

## Taboos as Supernatural Interdictions in Folklore: The Constructors of Social Reality

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**ABSTRACT** This paper serves as a fundamental study of taboos as a form of interdictions among the African people. Taboos form part of social control structures by which internal order is maintained in agreement with the principles of traditional competence and individual societal rights and limitations. It has been observed that, in the approach to these prohibitions, the principle of constancy and personality can be welded together to enable people to describe individual or communal existence. In general, the concept constancy in human beings is used to indicate the uninterrupted feature of personal existence. This paper serves as a safety measure in connection with traditional laws, that is, the protection of the public in general and the prevention of anti-social behaviour in particular. Basically, taboos form a pattern of mutual harmonious co-existence whereby some expectations of every human being are set.

### INTRODUCTION

African people in general, including the Northern Sotho-speaking people, have clear ideas about prohibitions which are deeply entrenched and firmly held. Taboos form part of culture and to each type of culture corresponds a particular community. They form part of language where one gets the whole cultural heritage which determines one's feelings. Kroeber (2012: 267) points out that "cultures are products of human societies operating under the influence of cultures handed down to them from earlier societies". Beliefs in these interdictions, whether in the present or another type of life, are very effective forms of social control since they may deter violation of social rules which might otherwise go unpunished. There is no reasonable person, for example, who can actually steal a tabooed object if he/she believes that such an action can result in some kind of an illness or some other form of retribution. According to Honigmann (2016: 68), the breaking of any taboo by anybody is regarded as a misconduct and this leads to sanctions against the community. That is why the community wreaks its vengeance on the transgressor by legal sanctions. It is, therefore, important for the people to preserve taboos and to transmit them to the next generation. Mafela (2012: 193) goes on to say that "the preservation of culture may reinforce

the element of ubuntu in our society... with the introduction of globalization, we have experienced a form of cultural decay and degeneration in our communities; this has led to a decline in morality". Rogers (2016: 101) concludes by saying that nowadays many people die young because they do not observe taboos. Taboos are an integral part of literature and it is important to teach young people the importance and relevance of their heritage.

### Literature Review

Taboos give a collective identity and a meaningful way of life. They help people to remember what should not be forgotten. People can destroy their own lives if they do not observe lessons given by taboos. For those who do not break taboos, their horizons are enlarged and their chances for a better and more meaningful life are improved (Barnad and Spencer 2016).

Mönnig (1983: 63) mentions that for a person to maintain the customary orderly way of life, he/she must not break the taboos. Any person who breaks a taboo does not respect the community. That is the reason why the author says that any transgression against the social order is a taboo and this can lead the community in the undesirable situation. Qhala and Thetso (2014: 198) add by stating that:

*The high mortality rate of women during delivery, the high mortality rate of newborns, various diseases as well as a large number of deformed children could be ascribed to the neglect of tabooic expressions.*

Knowing taboos make people to get rid of their objectionable behaviour. Tolosa (2016) asserts that a number of prohibitions are concerned with human beings' interpersonal relationships, beliefs, thoughts and feelings. This idea is supplemented by Martin and Nakayama (2003) when they say that African cultural worldview contains various specific elements like beliefs, religions, norms and values.

### METHODOLOGY

Due to the nature of this research, the researcher thought that it would be convenient to employ documentary method to collect data. The researcher used the documentary evidence to support this research. Different sources like books, extended essays, dissertations, theses, journal articles, magazines and newspapers were consulted. Through literature, young people do not only get a better understanding of their own heritage, but also learn to embrace the cultures of so many other people in our diverse nation. Some taboos do not give the correct results for performing certain actions, but give results that people naturally fear. For any person to understand the complexity of taboos, he/she has to look at their common and hidden meanings. The question of the truth and justification conditions in the interdictions seem not to be important, but what is important is that human beings are adequately discouraged from engaging in anti-social behaviour.

### RESULTS

Readers and researchers will have a better understanding of the concept 'taboo'. They will also be able to differentiate taboos from other aspects of folklore like idioms, proverbs, riddles and songs. Taboos transform people's identities and create their profiles in the context of social relations. Africans can benefit from the rich heritage of the life-affirmation in their literature. In written literature, the author is a person responsible for communicating culture from one generation to the next. Taboos promote desirable moral education among the communities.

