



TOTEMISM, TOBOO AND ANIMAL SPECES CONSERVATION IN KOLO CREEK CLAN

Azibalua Onyaghola (Ph.D.)

Department of Philosophy, Faculty of Arts, Niger Delta University, Wilberforce Island,
Bayelsa State.

Email: azibaluaonyaghoglo@gmail.com; Tel.: 08034933251

Cite this article:

Azibalua Onyaghola (2025), Totemism, Toboo and Animal Speces Conservation in Kolo Creek Clan. African Journal of Environment and Natural Science Research 8(1), 56-65. DOI: 10.52589/AJENSR-HKYHQN8R

Manuscript History

Received: 17 Oct 2024

Accepted: 2 Dec 2024

Published: 10 Jan 2025

Copyright © 2025 The Author(s).

This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International (CC BY-NC-ND 4.0), which permits anyone to share, use, reproduce and redistribute in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited.

ABSTRACT: *This study tries to examine totemism, taboo and animal species conservation in the Kolo Creek clan. It adopted textual, expository, analytical and empirical methods. The findings of the study revealed that the practice of taboo and totemism by families and communities in the Kolo Creek clan is an indirect form of animal species conservation. Therefore, it concluded that individuals, communities and the general public should be enlightened on the adverse effects of ending taboo and totem practice in Kolo Creek as this will lead to endangering of animal species.*

KEYWORDS: Conservation, Endangered Species, Kolo Creek, Taboo, Totemism.



INTRODUCTION

Man as a creature with spiritual composition strives to make his life comfortable. Man tries to combine the material and the spiritual for his wellbeing. In its bid to make life comfortable by making sure it survives the vagaries of nature adopts a medium in which it can effectively tackle these seen and unseen as well as unforeseen incidents of nature while existing and struggling for survival on earth.

In man's struggle for survival on earth, he has to take care of security, transportation, feeding, shelter, his relationship with his fellow man; his relationship with the dead, aged, young, women, men, the unborn baby, in terms of accident, birth, naming ceremony, marriage ceremony, maintenance of the environment, reverence to the elders, dead, living, safety in war times, or in peace times, etc.

Man in trying to maintain all facets of his life for his survival in the environment on earth creates non-human creatures as a medium that would be used to intervene and execute any of the issues that affect its life and wellbeing on earth that would be forbidden to give spiritual authority and power on it. When a non-human species is forbidden and worshipped by man to give spirituality to that non-human creature, the creature becomes a taboo to be killed and eaten by the people. In turn, the non-human species executes the functions it is meant to perform; this is now referred to as a Totem.

The Environment of Kolo Creek Clan

Kolo Creek Clan is in Bayelsa State of Nigeria within latitudes $4^{\circ} 15' 1''$ North and $15^{\circ} 23' 1''$ South and longitude $5^{\circ} 22' 1''$ West and $6^{\circ} 45' 1''$ East. Kolo Creek is one of the Oil and Gas producing areas well known in Bayelsa State and Nigeria at large. It houses an oil well at Itokopiri, Otabagi near Oloibiri where oil was first discovered in commercial quantities in 1956 by Shell B. P. It is in the South East of Bayelsa State which is the southernmost state in the country and the Southern shores are less than five degrees of latitude north of the Equator. Kolo Creek is criss-crossed by several lakes, rivers and creeks in addition to the swampy that constitutes about 75 percent land mass covering an area of about 11,109 square kilometres.

Kolo Creek is located in the South East of Bayelsa state, Nigeria in the Niger Delta. It has a freshwater habitat. It has an equatorial climate with more of the rainy season than the dry season. It is covered with swamps with thick forests and greenish vegetation all through the year. It is cross-criss with rivers, creeks, streams and rivulets. During the flood period, inhabitants can transport into the hinterlands and the bushes with canoes. The main means of transportation are dugout canoes to farms and the interior of the forests. Kolo Creek is bounded in the East by Akani, Ogboloman and Emago communities in Rivers state, North East with Amirikpoko also in Rivers state. In the North, it shares boundaries with Okarki in Rivers state, in the North West with Agudama-Epie, Edepie, Opolo and Kpansia communities all in Yenagoa local government area, in the West with Azikoro and Agbura communities also in Yenagoa local government area. Kolo Creek shares boundaries with Otuokpoti, Otuogori and Onuebum, along the Ekole River. Kolo Creek also shares boundaries with Otuoke, Otuaba, and Akoloman communities. In the South, it shares with Ogbia town, Otuabo, Opume and Iduma communities. This area is swampy with thick forests and equatorial regions. And it is largely fresh water but the Southern part of the creek is salt water with mangrove swamps.



