



A STUDY OF PROHIBITED ANIMALS IN THE IGBO CULTURE

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Abstract

In Igbo land, there are some animals which are not totems, but it is forbidden to eat, kill or harm them. Such animals are respected as other totem animals. The community, clan, family, town or groups of people prohibit the eating, killing or hurting for a period of time or as a perpetual cultural practice. These animals are the ones we described in this paper as tabooed or prohibitive animals (Anu a na-eze eze/Anu nso). The prohibition could be as a result of assistance the animal rendered or evil it did in the past or what someone who ate or killed the animal in the past suffered. The tabooed or prohibitive animal is avoided. It could turn to an age-long cultural practice which will be generally accepted by the people and it is transferred from generation to generation. In some Igbo communities, the present generation are ignorant of their tabooed animals and where they know the animals, they may not know the story or myth behind the prohibition on such animals. This paper would be a positive contribution towards a better and more detailed understanding of tabooed or prohibitive animals in Igbo culture. It would also broaden the frontiers of scholarship in Igbo culture.

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Introduction.

In some communities in Igbo land, some animals are not regarded as totems, yet they are prohibited, banned, not permitted and not allowed to be eaten, killed or harmed. These animals are the ones we described as tabooed or prohibitive animals (Anu a na-eze eze/ Anu nso). A taboo refers to a religious or social practice that restricts a certain behaviour, activity or relationship with people, places or things. The Igbo people are known for their sacred observance of culture and tradition. They accord spirituality and respect to plants and animals. This informs the conceptualization of taboos among the Igbo communities. Our concern here is the tabooed and prohibitive animals in Igbo culture.

Generally speaking, taboo is a vehement prohibition of an action based on the belief that such behaviour is either too sacred or too accursed for ordinary individuals to undertake. Such prohibitions are present in virtually all societies. Breaking a taboo is usually considered objectionable by society in general, not merely a subset of a culture. A taboo is something declared forbidden either for its sacred nature or to protect the people of a given community from the wrath of the gods and the leaders.

A taboo is a part of any culture in Africa and other parts of the world largely because it brings a sense of sanity and reverence to certain things in the community. The fact that Igbo society is religious, “taboos” become religious and their violations are often linked to the ontological order of the universe, as they can upset the relationship between God and human beings. Taboo in traditional African society as well as Igbo society vary from one place to another. As such, what may be regarded as a taboo in one part of Igbo land may not be in another.

Oba Ezekiel Ipinlaye, commenting on ‘Taboo’ in Afe (2013) maintains that taboo sanctions were believed to be instantaneous and automatic. Any breach to a taboo would attract instant repercussion. Yet people out of prudence would not deliberately violate them even if they were skeptical of their potency. Hence, the value of taboos as instruments of social control cannot be underestimated. The tabooed animals are avoided (A na-eze ya eze). The prohibition on such animals is sometimes an age-long cultural practice. It is generally accepted by the people and it is transferred from generation to generation. In some Igbo communities, the present generation are ignorant of their tabooed animals, and where they know, they may not know the story or myth behind the prohibition on such animals.

Study objectives and methodology: This study has the following objectives, to:

- i. identify the prohibited animals in Igbo culture.
- ii. establish how prohibited animals as part of Igbo mysticism merit a place in Igbo world view.

iii. encourage the preservation of prohibited animals, which some people have disregarded today on the basis of modernization.

This study is basically qualitative and data has been collected through random sampling. The random sampling is done within the area of the study, as it is as difficult to study the area as a whole, we selected some adults who know the myth and history of origin of prohibited animals and names of the selected samples communities spread across the Igbo land for the purpose of the study.

Data collection for this study was through in depth oral interview as primary source. As an Igbo native born and brought up in Igbo land, we will generate some data introspectively. Library materials and documents-texts, journals, and internet materials serve as secondary source of data collection.

