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SOCIOLOGICAL EFFECTS OF TABOOS IN THE *EREGHEZI* DEITY FESTIVAL OF EKAE COMMUNITY, EDO STATE

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ABSTRACT

This paper investigates the sociological effects of taboos associated with the Ereghezi Deity Festival in Ekae community, Benin City, Nigeria. The objectives of the study were to explore the concept of festivals and taboos, examine the historical background of the Ereghezi festival, identify the taboos linked to it, and assess both the positive and negative impacts on the people of Ekae. The research employed a combination of historical and survey methodologies. Historical research involved the analysis of secondary sources such as books, journals, and archival materials, while survey research relied on primary data obtained through oral interviews with key informants in the community. Findings reveal that the Ereghezi Festival serves as a medium for communal bonding, cultural continuity, and moral reinforcement, particularly through adherence to taboos which fostered ethical behavior and reverence for the deity. However, the study also identified negative outcomes, including inter-religious conflict, particularly with the Christian community, due to restrictions placed on movement and worship during the festival. The paper concludes by recommending respectful preservation of indigenous heritage, interfaith dialogue, and the selective integration of ethical taboos into broader societal values for communal harmony and sustainable development.

Keywords: *Ereghezi* Festival, taboos, sociological impact, African Traditional Religion, interfaith dialogue.

Introduction

Despite the pervasive influence of Western civilization and globalization, African cultural values, though challenged, continue to thrive. Traditional festivals remain a vital expression of cultural identity and are institutionalized elements of African heritage. Among these cultural elements, taboos occupy a central place in African Traditional Religion (ATR), serving as mechanisms for social regulation, moral instruction, and communal identity. However, the rise of modern science, Christianity, and Islam has significantly weakened the relevance of taboos, often casting them as outdated or superstitious.

Scholars argue that taboos offer deep insight into the psychological, religious, and social life of African communities. Passed down through generations via oral traditions, ceremonies, and everyday interactions, these taboos continue to influence behavior and societal norms. In the Ekae community of the Benin Kingdom, this is particularly evident in the celebration of the *Ereghezi* deity festival, where taboos are not only cultural relics but living principles that shape community life.

This paper investigates the historical background of the Egherezi deity festival, examines the taboos associated with it, and analyzes their sociological impact on the people of Ekae. It further explores the tension between traditional values and modernity, highlighting ongoing debates about the relevance of taboos in contemporary society.

Concept of Festival

Festivals are organized communal celebrations rooted in cultural, religious, or social values, often held annually (Wehmevier, 2008; Falassi, 1987). In African societies, they reinforce identity, unity, and heritage (Ndubisi, 2022). From a sociological view, festivals embody collective effervescence and societal cohesion (Durkheim, 2001) and are considered "intangible cultural heritage" by UNESCO (2003). Africa, known for its rich cultural diversity, uses festivals to commemorate history, express spirituality, and foster reconciliation (Ogbenika, 2020; Onwubiko, 1991; Ndubisi, 2022). Ogbenika (2020) compares them to Eliade's "myth of eternal return," with priests and griots mediating between the divine and human.

In the Benin Kingdom, festivals such as Ugivie, Evben, Ague, Igue, Ewere, and Akhue serve religious and historical functions, celebrating purification, youth engagement, spiritual renewal, royal blessings, and ancestral legacy (Adodo, 2018). Other festivals like Ikhuure, Eho, Erhoba, and Ikpoleki further illustrate Benin's cultural depth (Adodo, 2018). Socially and economically, festivals promote interaction and boost local development (Hill Strategies, 2003; Andersson & Lundberg, 2013). Although some are gender-exclusive or involve fetish practices (Ogbenika, 2020), scholars advocate for their secularization to enhance inclusivity and global relevance (Ndubisi, 2022).

