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Taboos and the Maintenance of Social Order in the Old Ondo Province, Southwestern Nigeria

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Abstract

The alarming rate of indiscipline and criminality in our societies has called for concerns. This situation makes it imperative to revisit the mechanisms used to maintain social order in pre-colonial times. Therefore, this paper examines the efficacy of taboos in the sustenance of social order in the Old Ondo Province before the advent of the British. This is germane to the understanding ways in which social order was maintained. This will also facilitate our grasp of the peculiarity and relevance of taboos in providing peace and tranquillity during the pre-colonial times. Taboo forbids anything akin to evil as perceived by the people and any act of fraud. The paper relies heavily on oral traditions and other written materials. All materials used were critically deployed. The study argues that taboos can be a necessary and complimentary tool in achieving a sustainable social order and moral rectitude in the contemporary times.

Introduction

The control of crimes in any society has been an uphill task from time immemorial. Therefore, different people in an attempt to curtail them have adopted different strategies to contend with crimes depending on their nature and extent. One thing is certain: a community, state or nation with a high

incidence of crime cannot grow or develop. Hence, traditional taboos formed one of the mechanisms used to achieve peace and tranquillity among the people of the Old Ondo Province and other African societies. Before the advent of modern civilisation, the norms of the people encouraged a need to fight crime using taboo. This was one major instrument of keeping peace between leadership and their subjects and between societies and their neighbours.

Taboo represented the main source of guiding principles regulating and directing the behaviour of individuals and the community ultimately towards the Supreme Being and especially the gods and ancestors in Yoruba traditional societies. The motivation for abiding by the normative principles was provided and reinforced by the religious sanctions from the gods and ancestors. Their cultic code of ethics, written or verbal served as a point of reference in determining traditional lawbreakers, and in the adjudicating of ensuing cases at the traditional courts and shrines. Those found guilty of serious moral or legal violations were made to undergo ritual cleansing as a means of moral purification and transformation (Arifalo: 2010).

It is equally important to mention while considering taboos, that covenant comes into focus when one enters into agreement with a divinity; such covenants usually have their sanctions and demands. One has to obey all the regulations of the cult and observe its taboos. Each divinity usually has certain things, which are taboo to it. Among the Yoruba, all the worshippers of *Orisa Nla*, the arch divinity, must not drink palm wine because *Orisa Nla*, the arch divinity, forbids it (Fabarebo: 2001:7).

In Yorubaland, taboo still forms one of the veritable instruments used in combating corruption within the society or in unveiling indecency in office. Therefore, actions of people are prevented, if they are unacceptable ones that are against societal norms and values. For instance, in Owo women were prevented from entering into the market without covering their head to avoid calamity in the community (Aruna: 2007).

Taboo was the only measure of social restriction and obligation in the pre-colonial period (Odofin: 2009) . Then, taboo was the cornerstone of the whole social order and there was no part of the social system that was not regulated and governed by taboo such as relationship between rulers and subjects, political life, sexual life, family life as well as the economic life of the society. For instance, it was an offence in pre-colonial times against the

Oba for a male citizen to touch, sit or discuss with an *Olori* either publicly or privately (Ipinlaye: 2010).

Conceptual clarification

The word taboo is called *eewo* in Yorubaland, that is, that which is forbidden. The action or conduct of one man/woman within the community can affect other members for good or evil (Idowu and Dopamu: 1980: 44-46). This is more so because of the imperatives of socialization processes. In order to prevent humans from becoming rebellious and promote the welfare of the society, there are set patterns or codes of behaviour which individuals must adhere to for the tone of the community as a whole. There are standards or norms to be observed. These norms or code of conduct can be seen as moral values and such things which are forbidden must not be done (Awolalu and Dopamu: 1976:7). In other words, taboo is a prohibited action and breaking the ban is followed by supernatural penalty. Taboo is a sacred term for a set of cultural or religious prohibitions instituted by traditional religious authorities as instruments of social control for protecting the sanctity of their shrines, worship of the gods and the wellbeing of their communities. The term is also applicable to any sort of social prohibition imposed by the leadership of a community regarding certain times, places, actions, events, people, etc, especially, but not exclusively for religious reasons, for the wellbeing of the society. Taboo is a common feature in most African societies. They are usually of divine or genetic origin. Taboos either had their origin from the gods, the ancestors or those derived from the birth of some particular members of a society. Such taboos are not moral laws applicable to all members except in rare cases (Oluwole: 1992: 70). There are individuals deliberately exempted from such of the 'vantage' position they occupied.

