

## URHOBOTRADITIONAL BELIEFS/PRACTICES CONCERNING (SACRED) ANIMALS: IMPLICATIONS FOR GLOBAL ANIMAL CARE ETHICS, AND ENVIRONMENTAL PRESERVATION.

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### ABSTRACT

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The entire planet is facing a multifaceted environmental crisis. One of the areas in which the environmental crisis is manifested is the endangerment of plants and animals. There is no doubt that plants and animals play important roles in the ecosystem and contribute to the entire biotic good. The endangerment of animals is precipitated and often caused by colonial capitalist forces, industrialization, mechanized agriculture, expansion of human habitation, oil pollution, gas flaring, and so forth. This paper argues that Urhobo traditional beliefs and practices concerning animals that are considered to be sacred can help in mitigating the endangerment of animals in Urhoboland and elsewhere. Conservation of animals can help in environmental care and humane treatment of animals. The paper uses critical analytic and hermeneutic methods to probe into the issues involved in the paper. The paper concludes that indigenous/traditional beliefs about animals such as that of the Urhobo can help in environmental conservation.

**Keywords:** Urhobo, beliefs, practices, animals, sacred animals, plants, animal care, environment, environmental ethics, conservation

### INTRODUCTION

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At present, the entire world is experiencing the endangerment of both plants and animals. Leal (2006) relates that: "Increasingly in our society animals and birds are being threatened with extinction as a result of our exploitative, environmentally destructive practices. Other animals and birds are being raised in captivity by humans under appalling conditions" (p. 68). The endangerment of animal species is one of the grave environmental problems that the world is experiencing. The fact that animals have an

enormous role to play in the ecosystem and are necessary for human wellbeing should not be in dispute. Though animals can provide for human food needs, medicinal and

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other needs, they are equally to be appreciated for their existence and intrinsic value. Animals can be used moderately and humanely for the human good. This paper is not against the moderate and humane usage of some animals to meet the genuine needs of human beings. What this paper quarrels about is the exploitation of animals and the cruel maltreatment of animals in the process of meeting human needs. Animals are entitled to their existence. Traditional beliefs can serve as a great resource for animal care and protection.

Different human societies especially traditional cultures and indigenous people have designated some animals as sacred animals that should be venerated and prevented from being killed or destroyed. This belief and practice accord with modern-day ideologies advocating for animal ethics and recognition of the moral status of animals. This paper does not necessarily agree with all cultural religious beliefs built on myths and superstitions concerning these sacred animals. Of concern for this paper is that no matter the religious beliefs regarding these sacred animals, the important thing is that by respecting these animals and protecting them from being killed or used as food or medicine; these animals are protected from endangerment and thus their role in the ecosystem is guaranteed.

This paper probes into how the Urhobo people of the present Delta State and the Niger Delta of Nigeria perceive sacred animals. The paper will examine the implication of these beliefs and practices for global animal care ethics and implication for environmental preservation. The methodological procedure here is to clarify the concepts. This will be followed by a description of the Urhobo people and their culture. Then there will be an examination of the endangerment of animals in Urhoboland. The paper will also

specifically look at Urhobo beliefs and practices concerning sacred animals. The Urhobo beliefs and practices will be brought into dialogue with other indigenous cultures. When this has been done, the implications of these Urhobo beliefs and practices for the global animal care ethics and environmental preservation will be presented, before the paper is brought to a conclusion. The method adopted in this paper is hermeneutical and critical analysis. The phenomenon of sacred animals in Urhobo cultures and other cultures will be interpreted and critically appraised and broken open. It should be noted that dealing with the current anthropogenic environmental crisis and the degradation of ecosystems and biodiversity requires bringing multiple perspectives into it, as O'Brien (2010) opines. One perspective that can be helpful is that of the Urhobo people.

