Taboos in Epie-Atissa, Yenagoa Local Government Area, Bayelsa State.

By

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Abstract

This paper discussed the taboos of the Epie-Atissa people in Yenagoa Local Government Area of Bayelsa State. The study used historical, phenomenological and sociological methodologies to guide the study. It used interview method to collect data for the purpose of the study. The library was also consulted for the purpose of collecting data for the study. Taboos are set of prohibitions and laws that are observed by traditional society and deity to regulate the behavioral pattern of a given society but that of the people of Epie-Atissa, records has not been created, that is the problem that the study is trying to solve for posterity. The importance of Taboos to the people of Epie-Atissa cannot be overemphasized. From the findings, it has been discovered that taboos have helped to maintain law and order and enhanced ethics and morals among the people. In the area of study, taboos are classified into various categories, they are taboos of respect, taboos meant to guide the marriage institution, burial rites and to enhance discipline, taboos to check immortality, children behavior and taboos observed to enhance social control. These taboos have helped to enhance peace and tranquility in the area, as such it should be upheld because they are of benefit to the people. The young ones in the area should observe these taboos, this is because the area in question is been rapidly urbanized and this has affected the strict observation of the taboos in place. It is part of the Epie-Atissa people's tradition, culture and so it should not be allowed to die.

Keywords: Taboos, Ethnics, Social Control, Peace, Epie-Atissa

Introduction

African communities are varied, having their own set of rules that regulate their daily lives. The regulations can be intimidating, but they are set rules to be followed. Different cultures have different norms, but the main objective is the same; they create a foundation of people to self-control. Human conduct is not solely regulated by rational decision-making. Members of a society are frequently encouraged to follow shared ideas and standard of acceptable behavior. By agreeing on expectations and regulations, culture and civilization directs the behavior and thoughts of its members. Social norms and taboos are the term used to describe a set of behavioral restrictions. These taboos and standards have a significant impact on our lives. The rules and taboos of the society is in existence to determine how we act, dress and live our lives. As harsh and rude as taboos are, they distinguish between societies and serve as a set of social rules that guide people on how to interact with the world around them. It is on this premise that we are going to use to work on our subject matter titled Taboos or *Isini ogugulu* as it is known in Epie-Atissa community.

Discussion

The term taboo is Polynesian in origin (the Tongan words are " tabu' or 'tapu'), and was only brought into English language in the 18th century. The original polynesian name has a religious connotation. Taboo or *Isini ogugulu* is Defined as the banning of an action based on the notion that such behaviour is either too sacred or consecrated for ordinary individuals to attempt or too dangerous and accursed for ordinary individuals to undertake. encyclopedia Britannica (2009).

Taboos served as the only measure to check and balance the entire social, cultural, religious and political life style of the Epie Atissa people during the precolonial era. Apart from the fact that Epie-Atissa has decentralized administration with *Obenaken* as the leader of different communities in both clans and his council of elders deciding on crimes and punishments, individuals are aware of taboos and the implication of certain actions, which is especially important when there are no witnesses to criminal activities or third parties to intervene or restrict violence or criminal activities. This will direct their conduct and control their behaviours.

The divinities, on the other hand, who are the givers of the taboos, ensure that they are not broken, and in cases when they are, they divine, and the ancestors, or man punishes the offender. Every indigenous Epie Atissa man is a keeper of the taboos that have been established in the area. Breaking a taboo can result in punishment for the individual, family, and in extreme situations, the entire community. Breaking a taboo may necessitate sacrifices and ceremonial rites to cleanse and appease the divinity involved, or to seek God's or *izibe's* pardon. On the other side, the punishment for breaking a given taboo may be irreversible, resulting in the individual's death or catastrophe, or curses passed down through generations.

The taboos *isiniagugu* as it is known in Epie language of the Epie-Atissa people of Yenagoa Bayelsa State are examined in this article, as well as their significance to modern society. Traditional belief systems are rapidly disappearing due to the inculcation of western beliefs, although this is no longer a novel trend. The majority of Epie-Atissa people have completely abandoned African ethics and values in favour of western civilization. This effort also aims to uncover the reality that the Epie-Atissa society will be much better in many aspects if some of the eroded African ideals can be revisited.

