

Taboos in Orlu Local Government Area of Imo State: Sociolinguistic interpretation

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ABSTRACT

This paper investigates the prevalence of taboos in Orlu Local Government Area of Imo State. The study aims to document the taboos prevalent in Orlu, Imo State. The groups involved in this study are Orlu indigenes from different communities. The corpus of this study was collected through participant observation, oral interview and document observation and subjected to Qualitative Content Analysis (QCA) and interpretation. This study adopts the theory of Cultural Relativism. The findings revealed that taboos prevalent in Orlu are gender biased against women, societal norms and unequal power relations between males and females.

Keywords: Taboo, cultural relativism, sociolinguistics.

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INTRODUCTION

This study examines an aspect of social norms in the Orlu Linguistic Community in Nigeria. Orlu is speculated to be the second largest city in southeast Nigeria with an estimated population of 3,000,000. It played a critical role as the headquarters for the Organization of African Unity (OAU) Humanitarian Relief Agencies during the Nigerian Civil War. Orlu has been and is still the Nigerian headquarters of the British Cheshire Home. It is a home for enterprise and industry, which gave it the unofficial tag of the commercial capital of Imo State. Many successful Nigerian businessmen, industrialists and champions of industries hail from Orlu Local Government Area.

Orlu Local Government Area consists of over thirty-three autonomous communities. Some of the communities are: Umuna, Eziachi, Orlu, Umuzike, Umutanze, Ihiteowerri, Amike, Mgbee, Amaifeke, Ihioma, Umuowa, Okporo, Ogberuru, Obibi-Ochasi, etc. The communities in Orlu Local Government Area have different cultural masquerade heritages through which they express their communal attributes, descent, and heritage. Some of these masquerades are: *Mmonwu, Ebuebu, Oghu, Okonko, Ekeleke and Okorosha*.

Against the above background, the study focuses on taboos in the Orlu Linguistic Community. Its purpose is to document the taboos prevalent in Orlu and the reasons for such taboos. To actualize this goal, the

methodology is prefaced with the conceptual, theoretical consideration of taboos and the emerging research interests.

Taboo as a concept

Fershtman, Gneezy and Hoffman (2011) see the word taboo to be of Polynesian origin and was introduced to the English language only in the eighteenth century. It originally had a specific religious association. The use of the word "taboo", drawn from tapu... dates back to 1777, and an English explorer, Captain James Cook, went to a place named "The Friendly Islands" now Tonga. Writing about the Tongans, he wrote: "Not one of them would sit down or eat a bit of anything... On expressing my surprise at this, they were all taboo, as they said... signifies a thing is forbidden to be eaten, or made use of..."

Another explanation of taboo is derived from the psychoanalytical approach. Sigmund Freud (1950) has it that taboos are the result of unconscious phenomena that are passed on to generations. According to Freud (1950),

Taboos, we must suppose, are prohibitions of primeval antiquity which were at some time

externally imposed upon a generation of primitive men; they must, that is to say, no doubts have been impressed on them violently by the previous generation. These prohibitions must have concerned activities towards which there was a strong inclination. They must then have persisted from generation to generation, perhaps merely as a result of tradition transmitted through parental and social authority... (p.24)

Tetlock, Orie, Berth and Lerner (2008) construe taboo in the following ways:

Taboos can be viewed as strong social norms that are supported by severe social sanctions.... Taboos are sometimes referred to as doing the "unthinkable". Even thinking about violating a taboo is problematic. The sanctions associated pertain not just to the behaviour that contradicts the taboo, but also to merely thinking or considering such a behaviour. Taboo is a form of "thought police" that governs not just human behaviour but also thought. (p.853)

Feshman et al (2011), supporting Tetlock et al. (2008), add:

A taboo is an "unthinkable" action. Even the thought of violating a taboo triggers a punishment. We consider a model in which taboos are part of the definition of one's identity. Deliberately breaking the taboo changes the individual's choice set and provides information on possible private benefit. The strength of the taboo is determined by the number of individuals who obey it. (p.139)