Taboos in pre-colonial times

Every community in Yorubaland has its peculiar taboos. Breachers of taboos bring disaster not only on the particular person or community, but also to the persons around. Thus, the Yoruba say '*bi ara ile eni ba nje kokoro buruku, bi a koba kilo fun aherehuru re ko ni je ki a sun loru*'; that is, if our neighbour eats the inedible and we do not warn him/her, his/her difficulty in breathing at night will not allow us to sleep (Idowu and Dopamu: 1980: 44-46).

The Yoruba believe in the reality of the taboo and do not consider it as superstition. They also believe that the keeping of the taboos gives joy,

happiness, wealth, comfort and long life (Babatunde: 2005: 99). The Yoruba also believe that violation of the taboos bring about misfortune and misery on the person who violates it.

Taboo is what is forbidden in the religious context. The Yoruba say *o je ewo*, when a person does what is forbidden (Alade: 2007: 24). They also hold the belief that taboo embraces everything, which can be conceived as sin, unethical or something that contravenes the norms and values of the traditional institution and the society. They convey the message that in a breach of any of them, one has personally offended someone in the course of violating it. Thus, *ewo orisa* means: what the divinity abhors or abomination (Alade: 2007: 24). It is perversion or abomination to the deity or divinity.

Yoruba communities in general and communities in old Ondo Province in particular had certain beliefs that guided their behaviour. They were forbidden to do certain things or were taught to accept certain happenings as normal. There was the belief that if such taboos were not respected, certain gods would be displeased (Adegbonmire: 2009). In turn, they would visit the defaulters with hardship and suffering including loss of blessings. Thus, the people respected the taboos as breaches which incurred the wrath of the gods and courted danger for himself and the community (Faloye: 2007).

Taboo may, therefore, be used in two ways: the spiritual usage and social-political usage. Both terms were evident among the people of old Ondo Province. Most taboos were taken seriously since they were believed to have been imposed by traditional rulers or priests on their behalf and in the general interest of the people (Adedoyin: 2009).

They might be promulgated and transmitted in the form of religious ordinances, creeds or vows. Hence, unlike ordinary wrongs, taboo might 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. For instance, in Owo, an *Omolowo* (Owo indigene) must not eat monkey (Oluwole: 1992: 70). Also, in the Province, it is a taboo for twins to eat monkey.

Taboo sanctions were believed to be instantaneous and automatic unlike sanctions in other religions that have to wait till a particular time or stand to be mitigated by God's mercy and forgiveness (Ipinlaye: 2010). For example, it was generally held that when people swore with gods like *Ogun* or *Sango*,

any breach would attract instant repercussion. Yet, people out of prudence would not deliberately violate them even if they were sceptical of their potency. Hence, the value of taboos as instruments of social control cannot be underestimated.

Chieftaincy and taboos

Due to the king's royal and regal position which was symbolic and linked with divinity, the king (*Oba*) observed many taboos. In pre-colonial times, he hardly travelled outside his domain. At his installation, the *Oba* would prostrate himself, for the last time, for the king-makers in public during his installation. He was, therefore, forbidden to do obeisance to anybody. The *Oba* must not see a dead body, also he must not eat outside or in public (Akosile: 2010). There were repercussions to be faced if he went against any of these taboos; it might bring about strange diseases to the *Oba*, his household or the community at large and peace and tranquillity might elude the community.

