

The Role of Taboo in Behavior Regulation in Selected African Communities

Innocent Elum Afen., Lucia Mwikali Mutuku., Prudence Hetegekimana., Julius Kuti., Joseph Marottiparambil Kumar., Stephen Asatsa

Department of Psychology, The Catholic University of Eastern Africa Nairobi County, Kenya

DOI: <https://dx.doi.org/10.47772/IJRISS.2025.908000607>

Received: 20 August 2025; Accepted: 26 August 2025; Published: 24 September 2025

ABSTRACT

Taboo is a crucial cultural practice that is deeply rooted across the different cultures in Africa, and this rootedness demonstrates high concern of moral regard for humans and nonhumans. This study explored the role of taboo in behavior regulation in selected African communities. The study addressed three questions: What are the different types of taboos in selected African communities? How does taboo regulate behavior among selected African communities? What are the possible challenges in adhering to taboos in selected African communities? The study adopted the exploratory sequential research design. The sample size of this study was 42 adults between the ages of 30-50 years old and above, and were males and females, from the Kamba, Luo, Kikuyu (Kenya), Igbo and Ogoja communities from Nigeria. Purposeful sampling technique was used. Data was collected through semi-structured interviews and Focused Group Discussions. An audio recording of participants' content was carried out. Audio recordings were transcribed to verbatim. The systematic thematic analysis was utilized to analyze data and themes development. Ethical considerations were strictly adhered to throughout the study. Findings showed that sexual relationships, food and dietary restrictions were the different types of taboos that exist among the selected Africa communities. It was found that taboos regulate behavior by emphasizing moral principle and instilling of discipline, among African communities. It was also found that modernity and belief systems stood as challenges in adhering to taboos in African communities. The study recommended that traditional African communities should implement educational programs that emphasize the importance of traditional taboos in maintaining social order and cultural identity. Workshops and community discussions can help bridge the gap between traditional values and contemporary challenges, fostering respect for cultural practices among younger generation.

Keywords: African Communities, Behavior Regulation, Humans, Morals, Taboos

INTRODUCTION

Taboo is one of the cultural practices that is deeply rooted across the different cultures in Africa, and this rootedness demonstrates high concern of moral regard for humans and nonhumans (Essel, 2018). Since humans are relational beings, capable of overstepping their boundaries (Afen, 2024), the place of taboos in the cultural societies call for moral compliance among members of a particular culture. Taboos may include restriction of some kind of behaviors such as sexual activities like incest, animal-human sex, necrophilia and adult-child sex, cutting down the sacred trees, speaking ill against the gods and the ancestors, walking naked, uprooting crops that has already been planted by the owner of the land, eating food and meat of sacrifice meant to appease the gods, and the monetization of humans (Fershtman et al., 2011; Saputri, 2022).

The term "taboo" originated in Polynesia; the Tongan words "tabu" or "tapu", denoting something "holy or sacred", with "spiritual restriction" or "implied prohibition". A taboo can be thought of in terms of "a cultural or religious custom that forbids people to touch, use or mention or do certain things. Taboo is an avoidance rules that forbids members of a community from exhibiting some kind of behavior (Chivasa & Mukono, 2017; Habibovic, 2010). According to Essel (2018), 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".

Based on the global perspective, Rochow (2009) conducted a study exploring food taboos: their origins and purposes among the Jewish and Hindu people. The researcher contended that a taboo prohibited someone from doing something, such as "touching a sacred person, killing a certain animal, eating certain food, eating at certain time. It was reported that among the Jewish people, an animal that was capable of feeding on a human being would not be eaten as it conceivably could contain some "humanness" in it. Also, it was revealed that small lizards and leeches are considered to be unclean. Should a leech, for example, accidentally drop into the cooking pot, all its contents will be regarded as contaminated and thrown away. Poisonous and harmful animals were also taboo, but the dangers that result from eating certain species were frequently less real or physiological than spiritual/psychological. Thus, the crow is thought to be poisonous and is rarely eaten. Likewise, any small, crawling animal living in or on the soil, was usually left alone for fear it might be dangerous in the stomach. The study further reported that, since all animals were considered to possess spirits, children within the age of 4 were prohibited from eating certain meats/animals until they are 20 years old. At 20 years of age the human spirit is deemed to be strong enough to successfully compete with the spirits of small monkeys, bat species, cats, anteaters, deer, turtle, larger birds, and even the Malayan bear. Pregnant women have strict food taboos to observe and must restrict themselves to rats, squirrels, frogs, toads, smaller birds and fishes that is animals which are small and thought to possess "weak" spirits (Rochow, 2009)

Additionally, if the men intend to go fishing for sharks, they not only have to abstain from sexual intercourse for a while, but they also have to fast (posuma) and drink a large quantity of saltwater beforehand. Findings among the Hindu, indicated that many orthodox Brahmins abstained from cooking or eating onion and garlic as they were said to increase passions like anger and sex drive. Milk and milk products were consumed, but said to be very sacred as the cow is held in the highest regard as "a holy mother" (Meyer-Rochow, 2009; Fikentscher, 2004).

Similarly, a study carried out by Worthy (2020) among the Swedes, Irish, Filipinos, Spaniards and Russians on human sexuality and the societal regulation. According to a 33,590-person survey on sexuality, 89% of Swedes responded that there is nothing wrong with premarital sex, while only 42% of Irish responded this way. From the same study, 93% of Filipinos responded that sex before age 16 was always a taboo, while only 75% of Russians responded this way (Widmer, Treas, and Newcomb, 1998). Sexual attitudes and taboo can also vary within a country. For instance, 45% of Spaniards responded that homosexuality was always a taboo, while 42% responded that it is never a taboo; only 13% responded somewhere in the middle.

