

# Indigenous Knowledge in Ekpeye Culture, Nigeria: A Case Study of Edeoha Totem Sculpture

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**ABSTRACT** — *This paper on indigenous knowledge examines the totem beliefs of the Ekpeye people. Totem sculpture as an aspect of religious belief becomes our case study. A structural interview schedule was used for data collection. Fifteen respondents were interviewed. The result of the study showed that the Ekpeye people still practice and utilize indigenous knowledge for religious belief in totem animals and sculptures. The result further showed that indigenous knowledge remains with the people which are passed on to generations through customs, tradition, folklores, poems, storytelling, proverbs, belief system, etc.*

**Keywords** — Totem Sculpture, Religious Belief, Indigenous Knowledge

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Indigenous knowledge is unique in African culture and society. Indigenous knowledge developed over time represents all the skills and innovations of a people as embodied in their collective wisdom and resourcefulness. It plays an important role in defining the identity of a community and people. Children learn these skills by participation, initiation, rituals, imitation, recitation and demonstration. Recreational practices such as wrestling, dancing, drumming, poetry, reasoning, riddles become the training methods.

Jain (2008) observed that indigenous knowledge has been defined in various ways to mean cultural knowledge, traditional wisdom, environmental knowledge, farmers or pastoralist's knowledge, community knowledge, local knowledge, folk knowledge, traditional science, people's knowledge and so on.

Prior to western education, indigenous knowledge has played a vital role in African economy. However, the United Nations Environment Programmes observed that documented literature on indigenous knowledge is limited. The ability of disseminating indigenous knowledge without documentation has become a problem in modern times, due to western education. This observation suggests that unless indigenous knowledge is properly documented, analysis and continuous dissemination could be lost forever.

Charyulu (2008) has observed that experiences have shown that development efforts that ignore indigenous knowledge, local system of knowledge and local environment may generally fail to achieve their desired objectives. It is against this background that the study examined the organization, utilization, dissemination and documentation of indigenous knowledge in Ekpeye culture, Nigeria.

## 2. OBJECTIVE

This study is aimed at knowing the following things in Ekpeye indigenous knowledge practice. They are:

1. The organization of indigenous knowledge in Ekpeye
2. The utilization of indigenous knowledge in Ekpeye
3. The dissemination of indigenous knowledge in Ekpeye
4. Previous efforts in documenting indigenous knowledge in Ekpeye

### 3. METHODOLOGY

The case study method was adopted for this research. This design helps for an indepth study of the unit. The data obtained is put to thorough examination with the ultimate aim of gathering result for our objectives. The population included all the custodians of Indigenous knowledge in Edeoha community, where our totem sculpture is located.

The instrument for data collection was a structured interview schedule, which contained (20) questions on the organization, utilization, dissemination and documentation of indigenous knowledge in Edeoha town, via Ekpeye culture. The interview were conducted by the researchers who also understood the local language of the people. Fifteen respondents were interviewed.

### 4. LITERATURE

Indigenous knowledge refers to the unique, traditional local knowledge existing within and developed around the specific conditions of a community, on which their livelihoods and survival depend, Steiner (2007). It is developed over the centuries. Therefore, it represents all the skills and innovations of a people, embodied in the collective wisdom and resourcefulness of the community. Indigenous knowledge is unique to a specific culture and plays an important role in defining the identity of a community.

Today, indigenous knowledge is at the risk of becoming extinct because of rapidly changing society and fast pacing cultural changes according to Ntui and Ottong(2008). Oral paths and knowledge dissemination are being blocked as people no longer stay in homogenous community. In addition, children are being sent to formal school with little or no time left for learning the culture. The youngsters become disinterested in their native culture because of outside influence. The knowledge system has also not been recorded systematically to allow for easy access and sustainability. However, this research is a process of documentation and dissemination.

Cultural belief systems demonstrate an immense knowledge and respect for the earth. These systems contain rules that define how the environment should be treated. Enforcement of these customs and norms are often ensured by social conformity and by codified threats. According to Ntui and Ottong (2008) by either ritual or magic, they were able to influence these supernatural forces in order to benefit from them. With proper training, they are able to contact supernatural forces which helps in establishing spiritual harmony among them. This finding is similar to Melville (2005) and Cintron, and Yara (2005) who observed that most tropical indigenous knowledge have systems of beliefs which involves various supernatural forces. The findings of Clay (1996) and Larson (1998) also state that indigenous groups all over the world have adapted systems that contain rules with which they relate with people and the environment. Similarly, Purcell (1998) said indigenous knowledge is shared and communicated orally, by specific examples and through culture. The structure usually include a leader which has the speed and strength to teach the young people who shall then pass on the message. This process removes exploitation as the information passed is through many persons.

### 5. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

**Table 1-** Distribution of Respondents by Age, Experience, Occupation and Education

Background Information	Frequency distribution
Age Group (a) 45 – 55	3
(b) 56 – 65	7
(c) 66 – 75	5
<b>Total</b>	<b>15</b>
Experience (a) 50 – 40 years	9
(b) 39 – 20 years	4
(c) 19 – 5 years	2
<b>Total</b>	<b>15</b>
Occupation (a) Farmer	5
(b) Trader	3
(c) Businessman	1
(d) Traditional Ruler	2
(e) Herbalist / Healers	2
(f) Juju Priest	2
<b>Total</b>	<b>15</b>
Education (a) Formal	6
(b) Non-formal	9
<b>Total</b>	<b>15</b>

According to Emma and Aliyu (2008) indigenous knowledge deals with history, culture, agricultural practice, health, local crafts, industry and recreational activities of a people usually passed on from generation to generation through traditional socialization process as demonstrated by elders and custodians. Fafunwa (1996) also stated that every society, whether simple or complex, has its own system of training and educating its youths. This type of education for the good life of a people has been one of the most persistent concerns of man throughout history.

