

INTERPRETIVIST PERSPECTIVE OF TOTEMISM IN DELTA STATE

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Abstract

Totemism is an ancient African belief system and practices across cultures that attributes reverence to an animal, plant, or other elements of nature with claims of possessing mystical powers and attributes, which the group sees as responsible for its collective survival, mediating between them and a supreme being in the supernatural world. The study examined totemism in Delta State from an interpretivist perspective using three communities (Okwagbe, Emevor and Ase) selected from the three senatorial districts in the state. The concept of totemism could be explained using different theories. For this paper, an interpretivist perspective using symbolic interactionist theory was employed. The study adopted a descriptive survey design. Three Hundred and Ninety-Seven ($n = 373$) participated in the study in a combination of cluster and purposive sampling techniques across the three communities using a questionnaire for data collection. While focus group discussions and interviews were conducted in each of the selected clans in order to ascertain questions related to the objectives of the study. Based on the findings of the study, the following recommendations are made: More awareness should be raised in communities about their belief so that community members do not deviate or strangers do not violate these norms, as they may not know the severity of such offences. The belief in the existence of a supreme being responsible for the protection of the communities will enable the traditional African communities to voluntarily take management of these social issues related to totemism very seriously.

Keywords: Communities, Totemism, Sociocultural, Belief, Interpretivism.

Introduction

In a broad anthropological explanation, totemism is a “belief in certain animals, plants, objects, or phenomena that possess sacred, spiritual, or mystical meaning for people, and are typical objects of totemic beliefs. Totemic symbols, though variable, “link human beings with nature and some times function as ancestral protectors, markers of identity, and keepers of traditional laws. Globally, totemism has appeared as a “cultural phenomenon of great interest that has evolved within indigenous cultures of various regions of the planet, influencing their

viewpoints, practices, and social norms. African examples of research into totemic practices demonstrate their role in promoting community integration “and directing social behaviour, even as they accommodate modern influences” (Ndubuisi, 2021; Dery et al., 2023; Role of Totemism in Tribal Religious Life: A Philosophical Study, 2025).

Totemic practices have been well recorded in the Niger Delta area found in Nigeria, specifically in Delta State. These practices have traditionally associated man with animals like python and iguana, plants, rivers, and forests that were considered religiously significant. Communities in this part of the world, for instance in Okwagbe, Useifrun, Emevor, and Ujevuwu in Delta State have folklore logical ideas that consider the python a totem and protector that prevents the tracks of the people from being seen during warfare. Other areas like Ase view certain plants as having socio-religious implication among their existence. These indigenous practices are more than just religious practices; through them are dictated specific behaviours like not killing or consuming a totemic animal as stipulated by indigenous cosmologies governing man and environment interactions (Oghenevwogaga & Omosor, 2024; Ikeke, 2024). But it suffice to note that these practices are upheld and sacred based on the interpretivistic meanings attached by the people that position them as emblems of significance.

In social science studies, an interpretivist paradigm encourages researchers to focus on the fact that human acts, beliefs, and social norms should be examined in light of subjective meaning and culture, and not exclusively in light of positivist approaches that concentrate on measurable quantitative information. An interpretivist paradigm suggests that practices in culture, signs, and belief systems like totemism are impossible to distinguish independently of worldviews, discourse, mythologies, and culture in practice in the society in question. It would seem that this type of research would specifically be suited for studying totemic practices in Delta State as the practice bear significance from the worldview of the people and external interpretation. Analyzing totemism from an interpretive perspective, totemism is deeply symbolic with regard to collective identity. Among the Urhobo, Isoko, Ijaw, Itsekiri and Ukwani tribes found in Delta State, for example, totem affiliation under the clan and or community is a symbolically powerful means of creating a common mythical history and membership for enhanced group solidarity and continuity. Studies carried out by Shanunu (2024) indicate totems are usually linked to mythical histories and claims to kinship, with individuals belonging to totemic orders practicing self-denial and avoiding harmful actions against some species not merely because

they may be subject to sanctions for violating cultural taboos but also due to a symbolic identification with ancestral and collective histories with symbolic importance.

