

Socio-Cultural and Attitudinal Study of Selected Yoruba Taboos in South West Nigeria

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Abstract

This study presents a socio-cultural description of some Yoruba taboos which are an integral part of culture and youths' attitude towards these taboos. The theoretical frame work for the study is based on Vygotskian's socio-cultural approach which holds that higher order functions develop out of social interaction. In other words, cultural development of an individual, especially the young ones, depends largely on social interactions with elders. Some socio-cultural factors like age, sex and education are the variables employed in the analysis. Data is gathered from interviewing students and staff of Redeemer's University, Mowe, Ogun state and Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ife, Osun state in the South Western part of Nigeria. Books and documents are also consulted. In the process of describing some selected Yoruba taboos, it is discovered that: (a) the language of a particular society is an integral part of its culture, (b) many of the taboos have been taken over by Christianity and technology (c) youths have a laissez-faire attitude as their belief in taboos is fast disappearing because parents and guardians do not educate children in these acts any more. It is concluded that for the Yoruba culture to be saved from imminent extinction, parents must expose the young ones to cultural beliefs and ensure that they speak the language. This is necessary because internalized culture allows people to respond in appropriate ways to the norms of the society or community in which they live.

Key words: Socio-cultural; Yoruba taboos; Society's attitude

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INTRODUCTION

Taboo is a major component of the Yoruba culture. It is one way in which the Yoruba society expresses its disapproval of certain kinds of behaviour believed to be harmful to its members, either for supernatural reasons or because such behaviour violates a moral code. In line with this understanding, Osei (2006) posits that "taboos represent the main source of guiding principles regulating and directing the behaviour of individuals and the community towards the Supreme Being and especially the gods and the ancestors in African traditional societies". It is the prohibition against touching, saying, or doing something for fear of immediate harm from a supernatural force. Akindele and Adegbite (1999) further explain that Taboo words and expressions reflect social customs and views of the Yoruba culture. It can be characterized as being concerned with behaviour which is believed to be supernaturally forbidden or regarded as immoral and improper. The term 'taboo' comes from the Tongan word 'tabu', meaning set apart or forbidden.

Every society has a culture and taboos hold the society together. Although some taboos can be traced to apparent danger in health and safety, no common explanation has been given for most others; most authorities agree that they tend to relate to objects and actions that are significant for the maintenance of social order. In summary, in the Yoruba society, a taboo is a powerful social proscription (or ban) relating to any area of human activity or social custom that is venerated and or forbidden based on moral judgment, religious beliefs and or scientific consensus. They are recognized to avoid

disrespect to any given authority, be it legal, moral and/or religious. In the same vein, Masaka and Chemhuru (2011) in their study of Shona taboos argue that Shona taboos provide moral sanctions that help in shaping a person's unhu (virtue) in the human community. They believe that proper behaviour in the young and the grown-up are inculcated through Shona taboos. Thus, social order according to them is improved in the Shona society.

Madu (2002) explains that breaking the taboo is usually considered as offensive or disgusting by society and attracts either a punishment from relevant authorities or suffering from guilty conscience. According to him, an inbuilt force seems to come into action condemning the negative behaviour of breaking a taboo. Trudgill (1974) earlier explains that taboo words occur in most languages and failure to adhere to the often strict rules governing their use can lead to punishment or public shame.

In line with Vygotskian's socio-cultural approach to cultural development, agents of culture have a responsibility of transmitting cultural knowledge to children. Trevarthen (1988) considers parents, teachers and guardians as agents of culture who set a child's actions within an intimate environment which is deeply informed by their own cultural knowledge.

The study focuses on the socio-cultural description of Yoruba taboos and then investigates society's (especially youths) attitude to Yoruba taboos.