In Nigeria, Ekwochi et al. (2016) conducted a study on food taboos and myths among women who had carried at least one pregnancy in Enugu, South-East. A purposive sampling technique was used to select 149 women who had carried at least one pregnancy. The study also adopted a cross-sectional research design. Interview was conducted using a structured pretested questionnaire. The results of this study indicated that approximately 37% of the respondent avoided some food in pregnancy due to food taboos. Snail and grass-cutter meat were the commonly avoided food in pregnancy. Some respondents believed that eating snail and grass-cutter meat makes a child sluggish and labor difficult respectively. This study reveals that taboos such as food contribute to unhealthy nutritional practices or behavior for pregnant women and infants.

Shaw and M'Raiji (2017) in their study analyzed the use of taboos as strategy for socialization, acculturation and communication among members of the *Bayei* community in North Western Botswana. The study used a qualitative research approach. Primary data was collected from informants of different age groups and gender. This study revealed that the *Bayei* use taboos for guidance and protection in their daily socio-economic activities such as during fishing, hunting and in rites of passage. The study also revealed that taboos have a practical value in nurturing, upbringing and the development of *Bayei* children of particular interest is the fact that the taboos significantly contribute to the *Bayei* philosophy of life. Lastly, this study emphasized that taboos among the *Bayei* are good teaching aids and can be helpful if they can be adopted and incorporated into the school curriculum to break the current trend of delinquent behavior exhibited in schools and societies.

A study by Mndawe (2019) investigated the use of taboos in a Swazi-speaking community of Mpumalanga province, South Africa. The qualitative research, employing interviews and observations, explored how taboos functioned in both child safety and biodiversity preservation. Findings revealed that taboos served as a form of

communal teaching. Parents prioritized their children's well-being, utilizing taboos to regulate behavior and prevent harm. Examples included restrictions on playing in specific locations like footpaths (due to fear of boils or lightning strikes) and crossroads (to avoid bad luck or evil spirits). While the explanations behind these taboos involved mythical elements, the underlying aim was demonstrably to safeguard children from physical dangers and illnesses. The study also noted the use of rituals, such as spitting or pronouncements, to mitigate potential consequences of breaking a taboo. Overall, the research suggests that taboos can play a role in transmitting knowledge about safety and environmental stewardship, even if the explanations themselves are rooted in folklore.

Kenya has numerous communities with rich cultural traditions and practices (Were, 2010). Taboos, deeply ingrained in these traditions, play a significant role in regulating behavior and maintaining social order (Galaty, 1993). The multifaceted role of taboos in selected Kenyan communities, have significant impact on individual and collective behavior, while they have their potential for both positive and negative consequences. Kenyan communities harbor a wide array of taboos, encompassing various aspects of life, including: Restrictions on consuming specific animals, plants, or food combinations are prevalent, often linked to religious beliefs or ancestral veneration (Kenyatta, 1968). According to Middleton (1960), Taboos surrounding menstruation, sexual intercourse, and childbirth aim to regulate sexual behavior and protect women's reproductive health. Lewis (1994) asserts that rules governing greetings, interactions with elders, and behavior in public spaces ensure respect and maintain social harmony. In many Kenyan communities, rituals and restrictions associated with death and mourning serve to honor the deceased and facilitate the grieving process (Were, 2010). There are examples of Kenyan communities that are known and respected for use of Taboos who include; The Maasai, the Kikuyu, Kamba, the Luo and the Somali. That illustrate the diverse roles and consequences of taboos in different Kenyan communities. While they contribute to cultural preservation, social cohesion, and resource management, it is crucial to critically examine their potential for negative consequences and work towards promoting their positive aspects while ensuring inclusivity and respect for individual rights.

Similarly in Kenya, Fontefrancesco and Lekanayia (2018) investigated meanings and taboos in traditional gastronomy of Maasai communities in Kajiado County. This study adopted ethnographic research approach. The research involved 6 focus groups, whose panel consisted of five Maasai elders each, and 93 interviews. The study was conducted in each *manyatta* (settlement) of the area, overall investigating 71 households. The results of the study highlight the emergent cultural meaning associated to food, in particular, livestock derivatives such as milk, blood and meat. Highlighting cultural values and taboos, this research points out how taboos in traditional gastronomy represent a fundamental element of social cohesion for the Maasai community.

Statement of the Problem

Taboos refer to various social restrictions enforced by community leaders concerning specific times, locations, behaviors, events, and individuals (Osei, 2006). These prohibitions are often rooted in religious beliefs but aim to promote the overall well-being and orderliness of society. Taboos have played an important role in traditional African societies and still have their influence felt in the modern societies. There are several reasons taboos came into being from the African perspective. The reason include; to avoid accident, have respect for religion and elders in the communities, obey rules of cleanliness and sacredness, teach moral values, guide against being wasteful and to explain things that are difficult to understand (Odejobi, 2013; MojaAfryka, 2014).

While Western knowledge has contributed significantly to development in various fields of life, its dominance poses challenges that threaten African cultural identities and social structures (Mazzocchi, 2023). The reliance on Western knowledge can lead to the disregarding of local traditions and practices. Indigenous knowledge systems, which are often well-adapted to local environments, are being overlooked in favor of Western cultures that may not be suitable in the African context (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2022).

Taboos in Africa have been disintegrating and failed to be upheld with utmost importance in contemporary times. According to Ron (2020), the deeply valued taboos that support communal life and promote morality in

indigenous Ghanaian society are rapidly diminishing. In the words of Brempong (2006), “the African has been robbed and deprived of their attitude and all that is most sacred to them, their laws, their religion, wisdom and institutions are destroyed; the Christian Churches and the mosques, their priests and priestesses, imams are most hateful to the traditions, customs and beliefs.