### CONCEPTUALIZATIONS.

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The word, "tradition" comes from the Latin word, "traditio" which means handing over. Tradition is what has been passed on from generation to generation. Valliere (2022) avers that: "a belief or practice in any field of culture may be said to be a tradition to the extent that it is received from the hands, lips, or the example of others rather than being discovered or invented; that it is received on the assumption that the authors and transmitters are reliable and therefore the tradition valid; and that it is received with the express command and conscious intention of further transmission without substantial change." Tradition has to do with beliefs, customs, ways of life, and cultural practices coming from past generations. The term traditional is the adjectival form of the noun tradition.

What then is belief? Braddon-Mitchell and Jackson (2011) in a dictionary of sociology define belief as: "a conviction or idea about the nature of reality that an individual or group accepts as true." For an example of belief, this dictionary states that: "Shinto, a traditional religion in Japan, believes in spirits of nature or kami." People generally hold their beliefs to be true. Traditional beliefs refer to convictions or ideals or notions about

reality and things in the universe that particular culture or group of people hold to be true, and these beliefs have been transmitted from ancient times or previous generations. Urhobo traditional beliefs are beliefs of the Urhobo people coming from previous generations that have been received from ancestral oral sources.

The term, “practices” refers to behaviors, doings, actions, and responses. The Encyclopedia Britannica (2022) defines the term, “practice” in different ways. It can refer to doing something over and over again, living by following the customs and teaching of religion, or professional practice of an occupation such as legal or medical practice. People often put their beliefs into practice or act according to their beliefs. Urhobo traditional beliefs that this paper is concerned with are put into practice by the people. The various sub-groups of peoples in the Urhobo ethnic nationality do act according to their beliefs regarding sacred animals.

What is a sacred animal? Biology Online (2022) defines an animal as: “...any of the eukaryotic multicellular organisms of the biological kingdom... Animals of this kingdom are generally characterized to be heterotrophic, motile, having specialized sensory organs, lacking a cell wall, and growing from a blastula during embryonic development” (p. 1). Maiorana, Valen, and Van (2020) states that: “animal, (kingdom Animalia), any of a group of multicellular eukaryotic organisms (i.e., as distinct from bacteria, their deoxyribonucleic acid, or DNA, is contained in a membrane-bound nucleus). They are thought to have evolved independently from the unicellular eukaryotes. (p. 1). 4-H Learning Network (2019) defines an animal as: “... a group of organisms in the family Animalia. Animals can be insects, mammals, reptiles, fish, and other organisms that do not plant” (p.1). Sacred animals refer to animals that certain cultures or peoples hold to be carriers of mystical, mysterious, divine, or other vital powers and care held as totems and protected from being eaten or killed.

Aaltola (2009) defines animal ethics as: “...a field of study within environmental philosophy. Animals often have been classified as beings of nature, and in contemporary

terminology, they form an integral part of concepts central to environmental philosophy” (p. 42). Animal care ethics emphasizes that the study and discussion should not end in theory. It should lead to practical actions to preserve and protect animals from unnecessary harm and extinction.

A cardinal goal of this paper is to draw the implications of the above Urhobo beliefs and practices for global animal care ethics and environmental preservation. The word global refers to the entire world or international or worldwide. Animal care ethics refers to human behavior towards animals and how human beings treat animals. Human behavior towards animals is a subject of ethical reflection. It is not only human-to-human relationship behaviors that can be considered ethical. Whether someone believes that animals have moral status or not, the way you relate to them is a moral issue. It is generally accepted in the light of the emergence and development of environmental ethics that to maltreat animals or be cruel to them is immoral. Treating animals with care and in a humane manner is moral and the right thing to do.

The concept to be defined next is “environment.” Rim-Rukeh (2009) defines environment as “everything that affects an organism during its lifetime” such as “the sum total of all external conditions that affect the growth and development of all living organisms” (p. 39). The air that human beings breathe, the water that they drink, the atmosphere, the land, the seas, trees, plants, animals, etc are all aspects of the environment. Environmental preservation refers to keeping and protecting the natural world from harm and injury. The term environment is used to mean everything and reality that exists in the universe. The environment is human beings, plants, animals, and all that surrounds them seen and unseen.

