

NORMS AND TABOOS AMONG THE IDOMA OF NORTH CENTRAL NIGERIA 1800-1980: A REGULATING MECHANISM FOR UPHOLDING MORALITY

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Abstract

Most Nigerian typical settings were unique and guided which is applicable to the Idoma group in the pre-colonial times and after Europeans invasion and pollution of her culture and traditions things started falling apart. During the colonial regime a lot of damage and havoc were done but against these odds some fundamental traces still survived as African heritage. This paper is concern with a historical revivalism into the Idoma past with a focus to x-ray some of the taboos (ebitaa) and bad omens in the society that their forebears instituted as regulating mechanism which helped and upheld high standard of morality in the Idoma society in their post-Apa abodes. From findings, some of these taboos included: Adultery and fornication of all kinds (Ajaa), theft of all kinds (Uwii), innocent killing of human beings (OocheOmno). Omens (Ebi) considered as taboos like: A giant rat is seen on broad day light by a person, when a Chameleon (Ayinya) is seen crossing the road by a road user, when a Dog (Ewoo) is crying in a compound and when a family that had pigeons (Oklebeta) discovered all the pigeons have suddenly vacated their cage to mention but a few. The paper discourses their significance and the remedy if there happened. Methodologically, the paper is purely a reconstructive history and is largely dependent on oral and other primary sources of investigation. Conclusively, the paper affirms that to bring back the positive angles of Idoma culture and traditions which housed the taboos, then, the ideal of the two foreign dominant religions: Christianity and Islam as the new society mirror should be redefined. The paper is certainly a value addition to the ongoing Africans calls for African cultural rejuvenation across the continent.

Keywords: Norms, Taboos, Idoma, North Central Nigeria, Morality

Introduction

From the various studies done on the Idoma people which are evident in publications by some of these authorities: R. G Armstrong, Professor Erim O. Erim, Professor Y. A. Ochefu, A. M Adejo, O. O Okpeh, V. G O'kwu, rich archival materials, and most importantly is the centuries survival of Idoma rich oral traditions which is quite proven over time. From crosschecking these oral evidence and written documents, it is clear that by the beginning of the 16th century the dismembering and dismantling of their pride home Apa in the defunct Kwararafa confederacy had started.

In the process of this continuous migration from somewhere in the lover Chad Basin from the findings of J. G Davies when unearthing the rise of the Bura/Babur and other Chadian groups who are at different locations today who are settled down in the upper, central and lover basin of the River Benue and parts of River Niger scattered across the length and breadth of the areas. J. G Davies suggests that this dislocation and dispersedly was probably occasioned by the arrival of the Sayfawa Dynasty, an offshoot of the great spread of the Arabs and Islam¹. This monumental centrifugal forces probably was the beginning of the regrouping within the Benue trough today as the Idoma, Agbashi, Alago, Afor, Eteh, Iyala, Etulo amongst others that probably shared the same ancestors down to Apa two (II) in present day South Nasarawa State. Reality check on their history suggests based on available oral findings that their ancestors created an *Idomanized* civilization as the traces are still seen in these various settings when you properly scoop their customs and norms. Interestingly, the semblances are still very pronounced and visible. These civilizations are hinged on the various festivities tied to the demi-human gods-king called *Oche* and *Ortse* as pronouns and spells among these groups.

From this age long principle of atonements and sacrifices that the relevancy of *Alekwu*² and the do and the do not of the civilization were embedded.³ This paper therefore, dwells on what were some of these critical norms and customs, and how were there able to regulate the Idoma society especially amongst the 19 Colonial Districts in the then 'Idoma Division' (now South of Benue State) excluding the three others: Ito, Oju and Owokwu as delineated by the British Colonial Authority in Nigeria? The 19 Colonial Districts in question namely: Adoka, Agatu, Agila, Akpa, Edumoga, Igumale, Ichama, Ijigbam, Okpoga, Ochekwu, Onyangede, Oglewu, Otukpo, Otukpa, Owukpa, Ugboju, Utonkon, Uffia, and Ulayi⁴.

This paper is a conscious attempt to bring to the front burner of discourse how this once rich custom and belief system ridded the Idoma society free of crimes, safe guided life and property and above all upheld morality of the highest standard amongst these people. What were the mechanisms set up to check and ensure the success of the belief before and during the Colonial Rule and the first quarters of the 20th century? The paper has some concise contributions to knowledge as a way of revisiting these heritages letting the world know how customs and belief of the Idoma was the watertight of morality and the absence today are causes of moral decadence everywhere.

