The Social Significance of Taboo Expressions in Sepedi Language

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Abstract

Taboo expressions are social influences involving behaviours specially designed to fit in with a group or the entire society. Taboo expressions were conditionally designed by African people to compel people to live according to socially prescribed rules and regulations; and to restrict African people to indulge in illicit acts. Although punishment for transgressing taboo expressions was not inescapable, African people went on to transgress them and most if not all suffered the consequences. The concept of a "taboo" is difficult to define. The word is borrowed from a Polynesian language. Taboo is defined as an element of all situations in which attitudes to values are expressed in terms of dangerous behaviour. A taboo has something to do with "sacredness", something that may be "forbidden", it may apply to a "person" or to a "thing" and may describe things that are "elements' or "devoted" (Essel, 2018:2). In Sepedi language, taboo expressions are characterised by the words, 'o se ke wa' (do not). The prefixal morpheme 'o' is common to all taboos in Sepedi. 'o se ke wa ṡupa dirapa' (never point your finger at the graves), is one taboo expression that command respect among African people. The latter taboo, comes-up with the punishment threat if a person transgresses it; 'o tla khokhoropana monwana' (your finger will become scrabbly); the threat is not real but just to make people to respect the place of the dead. To other taboo expressions the threat is real; 'o se ke wa kopanela dikobo le mohwana' (never have sex with a woman who have just lost a husband). The terrifying consequences of the latter taboo expression is that the man will develop swollen legs (makgoma) which will ultimately lead to death. It is therefore inevitable that taboo expressions in Sepedi can be divided into two; those that enforce acceptable social behaviour (harmless) and those that restrict people from indulging in wayward acts which may lead to death. Diawuo (2015:117) argues that taboos represent unwritten social rules that regulate human behaviour." Although taboo expressions were not written; in their oral nature, they were able to be transmitted from African generation to the next. To enhance their permanent stay in African cultures, taboos formed part of oral traditional songs, poetry, folklore, riddles, games and different cultural plays; but it should always be remembered that they are 'social rules that regulate human behaviour.

***Keywords**:* Taboos, culture, euphemism, religion, temptation, tradition, Pedi and African

1. Introduction

Taboos are oral traditional expressions which were used by African people to ensure acceptable conduct within African societies; even today taboo expressions are still applicable. In those African societies in which taboo expressions are used; there exists licit and good conduct. Most philosophers related taboo expressions and euphemism. Etymologically, euphemism is derived from the Greek word "eu" meaning "good" and "pheme" meaning "speak" literally relating to as speaking with good words.

Basically, the use of euphemisms is motivated to avoid taboo words. From this understanding, linguists advanced the definition of euphemism in varied ways. Euphemism can be defined as an act of substituting an offensive or unpleasant word for a more pleasant one, thereby veneering the truth by using kind words (Gabriel & Charlotte, 2021: 40). What prompted us to pursue this study is the powerful influence that taboo expressions have to the social conduct of African people; throughout their daily activities, taboo expressions continued to guide and align their lives. There are some taboo expressions meant to enforce the licit conduct in children, others were meant to

inform African women about their boundaries with regard to acceptable social conduct. the last set of taboos are those guiding African men to conform to the norms and values of their culture. Fershtman et al. (2011:139) ascertained that:

> "Human behaviour is governed only by rational decision making. Societies often have shared values and standards of acceptable behaviour that members of the society are encouraged to follow. A culture or a society guides the behaviour and the thoughts of their members by agreed upon expectations and rules."

The list of taboos and their importance are dynamic, some taboos may enervate or even vanish while others may become indestructible and more dominant. Our study converged its emphasis on those taboo expressions which are not changing and had not changed since their origin. These taboos have been respected and sacred in African societies. Taboos are enforced by social punishment. The most social punishment involves the attitude and reactions of other members of society (Fershtman, 2011:140). African people believed that ancestors are capable to punish anyone who transgresses certain religious taboos; most probably, ancestral punishment is death. Therefore, no member of the society would wish to be punished by death thus, they will toe the line and avoid any form of taboos transgression.

