a totem and is worshiped and revered as a religious covenant or communion.

The bedrock of communion in the religious undertone both human and divine could be perceived as a “covenant”. Communion in this perspective is hydra-headed in character and its epochal religious unfolding. This hydraheadedness of communion is eloquently visible in its vertical aptitude, i.e., communion between God and man, and in its horizontal aptitude, i.e., communion between man and man. Either the vertical or horizontal communion is actualized and strengthened by rituals in the natural and supernatural formation of a people, community or culture. When the concept of covenant and communion undergoes epochal deformation, the resultant effect is usually a perilous ethnic awareness which militates against communion and covenant. Remedial to this epochal deformation and perilous ethnic awareness is the religious and cultural springboard and birthmark of the concepts of totems and taboos as evident in African Traditional Religion. In this thought pattern of communion or covenantal consciousness, Ugwu (2014:40) holds that totems and taboos have intermediary roles between God/gods and man, and are conceived as links to God and the gods in African religious beliefs. He reiterates that totems whether they are animals, objects or plants, must have very special and mysterious endearing qualities which instigate in the people the deserved ritual worship or veneration they render to them. In light of this, it becomes evident that religion and culture ought to take cognizance of the purpose and value of rituals in so far as ritual beliefs are cultural core values lived out in the practice of religion. Fundamentally, rituals are portentous revelations of values. The postulations of African traditional beliefs in totems and taboos as evident in Ebonyi State is the principal force motivating the cultural man to express in rituals his religious underpinning. This contention argues in favour of the position that the traditional believer’s belief in totems and taboos or what compels his cultural belief practices is the focal point of traditional religion in Ebonyi State. It is in this cultural anthropological perspective that Ukpokolo (2014:16) argues that the trajectory course of the human race is from man to culture and that it is concerning culture that many entities are conjectured, interpreted and considered rational or irrational. Precisely because the religious cultural forms of expressions used are conventionalized and obligatory in the cases of totems and taboos, they become the medium of the revelation of the sacred values of the society or community.

Theory and Framework of Study

This research applies the sociocultural and symbolic anthropological theory, which as a school of thought, dates no earlier than the late 1960s (Ezeh:2012:11). Among the best-

known and prominent theorists in social anthropology stands out Claude Levi-Strauss (1973:18) who attempted the definition of the entire discipline in the framework of the study of signs as a field which later became technically known as semiotics or semiology. When mention is made of *semiotics* reference is to the general philosophical theory of signs and symbols, a theory that deals, especially with the way signs and symbols are interpreted in their function in both artificially constructed and natural languages involving syntactic, semantics, and pragmatics. In its cultural anthropological perspective, Eze (2012:13) ascertains that “It seems logical that symbolic anthropology as a formal subdiscipline grew out of such a view of culture, although from the beginning anthropologists of all persuasions and nationalities had always studied signs as part of the culture.” The socio-cultural and symbolic anthropological theory aligns with this research precisely because totems and taboos in their meaning and significance in African Traditional Religion are but religious signs and symbols. Totems and taboos are therefore ethically religious and anthropological expressions of African Traditional Religion in so far as they deal with human culture on the levels of customs and civilization (Agha: 2003:5). In Eze’s (2012: 14) view, “sign or signal in the sense it is used in anthropology is broader than symbol or signal. A symbol is a type of sign but not every symbol is a sign. It follows that anything that may be used to stand for something else is a sign.” In this line of thought, Awolalu (1979:136) is precise in the view that “In West Africa, each divinity has his or her specific sacred objects. These objects can either be symbols or emblems. The symbols can be the anthropomorphic images of the divinity, while the emblems can be the sacred objects specially set apart as visual representations of the divinity.” What this position places on record here is the traditional religious belief in totems and taboos as religious symbols and emblems. Christianity believes that even among Christians signs and symbols occupy an important place and this holds for man’s relationship with God (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, Nos. 1145-1152).

The tripartite characters of Totems and Taboos as Signs and Symbols

Totems and taboos are cultural symbols and traditional cum customary signs. In the perceptions of the American theorist, Claude Sanders, Eze (2012:15) believes that signs possess tripartite basic categorical and divisional characters namely,

- i) Symbols which are in themselves conventional signs symbolized as words, flags, etc.
- ii) Indexes which are natural signs in the sense that they occur through nature, i.e., the rainbow as a sign of rain, smoke as a significant fire, etc.

- iii) Icons as signs such as those that are neither wholly conventional nor wholly natural, e.g., photography, paintings, maps, etc.