Conceptual Clarifications

For clarity of what the paper is all about it is pertinent to attempt the meaning of the two leading words briefly. Looking at norms and taboos in the society and in the Idoma society and setting in particular.

¹The *Alekwu* was and still the guiding angel that are missioned by the *Ocho'omanchala* (God Almighty) who is worshipped through the oracles standing in on behalf the *Oche* and people, he blesses, curses and reproach accordingly for the gods and for and against the people within these domains.

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³Obeya N. Bernard, *Ucholo'kai'Idoma: A Compendium of Apa Heritage*, (African Tale Crew, Makurdi, 2009)1-31

⁴See Vincent G. O'kwu, "Idomaland under Colonial Rule, 1900-1920", (A Seminar paper presented at the Department of History, Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria, 26th -27th April, 1974) 3-6 and Obeya N. Bernard, *Ucholo'kai'Idoma: A Compendium of Apa Heritage*)1-31

Norms generally, are considered as “shared standard of acceptable behaviours by groups. It can be both formal understanding that govern the behaviours of members of a society, as well as be codified into rules and laws”⁵.

Societal norms are seen from three known sociological perspectives namely:

1. Regulative norms which are anchored on those codified laws and doctrines that regulate the human activities or behaviours within the jurisdiction of the society. Regulative norms are more fundamental as they search to achieve laws or orderliness in the society.
2. Constructive norms: This angle handles the reshaping of interest as it is more protective like politics, economic amongst others.
3. Finally, norms are also seen from the ‘Prescriptive Perspective’: These are the societal norms created and are determined to tell the human beings in the society or the actors and characters what they ought or needed to do. For instance: Where you are supposed to build or not, when you are supposed to be in the farm or not amongst other things⁶.

In corroborating the various types of societal norms to this paper, the regulative norm explains more the direction and narrative of the paper and thus, the paper is anchored on the regulative norms amongst the Idoma of North-central Nigeria.

Taboos on the other hand work hand by hand or par parcel with the norms of the society. Taboos are the activities or behaviours that are forbidden, prohibited or outlawed in any given society. There are some considered unacceptable and not welcome. They are the watch man and promoter of morality and often linked to religious matters. Interestingly, across African and Nigerian settings these very ingredients varies but are logically targeted toward upholding morality and orderliness⁷.

Some Norms and Taboos amongst the Idoma 1800-1980

The Idoma settings both in the pre-colonial and the post-colonial times do not operate written constitution and laws were very rigid and compulsory. Consequently, violations and offenses attract heavy penalties and appropriate punishments and sanctions. This was because the law and otherwise must strictly be adhered to. In this paper some of the regulating taboos, omens and regulative norms⁸ amongst the Idoma in time past particularly before the incursion and the overtaken by the British legal model. Some of these included: Adultery and fornications, theft and stealing, killing of persons outside conflict situations or man slaughter, it was also a taboo for an adult male to see the nakedness of his mother and that of a female to see that of his father and vis-a-vis: the parents to their adult off springs⁹.

Omens considered bad that has negative effects among the Idoma in time past included: It was forbidden for an Idoma person to see a giant rat (*Akoto*) running or walking on broad day light, a chameleon (*Ayinya*) crossing the road on day light, a domestic dog seen crying and weaning in the compound, pigeon suddenly vacated their cage in a compound. Others included when a husband was seen naked in angry rage and he pull off his manhood (*Apii*) and strike it on the floor of his compound before the wife or the wife naked herself publicly and displayed or screened her buttocks(*Okwuocha'toba*) before the husband during outburst and quarrels were considered a dangerous taboos¹⁰.

⁵ <http://enim.wikipedia.org/wiki/society>, (retrieved on 30th September, 2021)

⁶ <http://enim.wikipedia.org/wiki/society>, (retrieved on 30th September, 2021)

⁷ <http://enim.wikipedia.org/wiki/society>, (retrieved on 30th September, 2021)

⁸ Taboos are called *Ebitaa*, bad omens are *Ebi* considered to have retributive effects on the person or people while the norms (*Onyabia*) spells the punishments.

