



TABOOS – THEIR ROLES AS INSTRUMENTS OF INSTRUCTION, PROTECTION AND CONSERVATION OF BIOTIC ELEMENTS

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Abstract

Taboos are oral instructions passed from one generation to another to maintain peace, order and well-being in the societies. Taboos are constraints, restrictions and “do nots” with consequences placed on a group of people bound by culture for their well-being. Taboos vary from one area to another. The review of literature, on which this paper is based, follows generic and interactive steps described by Templier and Paré (2015) which include formulating the research objectives; searching for literature; screening for inclusion and exclusion; assessing the studies; extracting and analyzing data. Search was conducted within online databases. The paper examines taboos associated with humans, plants, animals, the environment and scientific concepts associated with them. The review showed that in societies traditional taboos have long served as informal yet effective mechanisms for environmental conservation, biotic protection and preservation. By restricting activities such as the felling of sacred trees and certain social behaviors, these taboos have contributed to biodiversity preservation and community well-being. As modernization influences cultural practices, providing logical and scientific explanations for these taboos becomes essential. Such contextualization can aid younger generations in understanding and valuing these traditions, ensuring their continued relevance in contemporary society.

Keywords: Conservation, Cultural beliefs, Society, Taboos, Traditional knowledge, Well-being.

Introduction

Taboos are things forbidden and when done results in chains of negative, hostile and unpalatable effects. It is associated with what is forbidden in religious context (Afe, 2013). Ekwochi *et al.* (2016) defined taboos as a belief that forbids association of a group of people with other people, places or practices. According to them taboo is an unwritten rule mainly based on religious and or historical reasons that regulate behaviour. Taboos are sets of prohibited

acts. Things or actions that are forbidden are termed sacred, consecrated or unclean (Elysium and Tayvian, 2024). Taboo is a set of moral code that regulates the actions of individuals in a social setting for ordered and harmonious life (Nwobodo, 2021). Taboos are cultural prohibitions restricting community behaviour to avoid danger and uphold sacred cultural practices that are peculiar to cultural set-ups in villages and moral guidance, protecting the deities and shrines, the well-being of the environment within rural

communities. Traditional rules that communities had to comply with in order to keep the land of the god's clean and pure are referred to as taboos.

Taboo is a reflection of belief systems, world view and ecology and economics (Mohammad and Mohammad, 2015). Nwobodo (2021) described taboos as a set of moral codes that regulates the actions of individuals in a social setting for ordered and harmonious life and infractions results in the wrath of the gods with very dire consequences. They also involve protection of water surface: wetlands, rivers and lakes; and terrestrial habitats in specific areas or locations.

Taboos apply to all spheres of people: young and old, male and female and influenced by cultural beliefs, religion, social status and richness of biodiversity in terms of species availability, distribution, population, diversity and use intensity by members of the community. Taboos cut across individuals, families, communities and the society (Mohammad and Mohammad, 2015; Adeleye, 2020; Olajide and Olaimolu, 2022). Taboo is universal, diverse, and relative (what is forbidden in a culture may not be forbidden in another culture) and are at the heart of religious, moral, social code that has to do with things or acts that are untouchable, unspeakable, disgusting, unacceptable, and improper (Olajide and Olaimolu, 2022). Taboos are evidence among cultures with each culture having its own taboos. Taboos such as incest, cannibalism, patricide, suicide, murder are universal while others may be associated to the nature of birth e.g twins, gender, families and communities (Odejobi, 2013; Osemeobo, 2013; Mohammad and Mohammad, 2015; Ekwochi *et al.* (2016); Elysium and Tayvian, 2024).

