

TABOOS IN NGWA-IGBO

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Abstract

A taboo is a socio-cultural behavior that is forbidden by a particular group of people. This paper seeks to show that Ngwa-Igbo speech community is controlled by laws /taboos which must be observed in order to avoid the wrath of the gods, that peace is sustained in Ngwa land by obedience to the laws of the of the land, that incest is the worst taboo in Ngwa-Igbo and often leads to death as it is very offensive to the earth goddess, that some taboos have minor penalty, while others have severe penalty, that taboos help in checking the excesses of unruly behaviours by individuals in Ngwa land, that taboos are part of the cultural heritage of the Ngwa people, that cultural taboos ensure that the Ngwa-Igbo land is not desecrated and that linguistic taboos help in determining what a person says at various linguistic contexts. The method of data collection for this paper is elicitation, where information is collated by consulting four elderly persons of the age range of fifty to seventy years through oral interview by the researcher. Ethnography of Communication was used for data analysis.

Keywords: *Taboos, Ngwa, Ethnography of Communication, Sociolinguistics, cultural constraints.*

1.0 Introduction

The word *taboo* comes from Tongan *tapu* or Fijian *tabu* which means: prohibited, disallowed, or forbidden, related among others to the Maori *tapu* and Hawaiian *kapu*. The use of the word *taboo*, dates back to 1777, when the British explorer James Cook visited Tonga and referred to the Tongans's use of the term for anything that is forbidden to be done. cf. Wikipedia (2019). According

to Trudgil (1983, p. 29) “Taboos are offensive behaviours or words that are not culturally or socially accepted”. This implies that taboos can be found in the things one does or in the linguistic expressions used by a person. Thus, taboos can be studied culturally or linguistically.

O’Grady, W., Archibald, J., Aronoff, M., and Rees-Miller, J. (2001, p.730), refer to taboo as “ expressions that are seen as often offensive and are euphemized”. This means that culturally taboos are seen as repulsive behaviours that are forbidden in a society and also include words that that are metaphorically expressed in language.

Akmajian, A., Demers, R.A., Farmer, A. K., and Harnish, R. M. (2008, p. 306), note that “taboo words are those words that are to be avoided entirely, or at least avoided in “mixed company” or “polite company”. Mixed or polite company here refer to formal contexts. This means that in a formal setting there is a constraint on the choice of words of what one may want to say in accordance to specified social norms. Examples of taboo words given by Akmajian et al in the English language are: damn! Shit! Heek! gee! jee! Fuck! and so on. Akmajian et al also note that “taboo words/languages are not limited to obscenity, but also that sacred language can also be tabooed, that is language to be avoided outside the context of sacred ritual”. In other words, it could be a taboo to use religious words out of a religious or sacred setting. Further, Akmajian et al (2008, p. 306) note that “what counts as a taboo language is something defined by culture and not by anything inherent in the language itself. It is therefore simply in the cultural history of the language /people that a word has come to be known and used as a taboo word”. This implies that taboo words are language specific. Thus, it varies from place to place since what is a taboo word in language **A** may not be in language **B**. Essien (2013, p. 257), notes that “... a cultural norm or a societal value guides and regulates the behavioural guidelines which is typically referred to as

societal norms, customs and taboos. These include not only illegal or criminal behaviours sanctioned by law, but also norms of conduct enforced through social sanctions". This means that taboos are part of the cultural knowledge of a particular linguistic community and the knowledge of the taboos of a place will direct and enhance the sociolinguistic behaviour of an individual in that community. Essien went further to refer to the customs or taboos that guide the interactions of people and their environment as: indigenous knowledge (IK), traditional knowledge (TK), or local knowledge (LK). Thus, taboos are part of the knowledge system of a person in a particular place. Agboola, T. and A. O. Mabawonku (1996, p. 36), argue that: "Indigenous knowledge ... constitutes an integrated part of human knowledge, behaviour and beliefs and has a huge effect on the people's lives". This shows that the whole behavioural pattern of a person is most times determined by the person's indigenous, traditional or local knowledge system. In other words, what a person knows and believes in, controls him. According to Boss (1999, p. 19), "From the cultural perspective, for social coexistence to be achieved, every cultural group must decide to follow its own rules and norms of behaviour". From Boss's assertion, a break from the cultural norms will result in chaos or disharmony amongst persons in a society since any abnormality in behaviour will lead to the placement of sanction (s) on that individual.