Worthy of note in their definitions above is that severe social sanctions are placed on an individual for the mere thought of doing the unthinkable. They forget the fact that mere thoughts are not observable for any punishment to be justifiable. Benabou and Tirole (2004, p.848) add: 'Taboos are enforced by social punishment. The most familiar social punishments involve the attitudes and reactions of other members of society. For such social punishment to be effective, behaviour must be observable.' Samgulne (2016) sees taboo as something declared forbidden either for its sacred nature or to protect the people of a given community from the wrath of the gods and the leaders. He adds that a taboo is a part of any culture in Africa and other parts of the world, largely because it brings a sense of sanity and reverence to certain things in the community.

For Applebaum (1987, p.157), "taboo systems may differ in origin. For the greater part, they are taught as a part of the external reality system, much the same way as we are taught to avoid a live electric wire". Bock (1969) avers:

The requirement that certain groups avoid touching or consuming a species' item or substance is known as taboo. In some Australian societies, the totem animal of a person's group is completely taboo to

him; he may kill or capture it, but he must never eat it himself lest the entire species perish. In many North American hunting societies, menstrual blood was taboo to the old, the sick, and the hunters; generally, a hunter kept himself and his hunting equipment far away from all menstruating women for fear of losing his luck (p.76).

Bock (1969) also adds that the belief in taboo, or automatic punishment that follows some offense to the spirit, serves as a deterrent to misbehavior. No reasonable man, according to Bock (1969), would steal a tabooed object if he believed that such an action would result in an illness or some other retribution. According to Crapo (1960):

A taboo is a rule that forbids contact with sacred or dangerous things... Taboos and ceremonial obligations further structure life in ways that demand predictable conformity from members of a community, just as myths and legends contribute an aura of sanctity to a way of life and increase people's respect for the social order. (p.223)

Kottak (2004) supports Crapo (1990) when he adds that taboos are set apart as sacred and off-limits to ordinary people, and their prohibition is backed by supernatural sanctions. Akerlof (1976) posits that taboos can therefore be viewed as strong social norms that are sufficiently strong that may be viewed as sacred. Every time an individual's behaviour diverges from the norm, this act impacts the other members of the society, who then punish the deviant individual.

Hornby (1974, p.437) sees taboo as "prohibition applying to something that is forbidden or set apart because it is sacred, consecrated, or unclean and therefore is considered dangerous. Hanks (1971, p.1584) describes taboo as... "Forbidden to general use or place under prohibition." This is to say that certain things were not open to public consumption. As Anderson (1975) points out:

Taboo has its source essentially in the fear of the unknown, the unusual and abnormal contact in human patterns. The unanswered questions about man's existence and happenings in the world made the Igbo man think about the unknown. This fear helped the people to keep the dos and don'ts. (p.17)

Lewis (1969) observes that it is a taboo for a husband to live in the same house with his pregnant wife so that he will not be under mystic influence. He adds that at the time of pregnancy and childbirth, the woman is seen as being sacred and dangerous. Contact with a corpse renders a person taboo. So contagious is the taboo that the prohibitions relating to death extend to the whole house, the whole family, and the whole clan.

Kottak (2004) points out incest (the prohibition against marrying or mating with a close relative) as among the most significant cultural universals. The violation of this taboo attracts punishment in a variety of ways based on a particular culture. Hobhouse (1915) and Lowie (1935),

as cited in Kottak (2004), argue that the incest taboo is universal because incest horror is instinctive since homosapiens have a genetically programmed disgust toward incest. As a result of this feeling, early humans banned it.

Stewart (2002) observes that there are food and drink taboos. These taboos are beverages that people abstain from consuming for religious, cultural, or hygienic reasons. Alibakbari and Raeesi (2015) observe that some taboos are culture-specific. They gave examples of such culture-specific taboos as: mentioning sacred beings, sacred objects, and food. Achebe (1958) points out that in Igbo land, it is a taboo for a man to be afflicted with swelling in the stomach and limbs. Such a man is never allowed to remain in the house. Goa (2013) notes that the acts of human excretion and sexual intercourse are taboos in England and China.