The Concept of Totemism

According to the 'Oxford Advanced Learners Dictionary of Current English, 9th Edition, a totem is an animal or other natural object that is chosen and respected as a special symbol of a community or family, especially among Native Americans; an image of this animal, etc. (Hornby 1655).

Nigerian scholars, F. Abiola Irele and Biodun Jeyifo define totemism as a system of thought and social practice that is based on a relationship between Adam and/or a person and an animal or thing. 'Humans', they write 'appropriate the positive attributes of the animal or thing, such as bravery, generosity, industriousness, or hunting prowess, to claim a higher social status over their fellows:

Totemism was necessitated by the first man's need to establish some sort of relationship between himself and the natural world he was to inhabit. The difference between the human and the non-human was and remains undeniable. At the beginning of things, the Africans resorted to metaphor to construct and elaborate this relationship, which emerged as totemism. From this perspective, totemism can be viewed as an elaborate, lived metaphor that serves to establish equivalences between heterogeneous modes of existence, the human and the non-human, but between which... There is similitude in dissimilitude. (Irele & Jeyifo, 381; see also Mangena 38).

Irele and Jeyifo dismiss any idea of a necessary evolutionary kinship between a clan and the clan's totem animal but assert that totemism is 'rooted in a symbiotic relationship based on analogy (381). Again, Mangena's comment is rather puzzling: the point is that it is through totemism that the existence of non-human animals finds meaningful expression' (Mangena 2013: 38). Does this mean that without human totemism nonhuman existence would be meaningless? Perhaps a charitable interpretation would acknowledge that 'meaning' is necessarily anthropogenic and that nonhuman existence would be neither the poorer nor the richer in the absence of human-generated meaning.

Similar considerations pertain to Zimbabwean scholar Munyaradzi Felix Murove's reference to Swiss missionary Henri-Philippe Junod who observed in the 1930s that totemism 'shows well one characteristic of the Bantu-mind: the strong tendency to give a human soul to animals, to plants, to nature as such, a tendency which is at the very root of the most beautiful blooms of poetry, a feeling that there is a community of substance between the various forms of life' (Murove 201-202: see Juno 1934f). Murove and Junod are implicitly invoking here what has become known as anthropomorphism, or 'humanisation' the projection of human characteristics onto nonhuman life forms.

The Concept of Taboo

However, taboos exist also with regard to endangered species and rare animals. For example, the python ought to be protected not only because it is an endangered species but also because it is symbolic in foretelling events of what the future holds for human beings' (Chemhuru and Masaka; 131) and because killing it will invite a drought. The Shona concern for the python is mirrored in the 'indigenous practice of royal python veneration among the Ogu in South-Western Nigeria' (Ola-Oluwa; 1, 6). Nigerian scholar Senayon Ola-Oluwa explains that the royal python is venerated because it is associated with ... benevolence in its dealings with humanity' (Ola-Oluwa; 7); Royal python veneration 'serves as a means of biodiversity



conservation ... because the preservation of groves for the python also means 'the preservation of a wide range of other plant and animal species' (Ola-Oluwa; 1,7). In an interesting parallel to Shona's beliefs, the Ogu would approach the royal python 'whenever there was drought'. In response to the votaries' supplication, 'the royal python would intervene and there would be rainfall to not only allay fears about the perpetuation of ... (the dry) weather but also to facilitate abundant harvest' (7). Returning to Shona's beliefs, the saying, Ukauraya Shato, Mvura Haizonayi, can be translated as meaning 'if you kill a python, the rain will not fall' (Chemhuru & Masaka; 131). Again, the paradoxical nature of Shona concern for animals is expressed in Chemhuru and Masaka's assertion (an endangered species such as pythons, pangolins ... and rhinoceros] deserve to be respected because they also contribute to human well-being and development through the provision of meat, medicines, and objects of trade' (Chemhuru and Masaka; 131). Thus, a python's bones are used by Shona's traditional healers for making beads that form part of their regalia, while her fat is used to prepare their medicinal concoctions (Chemhuru and Masaka; 131).