According to the information from Wikipedia: <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/taboo> "... a taboo is an implicit prohibition on something (usually against an utterance or behaviour) based on a cultural sense that it is excessively repulsive or perhaps, too sacred for ordinary people". This indicates that a taboo a ban placed on an action which could be verbal or non-verbal based on the agreed norms in a society. This internet source goes on to say that "whether scientifically correct or not, taboos are often meant to protect the

human individual”. Thus, this is emphatically saying that taboos are like laws that preserve the sanctity of the society and its citizens. In the lines that follow a list of the functions of taboos is presented. Some of these are:

- a. taboos are a reflection of the system of values and beliefs of a society.
- b. taboos are a reflection of emphasis on morality and culture.
- c. taboos act as checks on the behavioural disposition of the people of a particular place.
- d. taboos instill fear and caution in people.
- e. taboos help in the preservation of the cultural heritage of a people. (cf. Trudgil 1983, p. 29).

The theoretical framework used in this paper is Ethnography of Communication. According to Okeke (2017, p. 160). “The Sociolinguistic approach to language study known as Ethnography of Communication was developed by Dell Hymes. Ethnographic study is not concerned with simply with the structure of language used in communication, but with its use paying extra attention to underlying socio-cultural rules that form the basis of the language use”. This means that context, and indigenous knowledge system all have a part to play in the use of every language. In Ethnolinguistic study, Communicative Language Teaching holds that during language acquisition or learning, what is learnt is not just the linguistic forms, but beyond the linguistic forms to how to properly to use them so as perform the kind of function that people in the society do, using language. Okeke (2017, p. 162). Ethnography of Communication, evaluates the place of culture in predicting the behaviours of individuals in a particular cultural setting in line with the taboos of that society. Thus, one of the premise on which Ethnography of Communication is established is that the expression and understanding of a behaviour is mainly entrenched in the taboo system of a society.

Ethnography of Communication describes the forms and functions of verbal and non-verbal behaviours within cultural settings. It is within this framework that every datum in this paper will be considered.

The method of data collection for this paper is elicitation, where information is collated by consulting four elderly persons of the age range of fifty to seventy years through oral interview by the researcher. At the collation points, writing and recording instruments were used to gather information so that they could be properly documented for examination. In the subsections that follow some taboos in the Ngwa-Igbo will be discussed.

1.2 Cultural taboos in Ngwa-Igbo

Ngwa-Igbo refers to the dialect of Igbo spoken in the following geographical zones in Abia State of Nigeria namely: Aba North, Aba South, Isiala Ngwa North, Isiala Ngwa South, Obingwa, Osisioma and Ugwuagbor. Cultural taboos are taboos that refer to repulsive behaviours or actions of persons in a particular cultural setting. Cultural taboos make for the different social norms and values that govern members' behaviour in a society. cf. Essien (2013, p. 256). Below are some cultural taboos in Ngwa-Igbo:

1. It is forbidden in Ngwa land for a woman to climb or tap the palmwine, kolanut, iroko or palm trees. This usually attracts a fine of one goat and a keg of wine to appease the gods in order to reaccept the woman into the community again.
2. It is a great abomination for folks of the same kindred or blood lineage to have carnal knowledge of one another. This means that incest is greatly frowned at in Ngwa land. The result is usually death or banishment from the community and numerous appeasements to the gods of the land. Sometimes the persons involved are brought to the village square to do the abominable act that they have committed in secret

before the whole village while a priest will use a life fowl to flog both the man and woman, as on lookers boo at them. After this both parties would be forbidden to do such act again.