The devastating phenomena of moral decay are to blame for several important issues plaguing the Epie-Atissa society and Africans as a whole. This can be attributed to the fact that most old taboos *isiniagugu* have been disregarded. More specifically, traditional taboos and belief systems have been neglected, which has resulted in some of the evils seen in socio-political, economic, and religious organizations of the people. The purpose of this research is therefore to look into the importance of observing taboos among individuals of Epie-Atissa in today's scientific and modern life. (Kikile 2023).

The researcher acknowledged that several taboos have been abandoned and forgotten and that the majority of teenagers and youths are unaware that such a concept as "taboo" exists in the culture. The youngsters in the Epie-Atissa region have a high rate of cultural apathy. Every civilization has its peculiarities and idiosyncrasies, and taboo, is one of them. No community, no matter how primitive or modern, exists without its own set of rules and regulations. Some of the prohibitions and demands are regarded as taboos in that particular civilization.

As such, it is not out of place for us to discuss taboos in Epie-Atissa, the literature that the study will generate will add something new to the body of knowledge.

The Epie-Atissa People

The Epia-Atissa people live in the tropical zone. They live between latitudes 4° 50 and 5° 2' north of the equator. Therefore, they enjoy the tropical or equatorial climate. The people live in twenty-nine independent towns and villages, which are not far apart from one another. The towns and villages are located along the banks Ekole and Epie creeks which are distributaries of River Nun and Orashi respectively. They are bounded on the north and west by the Ekpetiama, Gbarain, and other clans of the Izon ethnic nationality; on the south by thẹ Ogbia people and east by the Engenni people. The twine clans has about Thirty Nine communities. (Yakie 2014).

The Concept of Taboo

Taboos is an element of the Epie-Atissa culture and in Epie-Atissa, the word taboo means *isini-agugulu*", which literary means 'that which is forbidden'. The connotation meaning of '*isini agugulu*' can further be added as those things that cannot be eaten for example totems, spoken of, touched or done. And if anyone through stubbornness or ignorance wants to venture into those things that are forbidden, then at that point it is believed that whatever that comes to him is his own problem whether good or bad.

The History of Taboo in Epie-Atissa

The origin of these taboos cannot be traced. Many asserted that the taboos where observed in Epie-Atissa from time immemorial. It was formed in the distant past by the forefathers who communicated with the deities and it's history is lost in the antiquities. Most of the informants that the researcher interviewed emphasized on the fact that they grew up to witness some of the taboos of the land, and without asking questions, observed the taboos like their fathers. (Kikile 2023)

It is worthy to note that one major taboo that is observed in Epie-Atissa till date, which form a major part of their traditional restrictions even in the modern society was gotten through intermarriage. A typical Epie-Atissa man or woman will not eat a crocodile! This taboo was observed only by a particular family in Epie-Atissa

called Ogboberi. The Ogboberi family was worshipping one of their ancestral deity called "Asegberi". This deity restricted them from eating crocodile. Any disobedience to this taboo will lead to a mysterious illness and eventual death. Until the offender buys a life crocodile and replace the dead one after carrying out some sacrifice the offender would recover from such illness. This taboo was exclusively for this family. It became the People's issue when the sons and daughters of Ogbobiri family began to intermarry with other families amongst the People, and they took along with them their restrictions. They passed it on to their children, by refusing to cook meals that have crocodile meat. This aroused a sense of consciousness among the children.

This belief was strengthened when a group of Epie-Atissa students from Ogbobiri family went to Yenagoa town for a competition in the early 1980s, and after the competition they were served a meal which unknowing to them was cooked with crocodile meat. After some days they all fell seriously ill. Due consultations and divination were made, and it was discovered that they ate the forbidden animal. Sacrifices had to be made and new live crocodiles were bought to appease the divinity. The dread of eating a crocodile or even killing it was so severe that even strangers were not permitted to kill a crocodile in the land.. They can buy it somewhere else kill it, butcher it and take it to their house to prepare it. (Barugu, 2014).