Taboos are like solutions to problems, each one addressing a different problem. Through them, people have a sense of national unity and loyalty among themselves.

### DISCUSSION

#### Meaning of Taboo

There are different definitions in the literature of the concept 'taboo'. The definitions are widely used to describe the phenomenon 'taboo', to explain it and to apply the knowledge with the idea of predicting, understanding and controlling this phenomenon. It is, therefore, necessary to give two or three definitions so that people can have important components of sensitive observation, disciplined imagination, mental power and sympathetic understanding. The explanation of this concept is in accordance with the group life and culture. The concept 'taboo' is derived from the Polynesian word 'tapu' meaning 'prohibition', 'unclean' or 'sacred'.

Taboo is a prohibition of certain contacts, words or undesirable behavioural patterns on religious grounds among a particular community. Africans, including the Northern Sotho-speaking people, regard it as anything which is prohibited by traditional or social usage. Junod (2009: 20) says that taboo refers to:

*Any object, act or person that implies a danger for the individual or for the community, and that must consequently be avoided; this object, act or person being under a kind of ban.*

Junod is supported by Mönnig (1983: 68) when saying that:

*Didikišwa are supernatural interdictions concerning the avoidance of certain actions, a breach of which may immediately invoke sanctions.*

Malungana (1996: 1-2) goes on by expounding that a taboo is a

*...word for supernatural injunctions against certain undesirable behaviour practiced by an individual which ought to be avoided within a given community. Such unwelcome behaviour may be dangerous to an individual if he or she does not avoid it.*

From the definitions mentioned above, one may say that the concept 'taboo' can now be used generally for any prohibition of certain undesirable acts or of the use of certain objects, particularly those which are associated with fear

or awe. Some taboos are of a more religious nature, and others are of common forms barred by the rules of manners. Taboos form part of a system of more or less shared ideational designs of the African people. These features are a set of elements shaping the behaviour patterns of the groups of people. Lewellen (2016: 176) contends that taboos, as part of folklore, are a special means of creating collective feeling, exoneration and mutual trust among members of a community. In this way, no one should disturb the balance that is achieved through taboos. It is through these patterns that all evolutionary processes evolve. They are the models of reality which can be examined in the full range of social and cultural settings. The comments concerning the cultural concerns of every group of people are not actually intended as a criticism but rather as a characterization of the nature of their social norms. This provides them with the historical context which they can refer to. Taboos link people with the wider cultural, philosophical and religious world of which they are part of. Through their experience in life, they shape their goals and values by clarifying their own identities. They deal with the events that are not only occurring locally, but globally. In actual fact, they deter people from striking out for meaningless freedom.

### **Classification of Taboos**

Taboos can be classified for convenient academic purposes into the following categories:

#### ***Taboos for Women***

An impression is created in the African society that taboos have been designed for men and inversely assume that women are ethically superior to men and that women are inherently better than men. This assumption is indeed a fallacy because there are taboos which have also been established for women since time immemorial. The following serve as examples of taboos established for women.

It is a taboo for women to smoke. Traditionally, women have been discouraged to smoke because women are bearers of children and, therefore, it would be unhealthy for them to smoke. Women who smoke were regarded as cocky and outcasts who wanted to enjoy the same status as men. The African people in gen-

eral regarded this status with disdain. However, elderly women and the wives of the traditional doctors could smoke under certain traditional healing practices which were accepted by the society. The rest of the women were not supposed to smoke except to dose snuff (*motšoko*). Cronje et al. (2007: 228-229) also point out that smoking has both a physiological and psychological effect. Physiologically, it deadens the higher brain centers, produces uninhibited behaviour, and also adversely affects the reactions and perceptions. Psychologically, it brings tension.

Traditionally, a man is expected to be the one who must give direction at home and not the woman. This is another form of a taboo. Culturally, a married woman is more tied to her in-laws' family and spends most of her time in the family circle. Interestingly, the Holy Bible (1997: 244) supports the above-mentioned idea in Ephesians, Chapter 6 from verses 22-24, which says:

*Wives, submit to your husbands as to the Lord. For a husband has authority over wife just as Christ has authority over the church, and Christ is himself the Saviour of the church, his body. And so wives must submit completely to their husbands just as the church submits itself to Christ.*

An African woman in general is encouraged to think of herself as a wife and mother, and nothing more. According to the Northern Sotho custom, a woman must mourn her husband for a year, which means that she must not divulge in any sexual activity with any man for a year after her husband's death. It is understood that seeing that death in African setting has always been viewed with suspicion, it has been preferred to 'clear the air' in case of any possible suspect/culprit who might have killed the husband in order to usurp the woman.

