

Taboo Across Cultures: A Reading Of Selected Nigerian/African Literary Texts

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Abstract: *This paper sets out to study the phenomena of taboo across Nigerian/African cultures as evident in selected Nigerian/African literary texts with a view to exploring:*

- (i) The relationship between a culture's taboo and that culture's belief system.*
- (ii) The similarities and differences of taboo across cultures, and*
- (iii) The implication of globalization in the collapse of traditional taboo, and the adaptation of foreign or new ones.*

The paper concludes that, taboos reflect the world view, belief, social realities, ecological and economic conditions of a culture as noted in the literary texts examined.

Key Words: *taboos, cultures, World view, literary text, Africa.*

I. Introduction:

Taboo has been defined as “a strong social prohibition (urban) relating to any area of human activity or social custom declared as sacred and forbidden.” (Wikipedia); “any prohibition resulting from social or other conventions.....ritual restriction or prohibition, especially of something that is considered holy or unclean” (Collins English Dictionary, 21st Century edition: P1554). Similarly, Collins Cobuild English Language Dictionary 1988 Edition (P1486) states that, taboo is a religious custom that forbids people to touch, say, or do something because they believe that they will be punished by God or the gods.

Thus, socially sanctioned prohibitions are considered sacred and any infringement is considered objectionable or abhorrent by society. A borrowed term from the Tongan Language, a Kingdom occupying an archipelago of more than 150 volcanic and coral islands in the South West Pacific, east of Fiji. In the Polynesian cultures, taboo often has religious connotations. The word gained currency in English in 1777 via its recording by James Cook.

Taboo is evident in every human culture across human history. However, no single taboo can lay claim to Universality even though some occur in majority of cultures, for instance incest, cannibalism and Patricide. This paper though is less concerned with the historical origin of taboo, yet it will not be out of place to explore its historical significance and implication in the development of human societies, real or creative.

Taboos essentially are a checkmate against socially unacceptable behaviours or utterances. The nature and level of observance of taboo in any society is a reflection of its belief system, world – view and ecology and economic conditions.

Writers of literary pieces: poetry, novel, and drama, often reflect in their works human societies that the reader readily associate or identify with as either belonging to the past, Present, or the future, or even as non – realistic but human all the same. The imaginary world of literature often, but not always, approximates our world. Thus, out exploration of taboo in selected Nigerian literary texts reveal the relationship between a culture's taboo, and that culture's belief system; the similarities and differences of taboo across cultures; and the implication of globalization in the collapse of traditional taboo, and the adaptation of foreign or new ones.

Equally, our exploration also reveals the implied and explicit forms of taboo besides the verbal, dietary, and behavioural forms of taboo: taboo may prohibit or encourage a particular form of behaviour. It may prohibit by an explicit interdiction provided against certain actions, or encourage a particular action by sanctioning its converse.

II. Taboo As A Reflection Of A Culture's Belief System (Or World View)

Taboo in many cultures is a reflection of religion herein simply defined as “belief in, worship of or obedience to a supernatural power or powers considered to be divine or to have control of human destiny (Collins English Dictionary, 21st Century edition). Moreover, taboos are expressive of anthological evidence about a society, and religion or belief system is one anthropological element which taboo reveals.

In most African literary texts, a people's belief system is evident in their taboo, and adherence to, and interdictions for transgressors of those taboos.

In Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* (henceforth to be referred to as T.F.A) and *Arrow of God* (henceforth A.O.G.) for examples, we find a strong relationship between the people's religion and the society's taboo. In fact, the religion is a diffusion of the people's taboo. In A.O.G. for instance, it is a taboo for any person in the six villages of Umuaro to eat yam before the New Yam Feast usually declared by Ezeulu, the Priest of Ulu. Likewise, we find that totality of the people's lives is undergird by taboos associated with their belief in supreme beings that regulate their lives, and transgressing against these taboo may earn one reprobation, interdiction or other forms of primitive measures. The nature of taboo in Achebe's A.O.G. reveals religion to be at once of an individual as well as communal concern. The taboo of the python for example is expressive of the communal nature of the people's religion or belief. This again shows that religion in Umuaro is not a "formal or institutionalized expression of belief."

Things Fall Apart on the other hand, embodies taboos which transgressing eventually culminates in the tragic end of Okonkwo; he desecrated the week of peace by beating up his wife, Ojuigo; fired a shot at his second wife but fortunately narrowly missed; he participated in the killing of a boy, Ikemefuna, who called him father (a taboo all the same, as implied by Obierika's warning); and he accidentally killed the son of Ezeulu.

From the foregoing, we can see that taboos associated with religion not only regulate people's action or behaviour but also provide stiff measures against the desecration of those prohibition or taboos.

III. Convergences And Divergences Of Taboo Across Cultures

We have observed certain similarities in taboo across cultures. As we have always noted, some taboos are explicitly stated while others are implied. Thus our exploration dwells on both the explicit and implied taboos, a working categorization we arrived at in relation to this study.