Concept of Taboo

The term "taboo," derived from the Polynesian word tabu, signifies a prohibition often rooted in religious or cultural contexts (Steiner, 1956). It involves behaviors or objects considered sacred, forbidden, or socially unacceptable (Hutton, 1942; Agnes & Sparks, 1999). Taboo is culturally specific, reflecting the values and beliefs of different societies (Adler, 1978). In African traditional settings, taboos serve as moral guidelines established by religious authorities to ensure societal harmony and spiritual well-being (Omobola, 2013). Violating taboos can lead to severe consequences such as disease, famine, or death (Nwoye, 2011). Essel (2018, p.373) adds that taboos relate to sacredness and the protection of valued societal norms.

In the Benin Kingdom, taboos are strictly observed, especially within the Oba's palace. Forbidden acts include sitting on double chairs (symbolic of the Oba's authority), using umbrellas in his presence, bringing palm fruits near the palace, and allowing dogs within the palace grounds (Adodo, 2018). Other taboos involve pointing fingers, whistle blowing (believed to summon spirits), wearing black clothing (associated with mourning), and gender-based restrictions around shrines and royal quarters. These prohibitions uphold reverence for sacred spaces and reinforce traditional authority structures. Furthermore, specific deities and

their festivals also have associated taboos that guide community behavior and religious observance.

Ereghezi Festival in Ekae Community

The *Ereghezi* Festival, a centuries-old tradition in *Ekae* community, Edo State, is a vibrant cultural and spiritual event celebrated annually in October. Deeply rooted in ancestral worship, the festival honors the deity *Ereghezi*, symbolizing protection, fertility, and communal prosperity. Preparations begin weeks in advance, with women storing food and water due to market and river restrictions, while men and youths prepare farmlands and clean key community paths.

Led by the Ohen (chief priest) and scheduled around local market days (eken), the festival opens with the *Ede Guaokpo* procession, where sacred rituals are performed and offerings are presented to the Oba of Benin. The procession is followed by days of communal rest and animal sacrifices at the deity's shrines in Iduokpe and Iduohue, reaffirming the shared reverence between the Oba, the priesthood, and the people.

A series of events follow, including *Ugie Igute* (house-to-house blessings), *Ema Egute* (night drumming), and *Usa*, a sacred night believed to mark the spirit's visitation—excluding women but allowing them to make symbolic fertility offerings. Subsequent rites such as *Ede-Iyanrue* enable women to dance and offer prayers at the shrine, supported by men. The *Egorlor* procession brings blessings to every household through prayerful dances and offerings, while the grand finale, *Ikpolo*, features male-only feasting and final rites, concluding with prayers for the Oba.

After the festival, the Ohen remains in seclusion for three months, continuing his spiritual duties. Overall, the *Ereghezi* Festival serves not only as a religious celebration but also as a powerful expression of cultural identity, social unity, and spiritual interconnection between the divine, the leaders, and the people (I. Igbinosa, personal communication, March 19, 2024).

Taboos in *Ekae* Community and *Ereghezi* Festival

According to *Izedomwen,* the worship of *Ereghezi* is known to be associated with several taboos that have been observed by its followers. These taboos are considered to be an integral part of *Ereghezi* worship and are believed to be essential for maintaining the sanctity of the religion. In this regard, it is imperative to delve deeper into these taboos and explore their significance. The adherence to taboos can be traced back to ancient times when humans used them to create and maintain order in their societies. Similarly, in *Ereghezi* worship, taboos serve as a means of reinforcing the social norms and values of the religion. These taboos are upheld and enforced by the community, and those who violate them are often considered to have committed a grave offence. The taboos associated with *Ereghezi* worship vary widely, ranging from dietary restrictions to restrictions on sexual behaviour and interpersonal relationships. The reasons for these taboos are diverse and complex, and they often reflect the beliefs and values of the *Ekae* community (M. Izedonmwen, personal communication, May 26, 2021).

