

## **TOTEMISM AND SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT IN THE NIGER DELTA**

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### **Abstract**

Totemism is a system of beliefs and practices by a social group of attributing to an animal, or plant or other elements of nature some theistic powers and attributes, which the group sees as responsible for its collective survival. One predominant aspect of totems is that they act for social cohesion and represent the mystical connection between humans and the natural world. The question that this paper examines is whether totems can serve sustainable development in the Niger Delta. The idea of sustainable development arose to confront the practice of development that is not attentive to the health of the natural environment. In a Niger Delta that has experienced so much environmental pollution, what role can totemism play? The paper used a critical analytic method to unravel that totemism is useful for sustainable development. The paper concludes that totemism can serve sustainable development in the Niger Delta.

**Keywords:** Totemism, sustainable development, Niger Delta, and environment.

### **Introduction**

Totemism is an ancient practice that is present in almost, if not all, indigenous cultures. Totemism is the practice of individuals or groups having and paying reverence to a sacred object or being that the individual or group sees as a symbol of their origin and identity. Totemic practices, especially in cultures where they have many totems have helped in conservation of nature. Compared with pre-colonial indigenous cultures, totems are facing dangers everywhere from many forces such as globalization, capitalism, religious extremism, war and violence, etc. There are people who consider anything associated with or related to totems as pagan, mere superstition, and non-scientific. In areas where totemism is practised it can help in environmental preservation especially of endangered species. Thus it can help in sustainable development.

By preserving totemic practices, great reverence is given to nature and aspects of the environment are preserved. When totemic practices are held sacred and valued, development takes into consideration the need to conserve the sites and items held to be totems. Totemic practices exist in Nigeria's Niger Delta among all the various cultures and peoples that live in the region.

But due to the forces mentioned above, totemic practices have dwindled or have been encroached upon. This is one of the things that have led to environmental degradation of the Niger Delta. The goal of this paper is to show that there is need to encourage totemic practices and when this is done, it will help in the sustainable development of the region. To pursue the task of this paper, it will examine what totemism and sustainable development are concerned about, and relate how they can lead to sustainable development of the Niger Delta. The paper is written from a critical analytic method. It seeks understanding these issues and seeking out their implications. Through critical analysis the paper will break open and unravel the issues of totemism in relationship to sustainable development in the Niger Delta. The goal is to relate and bring all the issues together with the goal of developing the Nigeria Delta.

### **Conceptual Clarifications**

What is totemism? The term totem or totemism is of Native American origin from the Ojibwe people of North America (Driscoll, 2014, par. 1). Though the term is of Native American origin, totemic beliefs and practices are common among many native cultures and indigenous peoples. The belief and practise of totems "refers to a (supernatural) being or (natural or supernatural) animal, plant, or phenomenon standing as originating ancestor and guardian of a clan (or other social unit) or of an entire people. By extension, the totem is also the emblem or symbol of the clan or people" (Espin, 2007, p. 1389). To the above is the fact that a totem is perceived to act for the wellbeing of a social group and serve social cohesion.

Vital to relate that the term, "totem," as John Morton relates came into frequent use after the trader James Long in the eighteenth century used it. He cites the direct words of Long who writes thus: "The religious superstitions of the Savages consist in each of them having his totam, or favourite spirit, which he believes watches over him. This totam they conceive assumes the shape of some beast or other, and therefore they never kill, hunt or eat the animal whose form they think this totam bears" (Morton, 2005, p. 1644).

The above definition infers the idea that totemism is common and perhaps inherent in indigenous and native cultures. This does not in any way imply there can be no totemic practices in modern and postmodern culture. As it is, whatever a particular culture or peoples, or organization or even an individual holds sacred and venerable and is an emblematic symbol of that group or individual becomes some form of totemic practice. Though it may not be technically called a totem but in reality that is what it is. A national symbol

such as flag, coat of honour, currency note, and national parks could be said to be forms of totems. It may not have originated from the origin of that group but it is linked to the meaning and purpose of that group.