A study of the Niger Delta, from the perspectives of both anthropology and environment, also indicates that totemism acts as a regulatory factor within environmental management, which can be considered a moral and spiritual duty by these communities. Given that totems are usually associated with ecologically important species, species groups, or communities of nature, the taboos surrounding these totems inadvertently support biodiversity preservation and proper natural resource use. It should be noted that an interpretivist lens permits a comprehension of such practices as culturally important responses to these challenges, and not just a way of survival (Ikeke, 2024).

The totemic belief systems in Delta State societies are closely linked to performances, storytelling, and collective memories. Oral traditions explain the origins of the association between the totems and clans or territories. These accounts combine mythology and history and emphasize the cosmological ties that are an essence and foundation for cultural practices like festivities, initiation ceremonies, and community administration. Notwithstanding the prevalence of Christianity and Islam in Delta State, the totemic mythology retains its cultural force and impact on ceremonies and symbolic language games that structure social life. Such an enduring phenomenon can only be adequately unpacked and explored through an interpretivist investigation that emphasizes interpretation and experience instead of non-meaning functionalist explanations (Omosor & Oghenewonogaga, 2025).

The socio-cultural aspects of totemism in Delta State are significant and are not confined to ecology or identity. This is because the taboos in totemism can sometimes serve as unwritten laws dictating how human interactions can prevail. In this way, the taboos can sometimes prevent people from being anti-social through the fear of the consequences. In addition, failure to observe the taboos may result in collective sanctions among the people or collective beliefs among the people pertaining to ill-fortune. The implication is that it promotes collective ethics. The study of this phenomenon is one that encapsulates the beliefs and tenets of the supernatural world by providing meaning to human existence through the way it deals with morality, society, and the cosmos. Totemism helps to provide a balance for the social, cultural and religious worldview of people as it create a balance wherein the supernatural interfaces with

the world of men for the regulation of daily life and help give meaning and create a distinct identity to their existence. This aspect is striving to make the world achieve collective functionality for human development.

For the Delta State of today, totemism is confronted with mutations brought on by processes of modernization and the destruction of the environment. However, the findings of interpretivist studies have verified that the majority of the teachings pertaining to totemic societies have survived as cultural heuristics that guide the value orientations of these societies. The task at hand for interpretivists is to find ways to interpret totems not as relics of the past but as a living discursive practice that constructs identity and guides the ethics of nature and society for the Delta State so that the population there might once again find value in them and offer an integrating empirical ethnographic work with interpretivist epistemologies provides a pathway to understanding how traditional cosmologies adapt and persist in rapidly changing socio-cultural landscapes.

The objective of this research is to examine and interpret the meaning and cultural significance of the totemic belief system among the people of Delta State, Nigeria, using an interpretivist research paradigm that focuses on local perspectives and worldviews, identity, and environmental beliefs. The study intends to: analyze the Okwagbe, Emevor, and Ase communities in Delta State, Delta State, Nigeria, and explore their totem symbolism and practices and their beliefs, indicating the role they play in terms of identity and collective memory. It will also examine the socio-cultural significance of totemism in Delta State, including its importance in taking care of the environment, moral education, social integration, and the well-being of society in the contemporary modern world.

2.0 Literature Review

2.1 Conceptual Clarification of Totem

The term “totem” or “totemism” originates from the Ojibwe people, a Native American tribe of North America (Driscoll, 2014). Although the word itself is Native American, the beliefs and practices associated with totems are widespread among many indigenous cultures worldwide. Totemism refers to a supernatural being or a natural/supernatural animal, plant, or

phenomenon regarded as the founding ancestor and protector of a clan or social group, and serves as their emblem or symbol (Espin, 2007, p. 1389).

The Ojibwe, an Algonquin tribe, hold certain plants or animals sacred based on the perceived assistance these totems provide to their tribe (Insoll, 2007). The word “totem” is believed to derive from the Ojibwa term *ototeman*, meaning “one’s brother-sister kin” (Goswami, 2017). The root *ote* refers to a blood relationship between siblings sharing the same mother, forbidding marriage between them. In kinship terms, if a clan’s apical ancestor is nonhuman, it is identified as a totem (Gouws & Prinsloo, 2008).