Taboos have their roles; check mating against socially unacceptable behaviour

(Mohammad and Mohammad, 2015); crime avoidance and detection and upholding moral standards (Nwobodo, 2021, Ekwochi *et al.*, 2016); means of biodiversity conservation (sacred groves and forest and forbidden the killing and consumption of some animals) (Kayode *et al.*, 2016; Osei, 2012; Osei-Tutu, 2017; Sejabaledi, 2022; Sinthumule, 2024; Onebunne, 2024); maintenance of social order and promoting values in the society (Odejobi, 2013; Mohammad and Mohammad, 2015; Nwobodo, 2021) ; maintaining harmony between Gods spirits and man; performs the role of education, regulates individual's conduct, guides our thinking and tell us what is proper and not proper . Taboos provide for the well-being of the environment. Infractions of taboos or non-observance result in terrible consequences or set back or a times death of breakers. This could be in form of pestilence, sickness and diseases, famine, chaos, bareness e.t.c.

Despite the profound influence that taboos on lives of people, over time there had been decline / poor level of compliance or observance. Odejobi (2013) pointed out that taboos are being weakened because of the mode of transmission which is oral from one generation to another. According to Iqbal *et al.* (2015) taboos undergo changes over time; some may disappear while others become stronger or dominate the prevailing customs of the society. The changes in the society have greatly affected observance to taboos. Osemeobo (2013) strongly noted that taboos are collapsing or almost no longer existing in community forests in Nigeria because of the following reasons: non recognition in courts - cases of enforcing tenure regimes are often lost in customary and magistrate courts; the sizes of community forests where tenure regimes are exercised have diminished and application of community regulations has lost its credibility and introduction of Christianity and Islam to communities which is associated

with faith in God against the beliefs in African mythology on which taboos are based. Osei-Tutu (2017) noted that the usefulness of taboos for effective and efficient natural resource management is threatened by their erosion as local communities' transform. It was further noted that the adoption of Christianity and other aspects of modernity such as formal education and exposure to foreign culture through modern media, taboos that rely on myths only to achieve compliance have lost their influence on resource use practice in contemporary local communities.

Taboos constitute a distinct type of informal local institutions that offer opportunity for achieving effective and efficient local resource management. They exist in many societies and they are usually voluntarily complied with, based on mythical beliefs that bad luck and calamities befall people who flout them (Osei-Tutu, 2017). This attribute distinguishes them from other informal institutions and gives them unique potential for natural resource conservation. According to Eyermam (2016) taboos is incompatible with modernization because modernization is associated with freedom, individuality and liberation from religious and other constrains. Modernization is at variance to taboos from younger generation's point of view because taboo is anti-freedom and anti-speech. Olajide and Olaimolu (2022) pointed out that the effectiveness of taboo has declined drastically due to civilization and that science does not take taboo serious because they are not provable. Taboos are affected by change in the society. Nwobode (2021) pointed out that as the society experience changes, the taboos are affected and changed. People question the rationale behind taboos especially those who consider them as primitive.

Osei (2017) noted that taboos have scientific

and rational explanation with respect to the roles they perform in the society. Although taboos compliance may be weakened by civilization in the society, their influence on resource use practice in contemporary local communities, resource management taboos need to be retained by having instrumental relevance as well as their mythical relevance (Osei-Tutu, 2017). Osei (2017) noted that most African taboos have underlying verifiable rational or scientific explanations and consists of moral principles comparable in their usefulness to any system of taboos or code of ethics found in other cultures. To buttress this, Sejabaledi (2022) pointed out that some taboos were enacted as a result of environmental challenges and taboo system were used to maintain, conserve and manage specific natural resources. Ihinmikaiye et al. (2022) noted that taboos have rational and scientific explanations. They noted that humans lived close to nature and recognized the connectivity and interdependence of all living things-humans, plants and animals and positive values were inculcated towards the use of natural resources through proverbs, stories, songs and religious ceremonies and rituals.

African taboos offer the best explanation for successful ecological practices and with appropriate interpretations and modifications taboos could be transformed into highly effective instrument for biodiversity conservation and sustaining holistic development. It is therefore necessary to explain the basis of taboo use in the society. This will enable the younger generations to contextualize, understand and value these traditions, ensuring their continued relevance in contemporary society. The paper also advocates for their inclusion in general studies curriculum in primary, secondary and tertiary levels of education.

The objectives of this paper are to: identify taboos that are been used for maintenance,

preservation, wellbeing of biotic elements and provide logical and scientific explanations for some of the taboos.