It was forbidden to say directly that a Yoruba king ate, drank, slept, washed, fell ill or died. All things must be said euphemistically. When a king died, the traditional way of announcing it is *Oba w'aja* (he has gone up the ceiling), *Erin wo* (the elephant has fallen), or *Opo ye* (the pillar has given way). The king, like a father, was closely linked with the idea of the preservation of law, peace and order within the kingdom. Whenever the death of the *Oba* was announced, there was breakdown of law and order (Arifalo and Okajare: 2005: 3).

Yoruba kings were expected in one way or another to ensure the prosperity and well being of their kingdoms. Thus, the scarcity of food, the failure of the rains, poor harvest, sudden deaths and the outbreak of epidemics were occurrences from which the king could not absolve himself. They were expected to establish a direct communication or link with relevant powers, either by magical means or by means of religious rites or by both (Abe: 2009). All these constituted their religious duties; failure to adhere strictly to them was a taboo.

The palace in Yorubaland was a sacred place; this was demonstrated in various restrictions and taboo with which it was treated. An act of immorality in or around the palace was regarded as taboo. For example, no man except the *Oba* could have an affair with a woman on the palace ground. Births and

deaths were completely taboo in the palace. The king must not set eyes on anything which was unclean. The main reason is that the king as a royal person being an important and first citizen should not deal with anything that is dead or stinking except the living. Either touching the walls of or pointing towards the palace was also forbidden. For all practical purposes, the palace was treated as 'a holy of holies (Atandare: 1973: 77-78). Any violation of the taboo was met with a sanction.

It was a taboo for anybody to wear the king's paraphernalia. In particular, his *Ade* (crown), *Opa Ase* (scepter) and *Bata Ileke* (royal beaded shoe) were objects of veneration and must not be worn by anyone other than the king himself (Atanda: 2007:116). It was considered improper for the king to mix freely with his subjects, being ordinary mortals.

It was a taboo for people of the same family to marry each other. Certainly, it has repercussions. It was an abomination to have sexual dealings with an *Oba's* wife; any person caught in this act was punished by death. The repercussion for that, if not punishable by death, was that such a person would live a miserable life. It was a taboo for a child to beat his parents; severe calamity would be the repercussion of such (Adetoyinbo: 2011). In other words, incest was a serious taboo among various communities during the pre-colonial times. This is still the situation in modern times. Sexual act within the family was an abomination. This offends the ancestors and the gods; it could breed conflicts that can break up families but also breed inexplicable abnormal births, birth defects and diseases.

In Yorubaland generally, it was a taboo to allow twins to ascend the *obaship* throne (Olubola: 2009). Among the Ilaje, women were not allowed to be king; the highest they could aspire to was to be chiefs. Slaves and disabled people were not allowed to be king. Spiritually, it was believed that anybody that would occupy that sacred position must be an able bodied person, because gods could only relate with complete persons. Any attempt to do contrary would attract calamities to the community (Ebitiha: 2009). On the socio-political aspect, this taboo was aimed at bringing about good and quality leadership to the traditional communities, and prune down the qualified people to this exalted position.

Among the Ekiti and the Akure, for instance, it was a taboo for *olori* (king's wives) to wear *buba* (blouse) and *gele* (head tie). It was believed that this was aimed at distinguishing the *olori* from other women (Adeyeye: 2010). It was

spiritually believed that if any of the wives contravened this taboo, this might bring calamities including untimely death of the King to the palace and the community as a whole (Arifalo: 2010).

The highest oath which anybody in the Province could take was to swear by the head of the king. For instance, if a housewife quarrelling with her husband in Akure, could shout *Deji mo sa ya oo* (Deji, I run to you for safety) she could be taken to the palace. If the king fancied the woman, he could take her as one of his wives. If not, the king would try to settle the quarrel and release the woman to her husband when a ransom of *ookanla* (55kobo) had been paid. If two suitors quarrelled over a lady, the king could settle the matter by taking her himself (Arifalo: 1976: 17).

The *Oba* was seen as a god and second in rank only to the gods. The *Oba* in this area of study must not see the inner part of his crown; and the crown must not be worn by another person (Adedoyin: 2010).