It is difficult to perceive any immediate concern for nonhuman animals, other than as their being means to human ends. Chemhuru and Masaka's reference to a further taboo illustrates this: Ukauraya Mutsumwatsumwa, n'ombe dzako dzinozotsemuka minyatso means 'if you kill a praying mantis, your cows will crack their teats'.

It is believed that if one kills it the teats of the udders of the offender's cows would develop cracks that would make it difficult to milk them. Considering the importance of cows among the Shona as providers of dietary needs and as stores of value, no one is prepared to risk losing his cows by killing a praying mantis. Besides being a symbol of wealth, the cow can also be sued for various other purposes like the payment of lobola, labour, meat and milk. (132).

The casual links between killing a python and drought, between killing a praying mantis and cows' udder's developing cracks are taken for granted here. They are simply asserted, without further argument or evidence. It follows that killing a discouraged for reasons that commonly have nothing to do with the animal in question.

According to Chemhuru and Masaka, fears of invoking the anger of ancestral spirits help the Shona to live in harmony with animals and the natural environment but how is this to be reconciled with their claim that such taboos are instrumental in making human beings 'treat and see natural vegetation and wildlife as ends in themselves, rather than assuming the once dominant Western traditional, homocentric view of ethics, where only ... human beings have intrinsic moral worth' (128), [emphasis mine] The response may be that ancestral spirits are characteristically made angry by people's failure to 'treat and see natural vegetation and wildlife as ends in themselves'. Yet, if people act predominantly out of fear of provoking the ire of the spiritual world, this will hardly open their eyes and minds to, say, animals' inherent value. The following remark by the authors is telling in its implicit abnegation of any value animals may have in and for themselves: 'ruthlessness [towards harmless creatures in the ecosystem] may end up hardening one's heart toward fellow human beings' (132). This argument is an important part of the arsenal employed by advocates of humane education. However, it is notoriously difficult to establish scientifically whether the maltreatment of nonhumans may have implications for the treatment of humans. The implication is also that human beings have direct obligations or responsibilities only to fellow human beings, namely not to 'harden their hearts' towards them through ruthlessness towards innocent animals – who, therefore, matter only indirectly or instrumentally.



There is, moreover, an obvious practical issue in relying on totemism and spiritualism, and subsequent 'taboos', to yield moral status and inherent value. The problem, it turns out, is that one clan's totem animal is another clan's favourite 'bush meat'.

Totemism, Taboo, and Animal Species in Kolo Creek Clan

Here we will look at how totems are perceived and tabooed by the Kolo Creek people with a view to finding out the spiritual/metaphysical implications of it. And also by making some that the totems are preserved for the good of man. But for us to really understand the belief and worship of totems whereby all been tabooed, we would like to look at some totems in some communities in the Kolo Creek Clan.

An animal that is a Taboo in Kolo Creek particularly Kolo Town is the Crocodile. The Crocodile is tabooed by the Inyade family, the family of the first son of Agholo the founder of Kolo Town.

It was believed that a certain man from the Inyade family in times past usually transformed form to a Crocodile to get fish for cooking whenever the wife lacked fish from the River. If there is a shortage of fish, he goes to the River without the knowledge of his wife; transforms into a crocodile enters the River then gets fish for cooking. One day, the wife trailed him and saw how he pulled off his clothes, transformed into a crocodile and then entered the river. Immediately he entered the river, the wife collected all his clothes and the magic wand he used to transform into a crocodile.