Materials and methods

The review of literature, on which this paper is based, follows generic and interactive steps described by Templier and Paré (2015). These include formulating the research objectives; searching for literature; screening for inclusion and exclusion criteria; assessing the studies and extracting needed information.

Literature search

Databases Searched: Search was conducted within a range of electronic databases such as Web of Science, PubMed, Google Scholar, Scopus and Semantic Scholar.

Search terms: The searches involved sole and combination of keywords such as taboos, cultural/ethnic prohibitions, conservations/preservation, and sacred forests/plants. The title of items returned across the keywords' searches was first checked and screened. After this initial check, abstract of the screened items was read to judge whether the whole paper is relevant and useful.

Inclusion criteria in assessing literatures used in this study were:

- i. Studies that explored the role of taboos in the conservation and protection of biotic elements, (plants and animals).
- ii. Research articles, reviews and book chapters that examined the cultural, social and ecological significance of taboos.
- iii. Studies that investigated the impact of taboos on human behavior and environmental outcomes.

Exclusion criteria include:

- i. Studies that do not specifically focus on the role of taboos in conservation

and protection of biotic elements.

- ii. Articles that lack sufficient data or methodological details and
- iii. Reviews or articles that were not peer reviewed.

Quality assessment of sources

a. Quality assessment criteria

This involved study design and methodology, sample size and population characteristics; data analysis and methods; relevance and applicability of findings to the research question.

b. Quality assessment tools

This included standardized quality assessment checklists for quantitative and qualitative studies.

Data extraction and synthesis

Relevant data were extracted from included studies using standardized data extraction form. Extracted data were study characteristics, sample size, methods and main findings.

Synthesis of extracted data was achieved using a narrative approach, with focus on the main themes and findings related to the role of taboos in conservation and protection of biotic elements.

Data analysis

Two approaches were adopted in this study

- i. Thematic analysis: extracted data were analyzed to identify patterns and themes related to the role of conservation and protection of biotic elements.
- ii. Content analysis: this was used to examine the cultural and social significance of taboos in different contexts.

Time Frame covered

Studies published from 2013 to 2024 were included. This time frame was chosen in order to capture recent and broad range of research on the roles of taboos in conservation and protection of biotic elements.

Results and discussion

Table 1: A summary of some taboos, scientific explanations and concepts taught

S/N	Taboo	Scientific explanation	Concept
1.	Standing under the rains and putting hand in the rains; we must not use bare hand to collect rain water during rain fall, so that thunder will not strike the person dead)	Lightning strikes-Standing outside during thunderstorms increases the risk of lightning strikes which can be fatal. Electrocution- lightning can travel through conductive objects, including water and metal, posing significant electrocution risk. Health risk Hypothermia- prolonged exposure to cold from rain can lead to hypothermia especially in vulnerable individuals. Infections- exposure to contaminated rain water or increased humidity may increase the risk of infections. To prevent cold, flu, prevent harshness of acid rains to the skin.	Public health- Disease prevention, public health concern
2.	Harvesting of medicinal herbs after 6.00p.m	Diurnal variation in chemical composition- some medicinal herbs may exhibit diurnal fluctuations in chemical composition, potentially affecting potency or efficacy. Secondary metabolites production- plants may produce secondary metabolites such as alkaloids, flavonoids in response to environmental stimuli which could vary through the day. Light exposure – light intensity and duration can influence growth, development and chemical composition. Temperature and humidity- changes in temperature and humidity after 6pm may impact water content, potentially affecting medicinal properties. Microbial contamination from dew and moisture- increased moisture content after 6p.m may promote microbial growth, potentially contaminating the harvested herbs.	Public health and potency/efficacy of the herbs.

