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TABOO AND MORAL REINFORCEMENT IN YORUBA TRADITIONAL THOUGHT

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Abstract: World as global village is a village of crisis where morality is seriously endangered with particular references to Africa, there is a serious need to attest the pathetic erosion of morality. There are diverse mechanisms for achieving this but one potential factor that should be considered is the potency of taboo. many Christians and Muslims regard it taboo as mere mythical construction to low unvaried mind through superstitious and further the relevance of African Traditional Religion. This paper argues that it is a critical analytical blunder to examine taboo through the lens of Western logic. Besides, modernity does not outlaw the pragmatic significance of taboo. Hence, taboo obeys a special metaphysical logic that draws on the synergy between the physical and the divine realm. It should be noted that the Supreme Being is the bedrock of the Yoruba religion and also the bedrock of moral reinforcement in Yoruba thought system. God is the source and giver of moral laws and these moral laws are inviolate and immutable. Any person that breaks the taboo would not go unpunished either here now or in the hereafter afterlife). It can seem that the ancestors on their own also help in upholding social and moral order. They serve as the watchdog of the community making sure that all comply with the laid down rules and regulations. They would not waste time in punishing any members that violate or go against the laid down principles because in the traditional Yoruba thought system, there is no “Sacred Cow”.

Keywords: Taboo, Morality, Reinforcement, Yoruba World View, Community

Introduction

Without moral and legal check, man is but a beast. His passion for survival can push him to that point where no method or idea is bad insomuch as such idea will further his course as an individual. This might not generate any problem if man is not a social and gregarious being whose existence is defined in the context of social relationship. However, man cannot escape social interaction. His personality is defined through a web of interaction with other men. This is a universal moral point that gives serious leverage to the pursuit of morals. The Yoruba really reckon with this point that among the indices for the determination of personality, morality is considered inevitable. In fact, they evolve series of pragmatic means to defend, evolve, reinforce and prize out good moral ideals. One of such is the pragmatic essence of taboo in reinforcing morality. It argues that, although taboo may be fallacious when pitched along some logical theories, yet they are structured upon strict metaphysics which western science cannot analyze.

Ethics and Taboos

An innovation into etymology will help in understanding the meaning of ethics “Ethics is derived from the Greek word ‘ethika’ (Latin *Moralia*) and it means morals”.¹ Of course, this etymology is a good pointer to what ethics stand for, yet there is need for more conceptual intensification. The meaning of ethics and morality may intertwine at a point, but in strict philosophical application, there is a context where it will be wrong to compare the two. Morality conveys the approved norms and rules of a society transmitted from generation to generation while ethics can be considered as personal reflection on the convention, rites and norms of the society. In line with this, it is plausible to say that the moral enterprise is the foundation of the ethical enterprise. Thus, “ethics can be defined as the branch of Philosophy which deals with the morality of human actions or as the branch of Philosophy which studies the norm of human behavior or the systematic study of the fundamental principles of the moral law or as the normative science of human conduct”.² Though ethics and morality can be viewed as similar but

1 Anthony Onyebuchi Echekwube and Pantaleon Iroegbu, “What is Ethics?,” in *KPIM of Morality*, ed. Anthony Onyebuchi and 2

Pantaleon Iroegbu (Nigeria: Heinemann Ed. Books, 2005), 22.

2 Joseph Omregbe, *Ethics: A Systematic and Historical Study*, (Lagos: JERP, 1993), 34.

Omoregbe tends to pitch morality as the ontological foundation of ethics. Echekwube corroborates this:

...while morality affirms the consciousness of the predicament of man and his or her capability to choose to act in a number of ways which may be right or wrong, ethics does an analysis of how the decision was arrived at ... while morality is a system of justification or condemnation of human actions as right or wrong, good or bad, etc, ethics applies a reflective process, elucidating the principles or norms which guide human behavior. Note, however, that both morality and ethics are closely related and then they are used interchangeably.³

Taboo is another key term in this paper. Ordinarily, taboo is a custom prohibiting or restricting a particular practice or forbidding association with a particular person, place or thing.

Taboo place embargo on some act and spell out the supernatural sanctions for venturing into such. The Thesaurus gives a variety of meaning on taboo. Some of these are presented below.