Apart from what is forbidden for one to do or what is sacred, taboo also includes what should not be said. Oti (2011) asserts that some societies that tolerate the use of the tabooed subjects have linguistic items that enable the speakers to discuss them liberally, while others restrict the discussions on such subjects to only occasions that duly warrant it.

Taboo has a lot of functions on individuals and on societies. Lewis (1969) says this about the function of taboo:

The function of taboo is predominantly psychological, originating in man's fear of dealing with forces he does not wholly understand. It engenders respect and causes fear for the supernatural. Inasmuch as supernatural power always involves taboo, no man can ever take his possession of power wholly for granted. It sustains the awesomeness of the supernatural by reinforcing attitudes of carelessness and profanity in dealing with it. (p.174)

According to Haidt, Paul Clark and Summio (1997, p.107), some of the benefits of taboo are as follows:

- It may guarantee safety. For example, the taboo against cannibalism would guarantee safety and the functioning of the society in case of a severe famine.
- It guarantees good health. Some food taboos may protect what may be dangerous to their health. The role of dietary taboo is emphasized by the fact that many of the diets are contamination-sensitive.
- A taboo prohibiting the direct payment of human organs for transplanting may benefit a society by eliminating incentives for exploitation and violate harvesting of human organs

Lewis (1969) adds:

Placing a taboo on things may discourage theft. Placing it on a person enhances his prestige. In relation to all rituals, it is an essential part of a process that reinforces certain values upon adherence to which the smooth running of society depends. (p.176)

According to Kalu (1978):

The African instituted elaborate rituals and taboos with which he sought to manipulate the good gods for protection and abundant life... it is the belief of the Igbo that their ancestors are always supervising their moral lives. That is why they always try to live a righteous life by keeping all the societal norms, values, and taboos bequeathed to them. (p.44)

Anizoba (2001) maintains that the reason for creating a taboo ranged from the protection of the weak from the strong, hygiene, efficacy of sacrifice, control of diseases, effective fertilization of the land and stopping dehumanized beings from coming into life to terminate the human race. For Metuh (1981, p.112), "The Igbo did not like to see one who had laboured to go empty-handed hence the institution of taboo on stealing of yam, the staple food of the Igbo and mainstay of the economy."

Taboo has consequences when one breaks it. Ayisi (1972, p.91) brings out the consequences of breaking a taboo: "once any of these taboos is broken, a cleansing sacrifice follows immediately. Failure to do this will, as believed, bring misfortune to the culprit in particular, his immediate family, and the society he belongs to in general." Lewis (1964) maintains that anyone who violates a taboo is the object of communal vengeance in primitive society. According to Hernandez (2015), a taboo breaker will become a community's black sheep, but the reaction can quickly escalate to full-scale ostracism or formal punishment by authorities. Public humiliation, incarceration and even death are common consequences when authorities see someone as flaunting taboos. This gives characters a strong motivation to avoid taboo behaviour. In many cultures, if a son or daughter is caught breaking a taboo, the father must be involved in their punishment to clean the dishonour from the rest of the family.

Based on all that has been said thus far about taboo, the researchers can then conceptualize taboo as that which one is forbidden to say, eat, touch, or based on the norms of a particular culture (society) where one exists at a particular point in time.

Taboos as a theory

Redfield (1953, p.144) argues that: "cultural relativism means that the values expressed in any culture are to be both understood and themselves valued only according to the way the people who carry out that culture see things." How can one accept Redfield's position here? If a culture does not cater to the interests of people, can it be accepted and valued? Any culture that fails to serve the interests of people should not be valued and accepted. Cultures that are just should be valued, while unjust ones should be jettisoned. Luther King (1964) maintains that there are two types of laws: just and unjust, and that one has not only a legal but a moral responsibility to obey just laws. He also argues that, conversely, one has a moral responsibility to disobey

unjust laws.