When the husband had finished getting the fish for the family use and came out of the water ready to transform into a human being again, he could not. So he wandered the whole river to no avail and finally turned into a crocodile. With what happened it is considered that any crocodile killed is the man from the family, so no person is allowed to eat or kill the crocodile. Since then the crocodile is now a Taboo to all the descendants of the Inyade family. The crocodile is strictly tabooed by the family and the whole of the River is flooded with crocodiles of different sizes. But when any of them stray outside that stretch of the river, people are free to kill it but not from the Inyade family.

Furthermore, at a bush called Edum Ifie or Edum ta Ifie otherwise called Ifie Bush; there is a lake that is tabooed. This lake contains different types of fish and sea animals like turtles, tortoises, alligators and crocodiles, nobody is allowed to kill or fish in that lake and all the surrounding swamps adjoining it.

This bush on which the lake is located is named after the god that controls the lake and the animal creatures. The name of the god in charge of the lake is called Ifie. That is why the bush is also named Ifie bush and the lake is also named after Ifie. The Ifie god is owned by a family in Otuasega in the Kolo Creek Clan called Ogoni Igbila.

In Ifie Lake, by extension, Ifie bush, nobody kills or fishes in that precinct for any reason; fishing or killing without the normal time and sacrifice attracts death no matter how the person is highly placed in the society. However, someone can only kill any fish around that area if the fish stray out of the defined bush called Ifie bush. The shrine is also located at the side of the lake, it is the procedure for killing the fish/animals in Ifie Lake, the fishes/animals in that lake and bush can be killed when the god approves it through spiritual consultations. The family of Ogoni Igbila will proclaim around the community for everybody interested in the Ifie fishing



festival to register his or her name. This registration is done with nothing but just to identify himself for the festival. Only those who identify themselves for the festival participate. Also, it is done so that they can identify everybody who participates in the fishing festival of Ifie. Before the day of the festival, sacrifices would be performed by the family to ensure that nobody is injured or harmed by anything during the festival in the lake.

Before the arrival of everybody, a man selected amongst the family matters would be picked by the god who shall bite a manila with mouth close till the end of the fishing festival. When he opens his mouth, it shows spiritually that he has opened the mouth of the crocodiles, alligators, etc. in the lake to harm the people participating in the fishing in the lake but while the mouth is closed with the manila in his mouth, nobody will be harmed all through the festival in the lake.

However, it is obligatory that when you kill/catch a big fish or animal during the festival in the lake, you are expected to give the family the head of either the big fish or the animal. That is why all participants register to be known and accounted for before and after the festival in the lake/bush.

That apart, in Kolo Town, the burial ground (cemetery) is in the bush, and the various family gods/goddesses and their shrines located in the bush are sacred and tabooed. These gods named after the bush that their shrines are located in the bush which are forbidden and sacred are:

- a. Aghologho forest
- b. Eriripo Ingede forest
- c. Eriripo Out-Egbesu forest
- d. Imuinkelele forest
- e. Aloghom forest
- f. Eghalaghala forest
- g. Egeliyai forest
- h. Ekogha forest
- i. Ebazo forest
- j. Owobenemema forest
- k. Oghodum forest
- l. Akalapiri forest
- m. Otubhe forest
- n. Eriripo – Out Ekata/Iduom forest
- o. Egu forest
- p. Okedum forest



q. Okpagimanam forest

All these forests in Kolo are sacred, forbidden and virgin as well. They are sacred, virgin and forbidden because the shrines of most of the family deities are located in the bush and the location of the deity in that bush is named after the deity. However, Eghalaghala forest and Ekogha forest have no shrine located there but it was believed by the Kolo people that those forests (Eghalaghala and Ekogha forest) are the abode of evil spirits in Kolo Town so nobody dared go fishing, farming, hunting, etc. Nobody goes there to do any activity without attracting the anger and wrath of the gods; so, it was highly forbidden and held sacred. Also related to our topic of discourse is a taboo practised by the Kolo people which is the killing of snakes and frogs for consumption. The eating of snakes of any kind and frogs of any kind is highly taboo in Kolo Town as well. This brings us to the main crux of our discourse which forms the topic of our paper.