YORUBA CULTURE AND ATTITUDE TO TABOOS

Culture refers to beliefs, values, behaviour and material objects that constitute a people's ways of life. It is distinguished between thoughts and things or material and non-material culture. Macionis (2000) defines culture as "involving all that entirely surround a person: beliefs, rules for behaviour, ideas of right and wrong and material objects; he views culture as the social heritage of a people, those learned patterns for thinking, feeling and acting that are transmitted from one generation to the next, including the quintessence of those patterns in physical objects".

The Yoruba culture is made of strict rules, norms, and mores that govern the ways a certain individual must behave. An individual must therefore respond in appropriate ways to the norms of the society or community in which she or he lives. To achieve this, she must internalize certain societal values through the process of socialization and social control. Yoruba culture according to Ayo (2002) is transmitted through the family, age sets, elders and secret societies. Thus, the transmission of culture from one generation to the other does not necessarily end with the use of language; it also involves how understanding establishes relationships among people in a given society.

Yoruba taboos just like in many other cultures in

Africa and several parts of the world, relate to various aspects of people's lives such as dressing, sex, food, hygiene, death, birth, business, royalty, etc. Salami (2006) explains that Yoruba people, for example, do not often describe the genitals by their technical terms and that it is also, taboo to mention women's menstrual activity by name. He further declares that although swearing (*eebu* in Yoruba) may be revolting, it is not considered as bad as using vulgar or obscene words (*oro rirun*) among the Yoruba people.

Olajubu (1997) summarizes the description of taboos among the Yoruba lucidly thus:

The Yoruba is guided by an unwritten constitution cutting across all spheres of the individual's life. Rules of life and conduct are most times embedded in the culture of the people in Africa; such aspect of culture includes prayers, proverbs, wise sayings, and taboos. Taboos can be described as the don'ts of the society. This could be perceived from two different angles, what must not be done because the society says so, and what cannot be done. Taboos touch every aspect of the individual's life in Yoruba society. For example, there are professional taboos; health taboos, religious taboos, moral taboos and sexual taboos to mention a few (p.1).

It has been observed also that specific personal qualities such as age, height, weight and appearance are not always discussed with friends or in public; this implies that such topics could be taboos among Yoruba people.

In recent times however, people's attitudes to taboos vary depending on age, literacy level and sex. In Nigeria, where English has a special status of being the national language as well as the second language, the proliferation of western mores through the English language has brought a *laissez-faire* attitude to Yoruba taboos. Salami (2006) posits that,

with the Nigerian society becoming more and more assimilated into the global village, college and university students, youths are increasingly influenced both by the cultural values from the west and the middle-east, including movies (on videos, satellite television and the internet), Pentecostalism, and fashion, as well as the spread of Muslim fundamentalism.

It is a common thing among youths to speak in English in and out of campuses. A cursory observation reveals that many of them attended primary and secondary schools that do not teach indigenous languages. The reason for this is not far fetched as parents believe that since English is the official language in Nigeria, it is expedient to train their children to speak the language from cradle. Therefore, at this youthful age where English is the language of communication, Yoruba taboos may not have a chance of transmission from parents to children.

How much of these taboos do parents transfer to their children? Is their attitude connected to the amount of cultural values inculcated into them?

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The study is based on Vygotsky's socio-cultural theory

which states that “every function in the child’s cultural development appears twice: first, on the social level, and later on the individual level, that is, first, between people (interpsychological), and second, inside the child (intrapsychological). This implies that the child first relates with people, parents, teachers, siblings and peers to develop culturally before the act is molded and established in him. The primary focus is learning through socialization.

Adamson and Chance (1998) relate the two important aspects in Vygotskian’s approach to social interactions at two levels. They see this approach firstly as fundamentally cultural and secondly, as a pattern of proximal developmental change in which a phase of adult support precedes a phase of independent infant accomplishment. The adult’s reaction and interpretations transform the infant’s emerging social behaviour into a social act. After many experiences of supported expression, the child gradually masters an action that is qualified with cultural meaning since the act has passed through a development process during which the adult has educated the child in its use. The term, “zone of proximal development” is an essential notion in social cultural theory. Vygotsky describes the zone of proximal development as all of the knowledge and skills that a person cannot yet understand or perform on their own yet, but is capable of learning with guidance.

