



Original Article

Interrogating the Ontologies of Animal Totems (Dogs and the Green Snake) in Tiv Culture: A Pathway for African Animal Ethics

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Abstract: This essay seeks to understand the relationship between dogs and the green snake, in a bid to illuminate their special status among the Tiv people of Central Nigeria. The Tiv are known for their great love for meat. The desire and love of meat propelled their ancestors into a culture of hunting and farming to ingratiate this insatiable need. However, respect and the conservation of a select breed of animals calls for a close study and special attention to understand why other animals are not edible. The Tiv share a common cosmological history and ontology with animals like dogs and the green snake. These animals are considered sacred and respected totems that the Tiv are forbidden to kill and eat. This research seeks to answer the question of how the Tiv people perceive the agency and special status of dogs and the green snake in their cultured area and the role played by animals in Tiv spiritual and cultural traditions. What ethical implications arise from these ontologies, particularly regarding animal rights, welfare, and conservation? These research questions will open diverse perspectives to the discourse on African animal ethics. This research also investigated and unveils the diverse perspectives on human-animal relationships and informs the development of an African animal ethics that incorporates indigenous knowledge systems. This research adopted a historicist, cultural, and evaluative approach in answering these questions. It argues that there are several similar totem practices in African cultures, many of which are gradually becoming obsolescent, which can be reclaimed and leveraged to liberate non-human animals to establish a viable African animal ethics.

Keywords: Animal ethics, African philosophy, ethics, animal liberation, Tiv people

Introduction: It has been argued that the abuse of animals and the denunciation of the painful death they experience in slaughterhouses were the starting point of the animal movement in the 1970s¹. Promoting

activism for animals' welfare as well as academic studies, the movement goes hand in hand with the rejection of speciesism. The Tiv people of Central Nigeria are known for their great love for meat of all kinds. It is therefore

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surprising that their culture forbids them from eating some animals. Prominent among such animals are dogs and the green snake. The Tiv are the dominant ethnic group in North-Central Nigeria. They have a very rich cultural heritage. There are several written works on the relationship between the Tiv people and these animals. Such stories and relationships are similar to other traditions in Africa. This can be used in developing African animal ethics, considering the spiritual implications of the totems in different African communities. The stories are considered by other scholars, such as Terngu Nomishan², as myths. Nevertheless, the people have held unto them for several years and they observe and keep them as sacred. This study shows how the mythology of different animals exists in other African traditions such as the python *eke* in some parts of Igbo land, in Eastern Nigeria³. There is another, in the Batlouni clan, in Botswana where the clan is named after the elephant, but also protects the rhinoceros and the hippopotamus from being harmed by humans⁴.

Methodology: This study employed a multidisciplinary approach, integrating historicist, cultural, and evaluative frameworks to interrogate the research questions. Through the historicist lens, the research traced the evolution and gradual decline of animal totem practices within African societies, particularly among the Tiv people. The cultural approach facilitated an exploration of the symbolic and ethical significance of these totems, while the evaluative method allowed for a critical assessment of their relevance in contemporary African thought.

Central to the study is the argument that many traditional animal totem practices are becoming obsolete. However, these practices hold untapped potential for revitalizing African animal ethics. By reclaiming and reintegrating forgotten totems into communal life, the study proposes a culturally grounded ethical framework that promotes the protection and preservation of non-human animals. This ethical revival is not merely symbolic; it is envisioned as a practical guide for

communities to reconnect with their heritage while fostering ecological responsibility.

The research specifically examines the totemic representations of the dog and the green snake in Tiv culture. These animals serve as ontological anchors through which the study explores indigenous conceptions of non-human life. By foregrounding these totems, the research offers pathways for enriching African animal ethics, advocating for a return to culturally embedded practices that honor and safeguard animal life as part of a broader moral and ecological vision.

Background to the Study: Oral traditions and early writings suggest that the Tiv people first lived in the Democratic Republic of Congo, before migrating to the present geographical entity later called Nigeria. While in Congo, their neighbours had many wars and conflicts with them and at a point they fashioned out plans to gang up and eliminate them. The Tiv people while living in Congo were considered to be brave, very strong, and hard to be defeated. When the plans to attack them and make them extinct got very tough, someone exposed the plan to the Tiv and they decided to migrate from Congo. On their way out, they had to cross the River Congo, which was very wide and impossible to cross. Nomishan added that the snake, *ikyalem* (opheodrys), mysteriously came to the aid of the Tiv people. "The snake formed a bridge across the river and the people walked on the back of the snake and crossed to the other side of the river"⁵. Therefore, with this act, the snake *ikyalem* or opheodrys has come to be respected in Tivland. The Tiv do not intentionally kill it and forbid anyone from carrying out the act, or killing it for consumption as food⁶. This action enabled the Tiv to travel through the forests and bush till they settled at Swem, the ancestral home of the Tiv. Nomishan added that the story of the *ikyalem* is passed from generation to generation, ensuring that no one harms it, and the snake on the other hand is harmless to the Tiv's sons and daughters. It is the most common snake seen in Tivland. It can be seen in settlements, on the trees, in gardens and compounds, and sometimes on the roof of thatched houses. And wherever the

ikyalem is identified, it is allowed to willfully move away without anyone harming it⁷.