⁹ An interview with elder Shaibu Ogbale, (aged well over 90, a retired farmer, a local historian, in his compound at Efu, Oiji, Apa Local Government Area of Benue State on 12th July, 2021).

¹⁰ An interview with elder Shaibu Ogbale, (aged well over 90, a retired farmer, a local historian, in his compound at Efu, Oiji, Apa Local Government Area of Benue State on 12th July, 2021).

Idoma Regulatory Mechanism Checking the Norms and Taboos

The regulatory mechanism or system set up carefully as the law enforcers and agents amongst the people of Idoma were purely based on clanic level as it is proven amongst the various clans in Idomaland to have the same ancestors and hence, they all shared consanguinity and the same belief system. This blood relationship was a binding factor that made the law work; hence, offenders were easily picked and the *Alekwu* was highly effective and ever presence based on the blood line. These were *Utah* and *Onyonkpo* seen across all the Idoma clans.

Utah Constabulary Force

The *Utah* system started sometimes around the 1800 across Idomaland but the concept and the spread started from the present day Idoma North areas namely: Agatu, Ochekwu, Adoka, Ugboju, Oglewu, Onyangede, and Otukpo clans but gradually spreads to all other parts of Idomaland¹¹. They were a highly organised constabulary constitutionally recognised as the Idoma ‘societal police’ who were saddled by the *Ojila* or the general assembly with the responsibilities to fish out law breakers, arrest, try and given punishments according to the degree of the offence which were centered on what the laws says on norms and taboos. The group were made up of able bodied men constituted by nominations from the various sub-clans that make up the clan for a village setting; nominations from various clans to the District level to make up the District *Ai’Uta* constabulary. It was the crème de la crème of *Utah* leaders that the British Colonial Authority in Idoma inherited and imposed as the first crops of District Heads from 1916-1920 when the overwhelming pacification of the Division started¹². Very central too, was their roles as the unit base of the military forces amongst the society. The group were referred to as the *Ai’Uta* (the *Utah* men), it has the *Ai’Igabo* (the ruling cabinet which is the kingship successive line by representation down to the king), *Anyakwoche* (Council of Elders) and was presided by the *Oche* (the king and the president of all sects, groups and formations amongst the Idoma) at all the various clan levels closely advised by the Head of *Utah* called the *Och’Utah* (the king of *Utah* who is the chairman and doubled as the *Och’Olihi*). Professor Jonah I. Elaigwu writing on *Utah* (*Uta*)¹³ amongst the Otukpo clan and people which was similar amongst the then Idoma North has this to say on the *Utah* mechanism:

AiUta Constabulary was composed of hamlet heads, members of dance groups and secret societies. They maintained law and order in the market place and imposed fines on defaulters of the codes of market-places behavior. The *AiUta* were often recruited from the hamlets attending the market-place...outside the market, they played the role of the policemen in the hamlets from where they were recruited¹⁴.

Another agent or mechanism for the enforcement of the norms and determination of taboos and the given of appropriate sanction was the *Onyonkpo* Secret Society group:

Onyonkpo/Obagaida Secret Societies

¹¹ An interview with elder Shaibu Ogbale, (aged well over 90, a retired farmer...

¹² His Royal Highness, Elaigwu Awa the first District Head of Ochekwu Colonial District who doubled as the first Och’Ugada of Idoma Division was the last district head of *Utah* in Ochekwu(1916-34) until he brutally assassinated in his compound at Ofoke, Ojope Ochekwu(now Apa LGA). The created Och’Ugada by the various metamorphosed into the office of Och’Idoma in 1947.

¹³ Due to the variation in dialectical intonations and pronunciations occasioned by some foreign infiltrations that resulted from the prolonged migrations and uproots that the Idoma suffered from Apa in the defunct Kwararafa confederacy enroute to this abodes. As a result, some words were, and still spells with slight moderation. *Utah* with ‘h’ at the end is common to the Ochekwu (now Apa and Agatu, now Agatu LGAs) while, the *Uta* without ‘h’ at the end is common among the Otukpo, Adoka, Ugboju and Oglewu respectively. Besides, these words always mean the same thing.