One part of this study examines youths’ attitude to Yoruba taboos on the premise of Vygotsky’s submissions.

DATA COLLECTION

The study employs oral interview to gather data from selected Yoruba speaking patrons and matrons, youths, the educated and uneducated within the environs of the Redeemer’s University in the Redemption Camp and Obafemi Awolowo University, at Ile-Ife. Respondents were asked specific questions pertaining to various Yoruba taboos and their attitude to taboos. Other sources used for gathering data were through books, articles, and journals.

METHODOLOGY

A sample of 600 respondents comprises (150) male and (150) female literate and illiterate adults with age range of 45-70 years constitute the adult group while (150) males and (150) females undergraduates of Obafemi Awolowo University and Redeemer’s University constitute the youth group with the age range of 16-35 years. Out of the 300 adults, 200 are educated and 80 are half literate in that they have primary education and some are attending adult literacy classes already, 20 are illiterates. The 300 youths are selected across various disciplines in both universities. Simple percentage is employed for data analysis.

Respondents are selected through the random sampling

technique. Obafemi Awolowo University being situated in Ile Ife, a town regarded as the cradle of the Yoruba culture is used for this reason while Redeemer’s University, a mission school situated in a Christian settlement at Mowe, Ogun state has its population made up of different Yoruba tribes.

Ten (10) taboos which are randomly selected cut across cooking, royalty, birth, death and business are analyzed based on Vygotsky socio-cultural theory.

A SOCIO-CULTURAL ANALYSIS OF SELECTED YORUBA TABOOS

Item 1

It is a taboo to say that the King is dead (*oba ti ku*). Instead, we say the King has entered the ceiling or roof (*oba w’aja*).

The phrase, ‘w’aja’ that is, ‘wo aja’ (entered the ceiling or roof) means ‘joined his ancestors’ or has ‘gone to the root of tradition’. This is because it is sacrilegious to equate the king with a mere man who dies, rather the Yoruba view the King as a mortal god who goes to rest with his ancestors after a job well done on earth. The Oba was the arch priest of the living members of society and ensured the fertility in plants and animals and the link between the living and the dead. The Oba lived in a compound in the center of the town, unseen, unheard and untouched except when performing spiritual and political duties (Maynard, 2001). The news of the king’s death is not immediately released until after some rituals have been done. According to Olaleye-Oruene (1983), at the head of each tribe reigns a king called Oba who used to deal with supra-regional matters. Nowadays, the Obas no longer have a say in official policy making although they are still honoured and respected as traditional rulers. Beaded crowns are worn by the Oba kings during festivities to emphasize their spiritual powers and royal lineage.

The Yoruba believe that dead ancestors return to the living, usually as a grandchild of the departed ancestor. So, when a child is born, the Yoruba generally consult the oracle in order to find out which ancestor has been reincarnated, as ancestors can only be reincarnated once and only in a particular child. Of note though, is the fact that only persons who were thought to be good before death, would be the ones to be reincarnated. (culled from acij-ioj.org.jm/v1/2011/07/beliefs...yoruba-afro-jamaicans)

All adult respondents are aware of the taboo and they explained that it is a way of according reverence and fear to the royalty. As an extension, whatever instruction comes from the throne is fearfully adhered to without complaint. But 80% of adults confessed that they have not taught their children this taboo. Could this explain why youths are not law abiding? Some of the youths 65% have never heard about this taboo before while 35% believe that there is nothing special about a king’s death since he

is a human being.

Item 2

It is a taboo to announce that someone has died (enia ti ku) rather; we are to say that the person's head has been covered with cloth (enia te'ri gba'so).

Death is revered and feared among the Yoruba. So, it is not to be spoken to forestall its occurrence especially at night. Rather than being the carrier of the bad news of death, a person is meant to say that his/her head has been covered with cloth in Yoruba culture, so as to lessen the impact of shock on the family members of the deceased.