### **ENDANGERMENT OF ANIMALS IN URHOBOLAND.**

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Since this piece dwells on Urhobo traditional beliefs and practices it is helpful here to describe the Urhobo people. They are one of the largest ethnic nationalities groups in

Nigeria. They live and inhabit the central part of Delta State in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria. Ekeh (2007) writes: "Urhobo collective folk memory holds that the Urhobo as a people migrated from the lands that are now called Benin, although the term Benin (or 'Ubini') does not exist in the Urhobo language and it most probably did not exist in the lands of proto-Edoids" (p. 14). The Urhobo people are presently made up or divided into twenty-four (24) kingdoms. Ekuerhare (2007) states that: "Urhoboland is transversed by waters of four main rivers and their tributaries. On the northern flanks, the Jamieson River and Ethiope River meet at Sapele to form the Benin River which runs through Koko to the Atlantic Ocean. Urhobo towns of Ughoton and Ukpokiti (Agbassa) are drained by the tributaries of Escravos River while the Warri River runs through Aladja, Ovwian, Agbarho, and Oha to its source at Utagba-Uno. Much of Ughelli North and South have tributaries of the Forcados River"(pp. 556-557). Many Urhobo who live in the villages are fishermen and women and farmers. With the coming of schools, you have teachers and others who work in the few factories in the land. There are also many business people. You also have workers who work in government offices and other business enterprises.

One of the cardinal driving forces or motivations for writing this paper is the endangerment of animals and destruction of the environment happening in Urhoboland. Urhoboland used to be filled with various species of both plants and animals. It was heavily forested and used to be a more serene and beautiful environment. But right from the coming of colonialism, capitalist exploitation of oil and gas resources, and the building of more factories and industries; the land has suffered from serious environmental degradation. This includes the wanton killing of animals. Hunting and careless disposal of both solid and chemical waste into the forests and streams have also contributed to animal suffering and death. Ekuerhare ( 2007) writes: "Urhobo forests had a high biodiversity of insects, reptiles, birds, and mammals, many of which are today endangered and are of conservation interest....The discovery of oil has changed all that"(p. 556). The coming of oil and seismic companies and many other industries associated with oil and petroleum resources have brought about a great deal of environmental devastation,

including the destruction of animals. The environment of Urhoboland that was once beautiful and serene has become hostile to the flourishing of human and non-human lives. What Benedict (2012) asserted applies to Urhoboland. "Some businessmen and women, governments and financial groups are involved in programmes of exploitation which pollute the environment and cause unprecedented desertification. Serious damage is done to nature, to the forests, to flora and fauna, and countless species risk extinction all these threaten the entire ecosystem and consequently the survival of humanity" (p. 41). The harm that oil multinational companies such as Shell, and other related companies have done to the environment of Urhoboland is unquantifiable.

The question can be asked, how have the above factors endangered animals?

Urhoboland which is part of the Niger Delta of Nigeria is a place where there are oil wells and oil exploration activities. The land has been polluted by gas flaring which is still taking place and poisonous chemicals emitted into the atmosphere. Ikeke (2017) writes: "Various kinds of birds and animals that used to exist in the region have gone into extinction. Many species of plants and trees have been destroyed. The woes and the various manifestations or consequences of environmental degradation in Urhoboland" (p.312). Wild animals live in the forest. But when these forests are destroyed through oil exploration activities, the habitat of animals is destroyed. In the process of cutting down trees and forests to give away for oil exploration activities, animals and birds are killed. Kii (2017) shows that oil spill and hydrocarbon pollution emanating from oil exploration activities destroys the lives of both flora and fauna, fishes, and other marine creatures.