Another animal that is not killed and eaten by the Tiv people is the dog. The dog is considered a part of the family and a member of the household where it is found. Therefore, the killing of dogs for whatsoever reasons comes with very serious consequences. It is a taboo for one to kill a dog among the Tiv people of Central Nigeria and it has been very difficult to arrive at a specific reason why killing and eating of dogs is forbidden among the Tiv. However, the consequences of this act are very effective, active, and glaring. Oral interviews show different views and perspectives on why the Tiv are forbidden from eating dogs. Benedict Shinku reports that in the past the Tiv used human sacrifice to seal some treaties, such as the *iye* treaty. This treaty was entered into by communities and allowed a young man from either community to elope with a young woman from the other community without the communities construing the elopement as an act of aggression, in the context that some eligible young men and women could not engage in exchange of marriage for reasons ranging from ugliness to not having a brother or a sister. In Tiv society, marriage was by exchange or what was called trade by barter, where a man takes his sister and gives her to another man, and the other man exchanges his sister too for marriage. Therefore, the *iye* treaty was a smart way the ancestors made it possible for such young people to get married when they did not have sisters to exchange for marriage. When the colonial authorities banned human sacrifice in 1913, the Tiv replaced human sacrifice with dogs in the rituals that required human sacrifice. The *iye* treaty which helped people to get married is long gone. However, in the Tiv cosmology, dogs are viewed as humans. That is why killing or eating them leads to *swende*.

Swende is a punishment for the killing or eating of dogs. Nomishan stated that *swende* is a belief that, whenever a Tiv person kills or eats a dog, knowingly or unknowingly, he or she is bound to experience unfamiliar health conditions. However, if it is eaten in error, the person can immediately visit a traditionalist for

cleansing. If a person fails to do this cleansing, he or she will have difficulties in bearing children in marriage. In the case of women, it is either that she will be having miscarriages, or that there will be a difficulty in conception. Even if she gives birth, the child may die in the first few months after birth. The only solution to this is the cleansing to be done by specialized traditionalist⁸. Therefore, the dogs are given a status in the Tiv community. The dog is seen as a companion and friend of the Tiv. Those who go for hunting of other animals in the bush use their dogs to hunt too.

Discussion: According to Ndubisi J.O. Ejikemeuwa, totems have to do with a relationship of a particular society or an individual with certain animals, animate or inanimate beings. There is always a spiritual connection between the totem and the people who hold the belief in them⁹. In Tiv cosmology, there are meanings and spiritual connotations attached to almost every reality of life. Totems are not an exception to this. Mariko opined that a totem can be an animal, a plant or any other natural object that is considered to have an ancestral connection to a particular clan or a tribe¹⁰. In discussing totems in Tiv culture, B. I. Dagba, L. N. Sambe, and S. A. Shomkegh presented an elaborate list of totems in Tiv culture with different belief systems attached to them and their effect on biodiversity. These totems range from animals to plants. A few examples are as follows: *hur* (wild custard apple fruit), which is believed to protect people from being bitten by snakes, and if in any case anyone is bitten by a snake, the leaves can be used as treatment. This has enabled the tree to become essentially conserved and it is in high demand in virtually every household. The owl (*ivungu*) is also believed to have certain spiritual powers. Others consider it as a "witch bird," therefore it is not killed, and with this, its population has increased¹¹. This shows that respected totems in different African communities as mentioned in the case of the Igbo people in Eastern Nigeria, the Batlounge clan in Botswana, and some parts of Ghana etc. can lead to biodiversity conservation.

Dagba, Sambe, and Shomkegh observed that in several African societies, there are totems

that are often the basis for traditional laws and customs. It is a violation of cultural and spiritual life to hunt, kill, or hurt an animal or plant totem. These totems are found among different clans and tribes in various African communities. For instance, in Zimbabwe, the Shona people have 25 different totems. The traditional belief system holds the ascription of supernatural powers to gods and goddesses or deities. The belief system is that the gods protect the community members from harm, famine, barrenness, impotence, drought, epidemics, and war, among other things¹². The gods avenge their anger on whoever omits or commits any flaw for which their presence forbids; hence, the cultural system holds to a very high esteem all the precepts of the laws of the gods. The Shona people consider totems as their ancestral symbols that connect families or individuals to their ancestors. It is part of their identity and family heritage. These totems are considered the guardians of any clan or family, as they are associated with them; therefore, it is always taboo for anyone to consume or kill any totem associated with them. For instance, lions (*shumba*), which symbolize the courage of this particular clan, are considered legends among the Bantu-speaking clans, while the other clans also depend on them for their bravery as they also bear the name *shumba*. They are expected not to kill and consume the lion too¹³. Therefore, reclaiming different totems is very paramount and of great important to the survival of several cultural heritages and many animals as the totems in every African culture can go a long way in conserving certain non-human animals in different African societies¹⁴. Also, totemic systems are deeply embedded in oral traditions, which transmit ecological knowledge across generations. Respecting totems becomes a moral obligation that teaches sustainable relationships with the environment. For example, the Baganda people of Uganda prohibit the consumption of their totem animals, passing down stories and rules about them as observed by Banana and Gombya-Ssembajjwe¹⁵.