Sigmund Freud, the pioneer of psychoanalysis, explored the socio-ethnographic perspective of totemism in his essays compiled in *Totem and Taboo*. In the essay “The Horror of Incest,” he examined the totem system among Australian Aborigines, highlighting its role in preventing incestuous relationships (Freud, 2012). Similarly, E.A. Hoebel, a distinguished anthropology professor, defined a totem as an object—often an animal or plant—held in special regard by members of a social group who perceive a unique emotional bond with it (Goswami, 2017). John Morton notes that the term “totem” became widely used after the eighteenth century when trader James Long described it as a “religious superstition” among indigenous peoples, where each person has a totem or favorite spirit often embodied as an animal, which they neither kill nor eat (Morton, 2005, p. 1644). This definition suggests that totemism is common and perhaps intrinsic to indigenous cultures, but it does not exclude the existence of totemic practices in modern or postmodern societies. Essentially, any object or symbol considered sacred and emblematic of a particular group or individual can be regarded as a form of totemism. Totems symbolize objects or animals with cultural and spiritual significance to certain societies, often linked to clans, tribes, or communities. They serve as expressions and reinforcements of group identity, beliefs, and values. Totems can appear as carvings, paintings, or natural elements, carrying symbolic meanings that establish a connection between the group and the symbol. Importantly, totems are believed to act for the well-being of their social groups and promote social cohesion.

2.2 Totemism in Nigeria

Folklore plays a crucial role in preserving culture, encompassing beliefs, practices, crafts, legends, and oral traditions passed down through generations (Quinn, 2000:129). Totemic tales

and myths form part of this oral heritage. Many Nigerian ethnic groups hold shared beliefs and collective sentiments toward animals and plants that require appraisal. In Nigeria, the human relationship with totems transcends mere coexistence with nature; totems have been integral to traditional society for centuries, influencing culture, religion, medicine, and everyday life. Various animals hold symbolic meanings across Nigerian communities: lions often symbolize royalty, strength, and leadership, while elephants represent wisdom, longevity, and communal harmony. The appearance of certain animals during ceremonies or daily life is interpreted as messages from the spirit world, shaping decisions and reinforcing cultural values.

Olusola A. G. (2005) explained that among the Yoruba people, many taboos and myths exist concerning animals, reflecting the interactions between people and animals and Yoruba philosophy. These beliefs are embedded in folklore through myths, legends, poetry, and literature. The Yoruba regard animals as divine beings akin to humans, deserving reverence and honor. Certain animals, such as vultures, ground hornbills, and parrots, are considered sacred and are neither killed nor eaten; for example, the parrot is domesticated rather than harmed. During rituals, only the parrot's feather—believed to be imbued with power—is used. Devotees of the deity 'Oya' regard it as taboo to eat buffalo, believed to be the deity's offspring. A myth narrates how a hunter married a buffalo-woman, who transformed by hiding her skin. After losing her skin due to family conflict, she returned to buffalo form, ultimately leading to the worship of Oya, with the buffalo's horn kept as an idol in ritual practice.

Among the Tiv, the myth of Ikyalem—the green snake—is tied to their migratory history. Oral traditions recount that when the Tiv faced attacks from neighbors in Congo, the Ikyalem snake miraculously formed a bridge across the River Congo, enabling their escape (Nomishan, 2020, p. 29). This event led the Tiv to regard the snake as sacred, forbidding harm against it. The snake remains a common and harmless presence in Tivland, freely roaming settlements and homes without being harmed.

Rim-Rukeh, Ierhiewwie, and Agbozu (2013) noted that the people of Orogun kingdom in Delta State hold the iguana as sacred. Myth states that while fleeing conflict, they crossed a river on a chain of iguanas, seeing the reptiles as protectors. Consequently, killing or eating iguanas is taboo, and violators suffer rashes curable only through rituals at the community shrine. Iguanas are well cared for, often living within homes and receiving burials upon death. Many Nigerian

cultures have a long list of animals and plants regarded as totems. Among some Igbo clans, revered totems include pythons, leopards, bushbucks, pigeons, tortoises, snails, elephants, and antelopes.