Theoretical Background: The theory which is related to this study is mythological theory. This theory is concerned with the study of myth. Mythology helps to trace people's traditional sacred stories and unveil the prohibited animals in their culture. Mythology is associated with mysteries. Mythology, therefore constitutes our framework based on the foregoing.

Conceptual Background: There are some concepts which are relevant to this study. They are: Totem, Taboo and Prohibition.

Totem: Hacked(n.d) posits that the term totem is derived from the Ojibwa word Ototeman meaning "one's brother-sister kin". Ojibwa is an American Indian people from the regions around lake superior. The grammatical root "Ote" signifies a blood relationship between brothers and sisters who have the same mother and who may not marry each other. In Igbo culture, totemism is not alien or a foreign cultural practice. Generally, totem is viewed by many people as a companion, relative, protector, progenitor or helper and ascribe superhuman powers and abilities to it and offer it some combination of respect, veneration, awe and fear.

Katsande(2015), exploring the intricate and fascinating African culture of totems kingship in relation to conservation, establishes that "totems protect taboos such as incest among like totems. A totem is usually an animal, and rarely the totem is a plant or a force of nature. From the foregoing, totemism is the belief in kinship with or a mystical relationship between a group or an individual and a totem.

Taboo: The word 'taboo' according to Joseph(1990), has its root to Polynesia, and was first used in English by the great explorer, Captain Cook. In the context of traditional Africa, taboos have being embedded in the African Traditional Religion. Etymologically speaking 'taboo' in its Polynesian rendering means, 'forbidden'. It is similar to the 'Sacer' in the Greek, 'kadesh' in

Hebrew and 'Nso' in Igbo language. It is called 'Eewo' in Yorubaland. According to Afe(2013), it means that which is forbidden.

Prohibition: The word prohibition, according to Dagba, Sambe and Shomkegh(2013) is taboo and taboo is prohibition, non-adherence to them comes along with a punishment for the individual who commits the act or for the entire community of which he is a member. In this paper, taboo and prohibition will be used interchangeably.

Some of the taboo animals that we shall be discussing here include: partridge, rabbit/Giant or pouched rat, Crab, Hawk, Female dog, Grass cutter, Snail, Igbo cow, toad, python, Bush rat.

Partridge (Okwa)

It is a kind of bird that lives in the bush. According to a traditional narrative by Allen (1933), there were three brothers – Umuka, Ikem and Obika, they lived peacefully at the Obikiabia village of Ngwa ukwu (as named during the dispute after Obika one of the three brothers) until a dispute broke among them. Umuka and Ikem allied against Obika and chase him out of his home. Angered Obika is said to have hired a band of local warriors to regain his home and decisively defeat his opponents. Luckily, the two brothers got wind of the invasion and quickly fled through the bush. However, as the two brothers with their family fled southwards to Nvosi area, they overlooked the fact that their footprints were clearly visible in the sandy soil, and their concealment would have been in vain had it not been for the fact that, just before Obika and his warriors reached the spot, a partridge (Okwa) passed along the path, obliterating the path of the refugees. In gratitude for what was regarded as a divine intervention, Umuka vowed that he and his descendants would treat the partridge as prohibitive or tabooed animal. From that time up till the present day, his descendants have carefully observed this taboo. In memory of this event in their history, they have taken the name 'Osokwa' (literarily meaning partridge(Bush-fowl) is forbidden). It is noteworthy that when Umuka migrated with his family people southwards to found the large community of Akpa Osokwa in Osisioma Ngwa Local Government Area, Abia state they preserved the prohibition on the killing or eating of partridge in their culture. Other offshoot settlements of Osokwa that do not kill or eat the partridge include the Akpa Osokwa Community South of Aba and the Osokwa Community in Nsukka.