Other African Nations with Totems: There are several other totems, such as the ones in the Tiv culture, that can be used in

establishing a viable African animal ethic. Jele Manganyi and Johan Buitendag stated that for the African, when an animal is to be killed, it must be for the purpose of a sacrifice that has been chosen by the ancestors, and the animal must have been killed by the eldest person within that particular lineage¹⁶. This shows the respect and the place of animals within African culture. Kanu opined that animals are sacred in African ontology, and what makes the animals sacred is the spirit that is related to them. And as the spirits dwell in them, these sacred animals have great powers and they are also respected¹⁷. He observed that there are particular animals that are sacred to the Igbo tradition. One such animal is the python. The python (*eke*) is a sacred animal which is also called *nne anyi* (our mother). Usually, when it comes around human habitations, this particular snake is not harmful to the people in most parts of Igbo land; therefore, it is also not being killed in such places. The people honor it, and when someone mistakenly steps on it, it hisses and recoils itself¹⁸. The python is also given certain privileges that are enjoyed by citizens, and the community also revere it; however, the snake is harmful to outsiders and will attack them instead. Adibe holds that the snake is respected because it is believed to be the abode of spirits. It is a symbol of ancestral spirits, therefore no one dares to kill it willingly. When it is mistakenly killed, it is given full burial rites as a human being¹⁹.

Animals occupy a special place in many African cultures, for instance the Bakwena tribe of Botswana is named after Kwena, the crocodile. The Batlounge clan in Botswana is named after the elephant. The people also protect the rhinoceros and the hippopotamus from being harmed by humans tribesmen; they do not hunt or harm it, or consume it as food. The crocodile is also believed to avoid harming them. These animals are regarded as the cousins of the elephant. The animals, as dreaded as they are, do not harm anyone in the Batlounge in return²⁰.

In Ghana, the use of totems is found in almost all the cultures. The people of Boabeng-Fiema in the Brong Ahafo Region have so much respect and reverence for the monkeys; they

now have a monkey sanctuary. This is similar to the people of the Old Ningo who consider the turtle as a god and have made their area safe for marine creatures²¹. The eight clans of the Akan tribe are known for a totem called *atweneboa*, which means animal leaned or relied upon for spiritual inspiration. The chiefs with this clan also adopted some totems that they emulate, some of them are displayed at the entrance of the palaces, while others are carved on the staff of office. When the chief sits in state, the linguist (spokesperson) holds the chief's staff with the totem at top. The stools used by the chiefs have all symbolic animal forms carved in them²².

The totemic ontology observed in Tiv and other African cultures offers a challenge to Western animal ethics frameworks which often derive moral considerability from rationality, sentience, or utilitarian calculus. The African model instead invokes a relational moral order, where agency is not limited to sentient experience but extends to symbolic, spiritual, and communal participation. This study provides an opportunity to reimagine animal ethics beyond Cartesian binaries of reason/instinct and human/animal. It opens a space for what might be called a decolonial animal ethic, which recognizes that indigenous traditions offer alternative systems of thought that are no less philosophically rigorous or ethically rich because they are taken from the cultural heritage of the people, and they cannot be systematically analyzed or followed as the culture and traditions demands strict observations to them without questioning the rationale behind it. Moreover, this approach carries implications for biodiversity conservation, animal welfare policy, and environmental justice movements across Africa. If indigenous totemic practices can be formally recognized and integrated into conservation frameworks, they can serve both ecological and cultural goals.

Conclusion: Humans and other animals have cohabited the earth for a long period of time. The rules of their engagement or existence are dependent on the human beings, based on their rationality, religious affiliation or perspectives, and cultural influences. To

Freddy Mnyongani, the culture has become the embodiment of how people see themselves and the environment. This includes their belief systems and interaction with the whole environment²³. Non-human animals are part of the biotic environment that we live in; they also have their important roles that they play towards the well-functioning of the environment. There is a need for seeking both traditional and cultural ways for the preservation and protection of animals to avoid extinction. The war humanity is waging against non-human animals is causing the extinction of several other animals. This study has shown the possibility of an African animal ethic, as the dogs and the green snake are protected and preserved in the Tiv culture, other cultures that similarly have totems can do likewise and if all of these are upheld we will be doing a great help to the animals. Totems are a common belief in many African communities and these totems are considered as an integral part of the people.

Human-animal relationships in Tiv and other African cultures reveal a profound ethical system that recognizes the agency and sacredness of certain non-human beings. Rather than seeing animals as resources, these traditions see them as kin, protectors, and spiritual entities. This relational ontology provides a fertile ground for the development of a unique African animal ethic, one that challenges anthropocentrism, promotes conservation, and upholds the moral status of animals based on indigenous knowledge systems. Future research must continue this work of conceptual translation, critical engagement, and philosophical validation to establish African animal ethics as a robust field within global moral discourse.

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