In so far as one can ascertain that totems and taboos fall within conventional signs and symbols, it paves the way to vehemently contend that totems and taboos in their perception as signs fall into a double category, namely totems and taboos of spontaneous categories and totems and taboos of utilitarian or functional categories. In this ambit, the spontaneous categories both in their origin and their significance are displayed throughout nature among humans, animals and nonsentient entities. These spontaneous categories of totems and taboos are observed as a biological or biochemical action which ought to occur at once if the conditions are fulfilled. The utilitarian or functional categories which are also perceived as “communicator-produced” and communicator-propelled” categories, are in themselves signs and symbols which communicate a particular message. For instance, certain animals make particular forms of noise to indicate either pleasure or pain (Eze: 2012:18). In their religious and cultural messages, these utilitarian or functional categories could be illustrated in a case of a religio-cultural society where totems and taboos are placed in diversified collective use as a form of challenge to other individual uses beliefs and practices.

Arguing in this perspective Ngwu (2006:10-11) subtly observes that in African Traditional Religious belief, each totem has a corresponding taboo guiding it. Among the Igbo people of Eastern Nigeria, such taboos are culturally designated as “*Aru*” or “*Nso ani*” which are taboos against the earth goddess. The Yoruba people of Western Nigeria have similar taboos as cultural prohibitive codes which they call “*Esse*” or “*Ewo*” (abomination) which customarily designates something set apart or sacred or forbidden to certain persons or uses of persons (Ugwu: 2014:40). Given this customary religious prohibitive implications Ubrurhe (1986:45) believes that in African Traditional Religious belief, taboos designate negative prohibitive sanctions which upon their violations there will be no human or supernatural mediation since the breaking of a designate taboo incurs misfortunes and danger that expose the victim to the wrath of the divinities and the ancestors. It is precisely in this religious and cultural respect that totems and taboos are said to be posing a serious challenge to contemporary Christians in Ebonyi State.

Mystical Qualities of Totems and Taboos

The mystery surrounding the cultural beliefs and practices of totems and taboos in African Traditional Religion is aptly captured in the erudite position of Ugwu (2014:40-41) who sees totems and taboos as twin brothers who share the same religio-cultural placenta carrying along the message of that which is forbidden on grounds of religious belief.

Perceived in the light of religious beliefs in Ebonyi State, totems and taboos in their mythical qualities unveil the primitive beliefs of the people of Ebonyi and by the volition of this, totems and taboos supply for what is empirically lacking by making provisions for the romantic explanations of the wonders of nature (David: 1972: 576). In Ebonyi State with particular reference to Ezz, Izzi, Akpoha and Afikpo communities, the religious and traditional conception of the mystical qualities of a designated totem be it animal or plant for instance, lions, tigers, elephants, tortoise, leopards, iguanas, crocodiles, lizards, snakes, dogs, Pisces (fish of different species), aves (birds of various species), mahogany, Iroko, *Nnunu-ebe* tree, spenal stones, mountains, rivers, oceans, etc, is heavily dependent on the mythical and the socio-cultural identity of the community.

Ebonyi State is replete with cultures and traditions which are in themselves mythical attempts at explaining the concepts of the gods, man and creation. Some African scholars argue in favour of this position and hold that in the African Traditional Religious worldview totems and taboos have socio-cultural links with the community's myth of creation (Quarcoopome: 1987:177). The concept of myths derives from the Greek word "*mythos*" which falls within the framework of traditional folkloric stories. Though myths are synonymous with fables or legends concerning an ancient culture or belief, they deal with traditional stories about natural phenomena, especially about the gods (Douglas: 1986:649). Ugwu (2002:34-35) masterly describes different kinds of myths namely, creation myths, culture myths, ritual myths and nature myths.

Totems and Taboos in Various Mythical Observations

From their socio-cultural and anthropological perspective creation myths, cultural myths, ritual myths and nature myths obtain among various tribes, tongues and peoples of Ebonyi State. African Traditional Religion is replete with many myths in keeping with their various religio-cultural observations of totems and their guiding taboos. In Ebonyi State with particular reference to the Ezza religio-cultural extraction, the creation myth sustains that the primogenitor of the Ezza people – patriarch Ezekuna, is reckoned with the paternity of the whole Ezza people. This creation myth argues that after God created the world, he fashioned Ezekuna as the primogenitor of the entirety of the Ezza patriarchy and that Ezekuna himself to found and rule the Ezza patriarchy immigrated into Ezza from an unknown region other than Ezza. African Traditional Religion as practised among the Ezza people of Ebonyi State upholds cultural and ritual myths in a religious and traditional circumcision designated and known as "*Ogvu Ogerinya*" (deity of adult ritual circumcision) which in itself is revered as a totem dedicated to the goddess of the earth (Odey: 1986:19). In keeping with this cultural and ritual myths the Ezza people

expound that in a similar religious perspective as that of the patriarch Abraham, Ezekuna was inspired by *Okuke Uwa* (Creator God) to perform the *Ogvu Ogerinya* and as such, to establish it as a religio-cultural and customary totem for all Ezza adults (Odey: 1986: 2-5). It is culturally and religiously speculated that the patriarch Ezekuna established this ritual circumcision as a totem for determining among his three sons, Ezechimkpuru, Oroke-Onuoha and Kpakpaji, who was the most senior. Odey (1986:15-16) vehemently avers that, following its cultural anthropological and traditional religious setting, the *Ogvu Ogerinya* totem of ritual circumcision is binding on all Ezza people of Ebonyi State such that,