3. It is a taboo to throw someone's property into the toilet. This taboo, if committed would require immediate appeasement of the gods by using an unbroken raw egg to touch the forehead of the person who committed the offense after which the same raw egg would be smashed at the toilet where the very items were thrown into. This must be done in order to bring reconciliation between the quarreling parties and also to bring peace into the life of the person who threw the object (s) into the toilet.
4. It is a taboo to bury a witch. His/her head is cut off by priests serving in a shrine and the body is then thrown into the evil forest. If the body is buried, the family of such a person suffers great casualty, ill health and many other kinds of unexplainable bad occurrences.
5. It is a taboo for a woman to wear the masquerade in Ngwa land. This attracts instant death on the female offender. This will require the appeasement of the gods by sacrificing goats, throwing of kolanuts and pouring of libation at shrine for her cleansing.
6. It is a taboo in Ngwa land, for a woman whose husband has just died and the body of the late husband is yet to be buried to commit adultery. This offence attracts a fine of a goat, two cocks and a keg of wine to the late husband's kinsmen. If not, she will be sent back in shame to her father's house.
7. In Ngwa land, it is a taboo to bury a child born of still birth. Such children are thrown into the village shrine or thrown into the evil forest.

8. In Ngwa land, it is a taboo for a woman to bless the kolanut. The blessing of kolanuts is exclusively the sole reserve of men. A woman who does this would be penalized by requesting that she pays a fine of one cock and a keg of wine.
9. In Ngwa land, it is forbidden to give or take something from someone with a left hand. This offence attracts a verbal apology from the offender to the person offended and a correction of the act by using the right hand to give or take something from someone.
10. In Ngwa land, it is an abomination for a king to see a dead body or wear any burial attire. Any king who commits this offence is forbidden from participating in sacred things pertaining to his office.
11. In Ngwa land, it is a taboo for someone to alter farm or land boundaries. This offence attracts a punishment by the village council in the form of one he goat, a keg of wine and some money as may be required by the village council men.
12. In Ngwa land, it is a taboo to treat the yam crop with disdain. This is because it is the chief of all crops in Igbo land. This offence usually attracts infertility and death in the course of time to the offender. In some cases if the gods are not properly appeased, it may lead to total annihilation of the offender's entire family.
13. It is an abomination in Ngwa land to point at unripe fruits as this may lead to their immature ripening or death. The penalty for this offence is for the offender to point again at the fruit with a folded fist.
14. It is a taboo to harvest palm fruits in Ngwa land, in a village where someone has just died. The penalty for this offence is that the person will be banned from participating in any communal activity for seven years after which he is

reabsorbed to take part in communal activities such as: buying and selling, farming, association, wrestling, hunting, fishing, masquerading and so on.

15. In Ngwa land, it is forbidden for an unmarried female to be pregnant out of wedlock. This is because such a behavior brings shame to the family of the female child. The penalty for this offence, is that such a female child is given into marriage as a second wife or to an old man who is a widower.
16. It is a taboo in Ngwa land to commit suicide. This abomination attracts a heavy punishment on the family of the person who has taken his life either by hanging, drinking poison, drowning himself or through any means by which the act has been effected. In the first instance, the body of the person would not be buried in the ground. The body is usually thrown into the evil forest after series of appeasements and sacrifices with goats, fowls, kolanuts and hot drinks which will be poured on the ground as libation to the gods and the ancestors of the land by the family members of the offender who forcefully took his life. These sacrifices are done in order to protect the lives of the living family members so that the gods of the land would not come after their own lives.

Having presented some cultural taboos in Ngwa-Igbo, the next section will present linguistic taboos in Ngwa-Igbo.