Elo (2020) affirms that westernization and loss of African taboos have brought about lack of social cohesion and individualism. Furthermore, the transition to modernity and globalization has led to a decline in traditional African values and the rise of immoral and unethical behaviors in African societies. In Nigeria for instance, promiscuous habits like rape and prostitution, respect erosion and substance abuse are on high trend (Ajayi, 2022). The adoption of European moral frameworks has weakened traditional taboos, contributing to a loss of cultural identity in the African communities.

Studying taboos was essential for understanding cultural identity and social cohesion. The erosion of indigenous values due to foreign influence highlights the need for critical examination. Therefore, this study explored the role of taboos in behavior regulation in selected African community.

Research Questions

What are the different types of taboos in selected African communities?

How does taboo regulate behavior among selected African communities?

What are the possible challenges in adhering to taboos in selected African community?

METHODOLOGY

The study adopted the exploratory sequential research design. The sample size of this study was 42 adults between the ages of 30-50 years old and above, from selected African communities of both male and female participants. The study used purposeful sampling technique. Purposeful sampling helped to select communities based on their diverse cultural backgrounds, geographical locations, range of ages, genders, and social status. The study focused on in-depth interviews with semi-structured questions, Focus Group Discussion with key informants, such as elders, religious leaders, women and men, exploring their experiences about taboos and their perspectives on their roles in behavior regulation.

An audio recording of participants' content was carried out, and the audio recordings were transcribed to verbatim thereby followed by the systematic thematic analysis. This aided in identifying recurring themes and patterns in interview transcripts. Narrative analysis was employed to analyze personal stories and narratives shared by participants to gain insights into the lived experiences of taboos and their impact on individuals and families.

Heyvaert et al. (2016) submit that there are principles that help guide research based on the best practices of conducting empirical studies. Some of the ethical consideration may include; voluntary participation in the study, informed consent. The study obtained informed consent from all participants of the study. Anonymity and confidentiality of all data collected were ensured. Confidentiality entails an obligation on the part of the researcher to make sure that any use of information acquired from or shared by human subjects respects the dignity and autonomy of the respondents. Additionally, the respondents were made aware of their ability to withdraw from participation at any time during the data gathering process. This study took into consideration cultural sensitivities and avoided imposing personal values or beliefs on the communities being studied. Collaboration with local community leaders ensured the research was conducted in an ethical and culturally appropriate manner.

Further, all data collected were stored securely and confidentially in the repository of the Catholic University of Eastern Africa. The physical copies of the information gathered on paper were stored in a secure area in a locked cabinet.

FINDINGS

Introduction

This section presents the findings of the study. It begins with the demographic characteristics of participants. The findings in connection to the research questions are articulated, and they include: the different types of taboos in selected African communities, how taboos regulate behavior among selected African communities, and the possible challenges in adhering to taboos in selected African community.

Demographic Characteristics of Participants

This section shows the findings from the demographic characteristics of participants of this study. This includes; age bracket and gender, and they are presented in Table 1.

Table 1 Demographic Characteristics of Participants

Age Bracket	Frequency	Percentage
30-35	2	4.7%
36-40	1	2.3%
41-45	1	2.3%
46-50	8	19.3%
51 and above	30	71.4%
Total	42	100.0%
Gender		
Male	27	64.3%
Females	15	35.7%
Total	42	100%

As seen in Table 1, findings from the descriptive analysis revealed that most (71.4%, $n = 30$) of the participants of this study were between the ages of 51 and above, while 2.3% ($n = 1$) of the participants were between the ages of 36-40 and 41-45 years respectively. Gender showed that the males (64.3%, $n = 27$) were the highest participants, while the females were at 35.7% ($n = 15$). These findings suggest that the study had unequal distribution of age as well as gender. Although, both genders (the males and females) were represented in the study, and this indicates gender balance.

The Different Types of Taboos in Selected African Communities?

The first research question was to find out the different types of taboos in selected African communities. Different types of taboos were found from four tribes which included: the Kamba community, the Luo community, the Kikuyu community, the Igbo community and the Ogoja community of Nigeria. The following types of taboos were found among the Kamba community; sex and sexuality, sweeping at night, resuming sexual activity after birth, infidelity, sexual activity with one's children, children visiting their parents' bedroom, marriage between close relatives, children sitting on their father's seat. Among the Luo community, the following types of taboos were found; no sexual relation between siblings, sleeping with a daughter in-law, married children are not allowed to stay in their parents' house, children fighting/beating their parents, gender role, like a man sweeping the compound, specific names for genders, widows are bound to shave their hairs and stay in the house for some days, and food related taboo. Among the Kikuyu community, they viewed the following as types of taboos: men were not allowed to eat meat meant for women, eating of donkey meat, adopting foreign culture, marriage among close relative, cutting of mugumo tree, women not allowed to go the mugumo tree, direct confrontation with the dead,

Among the Igbo community in Nigeria, sleeping with a married person, sleeping with the brother's wife, desecrating shrine or sacred places, killing another person, fishing at night, sweeping at night. The Ogoja community in Nigeria has the following types of taboos; sleeping with a married person, cutting down sacred trees, incest, sweeping at night, disrespecting king, chief and elders, responding to a voice you do not know,

fishing from a sacred stream, burying the dead on a market day, fighting one's parents, marrying a relative, speaking ill of the gods, and homosexuality. The following themes were derived from the different types of taboos among the selected Africa communities; sexual relationships, Food and dietary restrictions.