...anybody who does not perform it is comparable to an “Osu” in other parts of Igboland. He could be the richest man, the most honest, the most educated, endowed with the best leadership qualities and what have you. But as long as he remains ritually uncircumcised, the custom requires he should not be allowed to prove his good qualities. Ritual circumcision is thus the most authentic symbol of Ezza traditional and communal solidarity. This being the case, woe betides you if you are an Ezza man and you are not ritually circumcised! You will be denied the right to own a plot of land, a homestead, economic trees and so on.

Odey’s position encapsulates and at the same time explicates *Ogvu Ogerinya* deity among the Ezza people as a totem and the taboos guiding the totem. It is at this religious and cultural anthropological junction that one meets with totems and taboos as challenges to contemporary Christians in Ebonyi State. Odey (1986: xiii) is at once in pars with these traditional religious totemic challenges as he contends that,

...the practice of ritual circumcision has, since the advent of Christianity in Ezza, constituted a great problem for Ezza people who honestly want to remain faithful to the Christian faith and loyal to Ezza custom. Faced with this problem, many baptized Christians in Ezza have abandoned their Christian faith in favour of ritual circumcision... because most of the Christians who understood that it is not in keeping with the Christian faith lacked the courage to say it openly.

A close traditional religious analysis of Odey’s postulations in the light of this research underscores not only the importance of this work but also its priority in the corpus of academic works on African Traditional Religion. One may therefore, make bold to hold that totems and taboos despite their cultural anthropological symbols and significance, constitute a great divide between African Traditional Religion and Christianity, and as such, form a great rubicon crisscrossing the proclamation of Christianity and African Traditional Religion in faith and practice which has built up as the religious question challenging contemporary Christians in Ebonyi State.

Ojiji and Otutara as Totems and Taboos challenging Christians in Izzi Land

The theory and practice of totems and taboos in African Traditional Religion is equally a socio-cultural reality among the Izzi people of Ebonyi State. *Ojiji* (deity of the new yam festival) and *Otutara* (ancestral anamnesis or commemoration of the ancestors) are the two major totems and taboos in the Izzi land of Ebonyi State. These totems are revered and venerated annually in the platform of religio-cultural celebration through which both the traditional individual Izzi person and the collective individual Izzi express their belief in *Ojiji* and *Otutara* and without which one incurs the wrath of the gods and his ancestors. In the traditional religious reverence offered to these totems, the primacy of place and honour goes to *Ojiji* through a sacrifice offered to *Enya Ali* (ancestor) at the Amagu community in Izzi given that Amagu is the patriarch of the entire Izzi patriarchy. A socio-cultural and traditional taboo obtains in the celebration of *Ojiji* because neither the traditional individual Izzi person nor the collective traditional Izzi is qualified to eat the new yam until after a sacrifice of a huge ram has been made to *Enya Ali* in a totemic commemoration of *Ojiji* which takes place on the third *Ofoke* market day after the new moon. The traditionally recognized and appointed place of the sacrifice is religiously designated as *Enya Ojiji* which is revealed only to the traditionally appointed *Ishi-ukes* (representative elders) who comprise four elders from Amagu and two from Ebya.

As a follow-up to the traditional religious reverence accorded to the totemic *Ojiji* deity, another totem called *Otutara* (ancestral anamnesis) is attached to its cultural celebration in Izzi land. The traditional religious veneration and worship of the totemic *Otutara* come up after three market days – *izu ato* (nine days) within which both the traditional religious individual and collective individual Izzi person commemorates his ancestors and reveres him in a cultural celebration. The traditional worshippers are strongly encouraged to make religious sacrifices to their totemic ancestors by offering animals like cows, goats, fowls, rams, etc. In the traditional religious underpinning of *Otutara*, poverty is not allowed as an excuse not to offer sacrifice in commemoration of the totemic ancestors in Izzi land such that those who do not have at least a fowl, could afford to offer even dried bush meat. It is a traditional religious taboo for one not to have something to offer or to fail to feed his totemic *Otutara*. However, unlike the totemic *Ojiji*, *Otutara* as a totem has neither a traditionally religious place designated for sacrifice nor a designated individual to perform the sacrifice. The performance of the religious sacrifice for the totemic *Otutara* is left to the choice of *Umunna* (the kindred) to whom it behoves to call on the most elderly person to carry out the sacrifice on their behalf. African Traditional Religion as expressed by the Izzi people of Ebonyi State in their belief and practice

of *Ojiji* and *Otutara* as totems and taboos, has a cultural commonplace or cliché that it is a taboo to offer sacrifice to an ancestor who died without a male child. For this traditional and religious reason, every Izzi man struggles to beget a male child (Orji: 2006:112). It is in the limelight of these traditional religious totemic *Ojiji* and *Otutara* and the taboos prohibiting their violation that the true Christian looks askance of African Traditional Religion and as well identifies totems and taboos as challenges to contemporary Christians in Ebonyi State.