These taboos in Epie-Atissa were believed to be given to them by the ancestors and the divinities. It's difficult for one to ascertain the origin of any of the taboos. For example it is a taboo for one to offer or receive something with the left hand. Even a left handed man doesn't shake hands with the left hand. One will argue that the left hand or right hands are both hands given to man by God or *Izibe* as it is known in Epie language, and there is nothing wrong offering or receiving something with the left hand since both the right and the left hand serve the same purpose. No matter how logical we tend to look at it, using the left hand to give or receive something from anybody is seen as unethical and inappropriate in the cultural life of the people. These taboos no matter how unreasonable it may sound are what has created a balance in the physical and spiritual life of the Epie-Atissa people and any violation will lead to a strong reprove.

The taboos stood as commandment in the traditional religion of the Epie-Atissa and the people that broke them, vengeance on such victims were immediate and very effective. Therefore, issues like stealing, incest, cultism, were not known as serious in those days. But, with Christianity, God's vengeance being seen as slow or till the coming of Jesus Christ, every vices are now on an unbearable increase. The advent of Christianity and state creation have dampened observance of traditional taboos such as destruction and desecration, of the worship places of the divinities, incest, stealing cultism, teenage pregnancy and high level of moral decadence.

Decoding Taboo: Different Taboos and Their Beliefs in Epie-Atissa People

The following are the practices and actions considered as, taboos *isiniagugu* among the Epie Atissa People taboos in relation to beliefs are Eating or killing of crocodile, *Igere* is highly prohibited. The divinity *Asegberi'* disallow any of its worshippers to eat a crocodile. Failure to comply may result to illness or mysterious death, if the proper sacrifices are not made. The worshippers of this divinity *'Asegberi'* the people of Famgbe community in Atissa are strictly disallowed to eat mud fish, *Igbi*. The nature of this fish may render the worshippers unclean and unsanctified before the divinity. Fishing close to the *'Asegberi'* shrine is an abomination. That part of the river is considered sacred. Urinating, salivating and defecating close to the *Asegberi* shrine is a taboo. This is considered to be a sacrilege to *Asegberi*. It's a taboo for ordinary men to enter the sacred shrine of *Asegberi* deity except the chief priest, (Baragu, 2014).

If anyone who has not been permitted by the divinity or the priest enter the shrine, it may lead to death of that person. It is a taboo for women to engage in palm cutting activity. According to tradition the work is exclusively a man's job. An uncircumcised Woman was a taboo. Any woman who is not circumcised will not be allowed to get married or she may encounter some difficulties during child birth or even die in the process of child birth. It is a taboo for an infant to develop milk-tooth first from the upper jaw. This according to tradition is unusual and requires some sacrifices. A married woman is not allowed to sit on the bare ground. It is believed that any married woman who sits on the bare ground is wishing her husband dead. A woman is not allowed to *vie-eden*, cry in the night. Because crying in the night is for the dead. Mouth whistling and blowing of

whistles in the night is a taboo. It is believed that whistling is the language of the spirits. Someone whistling at night may attracts evil spirits. It's a taboo to call or shout someone by name in the farm or forest, *azi*, It may result to the death of that person. An evil spirit may likely answer the call and recognize the name. Engaging in sexual intercourse in the forest is an *Isini-agugulu* abomination. It will lead to death or severe illness of either of the offender or the lady involved will experience difficulties in child birth. This is because they have desecrated the forest. Throwing of stones in the forest or river is not allowed. The people believe spirits are found everywhere and one is likely to stone a spirit. A man getting married to a more elderly woman is unethical and a taboo, it is inappropriate.