2.3 Conservation of Totemic Practices in Delta State

The tribal communities in Delta Central, Delta South, and Delta North of Delta State have a long-standing tradition of environmental conservation rooted in various religious beliefs. Among the Urhobos, totemism—the belief in a supernatural bond between a group of people and certain objects, often animals or plants—is a key aspect of natural resource conservation (Tonukari, 2012). Killing or eating a totem animal is usually forbidden. Social taboos, present in all cultures worldwide, act as informal institutions governed by traditional and religious norms that regulate human behavior. These taboos significantly influence the community's approach to natural resource use. However, the critical role these taboo systems play in conserving totemism has often been overlooked. In Delta State, sacred natural sites—especially sacred forests—are protected by such taboos, rituals, and beliefs that underline traditional natural resource management.

For instance, in Orhoakpor, Ethiope East Local Government Area, the Okpagha tree is highly revered. The Okpagha and Ogriki trees hold a prominent place in the cultural identity of the people. The Okpagha tree is believed to be the dwelling of the Aziza spirit, a deity considered the guardian of fields, crops, and herds, protecting the community from enemies. The tree's location is a sacred space where plants and animals grow and live freely without human interference. Groves of these trees are protected by strict taboos: no cutting, breaking branches, gathering firewood, or burning grass is allowed. Animals residing in the grove are also protected. Ritual sacrifices of cocks, sheep, and goats are offered at the tree's base for rain, good weather, or the health of children. Additionally, many juju priests derive their powers from the Aziza spirit (Omorovie & Alumona, 2016).

The Okpagha tree also serves as a natural archive, harboring rare species of plants and birds. While protected, the tree's wood is used in religious artifacts such as statues and staffs, believed to retain magical powers. Its bark is medicinal, reputedly effective against unusual illnesses.

In Ovu Inland, Ethiopie East Local Government Area, the Ovughere (village deity) is regarded as a god of war. The chief priest, Osedjo, inherits this position. The deity's abode is a dense forest containing Iroko, Mahogany, and Ogriki trees—some over seventy years old. This forest is sacred property of the village god, and tree cutting is forbidden. Residential settlements are not permitted near the shrine, preventing deforestation and farming activities, thus conserving the vegetation. Information about ritual, medicinal, or commercially valuable species in the forest is kept secret from outsiders. This aligns with findings in other African traditional societies where trees and forests are seen as manifestations of the Supreme Being's power (Eneji et al., 2009).

In Ode Itsekiri, Warri South Local Government Area, there exists an "evil forest" within the mangrove swamp, where "bad dead people" are buried—those who died by witchcraft, suicide, certain illnesses, accidents, or without confessing evil deeds. Oracles determine who qualifies for this burial to prevent spirits' reincarnation. Human activity is forbidden here, as disturbing the spirits is believed to bring misfortune. Consequently, the area remains a dense forest harboring diverse wildlife (Rim-Rukeh et al., 2013).

At Umuaja in Ukwani Local Government Area lies the source of the Ethiopie River, emerging from underground near the roots of a large sacred tree. This grove is considered a divine abode, overseen by a chief priest acting as the gods' messenger. The river source symbolizes life and fertility, attracting barren women seeking to conceive. The river and surrounding forest are protected as the spirit of the river is believed to reside there. The community shares responsibility for safeguarding the grove, with selected families enforcing rules. Conservation is rooted in taboos, totems, sacrilege prohibitions, and various cultural and religious rites, sustained through reverence for gods and ancestors (Rim-Rukeh et al., 2013). Traditional guardians patrol the grove, punishing violators with fines or sacrifices—including cash, drinks, livestock, kola nuts, and alligator pepper—intended to appease the spirits. This culturally grounded conservation fosters community involvement in natural resource protection and nurtures an awareness of the relationship between humans and nature, especially sacred places (Tunon and Bruhn, 1994; Tupper, 2002).

Theoretical Framework

Symbolic interactionism posits that the meanings of objects, behaviors, and events arise from individuals' interpretations, which vary between people (Asemah, 2016). Developed from the works of Charles Horton Cooley and George Herbert Mead in the early 20th century—and later summarized by Mead's student Herbert Blumer after Mead's death—this social theory emphasizes that people act based on meanings they assign to things. These meanings develop through social interactions, evolving over time as individuals interpret and reinterpret them.

According to Blumer's key premises:

1. Humans act toward things based on the meanings they ascribe to them.
2. These meanings emerge from social interaction with others and society.
3. Meanings are modified through an interpretive process when individuals engage with their environment.