Uwa Yaya Deity as Totem and Taboo Challenging Christians in Akpoha/Afikpo

A renowned African Traditional Religious scholar, Awolalu and Dopamu (1979:136) contends that some African traditional religious people believe that certain natural objects and places have peculiar religious significance; that such objects and places are dedicated to the divinity, eg, rivers, stones, special trees, mountains, roads, etc; and that such totemic emblems or symbols are usually guarded with taboos to keep them from profane touch and out of ordinary reach. In this religious perspective and in the bid to explain the mystery of creation and the changing world in its cultural, traditional and mythical perception, a particular totem and taboo also obtain in Akpoha in Afikpo North LGA of Ebonyi State, whereby a particular dual carriage road crisscrossing the major road junction to the Amata Akpoha community is tagged “*Uwa yaya*” (deity of the changing world) as a sacred road totem. The traditional religious theory of a sacred road as a totem is genuinely supported by Ugwu (2014:41) who in his list of totems and their guiding taboos includes the meeting of two persons in a sacred junction among other taboos. In its traditional and religious conception, the Amata Akpoha *Uwa yaya* sacred road is culturally revered as a totem and alternately blocked and any passage prohibited annually is a taboo to all members of the community. If any individual human person or an object carried by a person falls on the totem road, a taboo applies because one is not allowed to get up or pick up the fallen object without rituals of purification. Highlighting the religio-cultural implication of such taboos, Ugwu (2014: 41) observes that,

...the breaking of a taboo is a serious offence against God, divinities, ancestors and even the entire people of the society since if the offender is not punished it will bring untold hardship, catastrophe and disaster to the entire people. This is why even with his achievements, heroism and elevated position among Umuofia, Okonkwo was banished by his people for inadvertently shooting someone dead with his dane gun during the burial ceremony of Ogbuefi Ezeudu.

Ugwu’s position underscores the purpose and meaning of the theory, the belief and practice of totems and taboos in African Traditional Religion with particular reference to Akpoha in Ebonyi State, and as well underlines the challenges facing Akpoha

contemporary Christians who as members of such socio-cultural settings and in obedience to their faith, are not bound by such totems and taboos. Yet, “it is crystal clear that totems and taboos are outstanding elements in African Traditional Religion which cannot be ignored.” In the cultural anthropological purview of African Traditional Religion, totems and taboos may be identified within the semiotic field as ethnic somatic marks and mortuary protocols, whereby they suffice as symbols of the distinctive bond of a human group although the entities chosen as totems vary from individual group to collective community groups (Eze:20012:21). Ugwu (2014:41) apprehends this religio-cultural position when he identifies taboos in African Traditional Religion to include murder, incest, adultery, stealing of tubers of yam, the meeting of two persons at a sacred road junction, a woman climbing a palm tree, etc.

This work makes it bold to say that totems and taboos are identifiable within conventional signs precisely because totems and taboos are of traditional designs used and accepted by an individual or collective group of people of a particular cultural extraction. It, therefore, occurs to ascertain that signs and symbols have specific religio-cultural relations to language within which signs could be perceived as dimorphic i.e., making use of “*signifie*” (the object signified in its meaning and purpose) and the “*significant*” (the signifier, the object per se in its origin and meaning). Totems and taboos in this line of thought could therefore be perceived as cultural cum traditional signs and symbols for labelling a designated sacred object in traditional religious perception. As religio-cultural symbols totems and taboos have expressions in the form of transient utterances, weeping, dancing, gestures, etc (Eze: 2012:23).

Totems and Taboos as Cultural and Religious Paradigm

In their religious and sociological undertones, totems and taboos are cultural paradigms which pose not only a challenge either to the individual Christian or the collective contemporary Christians but also as a very important cultural sine qua non for any authentic traditional religious organization or group relations in the human society. In the traditional religious setting in the different communities of Ebonyi State, certain natural objects come to make up designate totems and taboos. It is also noteworthy that only the social significance attached to such totems and taboos by the individual or collective community defines their relevance. The traditional religious meaning and purpose of totems and taboos is a question of cultural paradigm dependent upon the name assigned to the object as a symbol by the individual or collective community. However, it is neither the object nor the act that constitutes a symbol but the perception of the object as a cultural semantic paradigm (Eze: 2012: 19). For instance, in Akaeze in Ivo LGA of

Ebonyi State, the totemic cultural paradigm is a “green snake” (*Akar*) which in itself as an object has neither a religious nor a cultural relevance. In the ambit of African Traditional Religion and by the volition of the religio-cultural paradigm assigned to it by the collective Akaeze ethnic traditional community, the green snake is a special and serious totemic object symbolizing a deity called “*Nna m’oche*” (my ancestor). Given its religious significance as an object dedicated to divinity and a representation of divinity, traditional religious worshipers protect it, venerate and offer reverence to it.