- *A ban or an inhibition resulting from social custom or emotional aversion.*

- *A prohibition excluding something from use, approach or mention because of its sacred and inviolable nature.*

- *An object a word or an act protected by such a prohibition, etc. (Thesaurus)*

In linguistic, Captain James Cook was the first to use the term taboo. In a journal entry from 1777. Cook says this word has a very comprehensive meaning but in general it signifies that a thing is forbidden. Cook was in the friendly Islands (New Tonga). The Tongan used taboo as an adjective. Cook besides borrowing the word into English, also made it a noun referring to the prohibition itself and a verb meaning ‘to make someone or something taboo’ (Heritage Dictionary).

Taboo according to Ayisi⁴ has its root in the Polynesian word “Tabu” which to him means things forbidden. He goes further to affirm

³ Pantoleon Iroegbu, “Globalized Ethics,” in *KPIM of Morality*, ed. Anthony Onyebuchi Echekwube and Pantoleon Iroegbu (Ibadan: Spectrum Books, 2005), 32.

⁴ Eric O. Aysis, *An Introduction of the Study of African Culture* (London: Heinemann, 1979), 91.

that, it was used by the Voyagers who came to Polynesia a long time ago, for a special kind of prohibition which they illustrated by the physical avoidance of certain things or categories of people. Thus having come into contact with any of such things, one is expected to undergo ritual cleaning which if not undertaken one would be exposed to danger and something dangerous may happen to the follow, his family or community at large.

Speaking further on Taboo, Amponsah⁵ expresses that, taboos have some religious connotation and negligence in observing these taboos may result in death, illness and hosts of other bad things that one may term as evil.

The word taboo among the Yoruba people is called “*Eewo*”, the violation of which is followed by penalty. As observed by Aderibigbe;

Taboos generally have to do with conducts which are forbidden. In African (the Yoruba inclusive) it is recognized that certain actions are against the good and well-being of other individual, the community or even certain actions are against the good and well-being of other individual, the community or even against the gods. Thus if there is going to be harmonious person-to-person, person to community and divine – person relationship, these actions must be forbidden.⁶

Taboo is an important moral question that is related to human behaviors and attitudes. It is referred to as things not done. According to Idowu, among the Yoruba, people of South-Western Nigeria:

...morality is certainly the fruit of religion. They do not make any attempt to separate the two...what have been named tabu took their origin from the fact that people discerned that there were certain things which were morally approved or disapproved by the Deity. So the Yoruba call tabu “*Eewo*”- “Things forbidden, “Things not done”. In the thought of the people, the tabu have collectively taken on a special significance by assuming or quasi-personal character in consequence of which it has

⁵ Kwabena Amponsah, *Topics on West African Traditional Religion* (Accra: McGraw Hill, 1978), 71.

⁶ Omregbe, *Ethics*, 305.

been given then name *A-ki-se-o-* “It –is-not done”. “It is tabu”, and this personification is variously conceived of as the “detective” of Orunmila or as an independent “agent” who is operative in the World by the decree of Olodumare. The Yoruba say therefore in the face of a baffling Crime or offence. *A-ki-se-e-lo maadajo* – It is –tabu will judge (track down the offender) which is as much as to say” Sinners will not go unpunished.⁷

Among the Yoruba, taboos are rooted in the indigenous religion of the people. There are various types of taboos among the people and these taboos vary from one society to another. What is a taboo being one community may be permitted in another community? While from the perspective of religious taboos, which has to do with ritual taboos, that is, what the gods/goddesses want or do not want. The taboos differ, for instance, among the Yoruba, all the worshipers of Orisanla, the arch divinity must not drink palm wine because Orisanla who is also Obatala forbid it and the reason for this taboo, they traced to the fact that Orisanla once became intoxicated after drinking palm wine and since then he would neither drink nor allow his worshippers to drink it. Also Orunmila does not tolerate the drinking of Palmwine but Ogun, the god of Iron, cherish it. It would even be a taboo for worshippers of Ogun not to give him Palmwine during the Worship section or period.

