
Essentials of Taboos in the Yoruba Cultural Sustainability

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Abstract: *Taboo is an inhibition or general agreement based on socio-cultural custom to prevent feeling and emotion from doing or talking about something that is being found sacred or offensive. It is a social or religious custom prohibiting or restricting a particular practice or forbidding association with a particular person, place, or thing. Taboos are common to different groups to restricting a particular practice, but the reasons for such may be quite different from one set of group to another. However, the Yoruba ethnic group of south western Nigeria, which is the focus of this work, has a lot of cultural practices which are so valued despite the westernization by the European colonialist. These cultural practices were introduced by the founding father of this ethnic group and are meant to regulate the moral order of the society. Therefore, this paper sets to give an insight into different forms of taboos among the Yoruba and how are these taboos acting as a propelling force in preserving Yoruba cultural beliefs for future generations. It will also delve into means and ways of entrenching acceptable moral order and values into Yoruba society through the use of taboos. To achieve these, historical and exploratory methods will be employed as the tools of work in the course of this research work.*

Keywords: taboos, ethnic groups, cultural beliefs, sustainability

INTRODUCTION

Taboos are age long traditional mechanism that meant to guide the beliefs and practices of people within the community and ethnic conferment with a view of learning and transmitting the knowledge and ways of living from one generation to succeeding generations. These are not contained in any written law but are preserved in the tradition; People learn them, practice them and teach others in the society. Taboos originated from the fact that people recognized that there were certain things which were morally approved or disapproved by the general concession, which were entrenched to facilitate orderly maintenance of the society.¹

Taboos are regarded as one of the principles used to control human behaviour in any society. It also described as a system of prohibitions with regard to certain persons, things, acts or situation. The objects considered as taboo are perceived to contain within them certain assumed

danger that always has repercussions against anyone who transgresses them. Such may not be well defined or perceived immediately by senses, but the consequences of that danger will always affect the one who broke a taboo. Different cultures hold a variety of taboos, but the purpose of such taboos is what makes each culture unique. Hence taboos constitute a part of African cultural heritage and it equally provides a good explanation of that heritage.²

In Yorubaland, taboos are acts which are predominantly considered abominable in their culture and tradition with great consequences that follow the defaulters. This had been helping in preservation of the uniqueness of Yoruba culture which is the totality of the way of life as it is being ingrained in the material and non-material aspects of culture. This is expressed in its religion and belief system, traditions, norms, values, behaviours, symbols, mores, philosophy, Literature, music and language, art and craft, occupation and livelihood of the people.³ Therefore culture as a means of identity amidst sub-groups or ethnic groups within a wide geographical location has a dual tendency, a tendency towards stability and a tendency towards change.

The fact still remains that for any culture to be known in history and humanity it must be sustained to avoid the crisis of existence. Despite the wave of cultural diffusion and diversity that accosted Africa culture in the late 18th century and early 19th century, Yoruba society still preserved their culture due to the mechanism put in place by our fore-fathers among which is taboo. It is on this premise however, that this paper intends to x-ray the concept of taboos, the reason for taboos and the types of taboos as it is common to Yoruba society. Finally the essentials of taboos in sustaining the Yoruba culture will be equally explored.

Concept of Taboos

The term *taboo* is associated with the Polynesian cultures of the South Pacific. Taboo as it is viewed from historical development of word (etymology) is derived from word 'tapu' or 'tabu' which is of Polynesian origin and was first noted by Captain James Cook during his visit to Tonga in 1771⁴. This was translated into English language and simply means forbidden. The word taboo among the Yoruba people is called "*Eewo*"⁵, the violation of which is followed by penalty. This was corroborated by Ayisi:

Taboo has its root in the Polynesian word "Tabu" which to him means things forbidden. He affirms that, it was used by the Voyagers who came to Polynesia a long time ago, for a special kind of prohibition which they illustrated by the physical avoidance of certain things or categories of people. Thus having come into contract with any of such things, one is expected to undergo ritual cleaning which if not undertaken one would be exposed to danger and something dangerous may have happened to the follow, his family or community at large.⁶

The term taboo was found in the early man's effort to explain nature and his own existence, to avoid evils he could not understand and to glimpse into the future. Taboos are therefore deeply rooted in the culture as well as the religious beliefs of the society. It is a sacred term for a set of religious injunctions appraised by traditional religious experts as instruments for moral motivation, guidance, and objectivity for protecting the sanctity

of their shrines and the well-being of their worshippers and worshipping communities. Apart from this, taboo is a term that often applicable to any sort of social prohibition enforced by the authority of a community regarding certain times, places, actions, events, and peoples in order to regulate contacts between a particular circumstance for the well-being of the society.⁷