In Akaeze ethnic traditional religious belief, the green snake (*akar*) is a welcome guest in their homes as an intermediary between the deities and the community. In their traditional religious belief, it is an abomination (*aru, nso ani*) to kill the *akar* and it is forbidden to pass by a dead *akar* without paying the last traditional religious rites of muttering certain words and then covering the dead snake with leaves or grass. A certain Christian woman (53yrs) came for Christian reconciliation for having performed some purification rituals after seeing a dead *akar* in her farmland and failed to perform its burial rites.

Mbiti (1969:51) credits African Traditional Religion with snake totems and taboos by ascertaining that, “Creeping animals feature in religious concepts more than do other wild animals. The snake is thought by some people, like the Vugusu and Sidamo, to be immortal. Others have sacred snakes, especially pythons which may not be killed by people. A considerable number of societies associate the snake with the living-dead or other human spirits, and such snakes are given food and drinks when they visit people’s homes.” In the traditional religious worldview of an Akaeze indigenous worshipper, it is an irreligious act and a taboo to pass by a dead totemic *akar* whether in Akaeze communal vicinity or anywhere one may find himself in the world, without venerating it with the necessary traditional and customary rituals. This is at once a socio-cultural expression of religious intimacy with totems and taboos and a show of the indeterminacy of the will of the gods and the inscrutability of fate (Msiska, 2008:v). Therefore *akar* as a totem and a cultural paradigm possess special mysterious qualities said to be surrounding it such that anyone who violates it is faced with misfortune and danger from the divinity and the “*nna m’oche*” (the ancestor). Viewed from this perspective, the traditional religious Akaeze totemic *akar* poses a serious challenge to contemporary Christians in Ebonyi State for whom the green snake is nothing but an ordinary creature and not God or a god.

c) Totems and Taboos as Traditional Religious Anthropomorphic Attributes of God

African Traditional Religious beliefs and practices in the framework of totems and taboos are perceived as a concerted religious cultural effort to affirm that God and the gods reveal themselves and continue to reveal themselves to man especially by communicating themselves to man through nature and natural entities. Christianity emphasizes Jesus

Christ as a perfect Man who has restored in the children of Adam the likeness to God, and Christ as the centre of the universe through his incarnation has promoted the human person by bringing him to the centre as *imago Dei* (*Gaudium et Spes*, no. 22). In the light of this Christian anthropocentric anthropomorphism Christianity contends that believers and unbelievers agree almost unanimously that all things on earth should be ordained to man as to their centre and summit, i.e., that man is the absolute measure of all things (*Gaudium et Spes*, 12).

African Traditional Religion in its anthropomorphic interpretation of man equally contends that man in some ways thinks of himself as the centre of the universe, and in his egocentric vision, he interprets the world both anthropocentric ally and anthropomorphically through the traditional symbols of totems and taboos. Given that African ontology (theory about the nature of being, kinds of being, their existence and relationship) is at once anthropocentric, the traditional religious African communities in Ebonyi State as a case study perceive God and nature from the ambit of God's relationship with a man. In this perspective, African traditional religious anthropomorphism implies that African Traditional Religious expressions heavily attribute human and animal natures to the gods through the symbols of totems and taboos as a conceptualization of the gods whom they have not seen though they believe in them and practice their detects (Mbiti: 1968:48).

The belief and practice of totems and taboos in African Traditional Religion as perceived in the different communities of Ebonyi State are anthropomorphically located within the traditional religious relationship between God, animals and plants which are linked with the concepts of God and the gods whom the totems symbolize. The "*Catechism of the Catholic Church*" teaches that, "As a being at once body and spirit, man expresses and perceives spiritual realities through physical signs and symbols. As a social being, man needs signs and symbols to communicate with others (CCC, No.1146). It has to be emphasized that the traditional religious expression and perception of spiritual realities in signs and symbols as one see in African Traditional religious totems and taboos ought not to aim at making these signs and symbols, i.e., totems and taboos ends in themselves. They are only religious means to an end. When totems and taboos as religious signs and symbols are made as ends in themselves, they pose religious challenges to Christians for whom these totems are but mere creatures and work of human hands. Raising a scholarly voice to these anthropomorphic polemics, Awolalu and Dopamu (1979:136) reemphasize that, "From the earliest times, man has found specific objects to symbolize the invisible super-sensible world. In Africa, each divinity his or her specific sacred objects. These objects can either be symbols or emblems. The symbols can be the anthropomorphic

images of the divinity, while the emblems can be the sacred objects specially set apart as visual representations of the divinity.” It is in the light of these visual representations of the divinities that the researcher, therefore, makes bold to affirm that these religious traditional symbols of anthropomorphic images of the deities pose serious challenges to contemporary Christians in Ebonyi State. These totemic deities have been subtly espoused in this work as,