#### ***Taboos for Men***

Men, like women, have cultural limitations. Men's lives are less confined to the home than those of women. Since men's lives are less tied to the home and because men are more active socially, they have more opportunities and temptations to commit what have been prohibited by the society than women.

It is regarded as a taboo for a boy to spend most of his time with girls because it is believed that he may become stupid. Girls have a special song which mocks this type of a young man. It

says: “Sehlwa-le-banenyana, sehlwa-se-roka-thetho” (one who is fond of staying with the girls and sews a girl’s apron). The interdiction in this regard is also meant to prevent early sexual contacts among boys and girls. The failure to heed this interdiction results in early and unexpected pregnancies as clearly witnessed in our modern times where young boys and girls freely mix without any prohibition.

Although a man is allowed to sleep with his pregnant woman, he is not allowed to engage/indulge in any sexual activity with her. In fact, after some few months of her woman’s pregnancy, the pregnant woman is transferred to the mother-in-law’s hut until she gives birth. The interdiction in this regard has been to prevent diseases which might be brought to the pregnant woman by the husband as it is traditionally acknowledged that ‘an African man is like an elephant which does not eat one type of a tree’. This man who can bring diseases from other types of ‘trees’ (women) is prevented from bringing diseases to the mother and child.

It is also regarded as a taboo for a man to eat directly from the pot because it is insinuated that he will develop breast like a woman. This interdiction is established on the basis of the maxim that pots belong to women, not men.

### *Taboos for Children*

First of all, parents have an obligation of instilling responsibility in children. This is achieved through the enforcement of taboos. The following are some of the pertinent examples of taboos for children, more especially in moral education.

It is a taboo to find a child whose upper teeth appear first or grow sooner than the lower teeth. Such a child is not allowed to visit any sick person. In fact, it is further believed that if such a child called ‘lešeka’ bites anyone; such a person will never get healed.

It is also regarded as a taboo for a child to be taken for places, that is, for visits immediately after its birth. The logical reason would be to prevent the child from contaminating various types of diseases, including flue.

### *Taboos for People in General*

Every member of a given society is a potential victim of one or more unpleasant situations

mentioned above. This implies that everybody runs a risk of being robbed or killed. Viljoen (2014: 40) points out that without the use of these teaching aids, people’s lives will be interrupted. The reactions of every person to these threats are, therefore, to adhere to these cultural laws to ensure their own safety and survival. The following are some of the examples:

A widow/widower who has just, within a period of one year, lost his/her partner, is not allowed to cut across the maize fields or any other field because it is believed that the crops will not bear any fruits.

A person must not shout in the evening as it is believed that his/her voice will be taken by the sorcerers. It is believed that sorcerers have many different supernatural forces which may cause unfortunate events (Mönnig 1983: 78). These supernatural forces are believed to be active and operate in the existing normal situation. Night-witches are more dangerous than day-witches because they are not visible and it is during this time which they excel in their supernatural activities. People observe night as a resting period. There should not be any disturbances at that time of rest.

### *Taboos for Homestead Activities*

Home is the basic social unit with its own subsistence economy performing internal cultural practices. A home is not something which is separated from the taboos.

It is a taboo for a woman, for example, to sweep rubbish out of the house during the night because it is believed that gods are also chased out. One would, therefore, forfeit their protection at night. Communication between the living and the dead is completely lost in this regard. It is believed that the dead transmit crucial messages to the living as expounded by Levi-Strauss (2008: 20).

It is a taboo for one family to give salt to the other during the night. Salt is believed to be an instrument used by sorcerers and other people who practice witchcraft to gain entrance into the homestead in order to practice their supernatural forces which may cause unfortunate events. It is also believed that such a commodity cannot be exchanged during the night because it (salt) is also meant to act as a protective foundation for the entire household.