Rabbit /Giant or Pouched rat (Ewi) “Genus Cricetomys”

Apart from being a totem, it is a taboo or prohibited animal in some Igbo communities. In our interview with Prof. Ikechukwu Okodo, we gathered from him that in Nnewi, Anambra State, the rabbit is taboo animal. The name of the town is coined from the animal. The Nnewi man has this proverb that “ya chuo ewi, o gbachaa, o Kwa n’ala a” (if one pursues a rabbit and it escapes, let it escape so far it is on this land.). This proverb signifies violence. This is an indication that the rabbit is not a totem here, but a taboo or prohibited animal. They do not kill or eat it, not because it is revered or attached to their deity. They prohibited the eating or killing of the animal as an avoided animal.

Crab (Nshiko):

Information on ‘Crab’ is gathered from www.crabfacts.softschool.com. Crab is an invertebrate that belong to the crustacean family. Some people have nicknamed it “the spider of the seas”. There are over 4,500 species of crabs and most of them live in coastal areas of salty, fresh or brackish water (mix of fresh and salty water). Besides aquatic species; some crabs are semi-terrestrial or terrestrial (they live on the land). They inhabit sandy areas with stones and rocks. Crabs are very old creatures. They appeared on the earth during Jurassic period 200million years ago. Crab are also known as decapods because they have ten legs. Crabs have external skeleton called “exoskeleton”. It is made of chitin and it provides protection for soft tissue underneath it.

Just like other Arthropods, crabs have segmented body (body divided in several parts). Unlike other animals-thorax and abdomen are fused together into single unit called “Cephalothoraxes”. The female are distinguished from males by the shape of the abdomen and the flap on their bellies. Female has abdomen and flap shaped like a done. Male has narrow abdomen and flap shaped like Obelisk. Crabs have eyes on the stalk, just like snails. They can distinguish colours, but their eyes see a lot less details than human eyes. Crabs are omnivores (they eat both meat and plants). They feed on different kind of algae, fungi, bacteria, other crustaceans, mollusks and worms. Crabs walk and swim sideways. They breathe with the help of gills. This is why they need to stay close to the water even if they live mainly on the land. Crabs communicate through sound. They produce drumming and flapping sounds by using the claws and pincers. The average life span of the crab is between three and four years.

Mazi Odi Agwu from Afikpo disclosed during our interview with him that the Oziza cultural group in Afikpo deifies crab. Consequently, it is an abomination for anybody in that community to capture, kill or eat crab. If any person defaults in this, such people will incur the anger and wrath of the gods. In Umuosonshiko (children/people who avoid the crab), one of our informants, Mr. Uche Nwokoro, from Umuduruegbeguru said that in the olden days, Nshiko (crab)

especially the brown type, stung and killed their enemies who evaded them. The community decided to revere crab in their town. It becomes a taboo to kill or eat, this prohibited animal.

Hawk(Agunkwo) 'Falconiformes'

Hawk is a general term for a large group of birds of prey of the order Falconiformes. There are about 270 species of hawks that can be found on all continents except Antarctica. Hawks inhabit different types of habitats: marshes, forests, rain forests, prairies, open savannas, grasslands, mountains and coastal regions. Certain species of hawks (such as Cooper's hawk) are endangered due to chemical pollution which induces destruction of the eggs. Other factors that affect survival of hawks in the wild are destruction of nesting areas, excessive hunt and collisions with cars. Hawks see eight times better than humans. Eyesight is primarily used for hunting. Hawk can locate its prey from a distance of hundred feet. They are able to catch a prey both in the air and on the ground. Hawks are diurnal animals (they are active during the day). Hawks are opportunistic feeders. That means that they hunt and eat whatever is available. Mostly, they hunt frogs, insects, squirrels, rats, snakes, rabbits and smaller birds. Certain species of hawks belong to group of migratory birds. Average lifespan of hawk is between thirteen and twenty years in the wild (softschools www.softschools.com).

According to Mr. Uche Nwokoro from Umuduruegbeguru the community in general prohibits the killing or ill-treating of hawk (Agunkwo). He said that hawk (Egbe) brought information during their inter-communal wars with neighbouring communities. The information brought by the hawk gave them victory in their wars. When the hawk visits any home, even today, to take their chicks, if caught they can remove some of the feathers and let it go. This is a way of friendly caution.