- i) Belief and practice of *Ogvu Ogerinya* (deity of circumcision) totem in the Ezza community
- (ii) Belief and practice of *Ojiji* (deity of the new yam) totem in the Izzi community
- (iii) Belief and practice of *Otutara* (ancestral anamnesis) totem in the Izzi community
- (iv) Belief and practice of *Uwa Yaya* (deity of the changing world) totem in Amata-Akpoha community, Afikpo North Local Government Area.
- (v) Belief and practice of *Akar/Nna m’oche* (deity of green snake) totem in Akaeze community, Ivo Local Government Area. These totems and their guiding taboos are in themselves a showcase of African Traditional Religious beliefs and practices in Ebonyi State that pose cultural religious challenges to contemporary Christians in Ebonyi State.

Some Major Causes of Totems and Taboos as Challenges to Contemporary Christians

The Use of Local Cultures for Evangelization as a Challenge to Christians

The different beliefs and practices which placed Christianity and African Traditional Religion and Culture in their perspective missionary domains are the brainchild of the Christian missionaries. Pope John Paul II had pastorally admonished that, “The synthesis between culture and faith is not only a necessity of culture but also faith. A faith which does not become a culture is a faith which is not fully accepted, thought out completely, and faithfully lived.” This papal statement is so religio-culturally rich and indicative of the fact that both faith and culture pose anthropological challenges. As much as faith challenges culture so does culture build-up challenges for the faith since both faith and culture are synthetically necessary for man in his traditional and religious society. The beliefs and practices of totems and taboos as evident in African Traditional Religion and Culture became a challenge to Christians with the advent of Christian missionaries who instead of bringing Christ into the new cultures they encountered in African Traditional Religion, rather aimed at introducing Christ of culture in the nomenclature of Christian culture. Onwubiko (1989:2) observes that this missionary approach resulted in the

Christian religious creation of the Congregation for the Propagation of the Faith in 1622. In the bid to curb these religio-cultural challenges to contemporary Christians, this religious body issued directives in favour of the use of “local cultures in evangelism.” In light of the directives, it became clear through Christian experience that any denial of cultural realities in the process of evangelization creates more difficulties in the process of conversion. The true African is deeply rooted in religion and culture in his perception of the world. When one considers the fact that African Traditional Religious beliefs and practices as evident in the symbols of totems and taboos are fundamentally cultural, and precisely because Christianity ought to take cognizance of local cultures in evangelism, then cultural beliefs and practices such as totems and taboos cannot but pose serious challenges to Christians who come from the same religio-cultural backgrounds.

Socio-Cultural Advantages of Totems and Taboos as a Challenge to Christians

The anthropological set-up of every authentic African is a socio-cultural reality. Every authentic indigenous individual man comes from a society and every authentic society is guided by a particular culture expressed in their totems and taboos. Culturally speaking certain social benefits are accruing to every man who abides by the culture of the totem of *Ogvu Ogerinya* adult circumcision deity (earth goddess) for instance in the Ezza community or *Ojiji* deity (new yam goddess) and *Otutara* deity (ancestral god) in Izzi community of Ebonyi State. The observance of the rituals and veneration of these totems and their taboos are the authentic status determinants and emblems for claiming one’s rights in the community. In light of this, observance of ritual circumcision in respect of the totemic *Ogvu Ogerinya* accords a socio-cultural advantage to an Ezza man such that he could ascend to any social height in the Ezza Ezekuna community in Ebonyi State. Odey (1986:14-15) affirms that the socio-cultural advantages and taboos of the totemic *Ogvu Ogerinya* are so compelling that an uncircumcised loses his voice, his rights and his role within his family circle, and if his younger brother happens to observe the totem before him, the taboo is that the elder cedes his birthright to the younger. In any traditional religious community in Ebonyi State, the socio-cultural denial of rights and privileges as taboos prohibiting the violation of these totems is the bedrock of the challenges to contemporary Christians.