This author can remember vividly while growing up and attending primary school in Owhowha Primary School Otogor in Urhoboland; on the way to the farm with his guardian, a lot of monkeys used to jump and play on the trees. Today you can no longer find them and the trees have been cleared for human habitation. Species endangerment can be a result of overexploitation, habitat destruction and invasion of non-native species, and other factors. These factors can be seen at work in Urhoboland and the Niger Delta in

general. Urhoboland like other areas in the Niger Delta is rich in oil and other petroleum resources. Since the discovery of oil, oil multinational companies have continued to exploit and mine for oil and petroleum resources without caring for remediation and preservation of the environment. Animals and beings that live in the forest and environment. They live in bushes and also near human dwellings. As oil activities invade these forests and bushes the lives of animals are endangered. Some of them are killed. As human beings cut down trees, and cultivate farms, the vital habitat of these animals is destroyed. Leal (2006) argues that: "The chief cause of the extinction of whole species is, in fact, the destruction of their habitat by humans" (p.70). Writing concerning the monitor lizard (Iguana) among the Orogun people of Urhoboland, Otite (2005) states that they are facing endangerment and decreasing in number as a result of the clearing of their resting and incubating places for farming and building purposes.

#### **URHOBO BELIEFS/PRACTICES CONCERNING SACRED ANIMALS.**

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It should be stated that not all animals in Urhoboland are designated technically as sacred animals. Designating an animal as a sacred animal is rooted often in the historical origin or journey of a people. Sacred animals are often perceived as playing a saving and protective role, especially at the time of the beginning or origin of a people. The sacred animal is conceived as being an instrument or agent of a deity or god. The web resource, I Love Veterinary (2019) states that: "... sacred animals, can be tied back to a relationship with a certain deity. Most sacred animals are not reflective of the animal itself, but rather the god it represents. It is believed that deities manifest themselves in the form of sacred animals, either by reincarnation or an epiphany" (p.1).

In Urhoboland which is constituted of many kingdoms and peoples, the Orogun people consider the Iguana and dog to be sacred animals. What is the attitude of these people to these sacred animals? These sacred animals are more or less to be seen as totems. Tonukari (n.d) rightly argues that in the totemic religion of the Urhobo people, some



animal species were considered to be totems just as some plants, and rivers. He states further: "The essential feature of totemism in Urhobo cultural perspective is the belief in a supernatural connection between a group of people and a group of objects like certain animal species, sometimes plants, or more rarely other objects. Usually, there is a taboo on killing or eating an animal totem." Otite (2005) has noted that the dog (erako) and the tiger (edjenekpo) are also the totems of sacred animals among the Orogun people. The monitor lizard is believed to have saved the Orogun people from their enemy when monitor lizards formed themselves into a form of a bridge for the Orogun people for them to escape from their enemies. The monitor lizard is not to be killed or eaten. Those who violate and desecrate the monitor lizard are inflicted with sickness. The monitor lizard, the tiger, and the dog are all considered to be messengers of the Orogun god (erose). The point to be noted here is that people who believe in sacred animals always see them as representatives of a deity and carry the sacredness of the divine.

Moses Darah in a telephone conversation and WhatsApp message on June 10, 2022 indicates that among the Urhiepron, the python is seen as sacred, and the killing of a python is considered taboo. He states that among the Uphurie, a sub-clan of Ughievwen men do not eat snails as it is believed that men's warrior power is weakened by eating the snail. Though women can eat snail they are not allowed to cook it in the family kitchen and all utensils used in cooking must be washed with ash. In the view of the writer of this paper, these regulations may have arisen as a result of the community seeing the snail as a slow animal and a weak one for that matter. Men who eat snails may have the features of the snail transmitted to them. Anyachebelu (2019) states that: "In discussing the status of animals in Urhobo culture, Nabofa... says 'Animals form root of names, they are revered and in some cases, are forbidden for consumption. Totemism a feature of traditional Urhobo religion varies from one polity to the other'. Ohwovoriolè ... toes the same line of thought as she points out that 'Every totem animal is regarded as sacred and is not to be killed, harmed or eaten. They are connected with mysterious stories' " (p.4).