Eating of snakes is prohibited, Snake is an unclean reptile to the Epie-Atissa people. Killing of white worms was a sacrilege. The white worm is believed to be associated with the divinity and its presence is a warning from the divinity. *Obolu-mo-bana* or twin plantain fingers are not to be eaten by men. Men were not allowed to eat twin plantain, this is not in all cases anyway for his wife will likely give birth to twins, children. During menstruation, women are not allowed to have intimate relationship or sex with their husbands. Any woman who disobeys will fall ill or will not be able to give birth until she confesses, this is because the time of menstruation is considered a time of uncleanliness of a woman. It is a taboo for a woman to bath naked in the river. It's against the ethical stance of the Atissa people. It is also believed that the nakedness of a women could cause the water deities to be blind and also neutralize their powers. She must tie a rapper while bathing, the people are not allowed to go to the farm or work on any day assigned to be a day of worship, or *edewiedeke*, the sacred day in the Epie-Atissa, people's calendar. It's a taboo for someone to go to the farm when someone dies or before completing the four days of mourning, or when a burial ceremony is going on. Respect is given to the deceased by the entire people. It is believed something bad happens to people that violates this, and people have often been inflicted by the forest spirits with stroke. Married couples were prohibited from taking blood oaths no matter their love story. Blood are not to be spilt indiscriminately especially on oath matters. It will result to death. It's a taboo to stand as a false witness in a controversial matter. The ancestors will punish such person, Lokoja (2015, oral interview). The divinities will penalize that person.

It's a taboo to leave an open drink in public places or ceremonies. Sorcerers may poison it, which will lead to death of whoever that drinks from it. It is an abomination for ordinary men to enter someone's house with the back. That is a pattern of entrance only permitted to a native doctor, *Oyonabu* or priest. It brings calamity upon the family. It's a taboo for siblings to engage in incest or close relationship or marriage, it's an abomination. It will result to marital curse and misfortune. It's a taboo to bury any animal creature alive in the ground, for example, cat, dog, lizard, fowl, etc, burials are only meant for humans and not any other creature, doing that will lead to misfortunes and dangerous happenings. It's a taboo to be caught in the act of adultery *dien-eten ifena*, such culprit will be made to pay a fine known as *isili etenifine* or adultery fee. If that is not done, the woman will die during child birth.

Stealing, embezzlement, syphoning or misappropriation of public or community fund is highly prohibited. The culprit will be publicly dealt with if caught, but if not caught, the ancestors of the community in question will react until he confesses and if he refused to confess then, that will lead to sickness or death.

It's a taboo for a man and a woman to get married without the appropriate marriage rites. It is very inappropriate. The Epie-Atissa culture frowns at it. It's an abomination for a woman whose bride price has not been paid to die in marriage or husband's house. More ransom and severe punishment will be demanded by the family of the woman. It's also a taboo for a woman to be buried in her husband's house when her bride price has not been paid. This is against the laws of the land. It's a taboo to take a new born baby and stand before the mirror. It is believed that, that point is a very fragile moment of the baby's life and the baby is not supposed to see his/her reflection at that tender age. Farming in the night is highly prohibited. Its unethical, one is likely to encounter vagabond and evil spirits at night in the forest.

Eating of zebra snail, *ebige* is a taboo to some Epie-Atissa people. Just like every other forbidden food, it was an existing prohibition. It is a taboo to flog one's child with broom stick. It will lead to misfortune on the side of the child. In the Atissa axis tradition, it is prohibited for individuals to sweep the house by night or throw the dirt out in the night. It means sweeping out good fortunes, or by one throwing

out dirt, it may likely be heaped on the face of spirits. It is forbidden to sing when eating, it's inappropriate. A married woman is not allowed to cut all her hair scalp, it is a sign of mourning, the woman can only do that while mourning her husband. It's a taboo to bury witches or wizards in the place where people who died well are buried *Azi-vie*. If that is done, the spirit of the dead person will react and the corpse of such person would be exhumed and taken to it appropriates cemetery for burial known as *Izie-viedidieli*. It's inappropriate. It is a taboo for anybody who committed suicide, or died mysteriously to be buried inside the house in the community. They are buried in the community's bad burial ground at the out skirt of the town where the evil people are meant to be buried came from called *azididieli* in Epie Atissa dialect suicide is considered not a good death. It's a taboo to kill a fellow indigene of Epie-Atissa. Anyone who kills must be killed. A pregnant woman must not sleep with her stomach flat. This is to avoid stillbirth. It is a taboo for a man to have sexual intercourse with a pregnant woman who is near to delivery. It is believed that the unborn child will be infected with some kind of infections. It is a taboo for a child to take or make a comment when elders or the parents are having conversations. This is a sign of disrespect and improper home training. It is a taboo for a woman or man to eat inside the pot or to eat with a cooking spoon. It attracts the curse of wretchedness. It's a taboo for a woman to deep her hands into the pocked of her husband. It's a sign of disrespect on her part. It is an unethical behaviour. It's a taboo for an infant to start crawling backwardly. It is forbidden. Giving or receiving anything with the left hand is a taboo. This action is considered inappropriate and unethical. It is a taboo for a married woman to abuse the husband in derogative language, for example, *diakpa eat* exreta or are you mad? The ancestors would punish such lady and the husband would not eat from her pot until she carries out prescribed rituals to appease the ancestral spirit of the community, if not, she will die.