The Political Advantages of Totems and Taboos as a Challenge to Christians

From the ambit of politics and cultural anthropology, Aristotle (384-322 BC) opined that man is a “homo politico” in so far as the human society has a need for leadership. The Holy Writ itself in its socio-political undertone affirms that God empowered man to

conquer and rule the earth (Gen. 1:28). In this political anthropological perspective, African Traditional Religion has some political merits and advantages accruing to any adherent who keeps to the totems and taboos. In the Ezza Ezekuna community for instance, the totemic *Ogvu Ogerinya* deity arrogates unto the adherent the right of participation in political and economic matters, continuing the family link without losing status and it bestows on a man a religio-cultural and traditional responsibility in the community. In the Ezza community, no matter the level of one's natural honesty, selfless sacrifice and personal commitment to the common good, the individual cannot attract supporters in communal discourse or political rallies if he fails to perform the rituals in respect of the totemic *Ogvu Ogerinya*. The deity of *Ogvu Ogerinya* instigates a discriminatory stigma on every Ezza adherent against the non-adherents. On account of the socio-political advantages arising from the veneration of the *Ogvu Ogerinya* traditional religious totem, one identifies the inherent challenges to Christians and at once perceives the reasons why many prominent Christians in Ezza have so easily succumbed to ritual circumcision contrary to their baptismal promises, precisely because to do otherwise would be tantamount to losing one's political status in an age where political power confers a person with a chain of rights and privileges (Odey:1986:17).

Religious Advantages of Totems and Taboos as Challenges to Contemporary Christians

About the religiosity of the African people Mbiti observes that "all people in Africa, without a single exception, have a notion of God as the Supreme Being" (Mbiti in Gbenga, 1997:28). In the Traditional Religious understanding, Arinze (1970:8) espouses that religion has both subjective as well as objective advantages to man and the society. In its subjective ambit religion takes cognizance of the individual's conscious dependence on a transcendent being and the inclination to worship such a being. In its objective perspective, religion is the collective community's awareness of complex truths, laws and rites by which both the individual and collective individual subordinate themselves to the transcendent being. Religion as belief in the existence of a supersensible ruling power endows man with the consciousness of a spiritual nature – the rational soul through which man possesses the capacity to exist here and hereafter (Idowu: 1073:58). It follows that apart from the socio-cultural and socio-political benefits of African Traditional Religion, religion per se has tremendous benefits as evident whether in *Ojiji/Otutara* totemic deities or *Ogvu Ogerinya* totemic religious beliefs and practices. In the Ezza Ezekuna community of Ebonyi State as a case in point, *Ogvu Ogerinya* religious totem is the underpinning socio-cultural emblem and the compendium of the people's religious life and beliefs. The *Ogvu Ogerinya* religious totem in its traditional and socio-cultural validity is

considered the primary and prominent determinant of Ezza Religio-cultural *modus vivendi* and *modus operandi* in religious matters. The religious challenges to contemporary Christians are noted here because *Ogvu Ogerinya's* totemic religious belief and practice have a collective religious binding force on the entire Ezza community. The Christian or any individual or collective failure to abide by the practice of *Ogvu Ogerinya* bears the brunt or taboo of being labelled a religious outcast, and the individual or collective individual will be denied any association with the entire Ezza community.

Recommendations

Ilogu (1985:XV) categorically observes that “The future of Christianity in any part of Africa, will largely depend on how well we can graft the realities of our religious cultural past on the vitality of the Christian present.” It is in this grafting of our religious cultural past on the validity of our contemporary Christian present consciousness that one comes upon the challenges of traditional religious totems and taboos to authentic contemporary Christians in Ebonyi State. Gabriel Marcel contends that authenticity could be perceived as that genuine centre of self-identity that recognizes the true worth of man concerning his fellow men, as sons of God/gods (1965: 605). It follows that our authentic Christian religious worth is decreased to the extent to which the affirmation of our authentic traditional religious existence is limited and the more we affirm the being of others (whether Christians or traditionalists) in the platform of inter-subjectivity, the more we become Christians or traditionalists, and the less we affirm others we thereby decrease the affirmation of our existence. In this perspective, the researcher subtly makes the following recommendations.

- 1) Precisely because most polemics have often emphasized the authenticity of African Traditional Religion vis-à-vis other religions, contemporary academic polemics ought to focus on the relations between Christianity, other authentic religions and cultures to forestall unnecessary enthronelement of religious totems and taboos.
- 2) The Christian task of inculturation (bringing Christ into new cultures) in the different communities in Ebonyi State ought to strive at recovering Christianity and African Traditional Religion the core values (i.e., respect and dignity of the human person) of their cultural institutions which are guarded by the use of totems and taboos as a *sine qua non* for mutual religious cooperations.
- 3) So that totems and taboos do not constitute challenges to contemporary Christians in Ebonyi State, there is the need for community humane living to be nurtured

through the upgrading of the moral values of the family life (which in ecclesiology is called “Domestic Church” – family of God (Lumen Gentium, CCC, no. 1655) and community consciousness.