Apart from taboos forbidden for religious reasons, some are prohibited because it is against social customs, or restricted to the use of god/goddess, a King, Priest/Priestess or Chiefs while it is forbidden to general use. It could at times be prohibited to a particular class (especially to women) or a particular people and they are seen as social prohibition. It is in this respect that Olajubu, remarks that:

Taboos are primarily matters of custom forming part of the social inheritance of the individual’s heredity...Taboos could be prohibitions imposed by men or the gods, in both cases it incorporates the regulatory imperatives of culture itself...taboos therefore affect the life of the ordinary man,

⁷ Bolaji Idowu, *Olodumare: God in Yoruba Belief* (London: Heinemann, 1996), 150.

surrounds his/her words, clothes, eating, names, Oaths taking sexual relationship.⁸

Apart from ritual taboos therefore, there are taboos that has to do with cleanliness, good-living, respect, matrimony, preventing evil, occupational taboos, taboos for pregnant women, mothers, royal taboos and ritual cleanliness.

Since man is central to the issue of ethics and taboos in Yoruba land, it would be necessary and germane to look at the concept of man (person) from the Yoruba point of view. The concept of ethics and taboos that centered around man, who is a complex being, an unknown and a unique figure within creation, whose role is to keep all taboos (don't) and do's with all sincerity of purpose. Emphasis is put on man's moral life which is that which determines the human personality in Yoruba thought system.

A Social Definition of Man as a Being-in-Relation

The question of personhood is presenting Yoruba. Here is a socio-ethical dimension to this issue. Apart from the anatomical and physiological description, being a person implies being a morally responsible individual, rational, reliable and socio-economically productive. It is believed that through a proper development of his mind, an individual becomes amenable to rational persuasion and moral correction within the community and to the extent that he remains so, he is free, responsible and a person in the social sense. Thus, we share Nwacha's view that not every life is approved by African, there is bad life as well as good life. The good life is what the society cherishes and approves. The good life is anchored on justice, moral probity, beneficial reciprocity, hospitality, etcetera. The individual as noted by Ukangba is not self-sufficient, he needs the cooperation of his fellow men and women. When faces life changing conflict, that is, in between expansive individual liberty and necessary communal demands arose, they were resolved in favor of the community.

There is no doubt that man is a biological being but this does not translate completely to being a person within the contextual bound of Yoruba ontological description of man. The Yoruba idea of man

⁸ Oyeronke Olajubu, "Taboos and Superstition as tool for social integration among the Yoruba of South Western Nigeria," in *Issues in the Practice of Religion in Nigeria*, ed. M.T. Yahya, P. A. Dopamu, E. A. Odumuyiwa, D. Shishima, S. A. Owoye and P. O. Abioje (Nigeria: Nigerian Association for the Study of Religions Publication, 2006),239.

embraces and emphasizes the sociality of man, the spirit of community, corporate existence and togetherness in the society. Man is not created to be alone. He is created to be a being in-relation. African society, Yorubaland inclusive, is full of the idea of communal living. Instead of saying that man is a political animal, as in Aristotelian sense or that man in Stoics' sense is a 'Communitarian animal'. According to Ade Ali, the Yoruba will say that "man is by nature a social, political and communitarian person" (1997:55).⁹ Mbiti rightly surmises that: 'To be human is to belong to the whole community and to do so involves participating in the beliefs ceremonies, rituals and festivals of the community'.¹⁰

From our own point of view, these beliefs include the various moral standard and the taboos which must be obeyed religiously. As explains by Aderibigbe:

...to break a taboo is to bring disorder not only on oneself but the whole community, which may entail severe penalties. Taboos are also important to the African in the sense that they inculcate spiritual and more values which are the hallmark of African Religion. Their observance goes a long way in promoting the needed sense of mutual responsibility and communalism on which the African culture and religion are solidly built.¹¹

Speaking further on this Awolalu is of the view that:

Wherever we speak of morality, the individual cannot be let out. In the final analysis, everyone is expected to act with consciousness of his own responsibility. Hence the Yoruba saying: *bi ara'leeni, banjekokorobuburu, ti a kosofun un*, Here, *huru re, konijekialadugbo o sun*. (meaning) if a member of one's household is eating poisonous insects, and we fail to warn him (to desist) the after effect of his action would rob neighbors of sleep. This

9 Samuel. A. Ali, "Persons: A Yoruba Example," in *Journal of Yoruba Folklore* 1, ed. Adajabo Sola (Nigeria: Ogun State University, 1997), 55.