They believe that death marks the transition to life after death, and much of the symbolism of Yoruba burial ritual is that of a journey. The dead go to one of two 'orun', depending on how they are judged by 'Olorun' (God); 'orun rere', (good heaven) for the virtuous, and 'orun apadi', (hell), for the wicked, where they are tormented forever.

They believe that human life does not end with death, but instead, is extended into the life beyond. Therefore, the living are able to maintain relationships with the non-living through offerings and prayers. However, of note, the Yoruba do not consider every dead person. It is only men and women who have lived well, attained an enviable old age before dying, and left behind good children and memory that are generally considered. Excluded from this respected group are barren women, children who died prematurely and, those who died tragically.

All the illiterate adults are aware of this taboo while only 65% of the educated adults are aware. However, 20% of the youth are aware but all 100% do not observe it. They mention the word death any time it happens among them. This is expressly done since many of the youth converse in English and not in Yoruba. Can we then say the high rate of death among youths could be as a result of not observing this taboo?

Item 3

It is prohibited to say that a fat or hefty person is heavy (enia wuwo). Rather, we say that the person is light (enia fuye).

The word 'light' is being used to refer to someone's weight because Yoruba abhor referring to someone as heavy as it is only the dead or a non-living thing/object that can be described as heavy. The Yoruba thus, run away from ascribing this term to a living being so that the person will not die.

All adults, both literate and illiterate are aware of this taboo but do not instruct their children and wards. Therefore, almost all (94%) of the undergraduates do not observe this taboo. Incidentally, many of them are on the fat side and they do not refer to the fat ones as light weight.

Item 4

It is a taboo to ask for a needle (abere) in the morning or

evening from a street hawker or petty trader. Rather, one should ask for 'okinni'.

A new word 'okinni', although the meaning is translucent has been created to replace 'abere'. It is believed that the mention of the word (abere) in the morning and evening brings bad luck to the trader as nobody would patronize her. The purpose of creating this word is to ensure that the buyer of the needle asks for it without attracting the wrath of the hawker.

All the youths (100%) asked have not heard about the word 'okinni' before. But they all know what 'abere' means. In other words, they have not been observing this taboo, although, adults are well aware.

Item 5

It is a taboo to ask whether a project/business was successful or not. Rather, one should ask whether the outcome was a fish or crab (eja nb' akan?).

Among the Yoruba, the words 'fish' and 'crab' mean 'bad or unsuccessful' and 'good or successful' respectively. The reason for the Yoruba saying this is not far fetched because they see 'fish' as something that rots or spoils quickly while the 'crab' does not spoil quickly. This is used to ask about the outcome of a contract deal, etc.

Maynard (2001) explains that;

The rural and traditional economy of the early Yoruba people was rooted in farming, hunting, and fishing. Farming in the midst of a rainforest produced unique challenges for farmers such as the difficulty of cultivating land thick with roots, the challenge of clearing trees held in place by jungle vines, the fast growing vegetation that was always ready to take back the land.

Thus, this is done to remove public embarrassment if the project did not come through and to keep it a secret if the project came through so that evil spirits would not tamper with its success.

Many of the adults 89% respond that they are aware but they do not see any reason in instructing their children because times have changed. According to them, no evil spirit is after anybody. None of the youth is aware of this taboo.

Item 6

It is a taboo to say that there is no salt at home (ko si iyo nile). Rather, we are to say there is no sea at home (ko si osa nile).

The word 'sea' originally means the large area of salty water that is mostly enclosed by land. It implies that salt is got from the sea. Apart from this 'salt' means joy, happiness in the Yoruba culture. It is a symbolic object used at naming ceremony and traditional marriage to pray for joy, wealth, riches and good health that make life worthwhile. The euphemism sea (osa) is used because they believe that if the taboo (no salt) is pronounced, their joy is going to be stolen or taken away and terrible things will begin to happen.

