
Taboos as Scientific Restrictions for Healthy Living among the Mafi-Eve

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Abstract: *The Mafi-Eve taboos, as the phenomenon has been among all Africans, are part of an ancient tradition aimed at sustaining the existence of man and other cosmic elements. Findings from this research reveal that, among the Mafi-Eve, the observation of some taboos is rooted in scientifically based knowledge aimed at keeping the people healthy for collective development. Although the effects of globalization have taken negative toll on some cultural observations, some taboos among the Mafi-Eve have defied the tide of change and continued to shape human behaviors.*

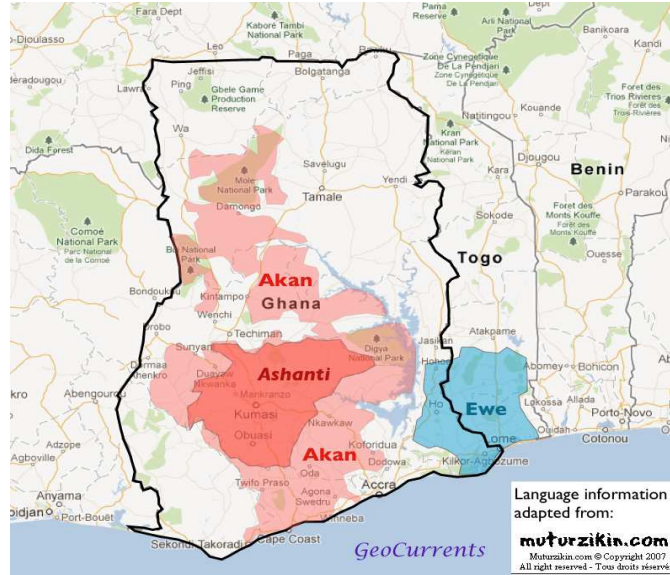
Key words: *Taboos; Mafi-Eve; Health; Morals; Scientific*

1. Introduction

The Mafi-Eve form part of the Eve ethnic group which forms the third largest ethnic group of Ghana constituting 13.9% of the population (2010 Population Census). They are located in the Volta Region (Southeastern Ghana). They speak Ewegbe; related to other Gbe languages such as the Fon and the Aja of Togo and Benin (Gayibor and Aguigah, 2005; Amenumey, 1997). Oral narratives have it that they migrated from Notsie (Notsie) in Dahome; present-day Benin and settled in present Togo and eastern Ghana. Oral Traditions and archaeological excavations suggest that a series of migrations took place starting in the 11th century from around the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers in the Middle East: Iraq, Mesopotamia and Sumerian Region (Kudzodzi, 2010). The Eve are said to settle in Ghana in the early 17th

Century (Gayibor and Aguigah, 2005; Amenumey, 1997). The exact location of the Ewe people is shown on the map below:

Figure i. Map of Ghana, Togo and Benin showing the location of the Ewe (Ewe people).



Among the Ewe group that moved to present day Ghana are the Mafi. They are located in the Tongu (Tɔŋu) area of the Volta region and have MafiAdidome as their administrative capital and MafiDugame as the traditional capital. Among the Mafi-Ewe, taboos are a serious part of their successful communal life. Taboos may be promulgated and transmitted in the form of religious ordinances, creeds or vows. Taboos are moral embargoes placed upon certain behaviors by authorities (kings, priests, etc.) of a people. The prohibitions in a taboo are based on the belief that particular behaviors are either too sacred or too accursed for ordinary individuals to undertake. Generally, the prohibitions that are inherent in a taboo include the idea that their breach or defiance will be followed by some kind of sanction or apprehension to the

offender, such as lack of success in farming, sickness or death.

2. Taboos as part of African Traditions

The tradition of taboos, among Africans, is as old as the existence of the people. The Shona, the largest ethnic group in Zimbabwe, for example have very old taboo traditions. The Shona, a conglomeration of a number of linguistic groups (Gwaravanda&Masaka, 2008) consisting of Korekore, Karanga, Zezuru, Ndau, Kalanga, and the Manyika, form about 76% of Zimbabwe's total population. According to Tatira (2000):

...Shona people often use *zviera* (taboos) as one of the ways of teaching young members of their society. The Shona had, and still have, unique ways of transmitting social values which are crucial to the development of their society. *Zviera*, among other practices, encourage conformity (to healthy living).

There is a strong Islamic and Christian influence in The Gambia today but the people still retain certain practices originating from past beliefs. Among these beliefs are taboos: members of the Sanyang family should not touch iguanas or eat turtle meat; members of the Jammeh family should not eat goat meat (*illiasa*); members of the Jobarteh and Trawalley families should not touch iguanas; members of the Ceesay family should not touch or eat sole fish and monitor lizards among others.