¹⁴ Jonah I. Elaigwu, “Self-Regulation in the Traditional Society: Integration and order in Precolonial Otukpo of Nigeria” (in the monthly Newsletter, No 11. Vol.5 , Information Division, Ministry of Internal Affairs and Information, Jos, 1975) 14

These were clandestine law enforcers who were neither seen but only heard on a kaleidoscope above the people of the hamlet, village or clan as cases were. Predominantly, they were found among the old Idoma-northern clans but later, the revolution spread to other parts of Idomaland before the European and British occupation. They operated differently in segments: In the nights and days. During the nights they worked closely with the *Ai'Utah* constabulary who were visible to their subjects and the accused and the condemned violators. The group were known for their thundering and blistering golden voices that were heard only during five days intervals which falls within the purview of the hamlet or community market days¹⁵.

In their modus operandi and because, it was forbidden to know them; during the day they were undercover amongst the people and cannot be seen and in the nights they blast their offenders and norms breakers by names and identity in their secret and coded songs. Their investigation and findings were done in the daytime but the actual sitting and cross-examinations were done in the nights via their angelic but frightening voices. The name of the culprits were mentioned and solemnly that the villagers listened as they rolled out the offence, the legal procedure and the verdicts subject to the final ratification at the floor of the *Ai'Utah* and the *Ojila* on a later date.

It was during the general *Ojila* that the *Ai'Utah* furthered the investigation as riders to the spiritual investigations done by the *Onyonkpo/Obagaida* and then made arrest. These culprits were presented before the *Oche* and then the count charges were released on them. If ventilated by the *Ojila* and if the accused is found guilty the person or persons were accordingly convicted and sentenced according to the laws of the land decided by the *Ojila*.¹⁶

Regulatory Mechanism, Taboos, Norms and Punishments

For effective and efficient but coherent working of the society hinged on the synergy forged the two agents in upholding morality amongst the clan were bound by a religious symbol considered so sacred to offend and if otherwise, were subjected to maximum degree of cleansing during the period of atonements set aside. This binding deities were the *Eka'Ocheyi*¹⁷ like: Ebakwu, Iyanwwu amongst others. In the past Idoma settings and their laws were streamlined into civil laws fashioned in the line of norms while capital punishments were fashioned along the lines of taboos and the forbidden.

- a. **Civil Offences:** This category included two-fighting, quarrels either between wife and husband arising from domestic misunderstanding, failures in performing matrimonial duties amongst others were handled at the level of *Onyonkpo*. Punishment set aside were complied with by the parties with immediate effects especially, before the next market day¹⁸. Gossips, scandals and insults were all grouped together and punishment also differs. Some offenders were subjected to public flogging by the *Ai'Uta* as deterrence to others. Fornications by bachelors and spinster if caught were handled by *Onyonkpo* as discussed above, punishment for mutual violation of female virginity is subject to ritual cleansing of slaughtering a white fowl or cock at the family deity by the man and the eventual imposition of the maid on him as a lifetime wife without any objection by the *Ai'Uta* group. Disobedience and disrespects to Elders and parents depending on the degree were subjected to public flogging by *Ai'Uta* which served as deterrence to the others to come or by eye witnessed¹⁹.

¹⁵ An interview with Elder Shaibu Ogbole...

¹⁶ An interview Elder Shaibu Ogbole...

¹⁷ *Eka'Ocheyi* were the deities held and worshipped across Idoma abodes in their pre-colonial and in the major parts of the 20th century before the ballistic rise in Christianity and Islam which became the nose-diving status of these gods as paganism. Though, the names varied from clan to clan in Idomaland.

¹⁸ An interview Mama Ikama Okpetu, aged 103, she was the last *Eninu* (matron) of the last *Onyonkpo* sect in Oiji, at her family house in Ipole-Oiji, Apa LGA, on 13th July, 2021. She was quickly admitted into the cult as their matron because, she was childless and decided to live her life for the community and cult till the collapse of the custom.

¹⁹ An interview with Mama Ikama Okpetu, aged 103, she...