Griffiths et al. (2015) explained that symbolic interactionists view belief systems as created and maintained through individuals' interactions and interpretations of each other's actions. Human interaction is a continuous process of deriving meaning from the physical and social world. Language allows people to express and communicate their interpretations. For example, the consumption of crocodile meat may be acceptable within a cultural group but offensive to outsiders. From an interpretivist perspective on totemic practices, what is taboo in one culture might be common practice in another. Thus, clear communication about meanings is essential to foster understanding between groups with differing beliefs.

Criticism

Research from this perspective faces critique for challenges in maintaining objectivity and for its narrow focus on symbolic interaction. However, many social researchers value its depth and use methods such as prolonged observation and interviews to explore phenomena thoroughly rather than broadly.

3.0 Methodology

This study was conducted in Delta State, selecting three communities purposively from each of the state's three senatorial districts—Okwagbe, Ase, and Emevor—due to their established religious and totemic cultural practices, as identified in the literature review. Since some traditions were shared across communities, overlapping practices were documented once to

avoid repetition. Field findings were recorded and discussed with interviewees across these communities.

The study employed a descriptive survey design. A total of 373 participants were selected using a combination of cluster and purposive sampling across the three communities. Data were collected via questionnaires and in-depth interviews. Focus group discussions and interviews were held to address questions related to the study's objectives. Data analysis involved crosstabulation, verbatim transcription, and content analysis, facilitated by the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS).

Senatorial District	Local Govt Areas	Communities	2024 Projected Population
Delta North	Ndokwa East	Ase	20,226
Delta South	Isoko North	Emevor	25,265
Delta Central	Ughelli South	Okwagbe	21,557
Total			67,048

Source: National Population Commission, 2006

4.0 Results and Discussion

4.1 Social Demographics

The data gathered from the fieldwork is displayed in Table 2, which presents and analyzes information collected through structured questionnaires and in-depth interviews. A total of 373 questionnaires were distributed to respondents. Out of these, 354 questionnaires were returned fully and accurately completed, while 19 were returned but not properly filled out. This indicates a response rate of 95.0%, with 5% of the questionnaires either incomplete or unusable. The analysis and presentation of findings are based on the 354 properly completed questionnaires. Additionally, 27 respondents participated in the in-depth interviews.

4.2. Presentation and Analysis of Data

Distribution of socio-demographic characteristics of Respondents

This section presents the distribution of respondents' socio-demographic characteristics.

Table 4.1: Socio-Demographic of the Respondents

		Frequency	Percentage
Sex	Male	270	76.3%
	Female	84	23.7%
	Total	354	100.0
Age (years)	18-28	65	18.4%
	29-39	123	34.7%
	40 years and above	166	46.9%
	Total	354	100.0
Marital Status	Single	80	22.6%
	Married	230	65.0%
	Divorced	44	12.4%
	Total	354	100.0
Educational Qualification	Primary education	161	45.5%
	Secondary education	100	28.3%
	Higher education	93	26.2%
	Total	354	100.0
Religion	Christian	281	79.4%
	Muslim	5	1.4%
	African Traditional Religion	68	19.2%
	Total	354	100.0%
Occupation	Unemployed	45	13.0%
	Trader	78	22.0%
	Farmer/Fishermen	158	44.6%
	Civil servants	44	12.4%
	Religious leaders	29	8.0%
Total		354	100.0

Source: Author's Fieldwork, 2025

Table 4.2 presents the socio-demographic characteristics of the survey participants. Regarding gender distribution, 23.7% of the respondents were female, while 76.3% were male. The age distribution showed that 18.4% of participants were between 18 and 28 years old, 34.7% were between 29 and 39 years, and 46.9% were aged 40 years and above. In terms of marital status, 22.6% of respondents were unmarried, 65.0% were married, and 12.4% were divorced. Educational qualifications revealed that 45.5% of respondents held a primary school certificate, 28.3% had a secondary school certificate, and 26.2% possessed higher education certificates. Religious affiliation among the respondents indicated that 79.4% identified as Christians, 1.4%

as Muslims, and 19.2% followed African Traditional Religion. Finally, the occupational distribution showed that 13.0% were unemployed, 22.0% were traders, 44.6% were engaged in farming and fishing, 8.0% were civil servants, and 3.0% were religious leaders.