In another vein, taboo is a prohibition of social actions by putting a person or a thing under temporary or permanent prohibition in order to support the dominant social systems that indicate membership of a given community.⁸ In every community there are set patterns or codes of behaviour which individuals must adhere to for the tone of the community as a whole. This code of conduct can be seen as moral values and things which are forbidden and must not be done.⁹ As it is being applicable in some social circle, there are some actions which are deeply offensive and illegal in order to prevent humans from becoming rebellious and promote the welfare of the society, speaking and thinking about such acts is taboo. Hence taboo is an activity or important moral question that is related to human behaviours and attitudes that is forbidden, prohibited or otherwise outside of what is considered acceptable in society. It places embargo on some act and spells out the supernatural sanctions for venturing into such act.¹⁰

Types of Taboos Common to Yoruba

Taboo is a common feature in most of the Yoruba societies. It usually originated from the gods, the ancestors and from the birth of some particular members of a society. Such might be promulgated and transmitted in the form of religious ordinance, creeds or vows. It might also require blood sacrifices to propitiate for forgiveness from the gods and ancestors to avoid their wrath on the living in form of epidemics, draughts and infertility.¹¹

Therefore different types of taboos are prevalent among the Yoruba people and these taboos vary from one community to another. What is a taboo in one community may be permitted in another community. Thus the popular saying among the Yoruba “*bayii ni aa se ni ile wa, eewo ibomiran ni*”.¹² In the Yoruba society, taboos are rooted in the traditional religion of the people. This religion considers particular things forbidden for religious reason. Therefore, religious taboos, which has to do with ritual taboos, aligned with what the gods/goddesses want or do not want.

Hence the religious taboos differ, among the Yoruba, in variance to their god/goddess on things the worshipers should not do, eat or drink. For instance it is a taboo for all the worshipers of *Obatala* (*Orisanla*) the arch divinity to drink palm wine because *Orisanla* who is also known as *Orunmila* forbid it. *Ogun*, the god of Iron, cherishes the drinking of palm wine. It would even be a taboo for worshippers of *Ogun* not to drink and give him palm wine during the Worship section or *Ogun* festival. The worshipper of *Sango*, the god of thunder should not eat *Ewasese* (specie of a local beans), *Eku Ago* (specie of rat) while the worshipper of *Esu* should not eat kolanut or use *Adin* (Locally made oil from palm kernel) to cream his body or pour in his head. Anyone who contravenes such taboos will face the wrath of such gods/ goddesses. Thus the popular saying among the Yoruba “*Eniyan kii gbe ja eewo. Eewo ni gbe ja ara re*”. Meaning one does not fight to protect taboos, it is the taboos that fight for itself.¹³ *Masquerade* (*Egungun*) is one of the traditional deities in Yoruba land. It is a taboo to mimicking the voice of

masquerades without wearing his costume. Whosoever violates this rule, will be kidnapped by Egungun.

Regardless of the differences in religious taboos among the Yoruba in variance to their gods/goddesses, there is still one taboo that common to all the worshippers. It is a taboo for the worshipper of one religious set to betray another religious set. Thus, the saying in Yoruba “*Awo kii da le awo. Awo ni ma ngbe awo ni gbowo*”. It is a very serious taboo to betray friendship according to Yoruba cultural.¹⁴ Fighting is also a taboo among the people in the various cults. They must not engage in insulting words. Respect all is their watchword. Whenever there is any misunderstanding they must settle it amicably. No harm must be done to one another, for they all have entered into the same covenant with the divinities.¹⁵ However, these religious taboos are put in place to have respect for and to strengthen the beliefs of the worshippers on these gods/goddesses.

Another taboo that is common among the Yoruba is the type that based on moral values. This Taboo helps to keep one off from anything or action that is inimical to one's health and existence. It is the type of taboo that impact daily activity of human beings in the society. It includes taboo to avoid accident and sudden death, taboo on cleanliness, taboo on respect for elder and peaceful co-existence. Among the Yoruba, it is a taboo for a baby to fall down when the mother wanted to back him/her. The repercussion of such act could lead to the death of the husband or wife of such baby thrice repeatedly when he/she marries.¹⁶ Any mother who falls victim of such taboo has to walk naked round the market to avert the repercussion of this taboo on her child. Consequently, the taboo teaches woman moral on how to care for their child. If a baby falls from her mother's back it may lead to death of such baby or cause fracture on the neck, leg or hand of the baby.¹⁷

Other taboos meant for the avoidance of accident among the Yoruba include one and the following:

1. It is a taboo for someone to climb pawpaw tree. This teaches us that pawpaw tree is not strong enough for climbing. It may break and cause serious body injuries to whosoever that tried it and eventually lead to death.
2. It is a taboo for a pregnant woman to walk in the night or noonday. This cautions that it is possible for a pregnant woman not to see clearly in the night and unconsciously trample on something that can cause her to slide or fall. In other way round, the scorching sun in the noonday may be injurious to a pregnant woman's health or that of the baby in her womb.
3. Using of bare hand to collect rain water and run around when the rain falls is a taboo. This is to prevent misfortune that thunder bolt or storm might cause when it strikes during the rainfall. In another way, it meant to prevent child not to catch cold during the rainfall.