Religion and taboos

It was a taboo for any title holder to do anything contrary to the oath he took during coronation. Oath taking was part of coronation rites in Yorubaland. It was compulsory that a solemn declaration to a god or a higher authority be carried out; one would speak the truth, be loyal to the community and keep to the promise. Oath taking is one of the world's oldest practices that has stood the test of many epochs and generations (Ilesanmi: 123-125) binding peoples' conscience, sometimes willingly, sometimes against their will, stultifying them and making them obey sheepishly, the illumination of each epoch.

Oath taking by a traditional institution was done with an emblem of traditional symbols like iron representing Yoruba god of iron, the wrath of iron, the wrath of God, the thunderbolt symbolising *Sango* and some other deities. This instilled the fear of resultant violence of the oath of office in the people concerned and invariably resulted in sanitizing the land (Ayantayo: 101).

The market place is an important melting pot for business minded people. It was treated with much awe and reverence. Certain rituals were carried out in the market place to appease the gods and to obtain their blessings. Culturally, the king's market was strategic for the appeasement of the gods (Fawehinmi: 2007). Certain beliefs were attached to the market place. For instance, if a

mad person entered the market, that madness, it is believed, could never be cured.

One of the most ritualistic agents of the maintenance of order and social justice among the Ikale, Ilaje and Apoi people was *Ayelala*. This was a deity considered to have an uninterrupted extensive power in the administration of social justice. Ilaje traditions hold that *Ayelala* was originally a slave woman who was used as a sacrificial 'lamb' over the issue of adultery committed by one *Tenetan* (a commoner) with the wife of *Keko* (a high Chief). By the time she was about to be drowned, she exclaimed *Ayelala!* (the world is terrible) and from that day on, she was deified held in awe (Ehinmore: 2010: 56-57). Since then, the spirit of *Ayelala* has been involved in civil and criminal matters such as; adultery, theft, witchcraft, murder, and related social crimes capable of causing social disorder in the society.

We must point out that this mechanism was used to achieve peace and tranquillity and served as social control. Violation of any deity's directive was seen as a taboo, and it was a common knowledge that criminals could not go unpunished. It was the opinion that if the evil doers escaped the punishment of humans, there was no way that he or she could escape the punishment of the gods. The fear created by *Ayelala* and other potent deities helped in judicial adjudication.

Taboos related to children

Taboo taught morals to the younger ones. For instance, it was forbidden for them to urinate into a mortal. It was claimed that any child that violated this would lose his/her mother. Therefore none of them would violate the taboo in order not to risk losing his/her mother. The essence, however, was to instil moral. Many taboos served as warning, reproof and guide. For example, children were forbidden to sit at the entrance of the house or to put knife in their mouths. These were ways in which the people used to instil discipline and morals into their children without necessarily using cane or harsh words on them (Ipinlaye: 2010).

Taboos related to women

It was a taboo among the Yoruba, for women to set eyes on divinities or step into the grove, regarded as a sacred place. It was believed that any woman who set her eyes on a divinity would be incarcerated by the divinity. It was believed that whenever a woman set her foot on the grove, the place would

become impotent. Violation of this would attract calamity to the community in question (Olabitan: 1986:73). However, certain categories of women were considered to be initiates, by reasons of the socio-cultural position they occupied and the role they played within such a socio-cultural community maybe exempted from this.

Moreover, it was a taboo for women to be nude in the market, or fight in the market. Anybody that violated any of these taboos would be asked to pay a fine to serve as deterrent to others. It was viewed that market could not develop in a lawless environment (Akinyemi: 2010). In addition, it was viewed that the market place was one of the melting pots of the gods and development.

Equally, it was forbidden for a pregnant woman to deliver a child in the open space, if pressed, she must look for or to be taken to a private place. It was also a taboo for women to deliver abnormal children such as children with six fingers, four legs, big head, and albino, among others. Although, such children might not be killed, the parents would avoid publicity. This also could be regarded as a safety taboo, because it enabled the child to grow outside the public notice (Olufade: 2010). In pre-colonial era, giving birth to twins was taken as a bad omen. But, with time, it had become clear that nothing was strange with the conception and delivery of twins. So, the attached psychological punishment of stigma was removed.