- 4) All manners of individualism and anti-community tendencies whether in Christianity or African Traditional Religion ought to be discouraged precisely because the concepts of good and evil which operate in the different levels within and without the communities in Ebonyi State are the main reason for the existence of traditional religious totems and taboos which now pose a challenge to contemporary Christians.
- 5) A socio-religious and cultural time has dawned in Ebonyi State to recognize the relevance of both the Christian communities and African Traditional Religious communities. This serves as a clarion call for the breaking of various traditional and religious boundaries created by various totems and taboos. This ought to be achieved through a socio-religious awakening in the psyche of the people in the sense of our common brotherhood in God without actually undoing the sense of community as our common socio-cultural and natural habitat. In the community, both Christians and Traditional religious worshipers are offered social, psychological, economic, political and spiritual security.
- 6) The socio-cultural and anthropocentric religious atmosphere in Ebonyi State ought to be one in which no totem and taboo existing either in the Christian community or Traditional Religious community should destroy the dignity of man and what the past Christian or Traditional religious generations had laboured to build.
- 7) In the cultural anthropological understanding of African Traditional Religion, where there are rituals there are totems and taboos, and precisely because rituals are often required to maintain a balance between totems and taboos for the sake of cultural ideals and values, and for religio-cultural transmission, there must be cultural dynamics and cultural aggiornamento (update) in Ebonyi State for the sake of a mutual socio-religious and cultural cooperation and co-existence.
- 8) To face the challenges of totems and taboos to contemporary Christians in Ebonyi State, ethnocentrism (the idea that one’s culture is superior) ought to be avoided in the process of evangelization of cultures. Noteworthy is the fact that those akin to Euro-American cultures often conceive a difference in cultural beliefs and practices to mean that other cultures or religions are bad or less desirable and thus, ought to be changed or discarded (Onwubiko:1989:6).
- 9) To overcome the challenges of totems and taboos to contemporary Christians in Ebonyi State, the Christian culture ought to eradicate the socio-religious

rationalistic view of the European cultural ethnocentrism i.e., Christianity ought not to be a culture conquering cultures. This is because the inability to perceive the salient contributions of African traditional religions and cultures in evangelization is the pivotal cause and encouragement of traditional religious totems and taboos.

- 10) It ought to be emphasized that traditional religious totems and taboos in their cultural beliefs and practices in Ebonyi State are in themselves African Traditional acronyms for cultural rites and rituals. It follows that any misconception of them as such does damage to the fundamental institutions of the community, and the aftermath includes moral decadence and an increase in sexual immorality, disintegration of marriage, community disorder, disrespect for law and custom, split-level Christianity among new converts, etc.

Conclusion

The individual Christian or African Traditional Religious worshipper in the perspective of culture will always survive as a community-culture bearer in so far as culture is the property of the community and must be community-protected through certain religio-cultural totems and taboos. Totems and taboos in the religious sense are therefore cultural signs and symbols, of cultural identity. Totems and taboos are inviolate as socio-cultural structures in so far as they persevere in bearing the emblem of tradition, custom and ancestral authority. To forestall the challenges of totems and taboos to contemporary Christians in Ebonyi State, Christians ought to perceive their past traditional and cultural encounter with reverence and consider their contemporary religio-cultural encounter with the responsibility to nurture their future traditional religious encounter with faith in God alone. All manners of adulteration and compromisation of the Christian faith in the name of religio-cultural totems and taboos are tantamount to rejection and denial of Jesus Christ. A social anthropological and religious setting which encourages certain totems and taboos non-contradictory to divine injunctions consists of no challenge to any Christian precisely because it is a religious proof that the God-given-privilege that man possesses to dominate and rule all things has not been misused (Gen.1:26). However, one must make bold to affirm that any cultural anthropological tradition in the nomenclature of religious totems and taboos contradictory to divine teachings, challenges true Christians and attempts separating them from Christ Jesus. Any individual Christian or collective individual Christian who honestly and faithfully professes and practices the Christian faith and at the same volition wishes to abide by the religio-cultural totems and taboos either of *Ogvu Ogerinya* deity in Ezza community or the *Ojiji/Otutara* deity of Izzi community

or the *Akar/Nna m'uche* deity of Akaeze community, or the *Uwa Yaya* deity in Akpoha – Afikpo in Ebonyi State, embarks on a face to face encounter with Christ's socio-cultural and religious admonition, "You put aside the commandment of God to cling to human traditions.... How ingeniously you get around the commandment of God to preserve your traditions!... In this way, you make God's word null and void for the sake of your tradition which you have handed down" (Mk. 7:8-13). This work is making bold to affirm that both Christianity and African Traditional Religion possess different but legitimate objective means of achieving common religious goals but that there is a contemporary need for a reorientation and purification of religious beliefs and practices which may promote the achievement of this goal.

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