

EEWO (TABOO) IN YORUBA CULTURE: A PHILOSOPHICAL INVESTIGATION

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DOI: 10.13140/RG.2.2.19692.39043

Abstract

This paper takes a critical reflection on eewo (taboo) among the people of Yorubaland in south west of Nigeria. Being a qualitative method of investigation, the paper carries out consultations to investigate how taboos help in guiding the behaviour of the traditional people of Yoruba land and as well maintain social order in the community. The paper also focuses on Eewo (Taboo) as an instrument of reclaiming lost values of Yoruba land. It reflects on the concept of "eewo" as a strong prohibition relating to any area of human activity or custom that is sacred or forbidden based on moral judgment, religious beliefs, or cultural norms. That breaking a taboo is usually considered objectionable by Yoruba traditional society and submits that the custodian of "eewo" taboo is the elder (teacher) who acts as a guide to the immature ones.

Keywords: *Eewo* (Taboo), philosophy, Yoruba belief, behavior and culture.

Introduction

Philosophy is the means by which every culture provides itself with justification for its values, beliefs and worldview and also serves as a catalyst for progress. Every philosophy emerges as a reaction to, or as justification for a particular culture and it is for this reason that philosophy may differ from one culture to another. (Tosam & Takou, 2016). Culture comprises those aspects of human activity which are socially rather than genetically transmitted. Each social group is characterized by its own culture, which informs the thought and activity of its members. Each culture is different and has its own systems of meaning and value, and cannot be ranked on any universal scale. One can see culture as that through which a people's highest spiritual aspirations are articulated. Culture in this sense can be seen as a substitute for religion, or as a kind of secular religion.

Examination of Eewo (Taboos) in Yorubaland

Concept of *Eewo* (Taboo) is an implicit prohibition on something based on a cultural sense that it is excessively repulsive or, perhaps, too sacred for ordinary people. Such prohibitions are present in virtually all societies (Encyclopedia Britannica). On a comparative basis, taboo, for example related to food items seem to make no sense at all, as what may be declared unfit for Ekiti state of south west, Nigeria may be perfectly acceptable to another people state of the same region. A taboo acknowledge by a particular group or tribe as part of their ways aids in the cohesion of the group, helps that particular group to stand out and maintains its identity in the face of others and therefore creates a feeling of belonging might be disregarded by the people of other cultural background.

The meaning of the word *eewo* (taboo) has been somewhat expanded in Yoruba traditional culture to strong prohibitions relating to any area of human activity or custom that is sacred or forbidden based on their moral judgement, religions, beliefs or norms. Any attempt by anybody to breaking "*eewo*" taboo is usually considered objectionable by all and sundry.

Though there is universally based *eewo* (taboo). All societies frown at incest and patricide. However, although cannibalism, in-group murder are taboos in the majority of societies, exceptions can be found, such as marriages between brothers and sisters in some countries but the Yoruba traditional society, however do not condole such relationship, it is "*Eewo*" (a Taboo) and it is looked at as an act of immorality. There is no justification for taking the life of another person; it is a taboo all over the world.

Eewo (taboos) in Yoruba traditional society serve as a set of social norms and help to explain the division between what is appropriate and inappropriate. While different cultures in Yoruba land hold a variety of *Eewo* (Taboos), the general purpose for all of them is the same (guiding of moral conduct), some might be considered silly and impractical to others, but is what make each culture unique. *Eewo* (Taboos) do not only constitute a part of our good explanation of that heritage (Omobola, 2013). Yoruba culture for example forbids a married woman to have sexual relations with a man that is not her husband. A man that suspects his wife of cheating could be tempted to lace her with *magun* (a fetish object to checkmate adultery) which is one of the strangest traditions in Nigeria. *Magun* could lead to her lover losing his life or getting stuck while in the act. This is still

an act that is being practiced till date in the south west of Nigeria to checkmate infertility on the part of both the married men and women.

The Yoruba people of south west of Nigeria hold cultural taboos in high esteem. Cultural heritage are not taken for granted. This is the hallmark of our traditional education. These *Eewo* (Taboos) are taught by the aged and elders mainly to protect individuals as a result of their past experiences or to make the younger ones desist from negatives things that can affect the whole community. Some of these *Eewo* (Taboos) are put in place to protect the age long traditions. In order to maintain the society in acceptable ways, various practices are collectively looked upon by the people. *Eewo*(Taboo) are developed to maintain peace and order in the society.

All communities in the world have their own social practices, values and taboos (*eewo*) in the traditional society. According to steiner (1956) Taboo is seen in maintaining harmony between God and spirits. This harmony would be ruled by moral order which is preserved by tradition and, if followed, has the power or force to sustain the existence and operation of the universe, ensuring a bountiful life for humanity (Magesa, 1997). To preserve that harmony is the duty of human being, which determines his character and influences the quality of life of a community and the universe itself. Taboos (*eewo*) are then seen as a moral ambience or moral codes intended to create harmony and regulate the conduct of individual in the society. This is because in Nigeria, the traditional system holds the ascription of supernatural powers to objects called gods and goddesses. The belief system is that the gods protect the community members from harm, famine, bareness, impotence, drought, epidemics and war among others. The gods avenge their anger on whoever omits or commits any flaw for which their presence forbids, hence the cultural system holds to a very high esteem all the precepts of the law of the gods (shastri, Bhat, Nagarages Mirali & Ravindranath 2002).

Significance of *Eewo* in Yoruba Culture

Yoruba has a lot of cultural practices; some have gone into oblivion due to the influence of western culture on our heritage. Nevertheless, Yorubas are rich in culture and tradition, which most still practice till date. Every community sees the need to sanitize it environments and prevent cultural abuses. *Eewo* (taboos) are there to guide people's conduct. Although the lists of cultural taboos (*Eewo*) in Yoruba land are numerous, let us examine just a few of them.