10 John Samuel Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*, (London: Heinmann, 1982), 2.

11 Ibigbolade Simon Aderibigbe, "The Moral Issues in African Religion," in *Studies in Religious Understanding in Nigeria*, ed. R. D. Abubakre, M.T. Yahya, M.O. Opeloye, R. A. Akanmu, E. A. Odumuyiwa, P. A. Dopamu and C.A. Dime (Nigeria: Nigeria Association for the study of Religious Publication, 1993), 305.

emphasizes the fact that the behavior of every member of the community is of concern to all. It is of concern because every member of the society has a certain moral standard to maintain, certain forms of behavior are considered right while others are considered wrong.

Foundation and Guidance of Morality in the Yoruba World View

There is an impression that Yoruba Traditional ethics is a religious ethic. It is assumed that it is depended on religion. Hence, morality without religion is inconceivable. In the ethical system of the Yoruba, *Olodumare* is the Supreme Being, the creator of man, the prime and final source, guidance and custodian of morality. God made man and it is He who implants in him the sense of right and wrong.¹²The concept or the issues of right which are those or wrong which are don'ts by the power of God has always been part of human nature and He, the Supreme Being, is the universally recognized binding Moral values in the religion of the Yoruba. Idowu, says in this regards that the Yoruba derive immediately from His own divine nature.

He is *Oba mimo, Oba pipe*-Pure King, Perfect King; He is *Alaaafunfun-oke*- The one clothed in white, who dwells above; He is *Ikinnifin, Alatiko l ona*- Essentially white object, white fabric without Pattern (entirely white). In Him alone can be resolved the ever-baffling problem of right conduct which we inevitably encounter in the divinities or ancestral sanctions. In order to aid man in ethical living *Olodumare* has put in him *Ifaaya*- The Oracle of the Heart or The Oracle which is in the heart. It is this 'oracle of the heart' that guides man and determines his ethical life. One is a good or a bad person in accordance as he responds to or disobeys; the guidance of the heart is a person's conscience- the law of God written in the heart.¹³

Therefore, to the Yoruba, morality is certainly the fruit of Religion and they do not make any attempt consciously or unconsciously to separate the two. This is because they know if they tried to separate the two there would be disastrous consequences. Though, the real source and the norm of the unrestricted, universally recognized binding moral values in the religion of the Yoruba is

¹² Idowu, *Oldumare*, 149.

¹³ Idowu, 160.

*Olodumare*¹⁴. The divinities are regarded as the ministers of the Supreme Being in the World as well as the intermediaries between Man and the Supreme Being they are charged they with the duty of keeping moral order in the society. These divinities command good behavior and good character among the people. They punish the recalcitrant and reward the compliance. Among the Yoruba, there are some divinities that are regarded as guardians of public morality, these include *Ogun, Sango, Ayelala, Sonpona, Obatala, Orunmila, Osun* and others. Apart from the above, we also have the ancestors. They are vested with how the family they left behind conduct their day to day practical living. Morality in form of custodianship and sanctions are with them and the reward and punishment as at when due the moral activities of the members of their families. They are the invisible agents who have the responsibility of teaching and inculcating the ethics of the religion.

In support of this view, Mbiti argues that:

They are the guardians of family affairs, traditions, ethics and activities... act as the invisible police of the families and communities. Because they are still people and have not yet become 'things', 'spirits' or 'its', the living-dead are therefore the best group of intermediaries between men and God. They know the needs of men, they have "recently" been here with men and at the same time they have fuel access to the channels of communicating with God directly or according to some societies, indirectly through their own forefathers.¹⁵

We also have human moral custodians who are diviners, priests, medicine men and women and elders. They are intermediaries between men, on one hand and *Olodumare*, divinities, spirits and ancestors on the other hand. According to Dzurgba, they have the Supernatural power and knowledge with which they are capable of reviewing beings for and on behalf of the individual, families and the entire communities.

The council of elders is the highest authority in the society...the Custodians of moral values. The Council regulates the entire Social life in which ethic of life is involved...the voice of Council is the voice of God,

¹⁴ Idowu, 160.