Table 1 gives a picture and background of our respondents. No woman was used in the information gathering. All the men used were between the ages of 45-75. They all have experiences upto 50 years, depending on when they started watching the event(s) of this case study. The respondents were either farmers, traders, businessmen, herbalist, traditional rulers or juju priest. Some have formal education, while others do not.

## **6. ORGANIZATION, UTILIZATION, DISSEMINATION AND DOCUMENTATION**

### **6.1 Organization**

The Edeoha Totem Sculpture has an organized institution. This institution is as old as the community. This organization is in two forms. It has a weekly organization which serves as a religious worship centre. It also has a seven year programme with an elaborate plan. The seventh year plan enables the Totem to be seen, appreciated and celebrated.

The weekly worship is a day set aside in every week for the worship of this Totem deity. The worshippers gather at a nearby hall where the Totems are located. They sing praise songs and worship. The chief priest is in charge of all activities of the day.

This deity dictates the pace of the community spiritual wellbeing. These include sacrifices such as the change of season from rainy to dry season, planting season sacrifice, new year festival sacrifices, the Totem sacrifice, epidemic illness sacrifice etc. Sometimes, members of the community also encounter the deity outside and come home to pay homage to the deity through the chief priest. This maybe with drinks, fowl, goat and even cow, depending on your situation.

In the seven years organization, these Totem Sculptures are celebrated in a big programme. The organization and activities of this programme are centred around one family considered to be the first settlers in the community. They will announce the programme which the entire community will note and participate. This event could prolong upto two weeks.

This event usually begins with an outing programme. The night before the day these Totems shall be seen will be announced at least by one week notice. On that particular night, the entire community shall remain indoors before 8pm. Those who either disobey or ignore are arrested, beaten and locked-up until when necessary before they are released. Ignorance is not an excuse before the law. They usually have the permission of the police. This is done so because nobody is allowed to see the Totems before their actual outing.

### **6.2 Utilization**

There is a very strong belief in the community and all the neighbouring communities that the outing of these Totem Sculptures usually bring blessings to barren women, goodlucks, business breakthrough, bumper harvest, healing to illness etc. As a result of this believe, the outing attracts a whole lot of people from all works of life, including the Christian community. The worshippers of this deity, dressed in their best attire, will prepare a basin of water, perhaps with the blessings of the Totems and position it at the centre of the event. At the appropriate time of the event, this water shall be sprinkled on people who care, this way they receive the blessing of the Totems.

Three gentlemen dressed in white cloths without shirts, rubbed with canwood all over the body are seated at the entrance of the deity hall. The three (3) Totem Sculptures, representing father, mother and child are then carried by these men. No pictures allowed. The possibility of going close to these items is also difficult, because the worshippers, numbering over 200 persons cluster around the Totems.

### **6.3 Dissemination**

The Edeoha Totem Sculpture has its own masquerades call Owu-Ele. This masquerade is only played during the outing of these Totems once in seven years also. This play, unlike other plays are not done to entertain anybody. It is a masquerade played to appease the gods. The pattern of play varies. It has a spiritual undertone, perhaps to entertain the gods during this period, hence the name, Owu-Ele. It has no dance pattern. People just enter the arena and start jumping about with cane in their both hands. It is usually played a couple of days after the outing.

The masquerade themselves also use cane to either flog or chase their victims, but not in an intensive manner. There was no particular time for any masquerade to dance. Masquerades that desire to dance according to the drumming go before the drummers and demonstrate any style. There is no offence from the drummers for not beating their dance pattern. It is as interesting as that.

There is a particular masquerade that stand on three (3) meter sticks, tied to his legs. Once this masquerade is able to get up and stand on these sticks it shall remain so throughout the dancing period. Ordinarily, this scene would have proved difficult for anybody, but with this season, it becomes possible.

The masquerade aspect allows for participation, learning and dissemination of this Totem activities. Participation is organized in a way that the 39 families in the community has one masquerade each to participate with. Families that do not participate were usually fined by the community. This way, it becomes a whole community affairs and a training ground for younger generation.

#### 6.4 Documentation

There were no efforts made by the people to document their indigenous knowledge. A few efforts made by students of higher institutions as either class assignment or long essays were not published. The people interviewed agreed that in the areas of Totem animals and Sculptures, little was being documented because most people do not want to be associated with it.

Otherwise, the posterity of the Ekpeye customs and culture were being stored in the people's memories, practices and activities. These were then expressed as cultural values, customs, traditions, agriculture, belief system, religious values and so on. Other forms are folklores, poem, proverbs, storytelling, folktales, etc.

The problems of documentation the respondents said was also as a result of western education. The people in this area did not welcome western education on time, even though primary education came to them far back 1908. This paper is therefore an attempt to bridge the gap.

## 7. CONCLUSION

African Societies did not initially believe that indigenous knowledge was as good as any western knowledge system. In recent times, this naïve is beginning to change. The process of sustainable indigenous knowledge has started to emerge. This study revealed that, though none of these information must have been published, there has been pockets of attempts made at documenting Ekpeye norms and belief systems, especially in Totems.

The dissemination methods are mostly through traditional instruments, learning through observation, participation and apprenticeships. This knowledge are expressed and communicated orally. However, the posterity of indigenous knowledge in Ekpeye culture lies with the educated people of this clan who must research and document all these norms and tradition.

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