4.3. Presentation of Analysis based on Specific Objective of the Study

This section discusses the specific objectives of the study as follows:

Table 4.2: Respondents' responses on the influence of modernity and conformity to the reverence of the community totem

ITEMS	SA	A	SD	D	Mean
Modernity is doing more harm to the belief system of totem in communities	188 53.90%	129 37.00%	11 2.30%	26 6.70%	3.37
Too much exposure and Eurocentrism have distorted lots of community traditions	129 36.40%	170 48.00%	43 12.10%	12 3.40%	3.18
Western religion is a ploy of modernity to weaken the African cultural practices	105 30.10%	120 34.40%	70 19.10%	59 16.50%	2.98
Prevalence of negative occurrences in communities is associated with neglect of totemic worship	151 42.80%	56 15.80%	87 24.40%	60 17.00%	2.99
Increased risk of premature death or facing misfortunes is linked to refusal to revere the community totem.	118 33.70%	90 25.10%	71 20.30%	75 20.90%	2.72
Weighted Mean					3.0

Source: Author's Fieldwork, 2025

SA = strongly agree, A = agree, SD = strongly disagree and D = disagree

Table 4.3 presents respondents' views on the impact of modernity and conformity on the reverence of community totems. Responses were weighted according to the level of agreement, with a weighted mean value of 3.0 set as the threshold for affirmative agreement. The table reveals that respondents generally believe modernity is adversely affecting the belief system surrounding totem worship in their communities, as indicated by a mean score of 3.37. Additionally, respondents agreed that excessive exposure to Eurocentric values has distorted many traditional community practices. They perceive Western religion as a facet of modernity aimed at undermining African cultural traditions. Furthermore, the occurrence of negative events within communities was linked to neglect of totemic worship, and community members

who refuse to honor the totem were believed to face increased risks of premature death or misfortune. These views received mean scores of 3.18, 2.98, 2.99, and 2.72, respectively.

In-depth interview responses were coded and grouped according to the study's sub-themes. Similar answers were consolidated, while differing opinions were treated separately concerning the influence of modernity and conformity on community totem reverence. Interviewees expressed that the diffusion of Western lifestyles has obscured the social perspective of some community members, leading them to deny any divine connection between the totem and the supernatural. One respondent expressed the following:

CASE A:

“We have consistently educated younger generations about the consequences for anyone in our community who deliberately kills or eats our python; it is sacrilegious and beyond imagination—may our god forgive me for even thinking otherwise. I have repeatedly confronted and requested to speak with parents of these youths, many of whom were not raised in our community. One parent even claimed that all meats come from God and are edible. I refuse to adopt Western ways at the expense of forgetting my roots.” (Teacher, Okwagbe)

A civil servant from Ase, Ndokwa East LGA, Delta State, added:

CASE B:

“I do not work in Ase; I work in Oleh, but I regularly return home. Some colleagues call me ‘the village man,’ but I do not mind. Sometimes, we must reconnect with our ancestral homes to preserve our cultural heritage. We are predominantly fishermen in Ase. Every male child aged seven and above knows how to fish, but none ventures near the Usede pond except during the once-in-ten-years fishing ritual, owing to the presence of the queen fish.”

An interviewee from Emevor supported these views:

CASE C:

“We consume various meats, but regardless of hunger, exposure, or adventurous tendencies, we would never intentionally or accidentally kill an iguana for food or amusement. The iguana is as cherished as family members; when they visit, it is regarded as a message of goodwill. Thus, we firmly uphold our beliefs despite the intrusion of other religions.”

In summary, Cases A, B, and C illustrated that modernity is significantly undermining the traditional belief systems surrounding community totems, resulting in careless behavior that may invite severe punishment from the Supreme Being, alongside sanctions from the community.