J. O. Ubrurhe in his book, *Urhobo Traditional Medicine*, as cited by Ikeke (2014) argues that: "African believe that the creator imbues both animate and inanimate objects with life forces. It is this life force that the objects have imbibed that connects them. This life force is the quintessence of the thing itself. This includes man, trees, beasts, or stone" (p. 79). There is a sacred presence or life force in all things. Animals whether specially named sacred or not are carriers of life force like other creatures. They are to be respected, revered, and protected. Animal life is honored and protected. If animals that are not considered sacred are used at all for food and medicine, they are to be used in humility, prudence, and gratitude to the creator, the Supreme Being. Erhimeyoma (2016) opines that environmental ethics in Urhobo's perspective sees the earth as sacred and it is a "symbol of the chain of life between the living and the living-dead" (p.75). He writes that because of the sacredness of the earth, libation is poured on the earth daily by the eldest male in the family, and "to say that the earth is sacred implies that it is jealously guarded and cared for"(p. 75). The earth here is not just the material earth alone, but all that exists on the earth such as plants, animals, birds, unseen realities, and other organisms.

In Urhobo environmental ontology, some animals are a carrier of messages from the unseen divine world to human beings. Take for instance one Urhobo myth on the origin of death. In that myth as retold by Eriwo (2005), God told the dog and the toad who had contrary views on the issue of death to bring their positions to human beings on earth. The dog was distracted by seeing human faces and relaxed to eat. The toad who thought that the one who dies should go (Orhowhuruokpo) overtook the dog and got to human beings first. He told human beings that, "Orhowhuruokpo" which means the one that dies should go home (p. 162). Animals have an important role to play in Urhobo cosmology. They connect human beings to the divine and can relate messages to human beings. Writing about totemism, Isiorovwoja, Banwune, and Okobia (2011) state that:

The wanton consumption and over dependence on plants and animals by man have made most species of animal to come to extinction. The Ogborigbo which is regarded

as a totem among the Orogun was a native Central America but today, it is no longer common among the people as it is considered as a common reptile. Also, the Obokari and Oghre, totems among the Avwra people have gradually disappeared from many urban centres of the clan. The influx of strangers has come to bear on them both in the lakes, ponds, rivers and the bushes as a result cultural infiltration. The presences of totems however, are greatly preserved at the grove around the ponds dedicated to the deity OVWUVWE at Toro Awake (p. 11).

In African traditional religion, only the Supreme Being is worshipped. Some people say some Africans worship these animals or some other goods. This debate shall not be entered into here. In the perspective of this current author, only the supreme being should be adored and worshipped, though other created things and creatures can be revered as they carry the vital force of the almighty. The fact that these animals that serve as a totem are not killed should be commendable and encouraged. Environmental pragmatism requires that whatever is done among people that protect the environment, animals and plants and animals from destruction and wanton harm should be encouraged.

### **ANIMALS AND SACRED ANIMALS IN OTHER CULTURES.**

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Here the paper will look at the beliefs on animals and sacred animals in other cultures only. The focus is on some ethnic or religious cultures. Theories of individual animal philosophers like Peter Singer, Tom Reagan, Lori Green, Mark Sag off, and Dale Jamieson will not feature here. This is done since the Urhobo people are a group and so their viewpoint is brought into dialogue with other group viewpoints instead of individual philosophers.

There is indeed an ambivalent attitude towards animals in some traditions. In the Christian religious tradition while there are many cases of kindness and noble treatment of animals there are also those who have interpreted Genesis 1:28 to imply that human

beings are to dominate over animals. Animals lack moral status and can be used as human beings desire. Leal (2006) opines that:

Glossing over the ambiguity of 'dominion' in this context, some commentators have seen in this verse an invitation to humans to exercise complete power over the animal world and to do with it what they please. Battery hens and genetic manipulation are just around the corner! This less than responsible view of 'dominion' also leads to our hunting animals to extinction, fishing out the seas and imprudently introducing into our land exotic animals that destroy the local ecology (pp. 72-73).

