TABOOS AS A LEASH ON COMMUNICATION: IS CONTEMPORARY SOCIETY MORE RESTRICTIVE?

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Abstract
Taboos represent restriction and control on what can or cannot be said or done in a given time or place. As the world continues on its march towards modernization, freedom from all restrictions are promoted and taboos, which are usually seen as a leash on freedom, are considered as being outdated and generally endangered. The secularization theory as well as many scholarly studies suggest that taboos are indeed endangered and might soon altogether pass away. However, a deeper attention to contemporary society shows that this assertion might be wrong. In this paper, we contend that contrary what exists in the literature and what theory suggests, modernization and secularization are not reducing the range of taboos. Rather, they are repackaging and re-labelling taboos in new nomenclatures such as political correctness, gender sensitivity and religious sensitivity. The sheer range of "don'ts" in the contemporary society far outnumbers the range of "don'ts" in the olden days. Therefore, the paper concludes that rather than being more free, contemporary society is probably more restrictive than the traditional society.
Keywords: Taboos, communication, freedom, contemporary society

INTRODUCTION

Taboo is a phenomenon which is universal, diverse and relative. **As behaviour and speech regulators**, taboos are at the heart of religious, moral and social codes relating to the untouchable and the unspeakable (Asaah, 2006). Taboos are restrictive on communication and were mostly based on religion. Taboos which have to do with the forbidden, disgusting, unacceptable, improper are a relevant part of communication.

From the above, one can see that taboos are incompatible with modernity or modernisation. Modernity, according to Eyerman (2016), is about freedom, individuality and liberation from religious and other restraints. One can therefore conceive of taboos and modernity as constituting opposite and incompatible poles. This is why African scholars, such as Familusi (2009) who lament that modernity would wipe off taboos and leave the world unregulated and therefore, chaotic. The secularisation thesis suggests this as well.

Yet, this position might be untenable. This paper argues that contrary to the belief that taboos are becoming endangered and losing reverence, they are increasing in scope and effect on human communication remains constant. This paper contends that the sheer range of "don'ts" in the contemporary society far outnumbers the range of "don'ts" in the olden days.

The study of taboos is of important concern to communication scholars because taboos are considered as anti-freedom and sometimes, anti-free speech. Fiske (2002:34) defines communication as "one of those human activities that everyone recognizes but few can define satisfactorily". He claims that communication is talking to one another, it is television, it is spreading information, it is our hairstyle, it is literary criticism. Human communication according to Fiske is diverse.

He further stated that communication involves signs and codes. These signs and codes are transmitted or made available to others and that the process of communication is the practice of social relationships. Fiske also believes that communication is central to the life of a culture. No culture can exist or survive without communication. Communication is therefore an important part of the societal structure of a particular culture. It is used to pass across the norms, values and beliefs of a socio-cultural group. The Japanese for example have a culture of silence which is seen as part of social etiquette and consider their American counterparts talkative.

According to Familusi (2009), taboos are a relevant part of communication in society. The use of taboo in society is a form of control as we have things that are considered forbidden or unacceptable in society. In communication, the use of taboo is a form of informal control as we have taboo topic in the society.

Secularisation Thesis versus the "Spiral of Silence" Theory

The secularization thesis in its simplest form states that modernity will secularize societies, that is, it will reduce the power and change the structure of religion in the society (Ojebode&Awolusi, forthcoming). The two scholars also stated that others have defined secularization as the decline of religion with increasing modernization. Yet others argue, that contrary to the theory of secularization, religion is not declining but growing alongside modernization.

When applied to the theme of taboos, secularisation suggests that as the modern society becomes more secular, it will throw away most religious and moral restraints. Taboos are a part of this restraint. Familusi (2009) among others, buttressed this by citing the different taboos in Yoruba land which are now no longer observed. For instance, women now go out in hot sun, children talk while they eat, children can eat bestriding the door threshold, people whistle in the night and they call snakes as snakes (instead of "strings of the ground").

When we look at it this way, one would agree with Familusi (2009) and others that taboos are endangered. But this approach is a little superficial. A deeper and more critical examination is required.

The spiral of silence theory warns us to look beyond the surface when we study what is silent and what is forbidden. The spiral of silence theory describes the tendency for individuals and groups to suppress their private opinions, under pressure from the fear of isolation (Folarin, 2002). The theory states that majority of the public tend to see issues and persons as media see them. It also claims that society rewards conformity and punishes

deviance, the fear of isolation compels people to submit to shared judgments or opinions. When society forbids something, the individual tendency is to forbid such a thing and remain silent rather than express dissenting opinions.