Totemism is an endangered practice. It is imperative to understand what an endangered practise is and what it is not. The word “endangered” is used here akin to the concept of endangered species. Defining an “endangered species,” Hook (2008, p. 75) sees it as “an organism that is under threat of extinction”. He shows further that:

In modern times, the vast majority of threat to the survival of species of flora and fauna are the results of humankind’s activities. Habitat loss is by far the most common cause, but there are other factors that can lower a population to critical levels. These include environmental pollution, industrial accidents and over-exploitation through such practices as fishing. (Hook, 2008, p.75)

Among the functions of totem which very often is not highlighted is that it could and does serve in environmental conservation. This is discussed in the next section. The discussion that follows in the next sections is grounded by an ecophilosophical paradigm. Ecophilosophy is the application of the philosophic tools of critical reasoning to the issues of ecology or environmental matters. It also draws on the resources of ethics in discussing the environmental issues. Ecophilosophers have moved the discussion of ethics beyond the human domain. It is not only what human persons do to themselves that matters. How humans live with and treat the natural world is also a question of ethics.

The argument of this paper is that totemism can enhance sustainable development in the Niger Delta. Before moving further it is imperative to define sustainable development and the Niger Delta. The Bruntland Report of the World Commission on Environment (2000, p. 198) states that: “Sustainable development is development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs”. The history and the debates over the fact that the definition privileges development over environmental wellbeing will not be entered into here. It suffices to note that from this definition many environmentalists and ecological scholars have come to argue that the wellbeing of the environment must be taken into consideration before any form of development is carried out. This is what has informed the growth of environmental impact assessments in most countries before development projects are carried out. Nigeria has one such impact assessment policy in the Environmental Impact Assessment Decree No. 86.

The concern for sustainable development here will be carried out in the Niger Delta. What is the Niger Delta? As Okaba (2008, p. 28-29) writes:

The Niger Delta Region which occupies an area of 75,000 sq. Km is located in southern Nigeria. It stretches from the Nigeria-Cameroon boundary in the East; bounded by Ondo-Ogun boundaries in the West; by Enugu, Ebonyi, Anambra, Kogi and Ekiti states to the North and the Atlantic Ocean forming the general boundary in the south. It is Africa's and the world's third largest mangrove forest: one of the world most expansive fresh water swamps in western and central Africa and Nigeria's major concentration of high biodiversity. The Niger Delta is the home of over 30 million people who live in about 13,400 long settled aboriginal communities made up of the Ijo, Isoko, Ishan, Ijaje, Ibibio, Anang, Efik, Ekpeye, Ikwerre, Edo, Ogoni, Ogba, Engeni, Ukwani, etc ethnic nationalities. Over 75% of this settlement lie along the coastal region of Nigeria

It is important to note that the Niger Delta has faced multiple challenges which include: environmental neglect, youth criminality, conflicts that have led to the displacement of peoples, atmospheric pollution from gas flaring, and low development of infrastructures. In the light of what the Niger Delta has suffered it is important to revive cultural practices that help in environmental preservation and sustainability. One of such practices is totemic practices. Without naming one by one the many totemic animals and plants in the Niger Delta, it is eye-opening to note the following statement of Adeola (2009, p. 142-143) which shows that totemic practices and the environment of the Niger Delta have been destroyed:

Welch notes that while Nigeria has received billions of dollars from crude oil, most of which has vanished into the national and international economies or private accounts without benefiting most Nigerians, very little oil revenues have trickled down to the areas of extraction in OBCs of Niger Delta. Furthermore, the indigenous cultures, including their customs and traditions, have been destroyed. In some instances sacred lands were breached or violated by reckless oil exploration and production activities. While poverty is endemic in Nigeria in general, the people of the Niger Delta in particular exhibit higher incidence of poverty and conditions of deprivation attributed to MNOCs oil and gas activities, and to the corresponding treadmill kills, decimation of priceless totemic species, water pollution, deforestation, and misappropriation of communal lands by the oil industry. People originally subsisting as hunters and gatherers, horticulturists, and fishermen or women have all

been displaced and impoverished by shell and other MNOCs operating in the Niger Delta.