It was a taboo among the people for women not to observe the widowhood (*opo*) rites. This was an integral aspect of funeral rites observed by the woman following the death of a husband. The word *opo*, among the Yoruba means widow or widower. Widow is synonymous with a woman who loses her husband, while the man that loses his wife or wives is referred to as a widower.

Death is inevitable in life. Then it is very certain for any wife or husband to be a widow or widower, except on rare cases where both die at the same time, especially by road accident, war or natural disaster, among others. If the death of the husband was confirmed, the bereaved family would break the news to his wife or wives formally, which would bring about so much groaning, mourning, sorrow and pain. Immediately after the husband had been buried, the wife/wives would be considered *opo* (widow), she/they would be asked to sit on the local mat (*eni/ ore*) spread on the floor for seven days (Akingbemi: 2007: 100-103).

This practice was and is still common among the Yoruba. Immediately the mat was spread for the widow, it became a taboo for couples that is men and women that still had husbands or wives to touch the mat or move very close to the widow. If the deceased had more than one wife, all his wives would sit on the mat according to their seniority.

Meanwhile, immediately the widow sat on the mat prepared for her, *opo* rites would commence. Elderly women or old widows would stay with her and loosen her plaited hair. This exercise would last for seven days and it was a taboo for any widow to evade this. During this period, a plate would be placed on the floor where people could drop their gifts or money (Adetoyinbo: 2010) for the widow. It was, however, a taboo for anybody to put anything in the hand of the widow. Every item must be dropped in the plate on the ground. Any woman staying with the widow must be her sister or be a widow herself (Falohun: 2011). All *opo* rites must be completed within seven days.

On the seventh day, it was a taboo for the widow to sleep till day breaks into the eighth day. This was regarded as a period of mourning and sober reflection on the part of the widow. On the eighth day, the mat and clothes worn during the period must be burnt immediately after taking her bath, while the sponge and soap used were thrown into a pit. In addition, for the next three months, the widow must not go to the market. She must not go to her family house and must not sleep outside her deceased husband's house (Adegbomire: 2011). She must wear a black dress all through.

The above procedure, a taboo, was adhered to so that the children of the *opo* would not die untimely. And this taboo was used to guide in the sharing of the deceased's property including the wife or wives left behind. This ensured peace in sharing of the inheritance, unlike today where a catalogue of litigations follows in our law courts. Thus, with the advent of Western Education and Christianity, many people have decided to break away from the past (Ojo: 2009). They see the act of willing a widow to another man (a relative of the deceased) to marry her, even to the extent of having children for him as unacceptable and outdated.

Taboos and cleanliness

These taboos aimed at enhancing environmental sanitation, which would in turn enhance long life because health is wealth. These taboos were designed

to thwart the spread of sickness. Curbing illness and infirmity were cardinal during pre-colonial times.

Also, it was a taboo among the people to have sex on bare floor. It was believed that anybody that engaged in this act would be struck by the gods. It was believed that land was sacred and must not be desecrated. The offenders would be cuffed with venereal sicknesses. This enforced that sex could not take place in an unprotected environment (Osei: www.jsd-africa.com). It was also a taboo to talk while preparing food or while eating. It was believed that anybody that violated this would lose his or her mother. This created fear in the minds of the people.

However, superstition and taboo are often considered to be the same. This conception is misleading and misplacement of values. Taboo is a social prohibition or restriction sanctioned by supra-societal (innate) means or socially sanctioned injunction alleged to have the force of such prohibition. While, superstition is a judgemental term traditional used by dominant religions to categorize and denigrate earlier, less sophisticated or disapproved religious attitudes and behaviour (Eliade: 1957: 283).