Association of taboos and sacralisation was advocated by many anthropologists; what is regarded as taboo, is usually what is considered as sacred by many African cultures. Taboo is generally accepted as drawing the fundamental boarders between the sacred and the profane, whereas a critical glance shows that these boarders can scarcely be drawn unproblematically, since not only the concepts of taboos as such, but also the concepts of the sacred turns out to be polysemic, if not aporetic (Horlacher, 2010:2). Detailed discussion of taboo and sacralisation is outlined under theoretical framework below.

2. Temptation, Tradition, And Taboo: A Theory Of Sacralization

The study was guided by Temptation, Tradition, and Taboo: A Theory of Sacralization. This theory is more reducing the margin between the sacred earthly material from taboos, temptation and tradition; and whoever violates a taboo is likely to face punishment and such individuals occasion moral outrage and instigate moral cleansing among that moral behaviour is in large part a matter of duly respecting and observing sacred taboos. Marshall (2010:64) propounded that:

> "A theory of Sacralization is offered in which the sacred emerges from the collision of temptation and tradition. It is proposed that when innate or acquired desires to behave in one-way conflict with socially acquired and/or mediated drives to behave in another way, actors ascribe sacredness to the objects of their action as a means of reconciling the difference between their desired and actual behaviour toward those objects.

The sacred is the essence of religion as well as a fundamental sociological concept is neither misplaced nor of historic interest. The sacred was and remains indispensable to understanding religion and is, moreover, an elemental social phenomenon with explanatory power and application far beyond the domain of religion per se. Temptation according to Marshal et al. (2010: 70) refers to motivations to behave so as to produce hedonically valued outcomes…tradition on the other hand refers to a broad spectrum of socially acquired behavioural restrictions or obligations like temptation, tradition is both a qualitative and quantitative variable encompassing

both the contents and strength of a group's practices. Jay (2009: 153) asserted that: "A taboo is a 'ban or inhibition resulting from social custom or aversion.' Taboo words are sanctioned or restricted on both institutions and individual levels under the assumption that some harm will occur if a taboo word is spoken. We first internalize taboos at a personal level. Indeed, we learn not to use them when we are punished by caregivers.

Temptation, Tradition and taboo were used to analyse and to interpret the data we gathered from participants.

3. Research Methodology And Research Design

The study was tailor-made to address the concept: social significance of taboo expressions in Sepedi. To address this concept successfully, we found a qualitative research approach most appropriate to allow us to interact with participants in a bid to collect all valuable points to address the problem under study. Busetto et al. (2020:1) argued that qqualitative research is defined as the study of the nature of phenomena", including "their quality, different manifestations, the context in which they appear or the perspectives from which they can be perceived." We finally embraced Cropley's submission that: "The task of all research is enlarging knowledge and understanding (Cropley, 2019:19). This motivated us to expand as much as possible our research designs, methods and sample in order to record every piece of valuable information.

4. Study Site And Sampling

The study took place at Ga-Mamabolo village, about 20 kilometers from the University of Limpopo in the Capricorn district. The village was selected for the rich cultural heritage and availability of elderlies with vast cultural knowledge. Elderlies in every society are agents of transmission of cultural traits from one generation to the other. Culture distinguishes human being from other animals, in that human are able to construct patterns of behaviours for themselves, and are able to transmit this from person to person and through generations. The study of culture is the key component of sociology along with the associated notion of socialization (Sibani, 2018:58).

Mamabolo village is a rural traditional, cultural community with the king's palace and 'Bakgoma' (king's brothers) homes surrounding the palace. People in the village live according to set cultural rules of the society; they respect all cultural traits including non-material cultural traits like taboos. Mamabolo village is a typical community appropriate to conduct the study and collect relevant data. While material culture is concrete and takes the form of artefacts and crafts, non-material culture is abstract but has a very pervasive influence on the lives of the people of a particular culture. Hence beliefs about what is good and what is bad, together with norms and taboos, are all good examples of non-material culture (Idang, 2015:3).