It is also regarded as a taboo to pass greetings to a family which has lost one of its mem-

bers or is still in the process of mourning. One is required to enter the house without any greeting. However, it is also observed that with a passage of time, there are some conventional greeting procedures established for such an event, for example, the 'mahloko' greeting is implied to share 'tribulation'. This is meant to sympathize with the bereaved family.

### ***Taboos as Part of the Social Order in the Natural Reality***

From time immemorial, African societies, including the Northern Sotho people, have been aware of the order in the natural reality which forms part of the total reality for their existence. Natural reality would have been chaotic without taboos. Through these taboos, the African people in general, and the Northern Sotho people in particular, have ordered their way of life on the ground of experience of the environment in which they live. This experience has been successfully transmitted from one generation to the other. Honigmann (2011: 22) explains this type of culture as part of the organized aggregate of people. The author goes on to say:

*Culture also flows continuously through time; each generation inherits an overwhelming share of its way of life from parents and far more remote, anonymous ancestors.*

African people chant their own way forward on the basis of their experience and that of others with whom they have certain links in life. Development of people can be divided into different phases and each phase is, to a certain extent, influenced by various factors and the general idea is that experiences during these many phases can basically influence behaviour. Taboos assist in people's social and moral adjustments.

### ***Taboos as Part of Authority and Discipline***

Norms and values are closely related to authority and discipline and all these factors are manifested in taboos. Norms and values imply authority which has been accepted and maintained by communities (Leacock and Lee 2009: 30-31). Taboos indicate commands over every individual's actions and freedom. Authority displayed by taboos might be taken to refer to 'expected' command over the actions of others, that is, to a command not only considered of as a

right but also as a fact based on belief. Conrad (1997: 164) supports this idea by stating that:

*Religious belief is another force within society which tends to encourage traditional behaviour.*

As a consequence, it is reasonable to believe that authority and discipline in cultural dimensions can establish a very high degree of personality uniformity. Chapple (2010: 286) continues to say that expected authority and discipline is regarded as implying adequacy. Any taboo brings cultural expectations which amounts to expecting any individual subjected to do as he/she is told and refrain from doing what is prohibited.

### ***The Logic of a Taboo***

People who engage themselves in things which are regarded as taboos become taboos themselves and are, therefore, expected to submit themselves to prescribed ritual purifications. It is believed that if such ritual purifications are not conducted, people are exposed to danger or something terribly bad can happen to them. It is also believed that if such rituals are not performed, various types of diseases and misfortunes can emanate from things which have been prescribed and can consequently spread to the entire community (Nadel 2007: 170). For instance, everybody knows the consequences of a man who indulges in a sexual activity with a woman who has gone through a pregnancy miscarriage.

Taboos have religious implications and people who overlook these taboos feel a sense of guilt and need rituals for spiritual restoration. The restoration rituals can be administered by a traditional doctor through prescribed ritual purifications. Many taboos which are found in most African societies are also found in the Northern Sotho-speaking people with a few cultural modifications. Because of the modern situation in which the Northern Sotho-speaking people find themselves, the concept taboo acquires a few different meanings in daily usage. It may express personal dislike for certain behaviours. For instance, it is regarded as a taboo to name out certain places or people just because they have unpleasant memories for an individual. Taboos in this regard have acquired a significant dimension in cultural survival.

### *The Educational Aspect of Taboos*

Through taboos, people are taught to avoid challenges, problems and crises because if they ignore them, they become helpless victims in an asphyxiating situation. The humanist philosophy which is found in taboos is that every person should be a purposeful agent who sees visions of a new tomorrow. Taboos show a philosophy of existence as are regarded as life-affirming principles. This is emphasized by Tembo and Mutasa (2012: 15) when they say that important principles, aesthetic values as well as moral ethics are embodied into the content of taboos and many other forms of oral literature.