Taboo is a major component of the Yoruba culture (Adebileje, 2012). Olajubu (1997) summarizes the Yoruba conception of taboo thus:

The Yoruba is guided by an unwritten constitution cutting across all spheres of the individual's life. Rules of life and conduct are most times embedded in the culture of the people in Africa; such aspect of culture includes ... taboos.

Taboos can be described as, the “don’ts of the society”. This could be perceived from two different angles, what must not be done because the society frowns upon it. Taboos touch every aspect of the individual’s life in Yoruba society. For example, there are professional taboos; health taboos, religious taboos, moral taboos and sexual taboos e.t.c. (p.1).

Other parts of Africa also have peculiar guiding principles that control their lives. Taboos are therefore part of the unwritten rules that guide behavior. They believe in the supernatural world hence the observation of the avoidance rules which has moral implications on the people.

3. The Mafi- Eve Conceptualization of Taboos

Taboo is derived from the Polynesian term *tabu* which means forbidden. It is similar to the *sacer* in the Greek, *Kadesh* in Hebrew and *Nso* in the Igbo language of Nigeria. In Akan, it is known as *mmusu* (Gyekye, 1995). According to Alfred Agbozo, a Catechist of the Roman Catholic Church and MamāWosekpoNyikplorkpo(Agbozo, 2013), a linguist and traditional poet in MafiTsrinyikofe, a suburb of MafiKumase, in an interview conducted for the purpose of this research, taboo in Mafi- Eve is *eko*. Taboo is applicable to any sort of prohibitions imposed by the leadership of a community regarding the entire communal life. Taboo sanctions are left in the hands of the gods and the ancestors but the custodians of the tradition: chiefs, stool-fathers and elders, punish offenders on behalf of the gods and the ancestors. If an offender refuses the punishment of the chiefs, stool-fathers and elders, libation is poured to the gods and ancestors to punish. It is held that the punishments of the gods and ancestors are more severe. Like most traditional African taboos, Mafi -Eve taboos also have scientific implications. Most of the food related taboos, for example are based mainly on personal hygiene and good living ethics to ensure good health. However, to make sure

that people comply with these taboos, very scary consequences such as death are stipulated as the reasons behind the taboos.

4. Theoretical Grounding

The study is grounded on the theory of Ethnography of Communication. Hymes (1974) suggests an ethnographic model which encompasses the different factors in communication. These factors form the acronym, **SPEAKING**: **S**- setting and scene, **P**- participants, **E**-ends, **A**-act sequence, **K**-key, **I**- instrumentality, **N**- norms of interaction and interpretation, **G**- genre. In this study, the setting is the place and time, participants are the people who form the subjects of this study and ends are the traditional and scientific reasons for the health taboo. Acts sequence can be seen in the events that inform the health taboo as a speech activity, key refers to the tone and mood of the contributors in the speech act. Instrument is the language used to carry these taboos across time and space. The norms are the socio- religious values and conventions connected to these taboos. The genre is a socio- religious as it delves the social and spiritual parts of communicative events and scientific as it brings out the scientific grounding of these taboos.

5. Methodology

The study employed the method of studying ethnographic and social phenomena. Data was collected through interviewing a number of stool-fathers, traditional elders, linguists, poets-cantors, some religious leaders and young people who were selected randomly. The study also used observations in some selected Mafi-Eve communities especially Kumikpo, Kumase, Adidome, Atitekpo and Agorve. Most of the observations made in these places were also

confirmed by people from other Ewe communities like Abor, Sogakofe, Tefle, Agbozume, Aflao, Dzodze, Ho, Hohoe, Kpando and Sokode. This makes the phenomenon a general one covering the whole of the Ewe land.

6. Discussion of the Results

In this section I discuss the traditional and scientific reasons behind the observance of health taboos and the sanctions imposed on offenders. I also assess health taboos in contemporary society. The data gathered from the subjects was analysed using qualitative methods of analysis.

Selected Health Taboos

Womedaaamenɔvigbo o (One must not sleep with his/her sibling.)

As noted earlier, some taboos have the aim of promoting human health. One of such taboos is incest. Incest is a serious taboo among the Mafi- Ewe. The explanation given by MamãWosekpoNyikplorkpoand which was confirmed by Alfred Agbozois that a sexual act within the family is an abomination because blood mixing offends the ancestors and the gods. Scientifically however, intra-family sexual intercourses breed abnormal births, birth defects and diseases. Modern science establishes that incest causes hemophilia and their dangerous birth defects as the gene pool within the family is corrupted by incest. According to <http://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/animals-and-us/201210/the-problem-incest>, a research examined four studies on the effects of incest on the health of the offspring. 40% of the children were born with autosomal recessive disorders, congenital physical malformations, or severe intellectual deficits and 14% of them had mild mental disabilities. The probability that a newborn child who is the product of brother-sister or father-daughter incest will suffer

an early death, a severe birth defect or some mental deficiency approaches 50%. To prevent this, the Mafi - Eve made incest a taboo.