All the undergraduates (100%) believe this is ridiculous though they are not aware of the taboo. They understand that salt symbolizes joy and richness but when exhausted it must be announced without reservation. However, 80% of adults are aware of this taboo but do not teach their children to observe it.

Item 7

It is a taboo to say that someone is eating (oun jeun). Rather, we say that he is on top of the king (o wa lori oba).

Another way of saying this is that 'he is observing tradition'. The Yoruba say this because the act of eating is something as important as a 'night with the king' or 'just conversing with the king.' Food is held in high esteem in families. Therefore, a person is not expected to talk or to be disturbed at all when eating.

While almost all the adults (89%) are aware of this taboo, all the youths (100%) do not observe it as they have not heard about it. They do not see any sense in not being able to say what you are doing at any given time, not even the act of eating which is normal. It is a common behaviour among youths to eat and talk or argue simultaneously while rushing to class or while waiting for the next activity in the lecture room. Also, they do not have the time and/or means to prepare their meals in school so, they are satisfied with eating fast foods at cafeterias over which they discuss different issues.

Item 8

It is prohibited to ask for or state the number of children a woman has (a ki ka omo f'olomo). Rather, we are to simply say that she has children.

This is done in the Yoruba culture so that barrenness or lack of children would not be publicly announced or prophesied to the woman. Barrenness is a grievous matter which must not be discussed in a lighter mood. In a Yoruba polygamous set up, it is difficult to know the biological mother of a child as all the wives have claims on all the children. Mobolade (1971) in an earlier research on twins explained that the family unit is of vital importance in the life of every Yoruba. He further expatiates that:

As in many African societies, the concept of the family extends far beyond one's own parents, siblings, wife and children. It includes a whole clan often composed of more than a hundred people among which mutual assistance is compulsory. The head of this extended family is the clan elder called Bale.

Instead of saying how many children a woman has, one should just say that the woman has children whether she has only one child or twelve children or none. This is also a measure taken to forestall actions of the evil spirits against the woman involved.

89% of the adult respondents, including both educated and uneducated believe in this taboo and they observe it. However, only 40% of the youth are aware of this taboo

but all of them believe that there is nothing wrong with saying the number of children a woman has. Therefore, they do not observe the taboo.

Item 9

It is a taboo for a lady to wear a man's cloth, particularly trousers, else she will die.

This taboo is based solely on superstitious tradition of culture. It is a way of bringing sanity into the woman's dressing culture.

Ladies on campus commonly wear trousers (jeans) to school and for casual outings. This is common among female students at Obafemi Awolowo University which is a secular/government school. But at the Redeemer's University, it is prohibited for female students to wear trousers. This rule is based on biblical injunctions not on cultural beliefs. Redeemer's University female students believe they are being unduly punished because jeans would have reduced a lot of stress in dressing for school. However, many of them say they wear jeans at home.

While 71% of the adult respondents are aware of this taboo, 56% of the younger ones have not heard of this taboo and they believe it is outrageous.

Item 10

It is a taboo for a pregnant woman to walk the street in the sunny afternoon. She is expected to do whatever she needs to do early in the morning or in the early evening. If there is a need for her to go out, she must tie a stone or pin in her wrapper or fixed on her dress. The belief is that evil spirits parade the streets in the afternoon and can drive away good babies from pregnant women and then inhabit their stomachs. The stone or pin is to drive away evil child from coming near her. Such taboo is given by elders to avoid 'abiku' spirits believed to wander in the noon. Verger, (1968) and Morton-Williams (1960) succinctly explain this mystery thus:

An abiku may be born in a child on earth, but it soon leaves for heaven again, and the child dies. The abiku spirits have their own egbe in heaven, and when one of them leaves for earth, he promises to return quickly to his companions. If a woman gives birth to a succession of children who die in infancy, it may be divined that it is an abiku at work, and the next child is given special treatment. Abiku children are given special names, examples are Aiyedun, 'life is good', implying that the child should stay to enjoy it, or Durosinmi, 'stay and bury me', implying that the child should outlive its parents. The appearance of these children is often neglected, and they might even be disfigured to make them less attractive to their companions in heaven. It is normal to postpone the circumcision or sacrifice of an abiku child until it appears likely that it will survive.

