

Art and Taboos in Ghana

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the taboos that are associated with some traditional arts, namely woodcarving, cloth-weaving, iron-smithing and pottery as practiced among the rural folk in Ghana and their implications in the society. It outlines the drawbacks that these taboos exert on the opportunities for the young in the practice of those arts. Suggestions are offered to bolster efforts being made to overcome the drawbacks so that the young people could avail themselves of those opportunities formerly denied.

KEYWORDS:

Traditional arts, taboo, society.

INTRODUCTION

There are various taboos in many cultures around the globe and Africa is no exception. In Ghana, these taboos are varied, and they are associated with different activities including Traditional Art. The restrictions and influences these taboos exert have induced foreigners to regard them as an impediment.

Taboos have existed in Ghana for generations and those associated with art have developed alongside the relevant arts. The word taboo is derived from a Polynesian word "tabu" which simply means forbidden and can be extended to embrace any prohibition. This implies that, that which is 'tabooed' is to be avoided. Any contact between a tabooed person or object therefore contributes a hazard to the society. For example, in a case where a man visits a tabooed claypit to obtain clay, he is deemed to have broken a taboo which forbids men to indulge in pottery among the Nkonyas of Volta Region and the Kwahus of Eastern Region. The action becomes a hazard not to the offender alone, but to the society at large. This danger can be

nullified by the performance of purification rites which may also entail the penalty of a fine.

Most taboos have been woven into the fabric of religious observances as well as into the legal code of the traditional society. Taboos are born out of the experiences of the society designed to protect the society and the environment from practices harmful to man and nature. Traditional society invariably accepted these taboos and observed them with some amount of dread and awe. In spite of the sacrosanct nature of the taboos and their attendant risks, they have been flouted and sometimes completely trampled upon with impunity by the youth. They have found some of them unrealistic in view of the present-day circumstances - Why should a man not practise pottery or a woman become a woodcarver?

A careful analysis of the facts of the particular society concerned, of the period the taboos were instituted and reasons for instituting them, induce one to sympathise with the youth. Notwithstanding, they have served some useful purpose in the past, while some continue to be relevant and useful to various societies throughout the country. But we should not lose sight of the fact that some have outlived their usefulness; this is the bane still lingering over the practice of traditional art today.

THE ARTS AS PRACTICED IN THE SOCIETY

Woodcarving

Woodcarving demands a lot of energy when felling the tree and cutting into logs before the actual carving. Even after the stage of acquisition of the logs, carving still requires physical energy.

In most Ghanaian traditional societies menstruation is regarded as spiritually unclean. The presence of a menstruating woman in the house is regarded as an abomination. Such a woman meddling in the affairs of men, especially of priests, medicine-men, carvers and ironsmiths could, it is believed, subvert their powers spiritually and expose them to dangers such as accidents and injury, like deep cuts from the adze in the case of carvers. Among the prerequisites of a carver engaged in producing ritual objects like masks or funerary figures for initiation and other ceremonies, is the state of purity of body, mind and spirit. For this reason he goes into seclusion to avoid women who are in their

menstrual periods. Women in their periods are also generally banned from places where their presence can be spiritually hazardous to the welfare of the household and the community.

A third reason why women are tabooed from woodcarving is to uphold the dignity of the women themselves by preventing occasions for erotic attraction and indecent exposure. Traditional woodcarvers sit on low stools or on the ground when carving so that the adze or the cutlass being used in controlled and prevented from being raised too high up and behind the carver. This prevents passers-by from being harmed accidentally. Also they sit astride the object being carved with their legs stretched out. In this position, when the tool slips, the soil receives the blow. The posture so described could expose the genital organ of women, especially when clothing was limited to loin-cloths. Women would thereby expose themselves to sexual attraction and ridicule. With tabooed women out of the way, men could work without problem while women were spared considerable inconvenience.

Iron-Smithing

Women's prohibition from smithing stems from a number of issues: iron smithing was considered a strenuous, difficult task for women to practise. Also, smithing was a field women could not enter because of the condition of menstruation which rendered them spiritually unclean. This spiritual uncleanness constitutes a hazard to smithing, which is considered to require spiritual purity. This spiritual attribute of the smith enables him to handle and harness fire and tools to forge a variety of implements for the society's use such as hoes, knives and guns. Women in some areas are completely barred from visiting the iron smith's shop to prevent any contamination. Furthermore, the smith's tools were believed to have power, for which reason rituals were periodically performed over them. The shop of the smith was accorded the status of a shrine which called for the observances that befit a sacred place and observance of taboos. Thus, evil forces such as menstruating women must not be allowed to contaminate the good forces.