COVID-19 compelled us to limit the number of our participants to three; after observing all COVID-19 protocols we ended up securing three participants from three different homesteads. We gave a complete explanation of the purpose and procedure of the study and addressed their consent. We explained to them that their participation in the study was entirely voluntary. We vowed our allegiance to confidentiality and anonymity to participants twice as much. The researcher develops an informed consent form for participants to sign before they engage in the research. This form acknowledges that participants' rights will be protected during data collection

(Creswell, 2002:89). After mutual agreement on how the study was going to be conducted, participants were then made to sign consent forms.

5. Data Collection

Satisfied that participants agreed to be part of the study, we began to create a conducive atmosphere for them to give us taboo expressions applicable in Sepedi and their social significance. Data was collected through semi-structured interviews and socio-cultural analysis.

6. Semi-Structured Interviews

A semi-structured schedule was used to initiate discussions with participants. Semi-structured interviews involve a series of open-ended questions based on the topic areas the researcher wants to cover. The open-ended nature of the question defines the topic under investigation but provides opportunities for both interviewer and interviewee to discuss some topics in more detail (Mathers et al., 2002:2). We found the semi-structured interviews more appropriate to evoke the level of participants' experiences and knowledge of taboos and their social significance in African societies. This helped us to develop own experiences and to unearth subtle and hidden social significances.

The interview schedule included three elements of theory of Sacralization: temptation, tradition, and taboo. About temptation, we asked them how taboos obliged and impelled licit socially accepted behaviour. Secondly, we wanted to know what prompted/enhanced the transmission of taboos from one generation to the next. Lastly, we wanted to know the value of taboos in African societies. Our plan was to visits each participant five times to collect first-hand data and conversation; unfortunately, due to COVID-19 pandemic we reduced our visits to three. The first visit was for arrangements and introduction of the study; the second visit was for actual interviews and the third and last visit was for feedback and debriefing. During every visit, we succumbed to COVID-19 regulations: we wore masks, frequently sanitised our hands and never forgot to keep safe distance between us and participants.

7. Socio-Cultural Analysis

Socio-cultural traits and beliefs were analyzed, in order to find the reason behind the origin of taboos; why African people so much respect both material and non-material cultural traits and beliefs; and whether the envisaged punishment for transgression of taboos is real or just an empty threat to compel African people to inherit social accepted morals. Every community, towns and villages in Africa had a system of morals which are preserved in their customs and tradition. There is no society (in Africa) that has no set of dos and don'ts. A society that has no norms or ethically intelligible way of ascertaining and enforcing good conduct is bound to disappear in the short or long run (Ozumba, 1995: 55). We found the socio-cultural analysis most suitable to unlock the social significance of taboo expressions in Sepedi language.

Fundamentally, both qualitative and quantitative data analysis revolve around summarising, describing and analysing masses of data (Lacey & Luff, 2007), We began right away to analyse data already collected and organized. Notes were taken from the audio-visual tablet in order to summarize data, describe data and analyse it to avoid missing any link leading to the social

significance of taboo expressions in Sepedi. Data was read over again until categories are identifiable. The categories were then developed into themes.

8. Findings

From the analysis of both interviews and socio-cultural data, we came-up with two main findings; the harmless taboos and harmful taboos, material and non-material taboos. These taboos are further exposed in the section that follow.

HARMLESS TABOOS (MORAL CONDUCT ENFORCING TABOOS)

Those non-material taboos that only channel people to abide by the laws of society; live by the prescribed rules of society and enforcing respect among members of societies are considered to be harmless taboos. there are many things that influence people's behavior. The patterns of thinking and acting that have been instilled into us as children are fundamental to our instinctive patterns of behavior in adulthood..." One such pattern of thinking are taboos that are introduced and inculcated into the minds of children from tender ages as a way of promoting good behavior that also encompasses a sound environmental ethic (Bourdillon, 1976). The following are examples of harmless taboo expressions and their social significance in African culture.