Gellner (1985) maintains that cultural relativism is a theory that asserts that there is no absolute, be it ethical, moral, or cultural, and there is no meaningful way to judge different cultures because all judgements are ethnocentric. Spencer (1904) believes that the early form of cultural relativism was a reaction to the ethnocentric assumptions of nineteenth-century science, which glorified Western societies and diminished the achievements of non-Western cultures. Brennan (1989) asserts that cultural relativism can be described, in its simplest form as the theory that there is intuitive cultural diversity and that all cultural practices are equally valid, and there are no absolutes upon which to judge one practice against another because the principle we may use for judging behaviour or anything else are relative to the culture in which we are raised. In other words, as one builds one's world, working through a culture's taboos will give one another dimension for differentiating people's culture from that of their neighbours. Social norms elevated to the level of taboo are considered fundamental to societal identity. A particular society is judged based on its social norms elevated to the level of taboo rather than being judged against the criteria of another culture; therefore, cultural relativism is relevant to this work.

Emerging research interest in taboos

Taboos have generated research interest in areas such as: regulatory measures against sexual immorality (Odinnuli, 2012); euphemisms as substitutes for taboos (Ghounane, 2013); sex variations in taboo expressions (Omega, 2014); linguistic taboos using polite model (Alibakbari and Raeesi 2015); euphemisms for socio cultural beliefs and taboos (Dosu, 2017); social identity and use of taboos in pregnant women (Getnet, Tychab and Tessema, 2018); sociolinguistic study of taboos (Yakubu and Udoye, 2019); tradition, taste and taboo; the gastroecology of maternal perinatal diet (Lunkenheimer, Burger, Akhauri, Chaudhuri and Dibbel, 2021).

The findings from the research interests above revealed that taboos exist in many places; sex taboos are still in existence and breaking them attracts a lot of negative consequences, taboos are gender specific, and taboos are gender biased against women.

METHODOLOGY

An unstructured interview was the major instrument used for this study. The interviewees were selected using snowball and criterion purposive sampling. The criteria were along age and nativeness. This means that to qualify to participate in the interview, participants must be native speakers of the Orlu dialect of Igbo and must be aged between 60-80 years. Snowball sampling was used to ensure that participants satisfy the requirement of the criteria since the researchers cannot, by a rule of thumb, determine members of the linguistic community

within the age bracket selected as a criterion for selection. Based on this criterion, five participants emerged for participation in the interview from different parts of the Orlu Linguistic Community. The following people were interviewed: Mr Simon Chukwukeme, Chief Felix Ochieze (Eze Ikpe), Mr Stephen Onyenkwo, Mr Silas Obiagwu, and Mr Peter Odikaesieme. The interview, which lasted for seven days, was tape-recorded. Interview, as the major instrument, was supplemented by participant observation in major social gatherings in the community. The meeting sessions were tape-recorded with an eye to the observance of taboos in social gatherings. Finally, document observation was used to gather information on the theoretical and empirical aspects of the study.

The corpus gathered was subjected to Qualitative Content Analysis (QCA), which involved collating, coding, and interpreting the recorded corpus. Collation involved wedding the relevant corpus, coding was theme-motivated, and interpretation was subjective-induced.

Qualitative content analysis

The corpus gathered thus far is classified in Tables 1, 2, 3, and 4 below, under the following headings: taboo areas (domain), taboo objects/words, reasons and informants.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Table 1 presents the religious taboos that are prevalent in Orlu. No one dares mention the name - python, catches or touches him, or even kills him. The python is a sacred or totemic animal according to our informant (Mr Simon Chukwukeme). He further explained that some pythons are totems belonging to a particular clan or community. They are also believed to be reincarnations of ancestors and regarded as "our father". According to the informant, "killing a python is like killing one's own father. Pythons are respected and worshipped. According to Mr Chukwukeme, quails, snails, and fish from certain streams are also sacred since they belong to the sea goddess. They should not be eaten or removed from the stream where they exist. Shrines and some designated forests belong to the gods, and for this reason, no one should enter them except those who attend to them. Mr Chukwukeme also maintains that masquerades in Orlu are spirits and, as a result, are highly feared and respected. No one dares to insult, challenge their authority, enter into any form of altercation with them, enter their temple, or touch any of their regalia. Women are forbidden from coming out at any time the masquerades are going around the community. It is also a taboo for a woman to disturb the peace of a masquerade by pounding while cooking late at night. Women do not dance to the tune of a masquerade. Another tabooed object mentioned by Mr. Felix Ochieze is the stream. He goes further to explain that it is a taboo to fight, make love, or steal in the stream.