Table 4.4: Respondents’ responses on cultural relativism and perception of totemic practices

ITEMS	SA	A	D	SD	Mean
Adhering to social norms of host communities has a significant effect on the sustenance of sacred cultural practices	125 34.50%	82 24.00%	96 28.10%	51 13.50%	2.80
The use of totemic practices as a spiritual means to communicate with supreme beings should be respected irrespective of our diverse beliefs	55 15.20%	58 14.30%	111 32.50%	130 38.00%	2.57
Fulfilling cultural obligations of totemic reverence does not affect any other choice of religious affiliations	84 23.40%	68 18.90%	106 30.30%	96 27.40%	2.68
Totemism is archaic and mere myths without scientific bases, but must be tolerated for peaceful coexistence	52 12.70%	76 22.00%	98 28.30%	128 37.00%	2.71
Preservation of totems and orientation of people on the significance of the myths behind totemic reverence has effect on their adherence level.	119 33.00%	103 29.20%	50 13.70%	82 24.00%	2.62
Weighted Mean					2.68

Source: Author’s Fieldwork, 2025

Table 4.4 displays respondents’ views on cultural relativism and perceptions of totemic practices. Responses were weighted based on the level of agreement, with a weighted mean value of 2.80 set as the benchmark for affirmative agreement. Specifically, respondents agreed that adhering to the social norms of host communities plays a significant role in sustaining sacred cultural practices. They also believe that totemic practices, as a spiritual medium for communicating with supreme beings, should be respected regardless of differing beliefs.

Furthermore, fulfilling cultural obligations related to totemic reverence does not conflict with one's choice of religious affiliation. Respondents disagreed that totemism is archaic or merely mythical without scientific basis, but suggested it must be tolerated to ensure peaceful coexistence. Additionally, they acknowledged that preservation of totems and educating people on the significance of the myths behind totemic reverence influences the level of adherence. The mean scores for these views were 2.80, 2.57, 2.68, 2.71, and 2.62, respectively.

The researcher also conducted interviews with key individuals regarding their perceptions of cultural relativism in relation to their belief systems. Most interviewees expressed understanding and support for cultural diversity, emphasizing that it enriches human existence but must be respected within communities that hold totems in high regard. One respondent noted:

CASE D:

“I am a graduate, though currently unemployed, and I have worked outside my state. Every community has things it reveres, and it costs very little to respect these, especially if you are a guest. I expect strangers to show the same respect when visiting us. If someone knowingly disregards what I forbid, especially when it could have spiritual implications for me or my household, that person clearly does not wish me well. Cultural tolerance is essential.”
(Unemployed youth from Oleh)

Another interviewee added:

CASE E:

“I am a Christian, but my religion does not replace my cultural heritage. For example, in 2024, a resident pastor of God's Grace Ministry in Okwagbe killed our deity, a boa that regularly visits the church premises and other community members. The pastor, originally from Orogun, despite his Christian beliefs, still respects the iguana when visiting his hometown. His act was shocking and sacrilegious. For peace, he was fined an amount to cover the burial rites of the boa, as custom requires, and was asked to leave the community.” (Mrs. Brightaye, Civil Servant, Delta State)

Regarding the view that totemism is an archaic practice and mere myth or folklore, the wife of a clergy member from Oleh expressed the following:

CASE F:

“How can anyone glorify or worship an animal or plant? The Bible clearly states that man named animals and has dominion over them. It makes no sense to worship what you have

authority over. Totem worship is simply idolatry. Other cultural practices may be respected, but we should never share God's glory with anything else." (Clergy's wife, Emevor, Delta State)

Supporting this perspective, a farmer from Ase remarked:

CASE G:

"Some traditional demands are worth upholding, but not all. Before returning to Ase, I farmed cassava elsewhere with poor yields. Despite consultations, nothing changed. Then, in 2016, I participated in a government program and received training, grants, new cassava stems, and fertilizers. Since then, my previously barren land has produced bountiful harvests for over eight years. We must stop attributing powers to things that do not possess them."

Findings

Ase Community and the Usede Pond

The study across the three selected communities revealed that totemic practices are deeply embedded in their shared sacred belief systems, serving as vital cultural anchors. In the Ase community, a mysterious natural site known as the "Usede" pond holds significant spiritual importance. The pond is unique in that fishing is strictly permitted only once every ten years. During this decade-long interval, community members are forbidden from approaching or visiting the pond, as doing so is believed to invoke severe punishment from the supreme being. The punishment is said to manifest as a fatal bloating illness, regardless of any sacrificial offerings or attempts at appeasement. This belief underscores the seriousness with which the community upholds the sacredness of the pond. The ritual surrounding the pond is marked by the onset of heavy rainfall, which symbolizes the alignment and unity between the spirits of the gods and the living people, signifying divine approval for the fishing activity. The ritual culminates with the appearance of the queen mother fish, a large fish distinguished by its adornment with strings of cowries. This fish signals the closing of the fishing ritual and the restoration of the sacred ten-year period of protection. Overall, the Usede pond is more than a natural resource—it is a spiritual symbol of peace, prosperity, and communal harmony, promising a bountiful harvest to those who respect its sacred rhythm.