Cloth-weaving

As in woodcarving and ironsmithing, cloth-weaving too is the preserve of men. The restriction of the activity to men is also in the interest of the dignity of women. Like carving, a particular posture is assumed during weaving. The weaver sits on a low stool or on the ground with both legs stretched out to enable the toes to manipulate the pulleys that work the warp and allow the weft to run in and out. The loin-cloth in such a situation offered little by

way of adequate covering for the genital area. To prevent women from exposing themselves indecently, they were tabooed from engaging in the vocation or cloth-weaving. It should be noted that in some places preparation of fibres into yarn was and has been the woman's occupation.

Pottery

In the field of pottery, men were restricted by taboos to give women an exclusive area of operation. It is the only vocation among those mentioned above that is reserved for women. This is because pottery is an occupation considered not strenuous to practise and which does not entail indecent exposure of the body and therefore offers no temptation to the menfolks.

Women do all the cooking in the traditional home. The instigators of this taboo felt that since women run the kitchen, they should know what receptacles are best suited for domestic catering. Women cater for food and storage of farm produce.

Potters normally work at home while the men either go to their farms or practise their trade elsewhere. This ensures that housekeeping, child care and pottery could be conveniently combined.

To further help make this taboo effective, men were prevented from visiting the vicinity of clay pits. This removes the possibility of a man coming upon half-naked women at work as women prefer to strip off their habit, rather than soil themselves with clay and mud, especially in flooded pits.

DISCUSSION

Today among the rural folk these taboos still exist. Even though some explanations for these taboos are shrewd, profound and sound, the reasons advanced do not justify their continued observance today. During the present age, like other ages, custom evolves its own ways of checking prevailing lapses. Taboos are therefore viewed, today, as agents for stifling progress in learning traditional arts from apprenticeship through to mastery. It is the goal of educational authorities that all Ghanaians should have equal opportunities to develop their potential without hindrance, even from taboos. It is important that avenues be found to neutralise or abrogate the old taboos completely or revise them to afford equal opportunities to all.

Efforts are being made in this direction so that all could learn such trades as they choose and become self-employed carvers, potters, weavers and ironsmiths. The continued strict observance of these taboos cannot therefore be in the best interest of Ghana.

Schools have for sometime now taught art without discrimination between boys and girls as obtains in traditional apprenticeship systems. The school system has yielded results in the form of men and women potters and female weavers, woodcarvers and ironsmiths. The lead given by the school system in disregard of the taboos has proved convincingly that the prohibiting taboos be re-examined in the light of present-day situations and replaced by conditions which offer equal opportunities to all. The call by the Government to traditional authorities to erase from the society all obsolete customs and practices is a pointer in the right direction. Taboos should be done away with to purge the current local apprenticeship system of many unnecessary, customary hindrances. In their place, the freedom to choose what one wants to study should be the only denominator for learning any trade. It is left to our teachers, lovers of art, the general public, the traditional authorities and our assemblies to exert their influences to enlighten the people as to why some taboos should be completely removed. An awareness of the negative effects of taboos will lead people to judge for themselves how unproductive taboos are and the extent of damage this can cause to development in present-day Ghana. With this realisation, there will be enough understanding on the part of the people to support the elimination of taboos. District Assemblies are well placed to enact laws to abolish obstructive taboos. More importantly, those who realise the need for change should use all avenues open to them to educate the people about the harm that some taboos do to the society. Pulpits and other sources should be used. Schools and Colleges should continue to teach the arts and crafts to both sexes, unaffected by local taboos, in view of their special institution as schools.

Finally, with understanding and support from all quarters, the taboos will die out; not only those connected with art but those associated with other fields which are considered to be prohibitive: sometimes including inhuman taboos and customs.

CONCLUSION

It is established that even though taboos were created for genuine reasons to achieve certain goals in the past, the reasons advanced are no longer justified under present-day circumstances. The fact is that freedom of choice and equal opportunity should be the underlying factors in both apprenticeship and practice of the traditional arts, comparative with what obtains in our schools today. It is proposed that the taboos be eliminated through collaborative efforts of educationists, chiefs, churches and District Assemblies; by enacting laws

to check the bad effects of these taboos and, through discussion, bring understanding to societies who still cling to such taboos.

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