Interpreting Genesis 1:28 as mandating exploitation and abuse of animals and the natural world is a narrow and parochial interpretation of the bible. The Judeo-Christian tradition and Christian history are deeply open to the value of compassionate care and reverence for animals and the natural world. The Psalmist depicts the animals as praising and thanking God. Jesus was with the wild beasts in the desert. Leah (2006) asserts and argues thus:

Many of the early Christian saints are depicted as being in close contact with animals of different kinds. In artistic representations Saint Jerome, the translator of the Bible into Latin and a reputed lover of animals, is always accompanied by a lion lying at his feet. This image suggests the recovery of a lost harmony with wild nature and, given Jerome's translation task, a strong link between the Bible and nature. We see this harmony and cooperation also in the well-known story of runaway Roman slave, Androcles, and the lion. In a Roman arena, the lion refuses to attack Androcles, because this man had earlier removed a thorn from the lion's paw. The story recalls in some ways the trial of Daniel in the lions' den. Many of the Celtic saints are associated with animals. The sixth-century Irish Saint Kieran of Saighir gathered around him something resembling a menagerie. He had a wild boar, a fox, a badger, a wolf and a deer. And of course the attraction of animals to St. Francis of Assisi is

well known, especially through the tale of wolf of Gubbio, which Francis successfully tamed (p. 73).

The Hindu tradition has great respect for animals. In Hinduism, the universe and everything in it are believed to have emanated from the divine spirit, Brahman. The entire universe is the body of God. Everything in the universe, plants, animals, birds, mountains, and human beings all carry the spark of Brahman. Human life is also in plants and animals and so that life should be respected and revered. Coward (2010) cites the Brihadaranyaka Upanisad, 1.3.22 saying: "The essential self or the vital essence in man is the same as that in the elephant...the same as that in the whole world" (p. 92). From Hindu teaching, human beings have duties to animals, plants, and other aspects of nature since they all have intrinsic worth. Apart from the general respect due animals, some animals are considered to be sacred animals such as the cow.

In Buddhism, the universe is perceived as one interconnected web of existence. Coward (2010) relates that the Buddha taught that everything that exists depends on others for its existence. The implications of this Coward states further is that: "...every single thing in the universe is important and thus deserving of respect.... nature includes humanity. Nature exists for reasonable human use, but not for selfish exploitation" (p.94). From Buddhist teaching we are called to be selfless, shun selfishness and stop inflicting pain on plants, animals, and other human beings. Coward (2010) quotes De Silva said that though there is no biotic egalitarianism, humans should live non-violently.

In many other African cultures, animals are revered and protected from harm. Nnaji (2012) has argued that Nigerian indigenous cultures are filled with proverbs and folklores that exalt the place of animals and their ontological status. For instance, the Yoruba people say: " 'Agbalagba ti n ta roba mo eye, ti ko ba fi sile yoo wo ina' and this mean "an elderly person catapulting a bird relentlessly shall be rewarded with hell fire." (p. 10). He rightly notes in the place cited above that that proverb forbids inhumane treatment of animals. Another statement according to Nnaji is the one that states: "Äkii pa oya se ola," which

means glasscutters should not be killed for riches. Nnaji (2012) rightly notes that in Nigerian cultural beliefs hunting and gaming should be for the sustenance of the community and not hunting for its own sake. Nnaji (2012) shows further that the Igbo have various proverbs that infer that animals should not be harmed, and that point to the vulture as a messenger of the gods, and so the vulture is not to be eaten. For Nnaji (2012), “the native cultural proverbs demonstrate deontological perspectives which maintain peaceful treatment for the right of animals. However, this respect is, sometimes, born from the many taboos and myths about different types of animals, which invariably represent the type of relationships that exist between the people and the animals” (p.11).

It is equally important here to restate the indigenous or aboriginal tradition. This is important for it aligns with Urhobo-African beliefs regarding the universe. In the aboriginal tradition, humans, plants, animals, rocks, and other aspects of nature are infused with the divine spirit or vital force. All things in the universe are kith and kin. They all belong to one family and should be accorded respect. Callicott (1989) writes thus: “Not only does everything have spirit, in the last analysis all things are related together as members of one universal family, born of one father, the sky, the Great Spirit, and one mother the Earth herself” (p. 186).

The point to be taken from this section is that reverencing animals and holding some of them in totemic awe are not peculiar to Urhobo people. It cuts across many world cultures and religious-philosophical traditions. This being the case, proposing that Urhobo beliefs have implications for global animal care and environmental preservation is in order. The fact is that the attitude and practice among the Urhobo of seeing some animals as sacred and deserving preservation are akin to the belief of other ethnic or religious cultures. It is not strange or an aberration when Urhobo considers some animals sacred. The historic circumstances and reasons why they designated some animals as sacred are different from that of other cultures but the consequential outcome is what should matter above

all. The consequential outcome is that these sacred animals are preserved and the environment is by extension saved from wanton destruction.