Sexual relationships among family members

A sexual relationship typically refers to a connection between individuals that involves physical intimacy and sexual activities. It can encompass a range of dynamics, including emotional bonds, mutual consent, and varying levels of commitment. These relationships can be casual, romantic, or long-term, and they often involve communication about desires, boundaries, and safety. The nature of the relationship can vary widely based on the preferences and agreements of those involved. Most of the participants of this study strongly see sexual relationships among family members as a strong taboo. One of the participants of this study stated:

There is taboo regarding sexuality and romantic affairs. No member of the family is allowed to have sexual relation with a sibling, one's parent. Such things bring a curse into the family. For example, if siblings get into sexual activity and the girl gets pregnant, the child is highly likely to die. The shame of such a habit can lead anyone of them to commit suicide. Thus, sexual activity and romantic affairs are supposed to be carried outside one's extended family. In such act, cleansing is done using some items recommended village healer; some items that are brought by the people who get involved in sexual relation may include 3 goats, 7 kola nuts, 1 white turtle dove, 2 big cock and hen, 20 liters of fresh palm wine. Failure to observe this cleansing rituals bring curse not only on the person, but also on the future generations. Also, there is the death of the offspring: If incest results in pregnancy, it is believed that the child conceived will most likely die. This is viewed as a form of divine retribution, ensuring that the curse is enforced and the violation is punished. There is the generational curse. The curse is not seen as affecting just the individuals involved but is believed to extend across generations. Future descendants of those who break the taboo may also suffer misfortune or death, as the curse lingers in the family line (Participant 3, male from Ogoja, Age 33, 2nd August, 2024).

Another participant also asserted;

Open discussion on sexual matters was a taboo in Kamba community. This cultural norm restricted the exchange of information and understanding about sexuality. Premarital sex was associated with severe consequences, including illness and death. Premarital sex could lead to illness and death. These beliefs instilled fear and caution among individuals contemplating sexual activity outside of marriage. Sex between parents and children was a serious taboo. It was forbidden for a woman with a baby to have sex with a man who is not her husband. Consequences would be - If she does it the baby would start vomiting and can eventually die (FG: P.1, male, 50 years, 15th July, 2024).

Still among the Kamba community, there is the taboo surrounding sexual activity during bereavements. *Some of the Kamba participants noted:*

Sexual issues were taken very seriously a sons /daughter who went to town and a. Member of the family dies, they were not allowed to get into their home compound or have conjugal relationship (kusyoka musyi before they are cleansed with Ng'onde and mutaa by a traditional doctor. They could not engage in conjugal relationship (kusyoka musyi) before their parents did it. It is true if a person dies in a family no one would sleep with his wife (conjugal relationship) before his parents came together for sexual relationship. If anyone had conjugal relationship with his wife before the sexual union of the parents with during the bereavement periods, that would attract sickness and death to his nuclear family (F12, F3, F1, 15th July, 2024).

Sexual relationship is a critical cultural taboo that forbids people from engaging in physical sexual act. It is highly discouraged from the different African communities. One of the participants of the study, from the Luo community postulated that:

You cannot have sex with your daughter in law. Once your son marries, she becomes your daughter. It will be like you are doing it to your own daughter. Then there is a significant consequence (P 4, male, Age 50, 17th August, 2024).

Food and dietary restrictions

Food is not just a basic need, it is intertwined with our health, culture, economy, and social lives, making it a vital aspect of human existence. Food provides essential nutrients, vitamins, and minerals that our bodies need to function properly. These nutrients support growth, repair tissues, and maintain overall health. However, African communities have different food restrictions, which food to take and which one not to or rather parts of some animal that were gender specific regarding their consumption. For instance, among the Kikuyu community, Certain animals like dogs, birds, and seafood were traditionally prohibited from consumption. Donkey meat is forbidden in Kikuyu culture, unlike other tribes where it may be accepted. Eating food from other communities, like fish from lake regions, was discouraged to avoid adopting foreign cultural traits and maintain a strong cultural identity. Eating forbidden food can lead to a curse, which might be lifted through rituals, such as slaughtering a goat and sharing the meal with elders. One of the participants from the Kikuyu community asserted:

Among the Kikuyu culture, certain types of birds, even things like fish are not considered as good diet. But even when it comes to the actual food, like when you talk about meat, meat, there are specific meats for men, for women, and for children. So, it means that meat was not just for anybody. So, suppose if a man takes the meat of a woman, it's a taboo. It was considered as an unaccepted behavior. In Kikuyu culture, donkey meat is forbidden. Other tribes do that. Okay, okay. It actually means that you can even die. And to prevent you from dying, a certain kind of ceremony has got to be performed to get that curse out of you (P2, Male, Age 60, 5th August, 2024).

Food taboos reflect deep-seated beliefs and values, shaping dietary practices across diverse African cultures. In some cultures, certain foods are considered inappropriate for specific genders. For example, women may be discouraged from eating foods that are thought to be “hot” or “strong,” which could affect fertility or health. For instance, a participant from the Luo community pointed that:

Back home the women were not eating chicken. My grandmother was not eating chicken because chicken was for men. Even those who are eating chicken could not eat gizzard for it was form men. I grew up seeing this being done although now it has been changed (FG2, Age 63, 17th July, 2024).