- **Pregnant woman walking in a sunny day:** It is a taboo (*Eewo*) for a pregnant woman to roam about in the hot sun. It is the belief of the Yoruba people that demons roam about at this time of the day. The belief is that the unborn baby or mother can be possessed by these demons. One can see this as a means of protecting the pregnant woman in the Yoruba culture from undergoing stress.
- **When a dog/cat cries:** It is seen as a bad omen for a dog or pussy cat to cry unnecessarily. These animals are believed to be closer to the spirit so when they cry, it is an indication that death is about to strike in the community. Yorubas have the belief that the animal should be killed immediately to avert the looming calamity
- **Beating a male child with a broom:** This is a common taboo (*Eewo*) in the south west part of Nigeria. The belief is that if a male child is beaten with broom that his sexual organ will disappear hence automatically becomes an impotent. Though one may subject this belief to scrutiny but practice has been devised to protect the male child from physical assault.
- **Collecting rain with the hand:** Children are often warned not to engage in the habit of going out when it is raining. It is a fact that children like to play in the rain. Some may want to wait till it rains before taking their bath. In order to keep them safe at home, the elder may say that thunder can strike one down if he or she collects rain with hand. This is done to actually save as a step to personal hygiene since if it does not rain, many of these children may not think of taking their bath that day and it also prevent them from drinking dirty water collected thereby also promoting personal hygiene.
- **Same - sex marriage is prohibited:** People of Yoruba do not practice same sex marriages. There have been instances where people have been seen struck down by thunder in the act of sexual union of the same sex as reported by one elder in my village. Though, the truth of this is not verified but such an act is seen as a disgrace to the community and is vehemently frowning at till the present days.
- **Whistling at night is not allowed:** The practice is also forbidden in Yoruba. It is believed that whistling at night acts as an invitation for the evil spirits and demons to enter the houses of the inhabitants and torment them. It also attracts reptiles like snakes into the house. One can say this (*eewo*) taboo portray the traditional Yorubas as very vast in

wisdom since it is possible to invite snake in the night by whistling and this has scientific support. Even, if one is not interested in this, it is an act of indiscipline to whistle in the night while one's neighbours are on bed. That of invitation of the evil spirit may not be justified but elders through this regulate the conducts of the younger one in the community.

- **A strapped baby must never fall from his/her mothers back:** It is an abomination in Yoruba land for a baby to fall from his/her mother's back. To avoid calamity in the community, nursing mother are serious warned to strap her baby very well. The implication of this is that if the baby falls from her mother's back, if he is a boy, there is probability that his wife will die in the future and if she is a girl, any man that have sexual intercourse with her in the future will die. This is a belief in Yoruba traditional society. One may applaud this because it serves as a means of inculcating discipline in the mind of the mother and also give room for proper care of the child.
- **Women must not enter the "ORO" grove (Shrine):** This is where egungun (Masquerade) takes off and returns so that the woman will avoid being kidnapped by "ORO" (Invisible supernatural being). One can say that this "*eewo*" (Taboo) was put in place to preserve the secret of the tradition from woman who may eventually leave the community to marry another man of different cultural background in the near future, thereby, preserving the cultural heritage of the community. The elders in the community are the custodians of all these *eewo* (taboos). This qualifies them to be teachers going by Akinpelu (2005) definition of teaching as the process through which a more mature man tries to impact knowledge in the less mature ones.
- **A king must not look inside his royal crown:** Yorubas of the south west of Nigeria believe that the day a king looks inside his royal crown will be his last day on earth. The day he does it is the day he will join his ancestors. A king in traditional Yoruba society can only be allowed to do his crown provided the members of the community are fed up with his reign as their king or that the king himself is tired of his reign and he insist of committing commit suicide. This is also a vital means of adding sanity to our culture, in the sense that a king should not be seen publicly removing his crown in the community as a sign of respect for the crown. If he will like to do this as custodian of cultural heritage, this should be done in his privacy.

Odejobi (2013) avers that *eewo* (taboos) provide a set of rules that serve as a moral guidance or law in the community to ensure peace and security were in the community. Osei (2006) attests to this that every moral system requires the existence of guiding principles. Even though formulated as a “negative” principle, stressing “do not” and teaching people about what is not acceptable in the community, by implication, they are also pointing out to the actions that are supposed to be done. By preventing people from doing wrong things, they are helping them to focus on what is encouraged in the society. In a society where there is no police, taboos serve as a guardian of moral values. To a certain extent, existence of *eewo* (taboos) in the traditional Yoruba culture is better than modern law enforcing agencies, because in most cases, breaking of a taboo is associated with an appropriate punishment even when the culprit is not physical arrested by anybody in the community.

Conclusion

Eewo (Taboos) is a vital instrument in the promotion of the tradition of the Yoruba cultural heritage. If culture is a way of life, then *eewo* (taboo), being an aspect of the way of life of Yorubas in the south west of Nigeria cannot be separated from the people. *Eewo* performs the role of education in the sense that it regulates individuals’ conduct, it guilds our thinking and tells us what is proper and what is not proper. What cannot be denied is the fact that, in the good old days, one who broke “*eewo*” (Taboo) did not need any person to arrest him just as it is done today by the present days law enforcement agencies. Traditional people of Yorubaland are taught to religiously follow the *eewo* (taboos) of their land to avoid being sanctioned. The punishment for wrong action as a repercussion of acting against the beliefs of the land is not negotiable. Through the learnt behaviour, the traditional Yorubas have been able to maintain social order and as well promote the values of their society.

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