The Otuasega people believe in the Iguana called Owagh as a Totem. This Iguana (Owagh) is worshipped by the people and tabooed to be killed. It has a chief priest in charge of the circular consultations. This Iguana being worshipped and tabooed is called Obarugu. This Iguana being worshipped and tabooed is called Abadi. Abadi is the spiritual name and it has the same functions and belief systems as the Obarugu at Otuasega.

Obarugu is the spiritual name of the totem, and Owagh is the native name of Iguana so when the name Obarugu is mentioned, it means that the totem is being referred to here in its spiritual dimension.

The Iguana (Owagh) – Obarugu totem is basically for male members of the community but women too are forbidden from killing and eating the totem. When a woman is pregnant and does not know the sex of the child, the woman is forbidden from killing and eating it. Also, since the men in the community don't eat it and even cooking utensils are not to be used in preparing the totem since the male children and the husband are not allowed to use such utensils, the women too finally forbade the killing and eating of the Iguana – Owagh (Obarugu). That is, the cooking utensils or domestic utensils in the home cannot be used in cooking, preparing, dishing or storing the totem because the male folk in the house will not use such a utensil again. So it ended that everybody in Otuasega both male and female forbade the killing and eating of Owagh because it is a totem.

This totem is a community-wide totem. It is a totem mainly for war, security and emergency accidental situations. It is because men go to war or defend the community from external aggression, they forbade the killing and eating of the Owagh.

This Obarugu (totem) protects and saves the people at every given time, even during peace time it protects them. In case of invasion or war, when a man enters the bush or any place with little grasses, the Otuasega man becomes invincible to the enemy. However, the Otuasega man sees the enemy very well but the enemy can never see the Otuasega man. The totem covers the Otuasega man so that the enemy cannot kill him – but he can kill the enemy. That is as long as there are small grasses on it and the Otuasega man steps in it, he becomes invincible in times of war.

That apart, the Owagh totem Obarugu also saves indigenes from being stranded. If an Otuasega person goes to the bush or on a journey and the boat capsizes, the totem comes and ferries the person to the shores for safety. Even when an indigene goes to the bush or goes somewhere



and there is no canoe to ferry the person across, if the person mentions and prays to Obarugu, it will come in the water to the location and when you sit in it, it ferries the person across to safety.

Again, when someone climbs a coconut or palm tree or any tree or a carpenter on top of a building and the person accidentally loses grip and falls to the ground, the Otuasega man must land on the ground safe and alive despite the height of the place. It is believed that as the person falls, the person takes the body of the totem which is a reptile and lands on the ground alive.

Totemism, Taboo and Animal Species Conservation in Kolo Creek Clan

Flowing from the discourse, the totemic and taboo practices of the Kolo Creek Clan people are natural means of the conservation of animal/endangered species in the area. However, the natives never knew that they were practising environment conservation, particularly animal species.

Conservation for the benefit of man either for intrinsic value or extrinsic value was an unconscious practice by the people. Though superficially they see themselves as worshipping their various gods/deities, unknowing to them they were practising environmental conservation and climate change, particularly for animal/endangered species conservations.

The totemic practice of Iguana by the Otuasega people paved the way for the Iguana to be produced plentifully. At Otuasega, the Iguana is seen around the people's houses sometimes and most importantly in the forest where the shrine is located. The whole area is flooded with Iguana and nobody tampers with it because it is believed that it is part of the life of the people and it is a sea life-saving animal as well; for that, it is forbidden. In case a mistake is made by killing it, you confess your innocence. However, the people did not realize that they were practising animal species conservation. And in this context is the Iguana.

Again, the crocodile tabooed by the Inyade family though caused by a calamity has now become indirectly a form of animal species conservation, particularly of the crocodile species. Even the python totem of the Egbesu family is a form of animal species conservation. The python lives amongst the people particularly members of the family. And also in the forest where the shrine is located, the python is seen everywhere and does not harm anybody. It is a form of conservation of the species for the benefit of man. Ensuring that it is conserved for future generations yet unborn but little did the native practitioners know that they are environmental conservationists.