¹⁵ Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*, 83.

divinities, spirits and ancestors, the council of elders is the most powerful, forceful and corrective organization in an African communities.¹⁶

Taboo and Ethical Reinforcement

In Yoruba traditional thought, taboo is attributed to the gods, goddesses and ancestral sanctions. These groups impose strict sanctions to enhance compliance with prohibition and maintenance of the social order. In traditional Yoruba, the *Orisa* (divinities-gods/goddesses) and the ancestors played a great role in the moral order. The Yoruba word for taboo is *eewo*. *Eewo* are the don't do things of the society. They are social prohibitions. In Yoruba traditional thought, taboo is attributed to the gods, goddesses and ancestral sanctions. These groups impose strict sanction to enhance compliance with prohibition and maintenance of the social order. According to Olajubu, taboo can be seen as:...serving to Control and Channel human interaction and collective negative differentiation marking out certain persons, objects and occasions, by specifying what may not be done to, with or on them.¹⁷

Speaking further, on taboo, Parrinder¹⁸ is of the view that;

Taboo refers particularly to the sacred character of people and things, and the uncleanness that follows violation of the prohibitions with which they are surrounded. It is normal that Kings and priests should be hedged about with strong taboos. The same obtains of members of particular crafts and occupations, smiths, hunters, weavers, and so on. But taboo enters into life of the ordinary man, surrounds his words, clothes, eating, names, oaths and sexual relationship.

Among the Yoruba as in other West African tribes there are various types of taboo. We have taboos associated with eating, words, crafts, royal taboos, social taboos, ritual taboos, taboos that shield many

16 A. Dzugba, "Idowu and Yoruba Religious Ethics," in *Under the Shelter of Oldumare, Essays in Memory of Professor E. Bolaji Idowu*, ed. S. O. Abogunrin and I.D. Ayegboyin (Ibadan: John Archers, 2014), 168.

17 Olajubu, *Issues*, 236.

18 Geoffrey Parrinder, *West African Religion: A Study of the Beliefs and Practices of Akan, Ewe, Yoruba, Ibo, and Kindred Peoples* (London: The Epworth Press, 1975), 178.

relationships of men and women and taboos that have to do with the menstruating women.

We shall examine some taboos that help in reinforcing morality.

(1) *Obinrinkogbodo fi igbalenaoko re tori pekokorooko re yooku.* (A woman must not whip the husband with broom because the man will lose his potency).

Within the realm of logical thinking, there is no rational connection between hitting a man with broom and loosing of potency. This is a clear case of fallacy of appeal to consequence. An appeal to consequences is an attempt to motivate belief with an appeal either to the good consequences of believing or the bad consequences of disbelieving. As fallacious as the thinking may be within the logic of formal thinking it is metaphysically and ethically valid in Yoruba traditional thought.

Primarily, this is a way of teaching women that a good housewife must not be a terror and fighter. She must be submissive and her productive life is apparently impossible without the 'phallus', then, she must contain her rage. Besides, the beauty of a woman resides essentially in character not mere shining facial appearance.

While the analytical thinkers in African philosophical thought will see this as a recondite and meaningless view, a good scholar in Yoruba metaphysics will not see it as such. Olusegun Oladipo bears out the rationale of logical connection between the gods and morality. He writes thus:

It is true that a belief is not justified simply because it fits perfectly into a system of beliefs but we must not ignore the fact that the theoretical entities of traditional Yoruba thought are postulated with a view to making intelligible some aspects of the people's experience even though they have not been systematically idealized as those in modern science.¹⁹

The Yoruba metaphysical lore internalizes some pragmatic divine principles. Science may not explain these principles because they fall outside its logic, yet this does not render them invalid. Till now science

¹⁹ Olusegun Oladipo, *The Idea of African Philosophy*, (Ibadan: Hope Publication, 1998), 43.

is yet to posit definite answer to the HIV/AIDS problem, though there are bundles of hypothesis. The above teaches that a woman must not nag, fight or treat the husband with levity.

(ii) *Obinrinkogbodobuobeloriina fun oko re, kokorooko re yooku.* (A woman must not ladle soup for the husband while the soup is on fire. The man's phallus will become non-functioning if this is done).

Apparently, there is no logical connection between the two. It will be a fallacy of false cause in the lens of Western logic, that this taboo serves pragmatic purpose. One, women must be swift, careful and cook with passion. Two, some men like hunters use amulets and charm that can lose their efficacy if given such food. Thus, to facelift this woman must be prompt and give their husbands the best.

(iii) *Omodekogbodojokojeunlenuona, iya re yooku.* (A child must not eat at the entrance; the mother will die).