Female dog (Nne nkita) 'Genus canis':

Dogs belong to the family of genus canis. It is a pet animal to many people. It is also a security agent. Chiedozie Mmachi from Nekede, Imo State informed us that in Nekede and Ihiagwa, female dog is prohibitive animal. They do not rear female dogs. According to Mrs. Mmachi, during the era of inter-village wars, a female dog led their enemies from the enemy village

to the hideouts of the natives. Till today the people prohibited the eating and rearing of female dogs. Here, female dogs are not revered, they are avoided.

An oral history on Mgboko, Abia State has it that an indigene of the community was bitten by a dog and he died. As a result dogs were banned or forbidden in the town. It becomes a taboo to bring a dog to the community. It is interesting to note part of this Mgboko orature. At the end of Nigerian civil war in 1970, an Umuahia trader who is said to have carried his dogs on a bicycle

to sell at the Aba market stopped briefly at the Mgboko area without knowing about their taboos on dogs. The Mgboko chased the trader away after killing some of his dogs.

Grasscutter (Nshi/Nchi) “Thryonomys Swinderianus”:

It is also known as the marsh cane-rat, ground hog and in Francophone West African, the aula code. It is a rodent but not a rat proper. Grasscutter belongs to the Hystricomorpha (porcupine family). This rodent subclass embraces similar species which were originally classified according to the differentiation of the masticatory musculature.

Due to their spatial separation, a common origin has often been contested and the hystricomorphic rodents of the new world have now been classified as caviomorpha (guinea pig relatives). Hystricomorpha are correctly comprised of hystricidae (family of porcupines), Bathyergidae (family of sand-diggers), Thryonomyidae (family of grasscutters) and pertromuride (family of African rock-rats) with the phiomydis (African tertiary) as the common tribe group. Grasscutters are found only in Africa, where they are represented by a single genus, Thryonomys (identical with Aula codes). Most of the species, subspecies or breeds described can be allied to one of the following groups of species. Thryonomys Swinderianus-the larger grasscutter and Thryonomys gregorianus –the lesser grasscutter. We are dealing here with the two groups of grasscutter. (Retrieved from: <https://the grass cutter // A livestock of tomorrow by M.N. Opara>).

Grasscutter is for meat and rich in protein. In Isiala Mbano where I came from, eating of grasscutter is prohibited for pregnant women. An oral tradition handed over to our generation made known that if a pregnant woman eats grasscutter’s meat, she will be gasping for breath even during labour. It is called ‘ime nchi’ (grass cutter pregnancy). It is therefore a prohibitive animal in my area.

Snail (Mbele or Ejula) “mollusk”

Snail is a mollusk that belongs to the class Gastropod. There are thousands of species of snails that are adapted to the life on the ground, in fresh waters or in the sea. Snails are one of the

oldest animals on earth. They appeared on earth nearly five hundred million years ago. It represents important source of food for wild animals and humans. The giant African land snail is the largest snail on the planet earth. The habitat affects its colour. It can be yellow, orange, red or inconspicuously coloured (white, grey or brown). The body consists of strong, muscular foot and coiled shell. Snail uses the shell as shelter. It quickly retreats into

the shell in the case of danger. Snail's shell grows entire life. Chemically speaking, it consists of calcium carbonate. Diet rich in calcium ensures strong shell. Snail has two pairs of tentacles on its head. Eyes are located on top of the long tentacles. Short tentacles are equipped with sense of smell to find food. Snail is nocturnal creature (active at night). Most snails are herbivores and their diet is based on various plants. Snails produce slimy mucus that facilitates movement on the ground. Snails are the slowest animal on earth. They move at speed of 0.5 inches per second. (Snail facts-www.softschools.com). This animal is another delicious traditional delicacy and rich source of protein. However, it is prohibited in some Igbo communities. For instance, in Isiala Mbano, my area, it is prohibited for pregnant and expectant mother to eat snails. It is our traditional belief that if a pregnant woman eats snail, the child she will give birth to will be pouring out saliva uncontrollably.