Since the stream belongs to the sea goddess and should be kept sacred.

Table 1

Domain	Taboo objects/words	Reason	Informants
Religion	Python	Sacred	Simon Chukwukeme
	Fish, quails, snails (from certain streams)	Sacred	Simon Chukwukeme
	Shrines and certain forests	gods	
	Masquerades	Spirits	
	Streams	Sacred	Felix Ochieze

Table 2 shows the food taboo. According to Mr Felix Ochieze, quails, snails, fish (from a certain stream), and pythons are forbidden to be eaten. They are sacred and belong to the gods and goddesses. Also, any food prepared by a wife suspected of infidelity is forbidden to be eaten by the husband. The reason, according to the informant, is that infidelity renders the food unclean and unhealthy for the man. Titled men do not eat in public because that reduces their dignity. Some fruits are

taboo. Fruits like Udara are not plucked and sold. It should be allowed to fall by itself. Udara is a sacred fruit, and it is associated with fertility. Pregnant women should not eat meat from monkeys, rats, or snails. The informant maintains that it affects the outlook of the child in the womb; pregnant women do not eat eggs that are being incubated. Mr Ochieze explains that eggs are associated with fertility and should not be destroyed during the period of incubation.

Table 2

Domain	Taboo objects/words	Reason	Informants
Food	Quails, fish, snails (from certain streams) and python	goddess	Felix Ochieze (Eze Ikpe)
	Food prepared by an unfaithful wife	Sacrilege	
	Eating food in public by a titled man	Insult	
	Some sacred fruits (like Udara)	Fertility	
	Eggs yet to be hatched	fertility	

Table 3 presents some taboos on sex that exist in Orlu. According to the informants, Mr Stephen Onyenkwo and Mr Silas Obiagwu, having sex in a stream or near a stream is an abomination against the sea goddess. In the past, when such a thing happened, all the streams dried up. The same applies to having sex in a farmland. It is taboo for a married woman to be pregnant by another man. Mr. Obiagwu explains that in the past,

when maternal mortality was on the increase, it was discovered that the goddess of fidelity was provoked as a result of the increase in infidelity. Mr. Obiagwu also points out that it is a taboo for a man to catch his wife in the act of sexual immorality. The man must do everything possible not to catch the wife in the act. The reason is to protect the life of the man.

Table 3

Domain	Taboo objects/words	Reason	Informants
Sex	Stream	Drought	Stephen Onyenkwo
	Farmland	Fertility	Stephen Onyenkwo
	Infidelity	Goddess	

Table 4 shows that respect for taboo exists in Orlu. According to Mr. Silas Obigwu and Mr. Peter Odikaesieme, a woman must not point her finger at or slap a man, for that reduces the respect of the man. One must not cause the fall of an elder or a titled man if one wants to grow old. A woman whose children are grown or have started getting married should not be seen procreating, as that affects the emotions and dignity of

her grown-up children. Our informant maintained that it is a taboo for a woman who is still mourning her husband to move out, open her business, talk to, or visit the opposite sex. The reason is that the spirit of the dead should not be provoked. Men in Orlu who are hunters do not go on hunting expeditions when their wives are due to deliver or are in labour. The reason is that they should not be expecting life and at the same time destroying life