- b. **Criminal and Capital Offence:** This category included adultery, theft, manslaughter or culpable homicide, suicides, theft and stealing of various degrees to mention but a few. This category was considered fatal and was treated with all seriousness that served as deterrence for a long time to come. Most victims of these taboos are being sung, transmitted and handed over from generations to generations in oral information and narratives. In the discharge of some of these capital punishments that the British Colonial forerunners in the pretext of Christians Missionaries encountered at the defunct *Utah* zonal headquarters at Oiji²⁰ and condemned it as ‘barbaric and inhumane’.
- i) **Adultery:** When a man is caught sleeping with his neighbour's wife, or caught sleeping with his father's wife or his sibling, these taboos attract the same punishments. The man is banished from the community or ostracized from his kinsmen for a long time and if he died within this period of time ranging from three years and more, his remains cannot be buried at home. The woman on her part will be subjected to present a big goat, some pots of *Burukutu* (traditional wine) accompanied by her kinsmen for the ritual publicly at the shrine before the *Eka'Ocheyi* and was made to confess all her sexual escapades outside her matrimonial bed and home otherwise, her male child or children will be taken by the gods (*Alekwu*) one after the other as payment²¹. To serve her right, the *Onyonkpo* will air the news from their base at night for the community to be aware of the woman who has committed adultery with the man in question. Again, if your wife is found to be cheating on you and you as a husband is aware but conceived it as if all is well, the day you sleep with her or take her meal thenceforth, is your mysterious death after the gods strike. When there is a situation of such, you are bound not to sleep with her or eat her meal until she cleanse you (*Iye'Ogwu*) before the *Eka'Ocheyi* with a goat and some pots of *Burukutu* and confess publicly her private sexual deeds, only then can you welcome her back as a wife, if you can.²²
- ii) **For Culpable Homicide and Man Slaughter (*Eje'onyila*):** Amongst the Idoma during this period, killing or cold murder of a fellow man not in battle or conflict situation was a taboo. Firstly, when an *Oche* who is the custodian of the *Alekwu* killed or murdered any of his subjects and is known to his people, he automatically loses his throne, he was forced to adjudicate and embarked on self-exile from the land and never to touch his feet on it again. A token is given to him containing the hybrid of all types of soil found within their domain in a calabash. Because, Idoma people can only dethrone their king but they don't strip him of the royal bead (*Oka*)²³ and as such he is allowed to choose where to leave for the rest of his life along with all the members of his courtiers²⁴. As deterrence, any man or woman caught or accused of man slaughter was brought before the *Ai'Utah* and after all legal procedures and he is found guilty, he was consequently sentenced to death with two options. He was given either poison made from a deadly herb (*Eneeh*) that scuttled life out of a man in less than an hour or he was stretched on four logs of wood by four hefty *Ai'Utah* men. Two on the ground, he was laid on it and the two others placed on his neck and legs and when the command was given by the Head of Utah, the men climbed and pressed him to death. This deterrence was public and thus, Idoma people resorted to reporting offenders rather

²⁰ Oiji was the zonal headquarters of *Utah* which comprised of Agatu, Ochekwu, Adoka, Ugboju, Oglewu and Otukpo till 1910 when the British Colonial Authority dislodged the regime and divided Ochekwu into two blocs based on River Ochekwu and River Okpokwu. Afterwards, Oiji still remained the headquarters for all those clans to the East and those to the West were delineated and Ugboju then a nascent settlement was made the headquarters for the Western axis till 1915 when Ugboju finally was gazetted as the new headquarters of Ochekwu District. This can also be corroborated in “AR/INT/I14/MAK/PROF/NAK”.

²¹ An interview with Mama Ikama Okpetu, aged 103, she)

²² An interview with Elder Shaibu Ogbole)

²³ *Oka* is one of the royal symbols of kingship amongst the Idoma which is transferred from one king to another.

²⁴ An interview with His Royal Highness, John Enefu Antenyi, the 13th *Idoga* of Oiji and the 4th District Head and the first *Odejo'k'Apa*, Ochekwu (now one of the most powerful Second-Class Chiefs in Idomaland and even within Northern Council of Chiefs and Emirs), (he has been king over his people of Oiji and Ochekwu since 1982 and 1984 respectively, in his palace at Ugboju on 6th July, 2021).

than taking laws into their own hands. You may call it jungle justice if you like, but it prevented man slaughter not even your own child or relative, you cannot physically shed an innocent blood in the name of anything²⁵.