### **Significance of Totemism to Environmental Conservation in the Niger Delta**

The practice of totems like every other human practise is an issue in ethics. How humans treat one animal or plant invariably informs how they treat all other animals and plants. Cultures and people who see sacredness or some higher force in a particular species of plant or animal are likely to see some high spiritual presence in all animals and plants that obligates treating them with respect or using them in a prudent manner. The fact is that all native and indigenous cultures that practised totemism are also the cultures that believe in the presence of a spiritual force or vital force in all things.

The preservation of totems certainly helps in controlling climate change and preserving endangered species of plants and animals. Among the Orogun people of the Niger Delta of Nigeria they possess three totems- the lizard (ogborigbo), the dog (Erako) and the tiger (edgenekpo) (Otite, 2005, p. 280). These animals are already endangered species. Many of them have either migrated from the land or have been killed. This has happened as more roads are constructed through Orogun land. The noise pollution from transportation facilities has already driven them out of the land. As more people build houses in Orogun land, the habitations of these animals are encroached upon. This endangerment of totems has not only happened in Orogun land but in all indigenous land world over. The destruction of these animals and in other places has caused hindrance to biocultural diversity. There is no doubt that the possession of totems indicates human reverence and relationship with nature (Otite , 2008, p. 286). Among the Australian Aborigines totems which often are representation of ancestors are seen as manifestation of the bond between humans and nature since humans and animals totems comes from the ancestors and so they are of the same being (Callicott, 1994, p. 175). The following well argued statements from Tasié are appropriate here:

Totemism is an aspect of the indigenous culture of Africa by which man's relationship with nature is organized. This involves the mystical and ritual relationship between a class or species of animals or birds or plants and a social group. In totemism, species of snakes, animals, birds, or plants become an important symbol of identity and solidarity for a social group. This relationship is translated into a harmonious living in which wild beasts become friends of men. So it is not unusual in rural Africa to see colonies of harmless crocodiles, boa constrictors, pythons, etc. right in the middle of a village with unrestricted movement, strolling round with a deep sense of dignity, and visiting people in their homes. There is a deep sense of sacred obligation to

receive them and offer them the best hospitality affordable. There are also taboos not to kill or eat them. In the event where they are accidentally killed, funeral rites befitting that of a noble are accorded them. A gesture which will excite the envy of animal rights activists. In reciprocity, the totems are completely harmless and there are unconfirmed reports and exceptional cases of communities in Africa where they look after human babies while their mothers attend to domestic chores. (Tasie, 2014, pp.105-106)

One important way that totemism can help in sustainable development is that it can help in boosting tourism, which in turn can provide funds for ecological preservation and development of social projects. George (2014) writes that:

In Ivory Coast, for example, and indeed, some other parts of Africa, they are beginning to harness this important element of African religion for tourism gains. Tourists who are amazed at this brotherhood of beast and man through these communities to have a glimpse of this wonder, thus providing gainful employments for local residents who act as tour guides and pose these animals for photographs with tourists.

It should be reckoned that the practice of totemism as well as other religious practices does not warrant calling indigenous peoples savages, as Long and other Eurocentric scholars call them. Long is wrong in confusing the idea of a personal spirit with that of the collective clan spirit (Morton, 2005, p. 1644). As noted, the practice of Totemism is relevant to sustainable development. A vital reason why it is relevant is that totemism ends up in the preservation of some vital animal species, plant species and other elements of nature. As should be realized, sustainable development is development that takes into consideration the preservation of the environment. Its concern is that in the process of development, the environment should not be harmed or devastated. It is known that if development damages the environment in a non-renewable manner, then human lives, the lives of future generations and that of the entire planet is jeopardized. It is recognized that for instance, trees play important roles in the ecosystem. Trees are the lungs of the world. And most of the oxygen we humans breathe in comes from the trees and plants. Every tree and plant that is preserved then contributes to and enhances human health (Maathai, 2010,