### **IMPLICATIONS FOR GLOBAL ANIMAL CARE ETHICS AND ENVIRONMENTAL PRESERVATION.**

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Traditional or indigenous beliefs have a great role to play in animal care/protection, environmental preservation, and promotion of ecological sustainability. This is so because people's behaviors are informed by the beliefs, ideologies, and philosophies that they uphold. Cultures that hold certain animals to be sacred or practice totemism likely refrain from the killing and destruction of those totems.

Genuine human interests should not be discountenanced by environmentalism and the debate on animal ethics. But not only human interests should count. The interests and well-being and welfare of animals should be taken into consideration by human beings also. This interest can be taken into consideration in various ways. If any animal is used to meet the food and medicinal needs of human beings, it should be done moderately and prudently. A human beings should take only what is necessary from nature. Human beings should take into consideration the indigenous cultural values and paradigms that are cherished by people and that have helped them to live and survive in their environment. Cultural beliefs that do not harm the fundamental rights of others should be upheld. Indigenous people like the Urhobo have a right to their religious beliefs in preserving animal totems. The United Nations (2007) enunciates firmly in article 11, paragraph 1, "Indigenous peoples have the right to practice and revitalize their cultural traditions and customs. This includes the right to maintain, protect and develop the past, present and future manifestations of their cultures, such as archaeological and historical sites, artefacts, designs, ceremonies, technologies and visual and performing arts and literature." The practice of totemism is a strong part of Urhobo culture and other indigenous cultures. There are equally ceremonies attached to these totems. The people have a right to their ceremonies. People should not be forced to abandon their cultural

beliefs and practices that preserve the environment. Though they can be moderated persuasively if there is other beneficial knowledge. In furtherance of the above point, the United Nations (2007) enacted thus in article 12, “1. Indigenous peoples have the right to manifest, practice, develop and teach their spiritual and religious traditions, customs and ceremonies; the right to maintain, protect, and have access in privacy to their religious and cultural sites; the right to the use and control of their ceremonial objects; and the right to the repatriation of their human remains.”

The declaration of the United Nations implies that Urhobo traditional beliefs and cultural practices have global recognition. Stating in article 13, paragraph 1, the United Nations (2007) propounds: “Indigenous peoples have the right to revitalize, use, develop and transmit to future generations their histories, languages, oral traditions, philosophies, writing systems and literatures, and to designate and retain their own names for communities, places and persons.” Indigenous or traditional beliefs in totems have helped in environmental preservation. These traditional practices should be revitalized, as far as they don’t offend against authentic human flourishing, ecological good, and global ethics, wherever they are dying out. Arising from different religious tenets, political ideologies, and systems of beliefs; one may not agree with all ceremonies practiced by indigenous and traditional peoples, but all should be open to dialogue in harnessing pragmatic aspects of traditional cultures that promote ecological wellbeing.

The practice of Urhobo totemism has a contribution to make to caring for animals and sustainability. Though human beings have the right to meet their food and medicinal needs from the things in the universe including plants and animals; there is nothing wrong if some plants and animals are designated as sacred or listed for special conservation for them to be protected from endangerment. In protecting these sacred animals all the more the ecological and biotic good is enhanced as animals make a high contribution to the ecosystem. Collins (2015) reveals that: “Some studies have looked into the link between religious and cultural beliefs, and found that totemism and taboos could help



environmental conservation. The study 'Traditional beliefs and conservation of natural resources: Evidences from selected communities in Delta State, Nigeria' looked at the role of traditional belief systems in the conservation of natural resources in a number of communities on the Niger Delta. It concluded that tabooed species in those areas had high populations and were not endangered.... A study in the Niger Delta found python populations are thriving where they are counted as totems and in areas where the python is revered - for instance, among the Usiefrun and Ujevwu communities whose customs stipulate the animal should be protected - populations are thriving, according to the study."