It is the responsibility of every society to transmit taboos from one generation to the next. It is also important to every generation to respect the taboos. It becomes very clear that they discourage every person from performing certain actions that violate community's moral code. All those who violate community's moral code are believed to invite very serious problems that affect their lives. Masaka and Mukusha (2012: 69) assert that:

*The violators of the... moral code as contained in taboos are believed to invite for themselves and the community in general, misfortunes such as bad luck, disease, drought and death.*

Taboos deter those who may try to involve themselves in anti-social behaviour. Although they give rise to fear that can be fatal, youth continue to take chances. Tatira (2000: 147) goes on to say:

*An act that breaches a taboo triggers a reaction supposedly at the supernatural level. Without this fear of the unknown, young people are generally adventurous, full of doubts and questions, and like experimenting with things. To curb with excessive desire to venture out, there is a ready consequence for each prohibition.*

The pragmatic function of taboos is that they help people to change their human behaviour for the better. Traditional education in the African Continent is integrated with the cultural and social life of every ethnic group. Basically, taboos are educative in nature simply because they promote morally commendable behaviour among the Africans (Chigidi 2009: 177). The pragmatic function here is that it corresponds to the existential situation that the people experience ev-

ery day. Through these interdictions, all members of every society are, in this way, taught of the morally accepted ways of behaving. People then know what to do and what not to do in specific situations. Fear of results of violating certain taboos would guide people to act in a way that is acceptable in a society.

### *The Importance of Taboos*

They are used to eliminate undesirable human inherent weaknesses. They are valid and reliable. They are speculative measures which guide the lives of the people. This is described by Hoebel (2016: 99) when saying that these social rules help to police or regulate human behaviour. Just as social existence becomes less and less complex because of the observance of the taboos, so is the undesirable behaviour. Taboos influence people's daily activities, for instance, it is a taboo to steal traditional doctor's divine bones because it is believed that a thief would either become mad or physically defective. When stealing is strictly prohibited, the primary aim is not only to prevent people from obtaining some of the things illegally but to safeguard the property of other human beings. In fact, they are intended to guide and direct everybody. They encourage consistent discipline which plays an important part in the transmission of values and they can also effectively counteract the influence of any undesirable behaviour. The importance of consistent discipline is that it can cement in people a stable attitude to life. They help people to develop feelings of independence and self-confidence. Taboos, together with other supernatural forces, help people to adhere to their culture in the understanding of their environment. To support this notion, Voget (2005: 242) says that:

*Behind the negative prohibition of taboo was the notion of turning aside the malign effects of medical contagion.*

Cultural values as an integral part of the social community are often stressed in taboos. The cultural point of view is that everybody is born with certain behavioural patterns which might be maximally developed or not, depending on his/her environment. There are still many prohibited actions that the Northern Sotho people convey through the use of taboos and are still relevant in the upbringing of the modern Northern Sotho community (Durkheim 1999: 83).

### CONCLUSION

Westernization and modernity also brought some changes in interdictions because some of the taboos have been greatly diluted, if not phased out and the consequence is clearly reflected by a significant scale of moral paralysis in the African societies. Social interdictions such as taboos are often not recorded. They are carried verbally like folklore from one generation to the other. Taboos are always carried forward simply because of the very same purpose that they were established. People continue to commit the very same mistakes which their forefathers committed long ago by way of disregarding societal norms as postulated by their traditional taboos for a stable society. The most important thing is that taboos embody a very deep humanist philosophy which help people to overcome challenges and crises in life. They have a principal function in building a more civilized community. It can be argued that people's philosophy of existence is anti-defeatism as taboos reveal a particular community that makes use of its creative potential to improve its life conditions. Taboos are important because people are able to foresee the results of their acts. In conclusion, anti-social behaviour is approached primarily as a social phenomenon, that is, as a phenomenon of group life and the social order with which the traditional laws, the administration of culture and the application of sanctions constitute part of the control of social forms of behaviour. Through the use of taboos, people attempt to reconstruct their African history, culture and identity. They help people to live far away from the most terrifying odds.

### RECOMMENDATIONS

Taboos should be given a space to thrive and make an impact in people's lives. Among other things, taboos support people's potential, indigenous knowledge and expertise for their own development. Taboos should be taught from lower grades to tertiary institutions because they face the threat of extinction. If they are not guarded jealously, the next generation will not know them. Experts in folklore and traditional studies, teachers and researchers should make sure that information about taboos is available in archives for public consumption and is easily accessible. The older generation has a lot of re-

sponsibility to impart their wisdom and knowledge regarding various aspects of culture, including their language, food, traditional attire, beliefs and values.

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