65% of the younger respondents are not aware of this and they believe it is impracticable and ridiculous. Older respondents however have a contrary opinion in that they explain that before the advent of Christianity, many were oppressed by evil spirits and child mortality rate was very high. 89% of adults do not teach their children and wards

this taboo as it has been overtaken by technology and Christianity.

DISCUSSION

Results from respondents reveal that youth's negative and laissez-faire attitude to some Yoruba taboos is due to parents' negligence. It is also discovered that many taboos are no longer relevant as Christianity and technology have taken over the times. Majority of the youth no longer speak the Yoruba language and have invariably taken on the western culture. Educated adults who are aware of some of these taboos do no longer practice them and so do not teach their children. Illiterate adults believe in the taboos but find it difficult to inculcate their beliefs on the educated younger ones who are of the view that taboos are mere superstitions.

Female youths are however interested in the taboo which prohibits pregnant women from walking in the sun. A few (15.5%) believe that there could be some sense in this taboo and they could observe it when the time comes. Also, female adults confess that they discourage their grown up daughters from walking the streets in the sunny afternoon but do not present this as a taboo. Educated adults believe that medically, it is advisable that one avoids the hot sun for many obvious reasons.

However, male youths are totally negative in their attitude to these selected taboos. They are less concerned and are not enthusiastic about this at all. The Gale Encyclopedia of Childhood and Adolescence explains that the attitude of youths may be due to the fact that "they are trying to experiment with identity, seek negative attention, rebel against authority figures, and question rules, boundaries, and social norms". Adult male respondents are of the opinion that the fear and trembling inculcated into them through taboos by their own parents is lacking among today's youths and this is due to negligence of their responsibility as cultural agents.

On the issue of age, it is discovered that many adults, both female and male (86.7%) fail to indicate their specific age. For instance all illiterate adults (15%) did not specify their age. This attitude corroborates the researcher's observation that personal traits like age, height, number of children are not publicly discussed as this could also be regarded as taboo among Yoruba people.

CONCLUSION

The Yoruba are strongly bound together by their language and their culture. Unfortunately, cultural practices of the Yoruba such as taboos and the language are virtually dead among the youth because the language is gradually being faced out as the use of English, Christianity and technology have greatly influenced their attitude to the belief in and practice of Yoruba taboos.

Leroy (2000) clarifies that,

Within today's Yoruba religious affiliations, more than 40% of the population are allied to Islam, less than 40% are Christians with the remaining 20% exclusively practicing the traditional animist Yoruba religion.

Although respondents regard taboos as an essential part of the socialization process, it is evident that social change cannot occur without stripping taboos off their cultural and religious associations (Drewal, 1999). However, the fact that a few respondents still believe and practice taboos shows that taboo themes cannot be totally eradicated because of their deep religious and cultural roots. If this problem would be solved, there are two ways to activating a positive attitude to taboo and culture. On one hand is the effort to uphold traditional values as they have been and the other is the ability to modify or change those aspects that do not suit modern circumstances, especially when science has proved some taboos wrong.

Thus, to uphold Yoruba cultural values, families must bring their children up by exposing them to existing taboos and explain the reasons behind their formulations. Yoruba language must be protected to avoid total extinction of the rich cultural values of the people. The only channel by which human beings abstract reality is language. Language affects the way we think or perceive our reality. Total abandonment of the Yoruba language brings total dislocation and loss of identity. Some basic aspects of the Yoruba culture like taboos, different forms of greetings, dressing, etc are now completely foreign to many elite families. It is imperative that elites show positive attitude to the proper maintenance of the Yoruba language and encourage their children to use and appreciate it. The Yoruba language must be used in order to preserve our rich culture.

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