in the bush at that particular period of time. Both the life of the pregnant wife and the unborn baby must be protected. Beating a male child with a broom is forbidden. Mr. Onyenkwo explains that it will instill in the male child feminine behaviour and stunted growth. He also points out that it is a taboo to address one as an *osu* (even if one is); rather, euphemistic words are used to describe them, like *lieutenant colonel* or *lefty*. The reason is to protect one's dignity to an extent. Women in Orlu are forbidden from carrying out any domestic activity under a kola-nut tree. It is a taboo for them to touch or cut any of the branches (even if it is dried) with a knife. Our informant explains that the kola-nut represents the entire custom in Orlu, and the tree should not be tampered with. Mr. Silas Obiagwu mentions that Eke market days are respected in the Orlu linguistic community; as a result, ceremonies (especially marriage

ceremonies are not fixed on Eke days. Compounds are not swept on Eke days; also, any woman who deserts her husband on such a day is never allowed to come back. The informant explains that Eke is a day that is sacrosanct only to the gods, who will not accept any other activities from human beings. It is forbidden for anyone to remove any palm fronds placed on a piece of land under dispute. Palm fronds signify death. Touching it means playing with one's life. Condolence money is not placed in the palm of anyone who is bereaved in Orlu; rather, it is placed on the ground. It is a taboo for the bereaved to thank the giver; the reason for this, according to Mr. Obiagwu, is that such a gift is not welcomed. Appreciating the giver is appreciating death. Women in the Orlu linguistic community are forbidden from using words that relate to sexual organs. These sexual organs are sacred. Women should respect them.

Table 4

Domain	Taboo objects/words	Reason	Informants
Respect	A man	Gods	Silas Obiagwu
	An elder	The land	Silas Obiagwu
	Procreation	Drawback	Peter Odikaesieme
	A woman still mourning	The late husband	Peter Odikaesieme
	Expectant wife of a hunter	Life	Stephen Onyenkwo
	A titled man	Respect	Stephen Onyenkwo
	An outcast	Dignity	Stephen Onyenkwo
	Kola nut	Dignity	Silas Obiagwu
	Eke market days	Defilement	Silas Obiagwu
	Palm frond	Defilement	Silas Obiagwu
	Condolence money	Condemnation	Silas Obiagwu
	Sexual organs	Dignity	Silas Obiagwu
	Broom on a male child	Growth	Stephen Onyekwo

Sociolinguistic findings

From the discussions of the various items on the tables, one can easily observe that abiding by or derailing from the use of these taboos, especially ones that involve the use of words, indicates societal values, the way power is structured in the society, and one's personal identification with societal norms. It fosters societal membership; hence, members of the speech community are always conscious of their speech and actions, knowing the implications of violating any of them. On the other hand, it can result in communication distancing among men and women, showing when, where, how, and or who, in the use of such words.

More so, it brings to the fore the unequal language and power relations between men and women in many African societies. Women in this area will not have adequate linguistic knowledge to discuss matters relating to those activities, and items considered to be taboo on their part, since they cannot use, participate or even watch their activities. Hence, to have a discourse in these areas, they may resort to developing some

form of euphemisms (Dosu, 2017) to express such taboos.

Conclusion

Based on the discussion of the tables on taboos in Orlu, it can be seen that taboos in Orlu are instituted for the good governance of people. It is instituted for the orderly conduct of the affairs of individuals. For example, the taboo that forbids women from having extramarital affairs and the punishment there helps to check their moral lives. However, a very close look at the taboos in Orlu shows that many of the taboos are not fair to women. Examples are as follows: women are forbidden from using obscene words; why should men be allowed to do so if the aim is to check one's moral behaviour? A young male child should not be flogged with a broom; what of a young female child? A woman should be faithful to her husband; what of the man to his wife? Pregnant women are denied some nutritious foods that can help them. Much emphasis is placed on the respect

and fear of the masquerade, the gods and goddesses.

It can then be concluded that the taboo prevalent in the Orlu Linguistic Community is gender biased against women. Men dominate, which is typical of an African society.

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