- iii) **Theft and Robbery:** When you are caught with petty stealing like stealing of farm produce, goat, chicken amongst others. After the investigation by the *Onyonkpo* Secret Society, the man or woman was presented to the *Ai'Uta* for further interrogation and when you are found guilty as a thief, the person was asked to carry the item he or she stole on the head and sing round the community from street to street guided by the *Ai'Uta* to avoid escape and massively escorted by children who also helped in singing out loud ... "Am owuwi k'ewu (goat) loo"... (If it was a goat) meaning I am the man who stole this goat. Afterwards, he was publicly lashed many times and stripped naked.

For those involved and condemned as robbers (*Ohujulugu* or *Ijagudda*) either on the market road or communal road disturbing the smooth movement of people and goods. He or she was brought before the *Ai'Utah* and if found guilty, the person is sentenced to death by either consuming poison (*Eneeh*) for an indigene but, for a foreign invader and robber caught by the *Ai'Utah* red handed, he was given a punishment of nailing a traditional nail or iron into his skull and was allowed to wonder from their land beyond. Normally, such execution were done outside their boundary as the robber continued his journey away to die²⁶.

Norms amongst the Idoma, 1800-1980

From all the investigation above and the consequences it is therefore normal and acceptable amongst typical Idoma settings in their pre-colonial, during and even in the present days Nigeria for their people not to commit any of the above and others too numerous to mention and discuss in this paper. If a man attempted any of the above during the zenith of this civilization, the various attachments to each breach of their norms were considered a taboo and the remedy and the reproach are what have been discussed in the aforementioned as penalties and punishments.

Bad Omens (*Ebi*)

These were taboos that were not necessary a product of man's action but a coincident that were considered as taboos amongst the Idoma and once there occurred such individual was subjected to ritual cleansing if necessary or such occurrences cannot be averted then the people prepared for the eventuality from the *Alekwu*. These omens as taboos included:

A man strolling and suddenly ran into a giant rabbit (*Akoto*) on a broad day light in an open space was considered a taboo as the consequence is a death of loved ones or a close relative ranging from parents, spouse, siblings or children.

When a chameleon (*Ayinya*) is sighted by a road user crossing the road in his front is a taboo and it attracts the same consequences as the former. When a domestic dog domesticated by the head of the house was seen crying in the same compound, it was considered a taboo meaning; the man is in line for death.

When pigeons that were kept as pets at home suddenly deserted their cage is a bad omen as it attracts somebody is going to die from the very compound that the pigeons vacated because, they (pigeons) don't accommodate the gathering of multitude which was one of the characteristic of Idoma funeral rites and mourning. All these omens can only be cushioned by series of rituals to appease the gods or *Alekwu* but the consequences most at time according to findings, were not averted²⁷.

²⁵ An interview with Elder Shaibu Ogbale...

²⁶ An interview with His Royal Highness, John Enefu Antenyi, the 13th *Idoga* of Oiji and the 4th District Head and *Odejo 'K' Apa*, Ochekwu

²⁷ An interview with His Royal Highness, John Enefu Antenyi, the 13th *Idoga* of Oiji and the 4th District Head and *Odejo 'K' Apa*, Ochekwu

Conclusion

In conclusion, this paper has succeeded in bringing to the table some of the very societal ingredients as core Idoma norms in time past and how they were used as the center piece of their existence. There were simple but stringent laws enacted by their forebears as the regulating mechanism in protecting lives and property and in upholding their very excess of existence and their cherished watchword being their unrelenting seek for peace, tranquility and utmost high standard of morality across their society even till date.

Some of the contributions to knowledge focused by this paper is how on earth in a traditional setting in pre-colonial Africa that laws were democratically enacted and the administration of justice were properly protocoled in ways to promote equity and fair play.

How the traditional Idoma settings and society before modern Nigeria did not stop at anything if morality was questioned. The mechanism ensured love was promoted, trust was encouraged, equality was guaranteed and brotherhood was upheld as key in their transactions and dispensation of justice. This development was emphasised in the paper from the foregone hence, the *Oche* was the custodian of all and was the focal point of every socio-cultural religious system amongst the Idoma, he was not above the laws of the land, in fact he was only a *primus inter pare*.

Finally, the system was so encompassing in restraining citizenry from committing evil against fellow man as if the Holy *Bible* and *Quran* were written and taught by Idoma ancestors. Everything God forbids who is referred to as “*Owoicho'Omanchala*” by the Idoma were carefully enshrined in their norms and values during this epoch which predated the coming of Europeans.

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