Now coming to the reserved and forbidden forests in Kolo Town, though it is the location of the shrines of the various family deities because it is forbidden, sacred and revered by the families and the town at large, all animal creatures in these forests are safe. No human being goes to such a forest to kill any living creature in it for any purpose whatsoever. The sacred and forbidden state of these forests now makes all animals/endangered species safe and conserved. Any attempt to kill any living creature in those forbidden and sacred virgin forests attracts death or the wrath of the gods on either the individual involved or the entire family will be wiped out.

Though the Eghalaghala and Ekogha forests have no shrines of deities, it is believed that these forests are the abode of evil spirits, so nobody enters those forests to do anything of any sort. That is why the forest is very virgin and the entire animal of different species are conserved by



the practising of revering these forest. This traditional custom and practice is a form of animal species conservation for the benefit of man and the continued living of the earth. Some animal species conserved in these forests are the wild Pig, Pythons, Iguanas, Leopards, Hyenas, frogs of different species, Hares, Porcupines, Turtles, Crabs, Crocodiles, Alligators, Birds of different species, Fox, Antelopes, Grass-cutters, Adders and so on. Different types of animal species are conserved in these forests for intrinsic and extrinsic values. Besides, even Ifie Lake is a form of conservation of different animal species in the water (amphibians).

The belief in totems and taboo by the Kolo Creek people goes to show that the people believed in the spiritual world as well as its environment for the overall wellbeing and welfare of man. The spiritual world is called Ema-Ebhel while the material world/world of the living is called Edum Ezue. The spiritual world controls the material world either for good or for bad as people's punishment or for the protection of the people, etc. The people still rely on the spiritual beings/world to achieve the material/worldly goals for a better living and favourable environment. The Kolo Creek Clan people still maintain a cordial relationship between the spiritual world/gods and its material world/man for a better living and a happy living earth.

Also, this totemic and taboo practice has some moral implications on the people because the consequences of killing or eating these animals in the bush, home, etc. attract grievous effects on the individuals and the family of the culprit(s). The refrain from killing or eating these animals in the bush or home or anywhere in the world by the people puts an end to the indiscriminate killing or eating of these totems/tabooed animal species. It also brings moral uprightness in terms of respect for animals of various species. And this brings respect and moral uprightness amongst people of various ages in the society thereby making the society and the environment conducive for man's living.

CONCLUSION

As our topic depicts, totem and taboo practices in the Kolo Creek clan improved the practice of maintaining animal/endangered species conservation. Though the natives see the traditional practice as just the worship of the gods/deities but analysing it further, we discovered that these practices are a form of animal/endangered species conservation. And by extension a form of maintaining and improving environmental change, especially in the animal kingdom. It also establishes a link between the spiritual world and the material world of man thereby maintaining a cordial relationship between man and the spirit for sustenance and improvement of man and his environment to maintain the connection of man and the living earth for the betterment of man and mankind.



WORKS CITED

- Chemhuru, M. & Masaka, D. 'Taboos as sources of Shona people's environmental ethics'. *Journal of Sustainable Development in Africa* 12(7), 2010.
- Collins English Dictionary [www.collinsdictionary.com]
- Irele, F.A. & Jeyifo, B. 'Totemism. The Oxford Encyclopedia of African Thought'. *Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press*, 2010.
- Longman Dictionary [www.idoceonline.com]
- Mangena, F. 'Discerning moral status in the African environment'. *Phronimon* 14(2), 2013.
- Murove, M.F. 'An African commitment to ecological conservation': The Shona concepts of ukama and ubuntu. *Mankind Quarterly* 45(2), 2004.
- Olaoluwa, S. When was the ecological turn? African eco-criticism and the limit of colonial claims. Paper presented at the International Conference on Migrations of Knowledge: Potentials and limits of knowledge production and critique in Europe and Africa, Carl von Ossietzky University Oldenburg, Germany (December), 2014.
- Taboo is an activity or behaviour that is considered completely unacceptable or forbidden. www.dictionary.com
- The Free Dictionary [www.thefreedictionary.com]
- www.britannica.com
- www.britannica.com
- www.merriam-webster.com