Food taboos are taken serious just like other taboos. A participant from Ogoja community in Nigeria shared that;

Foods that are linked to ancestors or spiritual practices might be treated with reverence. Consuming these foods inappropriately could be viewed as dishonoring cultural heritage. For example, among the Ogoja community, eating fish from the sacred stream is prohibited since it is connected to the ancestral presence in the stream. One a eats fish from the sacred stream invites curse and death upon the family (P 5, Age 45, 3rd August, 2024)

Among the Igbo community of Nigeria, some foods carry cultural significance, and eating them inappropriately or at the wrong time might be viewed as a breach of tradition. Taboos on food reflect the rich cultural heritage of the Igbo people, emphasizing respect for traditions and the spiritual significance of food in their society.

One of the participants from the Igbo community stated that:

The Igbo community believe that consuming palm wine alongside certain foods, particularly those associated with mourning or rituals, is inappropriate. This reflects the importance of context in meal consumption. The consequence is that this could disrupt spiritual harmony and invite punishment from the gods, such as bad luck, illness, or crop failure. Based on family consequences, in Igbo culture, violating taboos could also have consequences for one's family, as it might be seen as a reflection of poor upbringing or lack of respect for ancestral teachings. It could lead to a loss of status or even result in being ostracized by elders and peers. (P 4, Age 47 years, 5th August, 2024).

From this participant, taboos are taken seriously. Disregarding these rules could weaken the social fabric, creating divisions within the community or even eroding the meaning behind important ceremonies like the New Yam Festival. Thus, breaking food taboos could lead to spiritual, social, and cultural repercussions, and thus adherence to them is considered essential for maintaining balance, respect, and harmony within the Igbo community.

In the Kamba community, food can be a taboo in several ways, often tied to cultural beliefs, gender roles, and spiritual practices. Taboos highlight the intricate relationship between food, culture, and social norms in the Kamba community. One of the participants held that:

Women may be prohibited from consuming certain foods, especially meat or specific plants, during menstruation or after childbirth, due to beliefs about purity and cleanliness. Some foods, like those used in sacrifices or ceremonies (e.g., goat or honey), are strictly reserved for specific occasions and should not be consumed casually, reflecting their spiritual significance. Certain Animals: Eating specific animals, such as certain birds or reptiles, may be avoided due to cultural beliefs or taboos that associate these animals with bad omens or misfortune. In Kamba community, vultures are often associated with death and considered a bad omen. Ostriches: Sometimes viewed as symbols of misfortune. Kamba people are cautious about reptiles, many snakes are feared and avoided, as they can symbolize danger or bad luck. Certain Lizards: Specific species may also be regarded with caution or avoided due to superstitions (FG1, 15th July, 2024).

How does taboo regulate behavior among selected African communities?

The second research question of this study was to find out how taboos regulate behavior among selected African communities. The following themes emerged from the finding of the study which includes; moral principle, instills discipline, respect

Moral Principle

Taboos plays a significant role in regulating behavior among various African communities by establishing boundaries around acceptable and unacceptable actions. These taboos are often rooted in cultural beliefs, religious practices, and social norms, and they serve several key functions. Based on the moral principle associated with taboos, one of the participants from the Luo community asserted that:

In Luo culture, taboos play a significant role in preserving identity, values, and social cohesion. Taboos serve as moral principle, moral guidelines, so that we live an ethical life in our community. Taboos uphold our morals (FG2, Age 60, 17/7/2024).

Another participant from the Luo community also added:

The continuation of our cultural heritage and practice is preserved through taboos. This preservation of cultural heritage goes to passing over values to our new members, to our children so that they are able to know or differentiate good from bad and choose the right thing to do. The they will be good citizen of value to the country (FG2, 59 years, 17/7/2024).

It is pertinent to note the Ogoja people hold unto two basic moral principle which could be seen from positive and negative perspectives. Taboos often convey moral lessons, teaching individuals about consequences and ethical behavior. They serve as cautionary tales that illustrate the repercussions of wrongdoing. A participant from the Ogoja community stated:

The positive principles have to do with what we ought to do, how we ought to behave. The negative principles prohibit certain actions and ways of behaviour which are wrong and which should be avoided. Moral norms do not only concern itself with individual human conducts, it also focuses on the maintenance of authority by means of reward and punishment. The concept of value, from a general viewpoint means the set of institutional ideals loved either by an individual or by a group of people. There are different kinds of taboos such as spiritual taboos (speaking ill of the ancestors, the gods of the land), material taboos (removing someone's crop

that has been already planted, religious taboos (stealing from a sacred shrining), moral taboos (sexual intimacy with family members, beating one's parent, disrespecting an elder) (P3. 33 years, 2/8/2024).

Among the Kamba community, taboos play a crucial role in preserving cultural heritage and traditions, passing them down through generations. The participants from this community held that:

Taboos were used to maintain traditional rules that enhanced moral values. Taboos served as a moral compass, guiding societal behavior and upholding traditional values. They reinforced ethical conduct, such as avoiding sexual misconduct with relatives (FG3) and adhering to marriage customs (FG6). In addition, girls were expected to stay away from their father as a way of showing respect and avoiding any sexual misconduct. We have serious taboos surrounding marriage because marrying certain relatives were prohibited and customs regarding bride price were observed to regulate social relationships and familial alliances (FG6).

Taboos in African communities serve as vital mechanisms for regulating behavior, ensuring cultural continuity, and fostering social cohesion. Many taboos from the different African communities are intertwined with rituals and ceremonies that reinforce their significance. Engaging in these practices not only honors the taboo but also strengthens communal ties and shared beliefs.