1.3 Linguistic taboos in Ngwa-Igbo

Linguistic taboos are words that are forbidden to be used in the public because of the embarrassing nature of such words. Taboo words usually have alternatives that are euphemized for sociolinguistic politeness. Matthews (2007, p. 400) refers to linguistic taboo as: “A word known to speakers but avoided in some, most or all forms or contexts of speech, for reasons of religion, decorum, politeness, and so on”. From

Matthews's assertion, one can see that there are sociolinguistic reasons for the use of alternative words in place of taboo words and this is the stand of this paper. cf. Trudgil (1983, p. 29), O'Grady et al (2001:730), and Akmajian, et al (2008, p. 306).

Taboo words Euphemized forms

- 17a. útú 'penis' b. hwé nwoke 'a man's thing'.
 18a. ɔtú 'vagina' b. hwe nnwáányi 'a woman's thing'.
 19a. árá 'breast' b. ɔbí 'chest'.
 20a. ɔkpa ámú 'scrotal sac' b. ɔgɔdɔ / ɔgbàgàrà úkwú 'loins' / 'joints'.
 21a. ɔnú nsi 'anus' b. íkè 'buttocks'.
 22a. ɔtikpíri 'latrine' b. ázú úlò 'backyard'.
 23a. ɔ nwúola # 'he /she has died'. b. ɔ háfúla #. 'he/she has left'.
 24a. ɔ írá ɔtú 'to fuck someone'. b. ɔ lja mmádú 'to lie with someone'.
 25a. ɔ mkpúmkpú 'short'. b. ɔ mpekéle# 'small'.
 26a. ɔnyé akwàrà 'a prostitute' b. ɔnyé étebéghè# 'an unstable person/ a walk about/ a loose person'.
 27a. ɔ enwéghi# ɔ m ɔji. 'I have nothing for entertainment'.
 b. ɔkɔla m ɔji 'do not say I have nothing for entertainment'.
 28a. hwé ɔjɔ́ ɔmèéla# 'something evil has happened'. b. ɔ ɔ̀ ɔ́ ɔ́gwú ɔ́! 'it is wonderful!'.
 29a. ɔnyé árá 'a mad person' b. ɔnyé ɔ́h) ɔ́ ɔ́ ɔ́h) ɔ́ 'a confused person'.
 30a. ɔnyé ɔ́h) ɔ́ nshí 'a thief/ a witch' b. ɔnyé ákálábù 'a person of two hands/standards'.
 31a. ɔnyé ɔ́jɔ́ 'bad person' b. ɔnyé úrú 'a mischievous person'.

Conclusion

In this paper, an attempt has been made to discuss taboos in Ngwa-Igbo. Two types of taboos were discussed namely: cultural taboos which is concerned with abominable behaviours and linguistic taboos which deals with offensive or obscene use of expressions that

are publicly embarrassing. In Ngwa-Igbo, it was discovered that every cultural taboo has a penalty attached to it. It was also discovered that all taboos do not have the same kind of punishment; some punishment could lead to death or banishment as in the case of incest or wizardry, while others like alteration of landmarks or cutting a palm fruit on a burial day could attract fines in the form of wine and money. It was observed that taboos helped in curtailing the excesses of individuals in Ngwa land. Taboos in Ngwa land showed that nobody is above the law. Cultural taboos in Ngwa-Igbo indicated that the affairs of the Ngwa man is controlled by the by the rich cultural moral norms since offence in any taboo always attracts a sanction to serve as a deterrent to others in the society. Such sanctions could lead to the appeasement of the gods and ancestors by the offender, which if ignored could lead to death or some other unhealthy situations. In Ngwa-Igbo, the strict observation of linguistic taboos indicates that the Ngwa-Igbo society frowns at uncaredful choice of words, hence it is part of the linguistic ability of every competent Ngwa-Igbo user to know when to euphemize certain expressions to avoid a public embarrassment. Thus, this paper has tried in revealing the socio-cultural and sociolinguistic implication of obscene behaviours and words in Ngwa-Igbo.

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