Taboo stands as the intersection of human affairs and forces of the larger universe. Generally, it is determined by divine or animistic mandates; but it may involve “punishment” by inherent circumstances as well as the real but exaggerated danger of genetic damages to the offspring on incestuous union. Taboo is a custom of avoidance or rejection while, superstition is a belief of prevention. That is, it is employed to prevent human beings from engaging in certain activities (Mbiti: 1990: 110).

Taboos and crime control

It was a taboo to commit murder among the people. Custom and traditions of the people frowned at this; it was viewed as a sin against the gods and humanity. Culprits were summarily killed if found guilty after investigation.

Suicide was a taboo; it was not common among the people to see people commit suicide by hanging. Anybody found to have done this, was believed to have committed great offence against the gods, humanity, and the community. It was also believed that the person must have contravened some societal taboos and he or she must have decided to commit suicide to avoid public ridicule. The bodies of those that committed suicide were usually handed over to the priest for burial. The denial of the family to give the

victim a proper burial was viewed as a grievous penalty because it was viewed as a disgrace to the family and the victim in which generations yet unborn would still refer to. In other words, murder and suicide were viewed as serious taboos among the people (Fawehinmi: 2007).

Hitherto, some taboos were devised significantly to promote the economy and productivity at personal and communal levels. Among these was the cutting of forbidden trees without the permission of the leadership of the community. It was a belief of the people that some trees were sacred, that the divinities or gods occupied them. So, if those trees were to be cut down, they believed that libations must be poured out to appease the spirits of the gods. Anybody who cut a sacred tree without appeasement would bring calamity to the community, most especially drought that would eventually snowball into low economic productivity and sicknesses (Osei: www.jsd-africa.com).

Also, stealing of community property, destroying and farming in the grove and sacred bushes, eating of totem animals such as tortoise, parrots, eagles, sacred fish, and so on were forbidden. All these were viewed as taboos, a violation of which they believed would affect the economic growth of the community (Osei: www.jsd-africa.com).

However, most of what formed part of our culture such as one, that an elder brother or sister should not inherit the property of his/her younger ones; two, that one must not be rude to the elders; and three, that husbands should not maltreat their wives could be regarded as taboos, for enduring peace, understanding and unity among the people (Afolabi Olabitan: 1986: 300). However, taboos enabled the people to be careful not offend the gods and do something that can bring the name of the family to disrepute.

Conclusion

In sum, the main thrust of discussion in this paper is that the Yoruba speaking people of the Old Ondo Province believed in the reality of taboos as instruments of maintenance of social order from time immemorial. They also believed that the keeping of the behests of taboo brought peace, joy, happiness, wealth, comfort and long life. It was further believed that violation of taboos amounted to the violation of the commands of the taboo on individuals, thus bringing about misfortune and misery on the person(s) that violated it. In other words, taboos were used to uphold peace and virtue within the chieftaincy institutions in Yorubaland, while vices were

condemned. Taboos were placed to instil fear into people's mind. They had their own consequences on whoever handled them with levity.

The traditional institution used this to achieve peace and tranquillity among the people in times past. Violation was not only seen as a crime against the gods and the society, but also against the traditional institution, regarded as the representative of the gods. The institution was saddled with the responsibility of ensuring peace, orderliness and development of the society.

Equally, taboo was one of the veritable instruments used in combating corruption of any form within the society or in unveiling indecency in office. Taboo was one of the mechanisms used by the traditional institution to maintain peace, law and order in this area of study in the past; this can still be relevant today. In contemporary times, the traditional institution should be given a recognized role in the constitution of the land so that they can play similar roles to that which they played in the past as customs and traditions permitted.

It is, therefore, our opinion that taboos is still relevant to the maintenance of social order in our contemporary society. For this to be accomplished there must be awareness in homes, school and the society at large. At the end, this will reduce the number of litigations in our courts of law and the prisons will be decongested.

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- S.O. Arifalo (73 years). He is a renowned Professor of History and versed in cultural history of the people of Old Ondo Province, Aule Road, Akure, 15th October, 2011.
- Joseph Olufade (55 years), businessman, No. 23, Iselewa Street, Supare-Akoko, 2010.