This leads us to the observation that there are so many issues or positions or opinions that are forbidden in these contemporary times. These are opinions which society in its sometimes unwritten laws forbids. These are the modern versions of the "don'ts" which were traditionally called taboos.

What is Taboo?

Gao (2013) points out that the word *taboo* is borrowed from Tongan, a language spoken by Polynesians in the Pacific archipelago, where it was forbidden to touch or talk about any sacred or humble thing. Citing Wardhaugh (2000), Goa (2013) further defines *taboo* as the prohibition or avoidance in any society of behaviour believed to be harmful to its members in that it would cause them anxiety, embarrassment, or shame. Taboo is a social phenomenon and is found in all cultures but in different forms. Taboo is relative as peoples of different countries do not agree totally on what taboos are. Homosexualism for example is a taboo in a lot of African countries, Nigeria inclusive yet it is not a taboo in several countries of the world.

Taboos are firmly entrenched in religion especially in African cultures. They are used to regulate behaviour and discourse. There is an obvious link between taboo and morality. Familusi (2009) stated that moral rules are enforced with the imposition of taboos and the consequence of flouting them in the Yoruba society of South West Nigeria.

Generally, societies have rules, values and norms which members adhere to and seek to confirm their lifestyles with. Fear of isolation and rejection compel members of a society to confirm with norms and values which they would originally have rejected. The spiral of silence theory strongly confirms the taboo phenomenon. People in society have the tendency to conform to the status quo. They follow trends, values and cultural beliefs because it is generally acceptable in the society.

It appears that society is divided on the taboo phenomenon and its effects on societal and communication. Familusi (2009) believes that taboos are threatened and are losing relevance. He implies that the state of morality when taboos were observed was better than the present. According to him, the effectiveness of taboo has drastically declined because of civilization. Also, he states that science does not take taboo serious because they are not provable. The secularization thesis in its simplest form states that modernity will secularize societies, that is, it will reduce the power and change the structure of religion in society. (Ojebode&Awonusi, forthcoming).

Recent events all over the world and Nigeria in particular seems to confirm this theory. Other events however, show that instead of declining or losing their relevance, taboos remain an integral part of societal communication and are still being used as behaviour and speech regulators.

Types of Traditional Taboo

There are many types of taboos covering different aspects of the life of the people in traditional societies. This is not a surprise because since life is multifaceted, taboos have to be multifaceted too to cover the diverse aspects of life.

First among the types of taboos are **sexual taboos**. Sexual matters were and are still considered as an issue meant to be treated with discretion. *Lady Chatterley's Lover* (Lawrence, 1928) was banned in Britain and American because it contained sexually explicit language. Sexuality is a serious phenomenon in Africa and Nigeria in particular. All forms of sexual immorality or pervasion are discouraged. Incest, homosexuality are forbidden topics. Words that have to do with human sex are used with discretion. Generally, words having to do with anatomy and sex were avoided (Baxter and Wilmot, 1985; Familusi, 2009).

The second category of taboos has to do with **death**. Death was also for a long time, treated as a taboo subject and couched in euphemistic language (Wildfener et al, 2015). The Yoruba for example, do not say "Oba ku" translated as "the king is dead". Instead, the phrase is replaced with "Oba w'àjà" meaning literally that "the king has ascended".

Third is **professional or organisational taboos**.Hudson and Okhuysen(2014), stated that there are topics that management researchers find distasteful or undesirable, topics that involve organizational stigma. According to them, study of organizational stigma often involves the examination of objectionable, despicable and disgusting activities, work and organisations. In their study, they state that the nature of stigmatized topics also makes them taboo.

Familusi (2009) stated that in the Yoruba society, all professionals have rules guiding the conduct of those who belong to them. These rules constitute taboos that are meant to be observed by the professional concerned. All traditional professions have special taboos that are peculiar to them.

The fourth kind of taboos is **religious Taboos.** These are engrained in the religious beliefs of a religious group. Each divinity has words and actions that are forbidden and which must be observed by the adherents of that particular religion. Worshippers of Obatala do not eat food that contains red (palm) oil while Ogun worshippers do not leave an empty gourd upstanding. Among modern religious adherents, there are taboos as well. For instance, Muslims and Jews are forbidden from eating pork while many Catholics abstain from meat on Fridays. In Nigeria, followers of Sat Guru Mahraji do not eat meat. Religious taboos, needless to say, vary from one religious group to the other.