8.	iii. Prohibition of marrying from certain families.	Prevents transfer of genetic of disorders, undesirable traits.	
9.	Prohibition of felling of some timber species - e.g <i>Milicia excelsa</i> , <i>Invingia gabonensis</i> , <i>Kyaya invorensis</i> , <i>Treculia africana</i> e.t.c Sacrifices must be made to iroko trees or some other timber species before felling	It is a means of preventing Iroko felling, <i>Milicia excelsa</i> (iroko) seedlings are easily susceptible to fungi infections, therefore they have to be preserved. Indigenous species regenerate poorly and are not well populated. Seeds exhibit dormancy under forest floor. Take long time to reach flowering and fruiting stages.	Biodiversity conservation
10	Prohibition of eating of some fruits and seeds e.g. "apon - <i>Invingia gabonensis</i>	-Seeds perpetuate the future generations and when consumed, the depletion of genetic resources occurs. -allergic reactions to such fruits and seeds	Genetic preservation Food safety.
11	Prohibition of eating of some vegetables and food E.g. <i>Solanum nigrum</i> , <i>cray fish</i> associated with some families	Allergic reactions to such foods	Food safety, allergic reaction and public health
12	Prohibition of indiscriminate harvesting of plants/trees associated with cultural site, shrines e.t.c.	To avoid depletion of genetic resources	Genetic preservation
13	Prohibition of having sex on farm lands/bush or open spaces/ No sex in the bush or bare floor	To prevent rape, transmission of sexual diseases, to curtail indiscriminate sexual urge; Sex in the bush is unsafe - partners could be bitten by insects, snakes, scorpions, exposure to infection from microorganisms. To deter rape.	Public health
14	Pregnant woman must not sleep with the stomach: so that the child will not die)	This is to guard against having a stillbirth. If a pregnant woman sleeps with her stomach it will be difficult for the fetus to kick while still in the stomach and this may to the death the of the baby.	Safety of the mother and unborn child

15	A man must not have sexual intercourse with a pregnant woman whose expected day of delivery is near; to avoid becoming wretched	It not convenient for a pregnant woman nearing delivery to be having sexual relationship. If the man has any infection like gonorrhoea, it may be contacted by the baby and the baby may become blind.	Personal safety of the woman
16	Hunting of animals of fishing during forbidden seasons and sacred days	Preservation - it is likely these periods are the mating seasons	Preservation and conservation
17	No talking while eating	To prevent choking	Personal safety
18	Falling in the birth room	to prevent falling in the bathroom and instill cleanliness among users	Personal safety and public health
19	No sex during a woman's menstrual flow	The tissues around the vagina are tender at this time which could dispose the woman to infections; the woman experiences mood swing which may affect pleasure derived from sex; conception can occur in women with less than 21 days menstrual cycle; it is messy for the man and woman.	Personal hygiene
20	Baby falling from her mother's back	Injury to the baby, paralysis from spinal cord injury, brain injury, multiple fractures could occur and a times death of the baby. Teaches the mother to be careful.	Child safety.
21	Murder and suicide	Killing violates the fundamental right to life, limits potential Taboos can exacerbate stigma, shame and guilt, which deters individual from seeking help. Fear of judgment or repercussion might prevent people from discussing suicidal thoughts or seeking help. Diminishes the population of the communities and they become vulnerable to attack from larger neighboring communities and wild animals and will not be able to provide protection the plants and animals	Mental and public health issues. Preservation of life and Human life protection.

22	Cannibalism - eating of other human beings.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Transmission of diseases such as prion diseases which can have health consequences. - consuming human tissues can pose nutritional risks including exposure to toxin and pathogens. - to prevent diseases transmission and promote social cohesion - has psychological effects on those engaging in it and those that witness it, traumatizing leading to emotional distress. <p>-This depopulates the communities. The gene pool is reduced.</p>	Public health issues. Preservation of life maintenance of mental health.
23	Bestiality - having sex with animals.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -It is a form of animal abuse, causing physical and emotional harm to animals. - Laws and regulations aimed to protect animals from exploitation and abuse. <p>Bestiality can increase the risk of zoonotic disease transmission i.e disease transferred from animals to humans.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - May be associated with underlying psychological issues or disorders. - Results in abnormal births referred to as 'ese omo' 	Public health concerns. Reflection of mental health issue.