Instill Discipline

Taboos in African communities often serve as a crucial mechanism for instilling discipline and maintaining social. Taboos create clear boundaries around acceptable behavior. Violating these norms can lead to social ostracism or punishment, reinforcing the importance of adhering to communal values. Among the Kikuyu community, taboos act as a social mechanism to instill discipline, guiding behavior from an early age until adulthood. Children are taught what is acceptable or forbidden, embedding cultural norms deeply within their identity. One of the participants from the Kikuyu community maintained that:

You see, culture is a very sensitive and also very deep thing. Culture. A child when he is born, the time that he has started talking or listening or you know, able to reason out, you start telling the child do's and don'ts. And that's why it goes deep into that child. So, we believe, that culture is in his bone, not even skin or flesh, it is in the bone (FG 3. Male 60 years old).

In the Igbo community, taboos serve as vital tools for instilling discipline, shaping behavior, and promoting harmony within the community. It was stated:

Taboos are intended to instill in children and parents respect, healthy boundaries, discipline, charity, kindness, safe guide marriage and prevent abuse. Some taboos regulate the use of natural resources or communal assets, ensuring sustainable practices and fostering a sense of responsibility among community members (P5, 37, 5/8/2024).

Taboos played a pivotal role in fostering discipline within the Kamba community. They promoted respect for elders given. According to FG7 "Taboos helped to instill discipline in the community, Children respected all parents and elderly people in the village" and ensured adherence to spiritual practices that require self-discipline. In Kamba community "prohibition of certain actions during religious ceremonies required discipline for the community to maintain a harmonious relationship with their beliefs and deities (Participant FG9 17 July 2024)., the culture discouraged deviant behaviors which was disciplined by clan elders (FG5). Participant FG5 stated that "Disobedience could lead to public humiliation and punishment for those who lacked discipline (FG5). According to F8, taboos not only instilled discipline and respect but also provided support and maintained social order which is a fruit of discipline.

Further, it is possible that taboos are tied to cultural beliefs and practices, fostering a sense of identity and belonging. This connection motivates individuals to conform to expectations to uphold their community's heritage. In the Luo community,

In our community taboos were meant to be respected. We considered them to be good guidelines on what we are supposed to do and consequences will follow from disregarding them. For instance, one who refused to

listen to taboos, the elephant tramples on his house because he was told that where his is building his house is the path on the elephant, so don't build there. But he could not listen and he built and the elephant came and trampled on his house. Taboos were there for discipline and respect (FG2, 59 years, 17/7/2024).

Taboos serve as vital tools for instilling discipline, shaping behavior, and promoting harmony within the community. Thus, taboos promote unity by creating shared values and norms. When community members respect taboos, it strengthens bonds and fosters cooperation, as everyone adheres to the same standards.

What Are the Possible Challenges in Adhering to Taboos in Selected African Community?

The third research question of this study was to find out the possible challenges in adhering to taboos in selected African community. The following themes emerged from the finding of the study which includes: modernity and belief system

Modernity as a Challenge in Adhering to Taboos among the Igbo Community

Adhering to taboos in various African communities can present several challenges, reflecting the complex interplay of culture, modernization, and individual beliefs. Different generations may have varying degrees of commitment to traditional taboos. This can create rifts within families and communities, as younger members may seek to challenge or reinterpret these norms. One of the participants among the Ogoja, community

The challenge among the Ogoja people will be level of exposure in the age of modernity. Some members who are exposed to education and influenced by different geographical thinking patterns may consider their cultural taboos are being outdated. There is also, the challenge of Christianity vs the traditional culture. For example, while Christianity forbids polygamous marriage, our cultural society allows polygamous marriage. Another example will be when someone commits suicide, he or she is supposed to be buried in the forest, whereas, Christianity opposes such alienation of the human being whether alive or dead. thus, the Christian message of love can weaken such taboo regarding suicide (P3, 2/8/2024).

The challenges posed by modernity to traditional taboos in the Luo community illustrate a complex interplay between preserving cultural identity and adapting to a changing world. Among the Luo community, they stated:

Many taboos are unknown to the present generation. It's really unknown to the Gen Z generation because of the urbanization, the Western culture that is really popping in very fast, and the digital space that is occurring for the majority of the people. Their reading is a challenge, may be if they are recorded, and put in You Tube where the Genz interact, they would want to learn and appreciate them (FG2)

The Kamba people hold that modernity often promotes individualism, which can clash with the collectivist values prevalent in the culture. They stated:

Traditionally education was offered through the elderly men, uncles and unties as well as informal groups but the present generation has many ways of attaining education that include formal learning system, social media (FG9). Modernization has also influenced our dressing, ways of communication, types of food that Kamba people eat (FG5).

Modernity presents several challenges to adhering to taboos within the African community, reflecting broader societal changes and individual transformations

Belief System

As societies evolve, traditional beliefs may be questioned or reinterpreted, leading to tensions between older generations who uphold taboos and younger generations who may feel constrained by them. Belief systems in many African communities can play a significant role in shaping taboos, which are often deeply rooted in cultural, spiritual, and historical contexts. However, some African communities are faced with some challenges in adhering to their belief systems. The Kikuyu community shared that:

Christianity contributed to the decline in adherence to Kikuyu taboos. The Mugumo tree, once considered sacred, was a place where elders would gather to pray for rain and other blessings. However, with the arrival of Christianity, worship shifted to churches, reducing the reverence for the Mugumo tree and diminishing its significance. As a result, many taboos associated with the tree, such as prohibitions against cutting it or allowing only elderly men to pray beneath it, are fading. Mugumo tree was connected with the spirit. They would go there, pray, slaughter goats under that tree. Yes. And then after that, the rain would fall. Yeah. So, you know, somehow it was connected with the traditional religion. Yes. That's how it is. Yeah. Actually, it was like in their church (P10, Female Age 48, 13th August, 2024).