Linguistics taboos are the fifth type. These are words considered inappropriate or improper in social conversations and even in written form. Examples in English include like fuck, cunt, tits and swear words like heck and dash, dammit are not acceptable in polite society (Rosenberg et al, 2016). In Yoruba and Tiv languages, a woman's menstrual period is referred to only in euphemistic terms meaning "visitor" or "month".

Are Taboos Waning, Waxing or being Repackaged?

As earlier mentioned in this study, the secularization thesis claims that religious and cultural beliefs and practices, which include taboos, would decrease with increasing modernization. With this, we expect that taboos should be waning and should soon disappear. Yet, this is not the case. When we take the reformed nomenclature of taboos into consideration, the range of what is forbidden today is not narrower than what used to

obtain. The only difference is that rather than call them taboos, they are labelled as political correctness, gender and religious sensitivities among others.

Put more directly, in this paper, we contend that contrary to the tenets of modernization and what subsists in existing literature, rather than shrinking, the scope and variety of taboos are increasing. Taboo are evolving, and this is also affecting communication in all of its facets. In today's society, taboos have been redefined and reshaped to fit the changing socio-cultural realities of different countries.

In the paragraphs that follow, we present evidence that shows that taboos are simply wearing a different name such as the different forms of "correctness" or "sensitivity".

Religion: This aspect of the society is vital and cannot be overlooked. Man is a reflection of what he believes or learns (culture is learned). Man's belief in the divine or supernatural shapes his ideology and actions in society. Religion shapes what to say or not to say, how to act or how not to act. Religion is volatile.

In several societies, religion is a delicate subject and some things are considered taboo. The recently suspended FRC law on religious institutions is an example of what is taboo or not in Nigeria. The code which was proposed is May 2015, limits the number of years heads of corporate organization can stay in office. The codes affected churches and mosques in Nigeria because they fall under the not-for-profit category. Governor Fayose cautioned the Federal Government against its implementation. He said "this government wants to subdue the church,God will subdue them. They are ridiculing leaders at the church, God will rubbish them" (Ogundele and Nwogu, 2017). The code was suspended by the Federal Government of Nigeria as it was capable of dividing the country along religious lines.

In Nigerian society, religion is sacred and religious leaders revered Christian and Muslim are now the major religious and the present being Muslim. Issues that portray them in negative light are forbidden and have led to riots again and again.

Osama Eid Hajjaj is a cartoonist from Jordan where he words at *Al Arab Al Yanin* Newspaper. He was under attacks in 1994 for drawing comics about the Muslim Brotherhood. Muslims consider their religion sacred will fight to protect it ().

An important point to note is that a hundred years ago, much of the division between Moslems and Christians in Nigeria was not there. The gap, if any, was not this wide and most people could talk or even criticise other people's faith quite freely without any animosity. That is no longer the case; what was not taboo then is a rather inflammable taboo now.

Politics

In government, there are political rules and ethics that influence political behaviour. There is an appropriate language for interaction among the political elites. Language and its usage are quite important because of the long term effect.

Politicians are also expected to observe political etiquette. The former President Barack Obama of the United States of America was liked because of his social etiquette and interpersonal communication. President Donald Trump however seems to have broken every form of unspoken political taboos. During his campaign, he was considered rude, aggressive and uncouth. His language was not politically correct. He has been severely criticized for his use of the Twitter, a social media platform, to discuss his policies. One might argue that President Trump trampled on every taboo yet he won, and one might

therefore see taboo as irrelevant. The truth, however, is that the fact that he has been under consistent attack even after his victory shows that taboos are still sacred.

In today's society, some issues are also taboo for security reasons. CNN politics recently reported that Peter Sonza, the White House photographer during the Obama tenure shaded President Trump over secure discussion. The photographer accused the president of discussing security issues with his North Korean counterpart is a non-secure location.

Sexuality

Another way in which taboo has been redefined is sexuality. Despite all the liberation and liberalism, sex still remains a restricted, if not forbidden, topic especially in Africa. One might say that in the West, sex is no freely discussed even in elementary schools. One might therefore, be led to conclude that sexual taboos are waning.

However, that would be misleading. The concept of sexuality has been redefined as it is now considered taboo to speak against LGBT people. People who speak out against LGBT people are labelled homophobic and generally condemned in society. Kim Burrell, a gospel preacher, experienced a lot of backlash from LGBT advocates when the spoke against in December. She was severely criticized and her position termed judgemental (*The Guardian*, 2017). She now belongs to the silent majority which the spiral of silence theory describes as people keeping their opinions to themselves for fear of isolation from the vocalminority. Fifty years ago, who would have believed that speaking against LGBT would be forbidden?