Taboo Expression	**Translation**
Go a ila go kota manala bośego	It is taboo to cut nails in the night

Social significance

Participants indicated that the above non-material moral conduct enforcing taboo, socially prohibit people not to cut nails in the night because nails are difficult to cut during the night when there is no sufficient day lighting. We should as well remember that ancient people did not have electricity, but depended on firewood that was used for cooking during the night. Therefore, using that deem lighting to cut nails could be dangerous and was tabooed.

Mythical threat

The mythical threat attached to the above was that; if you cut your nails in the night, you will not be able to collect all cut nails, thus witches could collect those nails and use them to bewitch and curse you and your children. This myth is considered real threat in African cultures; over and above it was inculcated into African people's minds that, after cutting nails, an African person would collect all cut nails to dispose them out of reach of witches and sorcerers. Africans believe that all ills, misfortunes, sicknesses, accidents, tragedies, sorrows, dangers, unhappy mysteries, etc, are caused by mystical powers employed by sorcerers, witches or wizards (Nyabwari & Kagema, 2014:11). The believe in witches and the fear to be cursed was passed from generation to generation.

Taboo Expression	**Translation**
Go a ila go kgopela letswai bośego	It is taboo to ask for salt at night

Social significance

According to participants, the above taboo, socially is about teaching people acceptable social conduct. If people abide by this taboo expression they will stay home during the night and perished salt would be asked the next day. Salt is so necessary in food thus people who walk around in the night use it as an excuse for evil practices.

Mythical threat

It is believed in African culture that salt can be used to supress witchcraft; therefore, if you buy or ask salt during the night you are in a way telling the donor that he/she is a witch thus you want to use his/her salt to supress his/her witchcraft. It is therefore a serious curse for a person to ask for salt during the night. Parrinder (1971:61) makes the following statement about a witch: "The witch is generally thought to fly at night from her sleeping body and feed on the soul of her victim who thereupon sickens and dies." The 'Pedi' proverb that says "Bośego ke Tau, bo re go sa ra hlolana" (Night is a Lion, we check each other in the morning) consolidates the initial point that evil activities occurs during the night. Night in the above context is ruthless and can devour you like a hungry Lion, therefore, when morning arrives African people will check who is still alive and who was devoured by the night.

HARMFUL/DANGEROUS TABOOS (DEATH AS ULTIMATE CONSEQUENCE)

Harmful/dangerous taboos are well-known by African people; every man is culturally charged with responsibilities to teach their sons about dangerous taboos; in-fact all men are obliged to tech every boy-child these dangerous taboos. Some taboos lessons are offered during initiation schools. The 'Pedi' saying that: "ngwana wa mośemane, o hwetśa molao tseleng" (a boy-child learn respect and cultural rules at the road) is well practiced in African culture. Cohen (1964: 51) advocates that, in a society where organisation and continued existence depends on a kinship group wider than the nuclear family, some mechanism must be found to break any strong nuclear bond that may exist, to make the child attach to and identify with the wider adult community. The following are some harmful/dangerous taboos, well presented and interpreted by participants:

Harmful/dangerous taboo	**Translation**
Go a ila go robala le mohwana a sa apere boso.	It is taboo to have sex with a woman who have just lost a husband while she is still wearing black.

Social significance

Participants vehemently indicate that this taboo expression has a social significance to teach African people social respect. A woman who lost a husband is still in a mourning stage, she is devastated by the passing of her husband. Such women in African culture are obliged to wear all black clothes for six months, restricted to stay home and prohibited to visit relatives and will not attend any societal functions before the lapse of twelve months. Baloyi and Makobe-Rabothata (n.d.) state the following:

> In South Africa some of the Bapedi tribe[s] that originate from Limpopo province believe that when a married man dies, his widow is forbidden from arriving home after sunset, visiting neighbors, attending family and community functions. (p. 236)

The black clothes inform all men to play far from her; consequently, free movement restrictions reduce the temptation to be seen by most men. Imagine if such a woman is engaged to another man weeks after losing her husband; she would be accused of being her husband's killer.