This taboo is aimed at teaching children the following lesson: One, they must eat in hygienic places. Two, they must eat in comfortable places not the entrances where they have to stand up severally to allow people to come in or go out of the house.

Really, many western scholars and social anthropologists like Smith argue that morality in traditional African society is bound by the sanctions of dogma, religion and authority. In fact scholars like, E.W. Smith regards African morality as 'taboo morality'.²⁰ Smith must note that Africans ever their customs and traditions but subject such to critical-rational reflection. Africans are not irreversibly dogmatic.

(iv) *Ma gbaiyawo ore re, oju lo fi n tini* (Do not covet your neighbor's wife, the action will end in shame).

Betrayal brings about loss of trust. Thus our humanity becomes meaningful when our action can become a categorical imperative to be used by all. A man that covets his friend's wife is as bad as a murderer.

Fundamentally, the penalty for taboo is inflicted by the gods and when properly followed taboo has the potentiality to reinforce morality. It inculcates fear and discipline. It may sound ridiculous, but it pragmatically works, for instance, to warn ladies against washing cloth at night. The Yoruba regards this as taboo and the punishment is that

20 A.F. Agunlana, "Moral Thinking in Traditional African Society: A Reconstructive Interpretation," *Prayna Vihana Journal of Philosophy and Religion* 8 (Thailand: Assumption University, 2007): 120.

there will be downpour on the wedding day of such a lady. This is an attempt to instill healthy habit and time consciousness in growing ladies. This may be a form of fallacy yet it works in the reinforcement of morals.

Society without morality will only breed chaos. The penal system, religion and taboo are crucial agents of moral reinforcement. Some taboos have to do with what children should not have fun with. For example, collecting rain water with the hollow of the palm during rainfall is outlawed because whoever tries that can incur the wrath of Sango (god of thunder). Sango can hit the person with a thunderbolt.

It is observed that in virtually all taboos, there are inherent sanctions. Thus, taboos carry intrinsic power of social, natural and divine justice.

Apart from the above, we also have religious taboos or ritual taboos, which are seen as abominations and the people are to refrain from it. We have the taboos connected with menstruation which is usually for women-the priestesses who are still of childbearing age have to be very careful. This has to do with the fact that a menstruating woman is generally seen as unclean. According to Pat Pauline²¹:

This general atmosphere of mistrust arises, in part at any rate, from the horror inspired by blood and from the feeling that there are magic dangers inherent in menstruation... Everywhere contact with a woman in 'impure' is considered to be defilement. A woman in this condition will avoid preparing food for her husband and will keep away from the alters and among agriculturists from the fields or among pastoralists from cattle's enclosures. Sometimes there is even a special dwelling on the outskirts of the settlement set aside for the use of menstruating women, who have to purify themselves before taking part again in communal life.²²

Nabofa²³ corroborated this assertion when he reported the same practice among the Igbo, Urhobo and Yoruba of Nigeria:

21 Denise Pauline, *Women of Tropical Africa* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1971), 134.

22 Pauline, 134.

23 M. Y. Nabofah, "Blood Symbolism in African Religion," *Religious Studies*, no.21(U.K: Cambridge University, June , 1985): 400.

Women priests and votaries keep away from their temples and shrines when they are under menstruation and other such conditions and generally all women are required to undergo ritual of purification at the end of their period and also some days or months after childbirth....blood resulting from menorrhagia and metrorrhagia is believed to be dangerous because it originates from the uterus, a human organ that is often associate with impurities which are capable of rendering man ritually impure,...the fear couched on the belief that a mysterious Negative power exists in the female reproduction organ and any blood that issues out of it, like meets other bodily refuse, has the potentialities of sacrilege.

Oranges are also taboos. They must not be taken in the shrine, this is because, it was believed that orange can “weaken” the potency of traditional medicine.

Awolalu and Dopamu observed that:

One has to obey all the regulations of the cult and observe its taboo. Each divinity usually has certain things which are to him...things forbidden...must be observed on entering into covenant with him. And the terms of the covenant constitute the norm of conduct or the code of behavior for the individual persons in the worship of the divinity.²⁴

Fighting is also a taboo among the people in the various cults. They must not engage in insulting worlds. Respect all is their watchword. According to Sijuade²⁵:

Whenever there is any misunderstanding they must settle it amicably. No harm must be done to one another, for they all have entered into the same covenant with the divinities.