Destroying worship places of the divinities was an abomination. This will lead to the death of the person or persons involved. It is a taboo to sell the burial place of one's father or grandfather. It's unethical and may attract curse from the ancestors. A woman is not allowed to enter her house with wet clothes from the river. It's inappropriate. It is a taboo to rape a woman. The punishment of rape is severe beating and the person could be ostracized. It is a taboo for king a *Obenaken* to be absent on the annual *Obunemu*-Epie festival in the case of the Epie clan and *Adiafa*

festival of the Atissa extraction of the clan's celebration. He will be seriously fined for his absence. It's a taboo for anybody to go to the farm on the *Obunemu*-Epie and *Uge adiafa* festival celebration period, for the celebration spans over seven days. This is seen as unreasonable and the person may likely face misfortune in the farm.

It is a taboo for a child to slap the father or the mother or an elder. This will result to contempt from the society and a retributive effect. It is a taboo for a dead person not to be tried by the *aganaga* divination. This is to enable the people know the cause of the death, if the person died a natural death or not, if the person died well or not and to enable them know the appropriate place to bury the person. It is a taboo to eat with the left hand. It attracts reprove from the parent. It's a taboo for one to drink from the cup of water wherein he has been sent by an elder. If caught such person will receive severe punishment.

It's a taboo to talk when turning a pot of food. It is believed that the person will cook salivated food for the family. One is not allowed to dance in the midnight when there is no occasion, either burial rite or wake keep etc. Dancing in the midnights are exclusively done for the dead during ceremonies. It's a taboo for one to sit on a cooking stone. It's a taboo for a female child to be caught putting anything through her genitals. It may damage or cause infection. This attracts severe punishment from the parents. It's a taboo to jump or cross over someone when he/she is lying down. Because it is possible that a bad sickness might be transmitted in this manner. It is also a taboo for a man to jump over an out stretched legs of a married woman. If that happens, it is assumed that such person has committed adultery and he must offer sacrifices to the ancestral spirits of the village in question to assuage them, If not, he would be afflicted with sickness by the *uto-enken*, ancestral spirits of the land. It is forbidden to stand idle on the middle of the road in the forest. Because it is believed that one may obstruct the movement of the spirits, which may lead to ill fortune. It's a taboo to set fire on the feaces of a person. It is believed that the person will experience difficulty when defecating or may develop pile. It's a taboo for a man/woman to talk or shout when passing at the sacred forest of '*Asegberi*'. It is believed that one will attract the attention of evil spirit and be tormented.

Functions of Taboos among the Epie-Atissa People

Taboos play significant and positive role among the Epie-Atissa People. The following are the functions of taboos in Epie-Atissa.

Moral Guidance: Taboos regulate morality among the Epie-Atissa people. Its laws restrict certain behaviour and actions. Taboos like 'a man getting married to a more elderly woman' creates a guide in terms of moral conduct when getting married. The crime of stealing and other moral decadence is frowned at and punishment are given out when necessary.

Peace and Stability: it ensures peace and stability among the people. It is a taboo for a townsman to spill the blood of another townsman. More also feuds and quarrels area taken to the appropriate institutions for settlement. It's also a taboo to bear ''false witness in a controversial matter.