Yoruba people cherishes clean environment for their health and well-being of others. Sequels to this, there are different taboos put in place to keep the rules of cleanliness in the Yoruba society. Few among these taboos are:

1. It is a taboo to sit on the door step or on the walkway in the house while eating. This is to prevent act of dirtiness
2. It is a taboo to stepping on the shell of melon that had been cracked yester night in the following morning. This portend that our environment must be well swept.
3. It is a taboo to wash hand in the plate we used to eat

Besides, there are some other taboos that put up to sustain human dignity and respect in the Yoruba society. This kind of taboo deals with moral etiquettes and peaceful co-existence in the society. The categories of these taboos are listed below:

1. It is a taboo for a child to talk when elders are still talking. This taboo implies that the child has to be groomed with home training.
2. It is a taboo for a married woman to greet any of her husband kinfolk that is older than her or the one that had born before she married to that family. This taboo is to emphasize respect and good relation between a married woman and her husband family.
3. It is a taboo for a man to sleep with another man's wife that is pregnant. In addition to this, incest is a serious taboo among various communities in Yorubaland¹⁸. This is to prevent adultery and conflicts that can break the family and society at large.

There are some taboos that peculiar to towns, clans and families in Yoruba society. Such taboo embraces everything that contravenes the norms and values of the traditional institution, and the ancestral beliefs of the clan and the family. Nearly in all the towns in Yoruba land, king is forbidden to prostrate for anybody after his installation. It also a taboo for a king to eat and drink publicly and he must not see a dead body and new born baby. In addition to this, it is a taboo for anybody to wear the king's paraphernalia such as beaded crown, beaded shoe and sceptre (*Opa ase*).¹⁹ These taboos are to guide the royal and sacred position of the king which is symbolic and linked to divinity in all the Yoruba land. Practically in all the Yoruba towns, King (Oba) is seeing as a god and second in rank only to gods.

There are some taboos that are peculiar to different towns and family within the Yoruba society. Such taboos might be originated from the historical antecedents of their ancestors and heroes. It might also be the result of epidemic and misfortune that had ones befall such town or family in the past which they do not want the occurrence of such again, such taboo could be regarded as a safety taboo. It could prevent the whole town or some family set within the town from eating some species of animal, vegetable or delicacy. For instance, it is forbidden for any son and daughter of Ondo town in Ondo state to eat *Okete* (sub specie of bush meat).²⁰

Taboo and the Yoruba cultural sustainability

The ideal of taboos has been a crucial element of Yoruba culture from the time immemorial. In Yoruba land the criteria of evaluation of individual or community whether better or worse, moral or immoral, attractive or repulsive, is partly a child of culture.²¹ And culture thus prescribes certain codes of behaviour which are embedded in the laws, taboos, customs which meant to shape the moral and attitude of the various groups in the society. In Yoruba traditional society, taboo is used to give sanctity to the customs and regulations of the

community. This has enhanced the Yoruba culture to develop from mere practice of the activities of human lives into a system of traditional beliefs, unified pride and ethnic identity.²² Taboos among the Yoruba people constitute a link between the past and present with a view to ensuring the maintenance and continuation of the people's social-cultural value. Therefore taboo has the potential to fortify morality. It inculcates fear and discipline to regulate the norm of conduct or the code of behaviour for the individual persons or community at large. Through the observation of the various taboos men can find peace within his society, with his fellow human being, the sacred being as well as the ancestors.²³

CONCLUSION

Taboos generally are mechanism necessary to recognise and curtail certain actions that are against the good and well-being of an individual in the community. It is essential to moral scaffolding of society and preserving the mutual dignity by which a community or ethnic group uphold her values of right and wrong. Therefore, to ensure that life is liveable, and harmonious person-to-person, person to community and divine – person relationship, this mechanism must be given a place of priority. To achieve this, taboos must be learnt, practiced and taught others in the society for onward transmission from the existing generation to the incoming ones in order to facilitate the sustainability of the society and their culture.

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