Taboos and biodiversity preservation and conservation

This paper showcases twenty-two taboos with explanations and concepts/relevance outlined in Table 1. The taboos are for the well-being of humans, and the other biotic elements (plants and animals). Man use plants and animals for food, pharmaceuticals and cultural events but conscious of the tendency to over exploit and them; he therefore devised means of protecting himself, the plants and animals around him. Human beings over the ages provided protection for plants, animals and themselves by proper management of resources and sustaining biodiversity and the whole ecological systems. This has been achieved through the use of taboos. According to Osemeobo (2013) taboos regulate access to biodiversity with respect to species protection, harvest and utilization. Sharma *et al.* (2021) noted that taboos have been used for sustainable utilization of natural resources, conservation and management of bioresources because traditional people and ethnic communities are close to nature and depend heavily on these natural resources. According to Onebunne (2024) methods employed by indigenous people or cultures to manage their resources from one generation to another include folk fore, religion and taboos. Taboos constitute a distinct type of informal local institutions that offer opportunity for achieving effective and efficient local resource management. Taboos are social prohibitions regulating or restraining individuals, families and communities from using biotic resources. They are based on mutual agreements collectively made by members of land holding communities to aid conservation of biodiversity.

Ecological taboos

Ecological taboos are those intended by

traditional authorities for the regulation of the ethical use of the environment in view of its resources for the ecology and sustainable development. Odejobi (2013) noted that sacred grooves are religious sites housing bioresources and taboos associated with access to them have contributed to bioresources conservation through intentional protection of such areas. Taboos have been utilised as a tool in community-based marine resource management (Ayodele *et al.*, 2023). Mafimisebi *et al.* (2016) reported that clans utilized taboos in protecting natural resources and in the ecosystem-based approach to fisheries management. Sharma *et al.* (2021) emphasized the role of taboos in personal well-being, nutrition and conservation. Species specific taboos; killing and eating of totem animals were reported by Kayode *et al.* (2016); Ihinmikaiye *et al.* (2022), Onebunne (2024) and Sinthumule (2024) attested to the use of taboos as means of preservation and conservation. Taboos associated with the ecosystem, especially humans, plants and animals are to ensure personal safety, public health (maternal and child health, mental health) of the society. The paper affirms the use of taboos in biodiversity protection, conservation, preservation, personal hygiene and public health and that the taboos are still relevant today as they were then.

Taboos associated with well-being and health practices

Table 1 showed that taboos are also associated with well-being of the people in a society. Some are for personal hygiene, safety, mental and public health. Restrictions placed on people on ensuring safety included not standing by the door, bathing in the rain, not having sex on bare floors or on the farm floor were intended for personal safety. Cannibalism is both mental and public health concern, therefore taboos were put in

place to address prevent such barbaric acts. Certain foods were forbidden due to taboos, possibly stemming from allergic reactions or cultural beliefs. Adachukwu (2017) and Abere and Azene (2023) noted that food taboos are foods and beverages, which are abstained from consuming for religious, cultural or hygienic reasons which however, have adverse impact on the health and socio-economic status of the Nigerian population especially the vulnerable groups- the women, pregnant women, children and the elderly. Taboos prohibiting the consumption of certain foods must be reasonably handled. Issues of foods that are beneficial to human health should not be done away with because of their nutritional benefits. Abere and Azene (2023) suggested that nutritional counseling should be given to families especially mothers on handling such misconceptions about forbidden foods. Nutritionists should create awareness of the nutritional importance of such foods. Town hall meetings should be held regularly to handle such contentious taboos.

Conclusion

The intersection of traditional knowledge and modern science reveals intriguing parallels, with ancestral taboos sometimes reflecting empirical observation. Most of the taboos outlined are based on personal hygiene, public health, safety, preservation and conservation. Taboos need to be revisited in our societies but logical and scientific explanations of their use and implications must be communicated to the younger generations so that they will understand the basis for the taboos and for easy acceptance. Parents and guardians should communicate the meaning, explanation and appropriateness of taboos to their children/wards at the family level. Taboos and their contextualization should be introduced into the general studies

curriculum at the different levels of education. Social media should also be employed to disseminate the relevance of taboos to the present age.

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