Womedona le gbeme o(One must not have sex in the bush.)

The explanation given to this taboo is that it offends the land. The earth itself is considered a god. Sexually related diseases, which no medicine can cure, are visited on an offender. Scientifically, however, this can cause several undesirable situations. There are dangerous insects, scorpions and snakes and micro-organisms which could hurt the people engaged in the act. The possibility of heart attacks or bleeding by the parties involved in the sexual act is very high. These could become critical and the situation might become worse when the bush is far away from home. This taboo is also meant to prevent the risks of rape.

Womefoa nu le nuɖufe o(One must not talk while eating.)

It is said that one's mother would die if one breaks this taboo. Scientifically however, this prohibition is to prevent people from getting choked. Many indigenous Mafi- Eve foods are produced from corn, cassava, yam and plantain among others. They are usually swallowed with soup or sauce and could choke in the course of swallowing. Foods that could choke include balls of kenkey, fufu, akple, slices of yam, cocoyam, cassava, sweet potatoes among others.

Dumekenaɖedetsidzi akamademadeeme o(One must not leave soup overnight without putting charcoal into it.)

Should such a thing happen, a ghost who visits the house at night might dip a finger into the soup and should someone eat the soup, the person will get sick and die.

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Scientifically, charcoal is known to have the property for absorbing the carbon content of liquids and thus prevents the action of micro-organisms on the soup. The soup with charcoal can therefore stay overnight without going bad. The 1908 catalog of Sears, Roebuck and Co (reprinted in 1969) showed some advertisements of the time that portrayed some other scientific importance of charcoal, (as quoted in Disney, 2008):

1. Every person is well acquainted with the great benefit derived from (...) charcoal in gastric and intestinal disorder, indigestion, dyspepsia, heartburn, sour or acid stomach, gas upon the stomach, constant belching, fetid breath, all gaseous complications and for the removal of the offensive odor of the breath after smoking.

2. Absorb all impurities in the stomach and bowels. Give healthy tone to the whole system, effectually warding off cholera, typhoid, and all malignant fevers, invaluable for indigestion, flatulence, etc., eradicate worms in children and sweetens breath.

It was not until much later that scientific research demonstrated that most of the claims made in such advertisements are indeed valid. It is now known that charcoal can absorb poisons, bacterial toxins, and such, in the gut (Disney, 2008).

Womedzia ha le tsilefe o (One must not sing while bathing.)

The folk explanation is that the mother of a person who does this will mysteriously die. There is a scientific explanation to this taboo. The soaps used in the olden days contain very acidic substances. This makes the soaps

poisonous when they or their lather is swallowed in large quantities. The taboo is aimed at preventing people from the effect of traditional soap. Historically, potassium hydroxide, extracted from the ashes of bracken or other plants, is the main ingredient in soaps. According to <http://www.fragrancex.com/Fragrance-Information/traditional-soap-making.html>, some ingredients for traditional soap making are white wood ashes from a hardwood tree, a fat or some oil, an amount of salt and a few small pieces of charcoal. Most of these are health-threatening. Children are generally, very close to their mothers than their fathers. The death of their mothers as a control measure therefore prevents children from eating lather of soaps.

Ahosialoahomekpɔnasrɔɔife o (A widow or widower must not be present at the cemetery for the burial of their spouses.)

This, according to the interviewees, disrupts the smooth separation of the dead spouse from the living spouse and the departure of the dead to the world of spirits. The ghost of the dead person, as believed, will visit and take the soul of the living spouse away at night. This taboo has a psychological cum scientific explanation. The taboo is aimed at protecting the mental health or emotional well-being of the living spouse as the emotional effects of the separation of spouse could result into the mental trauma or death of the living spouse.

7. Health Taboos in Contemporary Mafi- Ewe Society

The study demonstrates that the ideological and religious philosophy of the Ewe remain strong Gavua (2000:97). This binds them to their observation of norms including taboos. Observations show that young people of contemporary times, especially in urbanized areas do not adhere to these taboos

as their parents' generation does. This is because they are exposed to modern knowledge that demystified the taboos. Also, some of the urbanized young people do not even know that these taboos exist. In the villages, however, young people still observe these prohibitions.

Parents therefore need to educate their children on positive social observances and prohibitions that promote healthy living among people.

8. Conclusion

This research looks at health related taboos among the Mafi-Eve, the traditional and scientific motivations and the sanctions associated with them.

Under the guise of religion and custom, these taboos are more important to the people than even laws. The study exposes that the real reasons behind taboos have more scientific values than any other reasons.

9. Acknowledgement

We are grateful to Vincent AwoonorAziaku (a PhD Candidate of Linguistics at the Goethe-Universität Frankfurt am Main) for his insight into this paper. We also thank all our subjects especially our principal informants: MamāWosekpoNyikplorkpo and Mr. Alfred Agbozo.

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