Igbo cow (Ehi/Efi Igbo) "Bos Taurus":

This is a species of cow reared mainly in Igbo land. It is usually big in size and not as tall as the other cow (lama).

Mr. Christian Michael from Etche, River State, informed us that in Ozuzu Etche, the Igbo cow (Ehi/Efi) is a taboo or prohibitive animal. According to the informant, Mr. Christian Michael, Amadioha deity is from Umunoha in Imo State. The deity, Amadioha detests cow (Ehi/Efi). When the people of Ozuzu Etche accepted Amadioha as their deity, they entered into covenant with Amadioha and as such prohibited the people of Ozuzu Etche from eating or killing the Igbo cow. If anyone from the community eats it, the people will incur the wrath of Amadioha. In Ozuzu Etche, if anyone swears an oath with 'Ehi', it is a serious matter. The people used to eat the cow before they covenanted with Amadioha as their deity from Umunoha, Imo State.

Toad (Awo):

Toads are associated with a drier, wart- covered, leathery skin, and shorter legs than frogs. They also can live further away from water. Toads are found on all continents except Antarctica and are also not present on isolated islands like New Zealand, New Guinea, and Madagascar. A group of toads is often called a knot. (Facts about toad-Google).

It is not taken as meat just as in many parts of Igbo land. We gathered from Chris Igberu that seldomly do people kill the toad in Ikwo. If it is unavoidably killed, it is allowed to decay on that spot. Anytime toad (ewo/awo) enters one's dish, it becomes a taboo and calls for cleansing. One would say that the toad is a tabooed or prohibitive animal in Ikwo land.

Python (Eke)

In some places in Igbo land, python is revered as totemic animal, and here we will look at it as a prohibitive or tabooed animal. According to Christian Michael from Etche, Rivers State, in the olden days, the people of Elele in Etche were eating python until they had war with one of their neighbouring community. During the war, as people of Elele, Etche were running away from their enemies, they ran into a forest, where they unknowingly marched on the python. It did not bite, harm or frighten them. The python turned against their enemies, scared them from entering the forest to lay hold on Elele, Etche people. After the war, the people resolved and entered into covenant with the python that since it saved them, the community will reciprocate the gesture by prohibiting it's people from the killing, harming and eating of python. The prohibition has continued to be effective even today. Anyone who violates the prohibition will give full traditional burial rites to the python. To the people of Elele, Etche, the python is a prohibitive animal.

Bush rat (odu):

This animal is like rat. It lives mainly in the bush. It has tiny legs and limbs. In Igbo speaking areas of River State it is known as 'Nwaekpeke'. Mr. Christian Michael informed us that in Ozuzu, River State, they used to eat bush rat. Bush rat is their symbol of strength. He said that bush rat was prohibited in the community, when they discovered that during their wars with their boundary neighbours, each time they eat bush rat, they will be defeated. However when they sacrificed the bush rat to their deity, they will be victorious. The community decided to avoid the eating or hurting of bush rat. It is an exclusive food or sacrifice to their community deity.

Again, in Akwa-Etche, the people use to enjoy bush rat as a wonderful meat. Myth in the community had it that the people abused the animal by saying that it has tiny legs. 'Nwaekpeke'

cursed the community that no person from the community will eat its meat again. If anyone from the community eats it, he/she will die. The people made it a taboo for any person from the community to eat the bush rat.

Conclusion

What this study has done is merely to examine a few of the areas in Igbo land where taboo and prohibited animals are avoided and produce restraining attitude that show respect and reverence to certain animals. The preservation of these taboo animals would help to avoid complete dislocation of the past. Again, the present generation will know the story or myth behind their town's prohibited animals.

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