Individual experiences, such as trauma or education, can shape one's belief system and lead to questioning or rejecting certain taboos, which can create friction within the community. The Kamba community shared:

Kamba people will not eat the first food before taking it to their God under a muumo tree. The present generation do not care about sacrificing the first food to God before they eat it (FG 8). While the modern general can clean of sweep any time, culturally, it was believed that, sweeping at one was sweeping away the wealth. That raises conflict between the older generation and the young generation in terms of maintaining traditional taboos (FG6).

An individual with different belief systems or personal convictions may struggle with this pressure, leading to internal conflict. participant from Ogoja community also stated:

Younger generations often question or reject taboos that they perceive as outdated or irrelevant to modern life. For instance, taboos around topics like marriage, gender roles, or expressions of sexuality may be challenged as younger people seek more freedom and autonomy. Young people might oppose the taboo against romantic relationships before marriage, choosing instead to date openly or live together without getting married. This can lead to conflicts with parents or elders who view such behaviors as immoral or disrespectful to cultural traditions (P2, 4th August, 2024).

DISCUSSIONS

The participants from the selected African communities affirm the practice of taboos among members in their traditional communities. Understanding taboos in African communities requires recognizing the diversity of cultures, languages, and beliefs across the continent. Taboos are often tied to cultural norms, religious beliefs, and social practices, and they serve various functions within communities.

The participants of this study from the selected African communities shared similar sentiments on types of taboos that exist in their communities, in which sexual relationships, food and dietary restrictions were commonly found among the different African communities. Based on how taboos regulate behavior, the participants from the selected African communities hold that taboos focus on reinforcing moral principle and as well instill discipline and respect among community members. Most of the participants from the selected African communities affirm that modernity and belief system stand as challenges to taboos in the African communities.

The findings of the current study align with the findings by Worthy (2020) among the Swedes, Irish, Filipinos, Spaniards and Russians, whose study explores human sexuality and the societal regulation. The study reported that 93% of Filipinos held that sex before age 16 was always a taboo, 45% of Spaniards responded that homosexuality was always a taboo.

The findings of the current study agree with the findings by Ekwochi et al. (2016) in Nigeria

The results of this study indicated that approximately 37% of the participants avoided consuming some items due to food taboos in the community. It was further reported that snail and grass-cutter meat were the commonly avoided food especially among pregnant women. There is the belief that eating snail and grass-cutter meat makes a child sluggish and labor difficult respectively. It was also revealed that taboos surrounding food contribute to healthy living among community members.

The findings of this study also corroborate the finding by Were (2010) in Kenya. It was reported that the Kenyan communities harbor a wide array of taboos, which encompass various aspects of life, including: Restrictions on consuming specific animals, plants, or food combinations are prevalent. According to Middleton (1960), sexual relationships was aimed to regulate sexual behavior among the community members, and to protect women's reproductive health.

While some taboos are widespread, such as those concerning death or food, many are specific to individual ethnic groups or regions. For example, the taboos among the Zulu in South Africa may differ significantly from those in the Maasai of Kenya (Ndlovu, 2023). Taboos play a significant role in African communities, serving as social, moral, and cultural guidelines that shape behaviors and beliefs. Taboos often stem from deep-rooted cultural beliefs that are crucial for maintaining the identity of a community. They serve as mechanisms for preserving traditional practices and values. For instance, many communities have taboos related to ancestral worship or sacred sites, which help reinforce cultural continuity and collective memory (Ndlovu, 2023).

Taboos in African communities serve as powerful regulatory mechanisms for behavior, influencing social interactions, moral conduct, and cultural practices. According to Chikanda and Khupe (2023), taboos delineate acceptable and unacceptable behaviors, setting clear boundaries for community members. For instance, taboos against theft, adultery, or dishonesty establish moral standards that guide individuals in their interactions. Such norms create a framework for expected behavior, fostering trust and cooperation within the community. Adebayo (2023) contends that taboos often reflect the moral values of a community, serving as ethical guidelines that influence decision-making. For example, taboos surrounding respect for elders or hospitality promote behaviors that honor social hierarchies and communal relationships.

Further, adhering to taboos in contemporary African communities presents several challenges, influenced by globalization, urbanization, and shifting social dynamics.

Chinua and Okwu (2023) argue that globalization exposes communities to diverse cultures and values, which can undermine traditional taboos. As Western norms and practices become more prevalent, younger generations may question or disregard established taboos. This cultural clash can lead to a decline in adherence to traditional practices. In addition, for example, traditional structures that reinforce taboos may weaken. The anonymity and diversity of urban life can dilute the enforcement of communal norms, making it easier for individuals to violate taboos without facing social consequences. The transition from rural to urban environments often disrupts traditional social networks that uphold these customs (Meyer, 2022).

Also, increased access to education can lead to critical questioning of taboos. While education is generally beneficial, it can also foster skepticism toward traditional beliefs, particularly if curricula emphasize scientific reasoning over cultural practices. This shift can create a generational divide, where younger individuals may prioritize modern values over traditional taboos (Ndlovu, 2023). Modern health practices sometimes conflict with traditional taboos. For example, taboos regarding childbirth or dietary restrictions may hinder the acceptance of medical interventions. As healthcare systems promote evidence-based practices, adherence to outdated taboos can pose risks to health outcomes (Kamau, 2023).

The contemporary African traditional societies are confronted with several challenges and its members are faced with the difficulties in adhering to the taboos of the community. In spite of the challenges, taboos help maintain order and reinforce community values, creating a sense of belonging. Understanding taboos in African communities is about appreciating the complexity and richness of cultural practices. Engaging with these topics respectfully and with an open mind is essential to grasping their significance within each community.