Gender

This is another area where people are sensitive and careful about what to say or not to say. In an increasingly globalized world where the fight for women's right is continuous, certain subjects can lead to accusations of discrimination against women and be considered offensive.

In Nigeria, the MTN advert, "Mama na boy" was widely criticized because it was said to be gender insensitive. The organization was accused of discrimination against the female child. Therefore, the company had to replace the advert with another one, 'Mama e don born" (Nairaland, 2009).

The Women's March on Washington took place on January 21, 2017 to advocate legislation and policies regarding women's rights and other issues. The protest took place worldwide and was a response to statements attributed to President Trump presenting him as anti-women or disrespectful. The organisers of the protest said they wanted to "send a bold message to our new administration on their first day in office, and to the world that women's rights are human rights" (Tatum, 2017)

Racism

Racism, the belief that a particular race is superior to another is also a controversial topic in society. It was formerly a taboo for blacks to consider themselves equal to whites. Blacks and Africans were discriminated against and oppressed by white supremacists. Among many other art works,*Houseboy* a novel by Ferdinand Oyono was written to depict the experiences of blacks under the colonialist government. Blacks were treated as inferior to whites because of their skin colour (Oyono, 1956).Martin Luther King Jr., a leader in the Civil Rights Movement who fought against racism and segregation in America. Prior to

this period, it was taboo for blacks to vote or see themselves as equal to whites (Crystal, 2016).

Today, racism is no longer accepted worldwide and human rights activists continue to fight against racial discrimination not just for blacks but all races. It is considered offensive. Coca-Cola's advert "It is beautiful", exemplifies the fact that racism is fast becoming unacceptable and a taboo subject in society. The advertisement promotes optimism, inclusion and celebrates humanity.

Culture

Cultural beliefs and conventions are also undergoing a rapid change globally. The things that were formally considered taboos are gradually becoming an acceptable part of the society. Divorce, domestic, violence, widow's rites, single parenting were relational issues that society had been silent on especially in patriarchal societies. It was mostly forbidden to delve into issues of domestic violence or speak against widowhood rites and support widows' rights. Open support for single parenting was frowned at. Yet, as a result of the increasing awareness and knowledge of human rights, domestic violence in Nigeria and other African nations is becoming culturally unacceptable.

In a recent article Richler (2017) points out how the times are indeed changing and how what one could freely say in the past are now becoming unacceptable. She reported the case of single mothers in Israel. It was conventional to insult single parenting in the past. These days, however, that is changing. She says: "In Israel, religious single moms gain greater acceptance". This suggests that it is becoming generally unacceptable to question a woman's right to choose. Several Israel, single mothers are choosing to be unconventional.

Waxing taboos and communication

Despite our professed liberalism, taboos still exist today, if not more strongly than in those days. In today's society, the effect of taboos on communication cannot be overlooked because they affect different aspects of communications. In interpersonal communication, for instance, taboos define how people exchange information or relate with themselves. The taboo phenomenon also shapes ideologies and personal principles in intra-personal communication. More and more people are learning to keep their thoughts to themselves on those issues that are either simply controversial or have become outright taboos. They do this because they do not wish to be isolated from the society as a result of their opinions. Taboos also affect mass communication. For instance, reporters are restricted in what can be reported on some taboo topics. Accusations of discrimination and subjectivity can trail the media on issues that are considered delicate, controversial or forbidden. The American media tries to be politically correct in their presentation of news to members of society (Kaye and Sapolsky, 2009).

At the organisational communication levels, taboos play a constraining role as well. In the aviation industry, for example, not only are crew members barred from exchanging hot words among themselves and with passengers, words such as "crash" are forbidden. They would rather use euphemistic equivalents such as emergency landing. Workers in the banks are not allowed to speak to the press even in their private capacity. Swedish banks are known for their near-cultic allegiance to customer secrecy – disclosure of most pieces of information is forbidden, in other words, taboo.

Conclusion

The modern society is indeed more restrictive given the broad range of "don'ts" that pervade it. The sources and dimensions of forbidden words, forbidden topics and forbidden actions are simply too many to list in the modern society. In other words, society is evolving and taboos are increasing instead of decreasing. They have been redefined or repackaged to fit into the changing realities occurring in the contemporary society and renamed as various forms of "correctness" or "sensitivities'. It seems therefore safe to say that taboos will continue to exist. As the world becomes more and more polarised, the number and range of taboos can only increase. Communicators will therefore have to be more sensitive to many more issues and things.

Researchers must also constantly re-examine such issues that seem to have been thrashed and settled in theory and literature. This is because the dynamics and contexts in which theory and research occur keep changing.

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