Okwagbe Community and the Python Totem

In the Okwagbe community, located within Ujevwin Kingdom in Ughelli South Local Government Area, the python holds a revered status as a community totem. Oral traditions passed down through generations recount a time of ethnic wars when the python played a

protective role by erasing the footprints of the Okwagbe people, thereby confusing and misleading enemy forces. This legendary act of protection has cemented the python's status as a sacred entity within the community. As a result, the people of Okwagbe strictly forbid the killing or consumption of pythons, not because they worship the physical snake itself, but because they honor the indwelling spirit believed to reside within it. The python is considered the principal object of ancestral adoration and a symbolic link between the community and their forebears. Any act of killing a python is seen as an abomination and a grave violation of cultural norms, potentially inviting spiritual retribution and communal sanctions. This sacred respect for the python exemplifies how totemic beliefs serve as powerful mechanisms for social cohesion and moral regulation within the community.

Emevor Community and the Iguana Totem

Emevor, an Isoko community situated in Isoko North Local Government Area, shares a common border with the Orogun community, where the iguana is regarded as a sacred animal. The reverence for the iguana originates from its historical role as a savior during a past intertribal war, a legacy that has shaped the cultural attitudes of neighboring communities. The founding father of Emevor, Oviecha, married an Orogun woman who upheld the taboo against killing or eating iguanas. In an act of respect, solidarity, and cultural integration, this reverence extended to the Emevor people as well. While some members of the Emevor community may be indifferent to the significance of the iguana, the animal is generally held in high esteem. It is widely believed that anyone who kills or consumes an iguana, whether intentionally or accidentally, risks being afflicted by a strange illness. To address violations of this taboo, the community maintains a shrine dedicated to cleansing offenders, allowing them to undergo rituals that purify and restore balance. This practice highlights the intersection of cultural belief, social order, and health within the community's traditional worldview.

Conclusion and Recommendations

This study aimed to explore the various meanings attached to sociocultural roles in totemism, focusing on the mystical powers ascribed to a range of natural objects such as animals, trees, forests, streams, and land. These beliefs, deeply rooted in respect for ancestral and divine forces, cultivate a profound reverence toward these totems, which serve as symbols of identity, spirituality, and social cohesion within communities. Employing an interpretivist approach, which emphasizes the subjective experiences and interpretations that differ across cultures, the

study reveals that what one community considers sacred or untouchable may be perceived as ordinary or even edible by another. This underscores the fact that meanings attached to social phenomena are not fixed but socially constructed through cultural interaction and shared understanding. Therefore, fostering awareness, respect, and adaptability to diverse belief systems is crucial for promoting peaceful coexistence among different cultural groups.

Recommendations

- a. Communities should be sensitized through the State Ministry of Culture to enhance awareness of traditional beliefs and the importance of respecting them. This awareness campaign should focus on educating both community members and outsiders about the seriousness of violating these cultural norms. Effective strategies for this sensitization include organizing workshops at the communal level to engage locals directly and erecting billboards in strategic locations to reach a wider audience. These efforts will help preserve cultural heritage and prevent inadvertent disrespect or violations.
- b. The belief in a supreme protector motivates traditional communities and development unions to take an active role in managing social issues related to totems. This spiritual conviction fosters respect for cultural practices and encourages people to uphold customs and taboos that protect their totems. As a result, communities should become more committed to preserving their heritage and ensuring the wellbeing of both the environment and their members.
- c. The Ministry of Environment should acknowledge that traditional beliefs and taboos play a crucial role in supporting environmental conservation by discouraging the exploitation of totems. Consequently, the ministry should actively promote and encourage the preservation and protection of cultural materials, including totems, which hold significant importance to the community. Integrating these cultural practices into environmental policies will strengthen conservation efforts and foster sustainable stewardship of natural resources.

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