CONCLUSION

Taboos play a vital role in regulating behavior within selected African communities, serving as foundational elements that uphold cultural integrity, social order, and ethical standards. They establish clear norms that delineate acceptable behavior, fostering social cohesion and trust among community members. By influencing

individual actions and shaping collective identity, taboos reinforce moral frameworks that guide interpersonal relationships and communal interactions. However, as contemporary challenges such as globalization, urbanization, and changing social dynamics emerge, the adherence to traditional taboos faces significant pressures. These shifts can lead to a decline in their influence, particularly among younger generations who may prioritize modern values over traditional practices. Despite these challenges, taboos remain a critical aspect of cultural identity, reflecting the resilience and adaptability of communities in navigating the complexities of modern life. Ultimately, while the landscape of taboos is evolving, their enduring significance in behavior regulation underscores the intricate balance between tradition and change, highlighting the need for ongoing dialogue about their relevance in contemporary society. As communities grapple with these dynamics, a nuanced understanding of taboos can inform efforts to preserve cultural heritage while adapting to new realities

RECOMMENDATIONS

This study recommends that traditional African communities should implement educational programs that emphasize the importance of traditional taboos in maintaining social order and cultural identity. Workshops and community discussions can help bridge the gap between traditional values and contemporary challenges, fostering respect for cultural practices among younger generations

African communities should encourage dialogue between elders and younger community members to facilitate the sharing of knowledge about the significance of taboos. This exchange can help contextualize traditional practices within modern frameworks, ensuring that younger individuals understand their relevance and importance

Explore ways to harmonize traditional taboos with modern health and social practices. For example, health education programs could address taboos related to childbirth or dietary restrictions, emphasizing how certain practices can coexist with contemporary medical advice.

African communities should invest in research to document and analyze existing taboos within communities. This can provide a clearer understanding of their functions and implications, supporting efforts to educate and engage community members about their significance.

REFERENCES

1. Abeku Essel, E. (2018). The role of taboos in African governance systems. *Polgári Szemle: Gazdasági És Társadalmi Folyóirat*, 14(4-6), 372-386.
2. Afen, I. E. (2024). The psychospiritual and cultural practice of forgiveness. In J. P. Egunjobi (Ed.), *Psycho-spiritual wellbeing: The component and measurement* (pp. 26–141). Lulu Press.
3. Ajayi, S. D. (2022). Rejuvenation of Taboo as a mechanism for curbing immorality in African society. *African Journal of Religion, Philosophy and Culture*, 3(2), 73–91. <https://doi.org/10.31920/2634-7644/2022/v3n2a5>
4. Adebayo, O. (2023). "Ethical Frameworks and the Role of Taboos in African Societies." *Journal of African Studies*, 45(2), 156-173.
5. Brempong, Owusu (2006): Chieftaincy and Traditional Taboos. In: Odotei, Irene – Awedoba, Albert K. (eds): *Chieftaincy In Ghana. Culture, Governance and Development*. Sub-Saharan Publishers, Legon.
6. Boas, F. (1911). *The Mind of Primitive Man*. New York: Macmillan.
7. Chivasa, N., & Mukono, A. (2017). An Analysis of the Contributions of Taboo System to Peace among Shona Communities in Zimbabwe. *International Journal of Research in Humanities and Social Studies*, 4, (1), pp 24 -32
8. Chinua, L., & Okwu, P. (2023). "Globalization and Cultural Erosion: Impact on Taboos in African Societies." *African Journal of Cultural Studies*, 22(1), 75-90.
9. Fershtman, C., Gneezy, U., & Hoffman, M. (2011). Taboos and identity: Considering the unthinkable. *American Economic Journal: Microeconomics*, 3(2), 139-164.
10. Fikentscher, W(2004). *Modes of thought: a study in the anthropology of law and religion*. Tübingen, Mohr Siebeck Pub

11. Habibovic, A.(2010). Taboo Language. Kristianstad University: English Department, 2010.
12. Elo, I. (2020). The media and the need to harness traditional taboos and injunctions for social cohesion in Nigeria. *Asian Journal of Social Sciences & Humanities*, 2. 22-32
13. Kamau, M. (2023). "Health Practices and the Conflict with Cultural Taboos in Africa." *African Health Review*, 10(3), 233-250.
14. Meyer, F. (2022). "The Impact of Urbanization on Traditional Taboos in Africa." *Cultural Anthropology Review*, 38(4), 325-342.
15. Meyer-Rochow, V. B. (2009). Food taboos: their origins and purposes. *Journal of ethno-biology and ethno-medicine*, 5, 1-10.
16. Ndlovu, T. (2023). "Rituals, Taboos, and Cultural Identity in Southern Africa." *International Journal of Cultural Heritage*, 15(1), 80-95.
17. Ron, M. (2020). The Future of Taboos in Indigenous Ghanaian Morality. *E-Journal of Religious and Theological Studies*, 6, 334-340. 10.38159/erats.2020101.
18. Osei, J. (2006). The value of African taboos for biodiversity and sustainable development. *Journal of Sustainable Development in Africa*, 8(3), 42–61. http://www.jsd-africa.com/Jsda/Fall2006/PDF/Arc_the%20Value%20of%20African%20Taboos.pdf
19. Saputri, Y. (2022). Why are Taboos Still Used? ICOLLEC Malang, Indonesia, 11-12,
20. Taboos. (2014). Moja Afryka. <http://mojaafryka.weebly.com/taboo.html>
21. Worthy, L.D., Lavigne, T.,& Romero,F. (2020). Sexuality and Culture. <https://open.maricopa.edu/culturepsychology/chapter/sexuality-and-culture/>