Death threat

Having sexual intercourse with a widow, as according to participants is punishable by death; African people belief the punishment is inflicted upon the transgressor by ancestors. Punishment can come in many different forms: through swollen legs, swollen belly, swollen genitals, instant headache. All these curses are consequences of transgression of taboos and lead to slow and painful death. Wash (1989:38) propounded that:

> Not only may mortals be socialized to believe that the possibility of supernatural punishment exists throughout the lifespan, but they may also be taught that moral wrongdoings are likely to be accounted for after death. Certainly, such a belief in never-ending agonies and tortures during the afterlife, combined with the belief that one may be punished supernaturally while living, contributes to the maintainance of social and moral order within a given group or culture.

It is mythically believed that sleeping with the widow before the lapse of twelve months is dangerous because the buried man is still intact but immediately after then his belly shall have busted, that's when it is safe to get intimate with the widow.

Harmful/dangerous taboo	**Translation**
Go a ila go bona lepokisi la monna yo le kopanetṡego mapai le mosadi o tee.	It is taboo to see the coffin of a man you shared a woman with

Participants acknowledged that the above taboo is real and must be heeded; people who disregarded this taboo perished. In African culture men who had sex with one woman must not burry one another, let alone just to see the coffin. Such men are forbidden to visit each other when sick; if by default that happen, the sick man will perish immediately. Sexual relations of one woman to more than one man is associated to polyandry; which is highly discouraged in African cultures. Starkweather et al. (2012:154) define polyandry as: "a bond between one woman and more than one man in which the woman has relatively restricted sexual rights toward the men, and men toward the woman." All those so-called civilized people, who regarded taboos as barbaric and non-existence perished like flies. There is an expression in Sepedi, that says: "rutang bana ditaola le se ye le tṡona badimong" (teach children all African traits, don't go gods with them). African people had absolute belief in the existence of gods and held the notion that when they perish they go back to their gods.

9. Discussion

Our overall finding was that taboos played an important role in the lives of African people; they enforced socially acceptable morals in all African societies. Seemingly African people were driven by the two core values of sacralization theory: temptation, tradition and taboos.

Temptation

According to Marshal et al. (2010: 70), temptation refers to motivations to behave so as to produce hedonically valued outcomes. From time to time, African people were tempted to live free from social accepted norms and standards, but were forced to toe the line by the introduction of taboos; coming-up with the do's and don'ts to compel African people to respect their culture. Idang (2015:98) propounded that:

> Culture, as it is usually understood, entails a totality of traits and characters that are peculiar to a people to the extent that it marks them out from other peoples or societies. These peculiar traits go on to include the people's language, dressing, music, work, arts, religion, dancing and so on. It also goes on to include a people's social norms, taboos and values. Values here are to be understood as beliefs that are held about what is right and wrong and what is important in life.

It is inevitably accepted that African people were always motivated to behave appropriately, in accordance to set cultural norms in order to avoid the harsh religious consequences. In the first instance African people are tempted to neglect the social and cultural taboos, threat of punishment most probably by death impel Africans to respect the set rules.

Tradition

Temptation is followed by tradition which is closely linked to religion, commonly known as traditional religion. Traditional religions have had tremendous influence on Africans in their thought processes, belief systems, and worldviews. Since the traditional African religions do not have a sacred text with prescribed doctrines, to study them requires living with the people who believe and practice the religions and reading essays like this one about them (Ndemanu, 2018:71). Tradition alone is ambiguous, but when coupled with religion together they describe the cultural force that made African people to live according to set norms and standards.

10. Conclusion

From these findings, two implications were observed, firstly that taboos in African culture are not just illusive threats but a reality, and secondly that African people have an obligation to train their youth to embrace and respect their cultural taboos amidst being educated and adoption of so-called foreign religions. Abdulla (2018:5) asserted that the higher level of protection that is afforded when religion is seen to be behind a practice makes it clear why advocates for human rights are often keen to stress that human rights violations are a result of culture, rather than religion.

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