The world over, certain animals that are held as totems should be protected from endangerment at least in those areas. The reason why particular cultures preserved totems might not make sense to a modern scientific mindset, but it has pragmatically and practically helped in the protection of the environment. This is a vital reason why those beliefs should not be commodified. The fact is that in communities and kingdoms where there are sacred animals the habitats of those sacred animals in the forests and among trees, and landscape were preserved and protected from cultivation and clearing. Thus those areas are saved from deforestation and destruction. Totemic practices then help in environmental protection and sustainability.

Every specie of animal counts. Each animal also counts. Any effort undertaken to preserve species and each animal without depriving human beings of their genuine human food needs is an important effort. Animals are an essential aspect of bio-diversity and bio-cultural diversity. Animals are an important part of ecosystems. The destruction of animals unnecessarily diminishes the biotic good and well-being of the ecosystem.

Animals are important aspects of ecology. Biology Online (2022) states that:

Animals are an important part of the ecological system. They form intricate food webs. They interact with other organisms and form various symbiotic relationships, e.g. mutualism, predation, competition, commensalism, and parasitism. Some animals

demonstrate altruistic (self-sacrificing) behavior for the benefit of their conspecifics or colonies.

The animals in the wild help regulate biodiversity as they act as nature's biological control agents as well as serve as an important source of nutrients for other species. Remains from dead animals serve as food for detritivores. Moreover, the decomposition of the dead animal body enables the return of elements and organic compounds to Earth. Thus, the extinction of an animal species causes a major impact on the ecosystem.

About one of the sacred animals in Urhoboland that is seriously endangered as a result of environmental pollution and human activities, the role of environmental education awareness on animal care and conservation should not be ignored. Awareness can produce positive action on the part of people. The need to conserve animals in Urhoboland and other places can never be over-emphasized. Every animal that is saved has important implications for the entire global community. Conservation efforts in one part of the world can directly affect and influence conservation efforts in other parts of the world. There is also the fact that animal conservation in Urhoboland can promote eco-tourism which can bring people from other parts of the world to visit Urhoboland. Their visits can bring enormous financial resources that can be used in conservation projects in Urhoboland.

Another cardinal point that is worth considering here is: that whether animals are considered to be sacred or not, they should be protected from unnecessary harm and suffering. The Urhobo like other indigenous people sees the value and good in all that exists not only sacred animals. Animal suffering should be taken seriously. Linzey (2009) argues thus; "Traditional ethics in almost all its forms privileges human suffering over all other kinds of suffering. It seems self-evident to many people that human suffering is virtually in a class of its own, and that animal suffering, while sometimes objectionable, isn't really as important or as morally significant"(p. 9). While animal suffering should not

necessarily be equated with human suffering, the fact remains that animal suffering should be of concern to human beings who are rational, have a conscience, and have moral responsibility. In the light of the great role that animals play in the ecosystem and how they have helped human beings in their evolution to become who they are, animals should be shown kindness and compassion. Human beings should serve as stewards to protect animals from harm and suffering.

## CONCLUSION

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This paper has examined the Urhobo traditional belief concerning sacred animals. To give the paper more footing it also brought the Urhobo beliefs into dialogue with other cultural beliefs on animals and sacred animals. The paper revealed that concerning animals in Urhoboland, are seriously endangered. They are endangered by hostile capitalist and colonial forces. They are endangered by oil and gas exploitation in the region that destroys animal habitats and makes the land and atmosphere uninhabitable for animals. Animals are also endangered as human beings clear the forests for residence and agriculture. The paper argued that sacred animals such as the Iguana (monitor lizard), dog, tiger, etc among some sub-groups in Urhoboland are equally subject to danger like other animals. Their status as sacred animals should be preserved and more awareness created for preserving these animals. This is necessary as animals play a great role in ecosystems and human lives. Preserving animals in Urhoboland and elsewhere is an ethical and moral issue. With the preservation of animals and all sacred animals, a healthy environment will be sustained which helps for the good of all cosmic beings.

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