Prohibitions against stealing, idleness, and plundering are common to Most African/Nigerian literary texts that dwell on such anthropological elements. For instance, the Lahab/Messenger episode in Abubakar Gimba's *Witnesses To Tears* is an example of a taboo that has found prohibition under the law, and transgressors, like the Messenger, and Obi Okonkwo in Achebe's *No Longer at Ease*, were visited with several penalties. Moreover, in some extreme cases of reprobation, the bloodline of transgressors may ever remain stigmatized.

Idleness, in the same vein, is a behaviour that has acquired the status of a taboo in most African/Nigerian cultures. In Achebe's T.F.A., Unoka's stigmatization is a consequence of his idleness. Abhorrence for idleness is a reflection of the materialist nature of most African/Nigerian societies. Idleness is often translated into the reason for an individual's mean economic status. Thus, even marriage is predicated on how well-off or hardworking a man is, to be able to take care of his wife.

The patriarchal nature of most African/Nigerian cultures is reflected in the taboo on childbearing. Though there is no prohibition against childbearing, but every woman knows that a woman who bore only female children suffers from a subtle even if debilitating reprobation for a deed that is both a joy and a pain. The travails of woman who suffered from such misfortunes could be gleaned from Hajara Abubakar Sadiq's *The Favourite Wife*; Buchi Emecheta's *Joys of Motherhood*, and Flora Nwapa's *Efuru*.

Marriage in most African cultures is effected only when the bridal payment of money or goods, is made to the bride or her parents by the bridegroom or his parents. Lakunle in Wole Soyinka's play, *The Lion And The Jewel*, lost out in his bid to marry Sidi because he insisted against paying the bride price. Marriages across Nigerian texts were usually contracted on payment of bride price. Achebe's TFA: Akueke's marriage (pgs.50/51); Amikwu's marriage (pg.92); Gimba's *Witnesses To Tears* Hussaina's/Lahab's marriage (pg.55) Asabe Kabir Usman's *Destinies of Life*: Aisha's/Umar's marriage (pgs42.43).

The divergences noticeable amongst cultures' taboos are few and those few relate to dietary taboo, consumption of wine and pork for example; belief in the guardian – angel roles of ancestors over the living as exemplified in the traditional act of libation in honour of long – dead ancestors, or traditional gods. Likewise, when it comes to matters of burial, it is a taboo in some cultures as depicted in Emecheta's *Joys of Motherhood* to have a Spartan burial devoid of elaborate pomp and pageantry. In contrast, the culture depicted in Abubakar Gimba's *Witnesses To Tears* abhors. elaborate ceremonies during burials.

In the same vein, it is a taboo, impliedly, for a woman to inherit the estate of her parents/husbands especially where there are male children. For instance, in Zulu Sofola's play, *Wedlock Of The Gods*, Ugwoma was herself regarded as a property of her deceased husband's family, so she does not have the right to decide for herself her future – that had been done already through the customary practice of levirate, which passes on the widow of a deceased brother to his younger brother. However. In some other cultures like the one depicted in Abubakar Gimba's *Witnesses To Tears* (henceforth WTT), a woman can be the inheritor of her parent's estate, and she is never regarded as her in-laws personal possession, not even her husband's – Hussaina in WTT.

Some other taboos peculiar to the cultures depicted in Achebe's A.O.G are those to do with women. For instance, a woman in a state of un-cleanliness is prohibited from cooking for any man (A.O.G. pg63) and the other is that which forbids women from talking at the occurrence of death (A.O.G. pg.87).

IV. New or Collapsed Taboos

Globalization which essentially is the narrowing down or closing up of distances between nations, cultures, and peoples has wrought upon our cultures new taboos and has led to the diffusion or complete collapse of some old traditional taboos.

One newly wrought taboo imbibed by our cultures from the global arena of diplomacy and governance is economy with the truth. Though this is not explicitly stated as a rule, yet it is the practice amongst diplomats and other government functionaries to be very economical with the truth. This new taboo is succinctly captured in Chinua Achebe's *Anthills Of The Savannah: Oriko's 'duel'* with his Excellency (pgs.1-13). It is a taboo for a diplomat or a government functionary to be generous with the truth. This may earn him a reprimand, a place in the prison, a slab less grave, or end up as a carcass for hounds.

In the domain of man – woman relationship, the amazons of female equality have proffered a new gender – based taboos. One is in Asabe Kabir Usman's *Destinies of Life* which re-echoes Mariama Ba's taboo that a man should not marry a woman once under his roof or care.

This taboo clearly contradicts both traditional and religious provisions, which do not place any impediments to such relationship for as long as the relation between the couples does not impede marriage between them. Aisha's predicament, like Ramatoulaye's, is largely predicated on her husband's marriage to a woman who was not only once under his care but is also as young as his own daughter. Of course this new taboo can be ascribed to nothing else but the global trend that has spread the gospel of gender equality that is best expressed in monogamy and or single parenthood as portrayed in the character of Aissatou in Mariama Ba's *So Long a Letter*.

V. Conclusion

In conclusion, our exploration of taboos in selected Nigerian/African literary texts has revealed that they are not only a reflection of a culture's world – view, belief system, and their ecologic and economic conditions, but also of their social realities. Embedded in a culture's taboo are reflections of the fears, hopes, and aspirations of a people.

A people's tenacity at upholding the sanctity of that which they made sacred is evidence of their relationship to the unfathomable realities of the unknown.

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