There must be ritual cleanliness among the people in the various cults if the divinities. Idowu stressed the importance of ritual cleanliness, that:

²⁴ Joseph Omosade Awolalu and Adelumo Peter Dopamu, *West African Traditional Religion* (Nigeria: Macmillan, 2005), 235-236.

²⁵ O. A. Sijuade, “Female-Oriented Cults and Ritual Practices in Ijebuland Ogun State, Nigeria,” Ph.D. Thesis (Ibadan: Department of Religious Studies, University of Ibadan, 2010), 107.

Ritual defilement may be incurred in several ways, depending on what is taboo to the particular divinity who is being worshipped. It is believed, however, that cohabitation immediately before worship or when its strain has not been removed by thorough washing is a thing forbidden by all the divinities. So also is it taboo for a worshipper to carry bad medicine on his person. The greatest obstacle to efficacious worship is impurity of heart. Thus moral and ritual cleanness have from time immemorial been accepted as a prerequisite of Yoruba Worship.²⁶

Conclusion

The significance of taboos is best seen in the contribution it makes to the cultivation and production of morality and respect for sacred beings. It conveys the reality of natural and divine justice. In spite of any anti-scientific thesis, the phenomenon of taboo is in consonance with the metaphysical structure of Yoruba metaphysics. Olajubu maintained that, taboos among the Yoruba people:...Constitute a link between the past and present with a view to ensuring the maintenance and continuation of the people's social-cultural value.²⁷ .

Taboos can be used as religious tools for social integration among the Yoruba. There are taboos that have to do with cleanliness, good-living, respect, matrimony and to prevent evil in the society. Aderibigbe²⁸ vehemently summarized it, in the following words:

What is important however is that taboos are to be kept with all severity? For to break a taboo is to bring disorder not only to oneself but the whole community which may entail severe penalties. Taboos are also important to the African in the sense that they inculcate spiritual and moral values which are the hallmark of African religion. Their observance goes a long way in promoting the needed sense of mutual responsibility and communalism on which the African culture and religion are solidly built.

²⁶ Idowu, *Oldumare*, 109.

²⁷ Sophie Bosede Oluwole, "The Rational Basis of Yoruba Thinking," in *Nigerian Journal of Philosophy* 4 (2006): 242.

²⁸ Aderibigbe, *The Moral Issues*, 305.

Taboos either imposed by men serve as a regulatory factor in the reinforcement of moral in Yoruba traditional thought system. Through the observation of the various taboos men can find peace within his society, with his fellow human being, the sacred being as well as the ancestors.

Taboos are regulations that reinforce morality in the traditional Yoruba society. It does not only reinforce morality; it helps to strengthen even marriage institutions with its prohibitions. Observing taboos in certain foods and persons can be used to give one healthy living or can leads to healthy living. In Yoruba traditional society, taboo is use to give sanctity to the customs and regulations of the community. Taboos are part of the moral. Code and ethics of a given society and they are held scared and are believed to have been instituted by God or national leaders. According to Mbiti:

Any breach of this code of behavior is considered evil, wrong or bad, for it is an injury or destruction to the accepted social order and peace. It must be punished by the corporate community of both the living and the departed, and God may also inflict punishment and bring about justice.²⁹

There are regulations and taboos that govern conduct in the Society and any breach of the right conduct in the society and any breach of the right conduct amounts to a moral evil. On a final note, according to Dime talking generally on African religion, this also applies to the Yoruba religion:

African religion prescribes certain codes of behavior which are embedded in the laws, taboos, customs and set-forms of behavior in any African Society and these shape the hives of the various groups. It is believed that when one breaks these taboos and customs then one has offended the spiritual powers and this is likely to impair the harmonious relationship existing between the spiritual powers and the human beings. Africans are very conscious that they have a moral code of their own superior in their view to that of

²⁹ Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*, 203.

others as was the traditional way of life which validates it.³⁰

We need to teach the younger generation the importance and consequence of breaking the taboos and the need for them to keep to the rules and regulation of the taboos in the society in order to receive favor from the Supreme Being, divinities and their ancestors.

30 C.A. Dime, "African Religion and the quest for Ethical Revolution," in *Religion and Ethic in Nigeria*, ed. S.O. Abogunrin, Ibadan Religious Study Series I (Ibadan: Ibadan Daystar Press, 1986), 38.

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