43). Trees can also have tourist significance and thereby brings economic gain. There are thousands of people from the Niger Delta who have travelled to places like Israel, India, and other places of tourist attraction. In some of these places, they behold and admire trees like the sycamore tree that Zacchaeus climbed, the holy trees in the garden of Gethsemane, date palms, and pomegranate. If people can travel out of Nigeria and spend money to see

trees and other landscapes, there is practically nothing wrong if we develop the stories behind the preservation of totems, sacred groves and other wonderful aspects of nature and build them into places of tourist attraction. The wonderful aspect of nature that has been preserved through totemic practices have as much significance as what people travel abroad to see. In speaking of tourist attraction, the totemic animals and birds such as the Iguana among the Orogun people, the snake among the Usiefrun people should not be neglected. If people can travel to zoos to see various kinds of animals, then why not also the totemic animals and birds that exist in the Niger Delta? The issue is that for too long people have neglected the totemic aspect of African culture and simply written them off as superstitions. If totemic practices are well packaged and marketed, while not neglecting their religious significance to the people, it can become a great source of income for the people and the nation. The income that comes from them can in turn be used to remediate the damages that come from development of infrastructure in the land.

No development can fully succeed if it does not take into consideration the cultural beliefs of the people. No development can succeed if the people do not own or believe in the development. One thing that will make people to easily own the process of development is when the development is attentive to their genuine cultural beliefs and practices. A cultural belief and practice that are concern here are totemic practices. If development is carried out in the Niger Delta with a respect for totemic practices, it has a total chance of being sustainable. This was recognized when Section 17 of the 1969 Petroleum Act prohibits exploration of oil in sacred land, this includes areas and places such as sacred groves where various totemic animals and plants dwell (Nwaomah, 2011, p. 91) But it is unfortunate today that almost, if not all the oil exploration companies in the Niger Delta pay no attention to this. In the Niger delta many totemic animals and plants have been driven into extinction as a result of oil exploration.

Totems have also contributed to unity and social stability of communities. The people who believe in a totem often see themselves as kinsmen and women and they try to live together in close harmony and peace. They are often drawn to their ancestral place of origin for celebration of festivals in honour of their totem. This being the case, it indirectly contributes to sustainable development for when the people live in peace and harmony, they can pay attention and pursue issues of development. They are also likely to be responsive to development projects.

One of the challenges that the Niger Delta suffers from is intra and inter ethnic crisis, militancy, youth restiveness, kidnapping, hostage taking and other violent practices. Violence has often impeded and delayed development projects in the Niger Delta. Many vital roads have been neglected as a result of kidnapping in the Niger Delta. Anything that can contribute to enhance the value of peace and non-violence no doubt can be very helpful in enhancing

development and protecting the environment. Respect for totems teaches the values and principles of non-violence. The more people are taught to respect totemic practices them, the more they are likely to promote peace in the land. In the struggle to build a better and sustainable society, no stone should be left unturned and very positive practices, whether minute or big should not be neglected. The fact is that habits matter. Cultivating a habit for peace is a significant phenomenon that should not be neglected.

There is no way that development can be sustainable if it fails to conserve the environment. Totemism as it is; is already a practice that helps in environment protection. It is imperative then that is recovered. Another important reason why totemism is related to development is that it has a medicinal value. In some communities, traditional medicine men and women make their herbs by harvesting some sacred plants and development in sustainable manner. Those herbs have provided healing and health to many members of the community. It is also possible that in the future, some totemic animals and plants that the present generation considers as not being useful can become useful in the production of life saving medicine.

### **Conclusion**

The Niger Delta in various ways has faced enormous environmental challenges, especially from oil-based mining activities. It has also suffered from militant violence, youth restiveness, unplanned development of cities and towns leading to urban decay, soil erosion, oil spillage, gas flaring, etc. Values of respect from totemic practices are gradually dying out as a result of encroachment of foreign values and militant evangelistic religions. If totemic practices as discussed in this paper can be encouraged, on a large scale it will help in promoting the values of sustainable development in the Niger Delta.

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