Children Education: Taboos provides platform for children upbringing among people. Children were given restrictions concerning certain actions. For example, eating directly from the pot' or dipping one's hand into pot of food to collect meat of food, this is highly prohibited. Taboos didn't only educate the children but it creates platforms for home management and moral conducts. Such as greeting of elders, restraining children from insulting elders etc.

Provided Rules for Marriage: there are taboos guiding the process before marriage and after marriage. Since marriage is a sacred institution, there are laws that strictly regulates its conduct. Taboo like for example it's a taboo for two people to call themselves husband and wife without the appropriate marriage processes' it is a taboo for a woman to seat on the ground, or taboo for a woman to be caught in the act of adultery. These laws regulate individual's attitudes towards marriages.

People Advancement: Taboos also creates platform for communal living. This is a call for oneness and stability. Peace creates an environment for people to develop generally and also manpower development.

Harmony between Visible and Invisible Forces: Taboos gives regulations between the sacred and the profane. The prohibitions are for the purpose of making man obey the dictates of the divinity. By so doing, man maintains harmony and cordial relationship with the sacred.

Check and Balances: Taboos serve as a watchdog to the conduct between the leaders and the lead. It stood as a regulatory mechanism in the social order of the people. It trimmed down individual ego and make one to conform to societal rules and regulations even when there was nobody to point an accusing finger.

Conservation: Taboos helps to preserve and conserved some of the natural resources of the people. Some wildlife from were not permitted to be eaten or killed, for example, crocodile, this python snake has saved certain wildlife from immanent extinction. Some forest was sacred and not disvirgined, felling of trees was highly prohibited in them. These forests cooled the atmosphere and made the air, more conducive for respiration and this has also helped to protect some species of trees that would have been destroyed.

Cultural Sustenance: Taboos were a means of sustaining the culture and heritage of the people. Taboos made sure that events and ceremonies were observed in its original order to maintain the harmony between the physical world and the supernatural. Till date, certain taboos are still observed, for example, not eating of crocodile meat. This have helped the present generation to have a clue concerning their cultural background and this had led to its sustenance for posterity.

Conflict Resolution: Conflicts were avoided and resolved through taboo. Taboos restrained killing, or bearing false witness and discourage people from coveting other people properties. Where there would be no policing mechanism like chiefs, king or third party, taboos restrained violence or criminal activities, because people for the fear of the consequence of taboos, they would not indulge in nefarious activities.

Agents of Punishment

Every taboo had its attendant punishment. If a taboo is broken, the punishment is sometimes rash and automatic and there were some agents responsible for

delivering such punishment. There were; ancestors, spirits, divinities, and in some cases man. Since God was the creator and also the Supreme Being, the power and authority used by other divinities came from him, though he may not be directly involved in the punishment of deviants.

One of the dominant agents of punishment is the human conscience. One will feel guilty of having broken a taboo and that guilt would cause the offender so much discomfort, such guilt acts as checks to vices in the Epie-Atissa society.

Conclusion:

In this study, we have discussed the taboo system of the Epie-Atissa people in Yenagoa Local Government Area, Bayelsa State. Through interviews and participant observations, the study explored the belief, practices, and usage of taboos within this community. It was found that taboos are an integral part of the cultural life of the people and it has helped to control social behaviour, maintained peace, and punishments are incurred if they are violated. Respect for authority, preservation of traditional customs and religion are some of the important uses of taboos within the Epie- Atissa people. The study also noted that some of the most common taboos were related to the deities, ancestors, and river gods and goddess in the area. In summation, taboos among the people of Epie Atissa kingdom in Yenagoa, Bayelsa State are a complex and varied system that governs the behaviour and interactions among its indigene. Taboos are passed down tradition from generation to generation, and they serve as a collective social code of conduct that determines how society generally, the Epie-Atissa society inclusive should and should not behave. They maintain social order and stability in the Epie-Atissa traditional and cultural environment and so it should be upheld and observed by the people. Ultimately, it is due to these taboos that the people of Epie-Atissa Community are able to maintain a sense of communal unity and this has enabled them survive in a highly competitive, modern and urbanized environment as it is with them presently.

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