The taboos associated with *Ereghezi* worship are an important part of the religion. In this analysis, we will explore these taboos in detail and examine their significance in the context of *Ereghezi* worship. According to interview conducted with the Chief Priest, Ohen Imafidon

Igbinosa and other elders like Izedonmwen and Stephen Agbonmwanre, they all agreed on the following taboos in the *Ekae* community;

1. ***Stealing:*** In *Ekae* community and *Ereghezi* worship, stealing is considered taboo, and there are strict consequences for anyone caught stealing in the community (M. Izedonmwen, personal communication, May 26, 2021). Adultery: Marrying another man's wife is prohibited (M. Izedonmwen, personal communication, May 26, 2021).
2. ***Conflicts:*** There is a strong belief in resolving conflicts within the community without involving outside authorities like the police. Infact there are no police, the *Ereghezi* deity serves as security for the community (M. Izedonmwen, personal communication, May 26, 2021).
3. ***Dogs/Sheep:*** It was strictly prohibited for dogs to reside within the community; their presence was deemed taboo. This tradition persisted even as civilization advanced, with newcomers to the community prohibited from bringing dogs before acquiring land. Dogs held significant symbolic value as instruments in the worship of the *Ereghezi deity.* The Chief Priest, *Ohen* Imafidon Igbinosa, recounts that prior to the advent of Christianity and Islam in the *Ekae* community, it was prohibited to rear dogs and sheep. He recalled an incident involving a young man who walked with a large dog near the *Ereghezi* shrine. Upon returning home and leaving the dog unattended, it attacked him, tearing his shirt and leaving marks on his face and body. He cried out for help, and someone with a gun helped to shoot the dog to rescue him (I. Igbinosa, personal communication, March 19, 2024).
4. ***Cock Crow:*** There is prohibition against hearing a cock crow at night. Any instance of such a disturbance led to immediate action, often resulting in the killing of the offending cock. Cock Crow at night is a sign of bad omen (I. Igbinosa, personal communication, March 19, 2024).
5. ***Sexual Activity:*** It was considered taboo to engage in sexual activity during daylight hours. This practice was strictly enforced, as indicated by the severe consequences for those who violated it. Anyone caught having daytime intercourse would fall seriously ill, and through consultation with the *Ereghezi* deity, their transgression would be revealed. Additionally, if a woman became pregnant as a result of daytime intercourse, she would face difficulties in childbirth due to the taboo. Consequently, any woman unable to deliver would face scrutiny and questioning regarding her adherence to this taboo. If it was discovered that someone engaged in daytime intercourse and they refuse to confess, they faced the consequence of death, often through certain sacrificial rituals (M. Izedonmwen, personal communication, May 26, 2021).
6. ***Climbing of She-Goat:*** The unusual behavior of female goats climbing he-goats, which was considered abnormal. Typically, it's the he-goats that climb the female goats. Any instance where this norm was reversed, resulting in a female goat climbing a He-goat, was viewed as a negative omen. In such cases, both the male and female goats involved would be killed, regardless of their owner, as it was believed to signify a significant deviation from the natural order (M. Izedonmwen, personal communication, May 26, 2021).
7. ***Segregation of Bathing Spaces*:** It was forbidden for women to bathe in the same area as men; they were required to bathe outdoors and leave their bathing buckets outside, as bringing them indoors was taboo (S. Agbonmwanre, personal communication, November 12, 2021).

8. ***Initiation Taboo:*** Izedomwen contributes that, it is taboo for male youths undergoing initiation in *Ekae* community to witness the proceedings; they must be blindfolded throughout the ceremony (M. Izedonmwen, personal communication, May 26, 2021).

Chief Priest Ohen Imafidion Igbinosa highlights some of the taboos associated to the *Ereghezi* festival as follows (I. Igbinosa, personal communication, March 19, 2024);

1. ***Women on Menstrual Cycle:*** He emphasized that women in their menstrual cycle are prohibited from preparing food for the ceremony.
2. ***No Quarrelling:*** He stressed that, during the festival, it is strictly forbidden for men to engage in quarrels with or physically harm their wives. This rule underscores the importance of maintaining harmony and respect within the community, emphasizing the values of peace and mutual understanding during this sacred time.
3. ***Women Squatting:*** It is considered taboo for women to squat while making fire for the festival's food preparation.
4. ***Women Prohibition:*** It is considered taboo for women to leave their homes, especially when the symbol of the *Ereghezi* deity is exhibited openly.
5. ***Strangers Prohibition:*** It is deemed inappropriate for strangers to attend the festival, particularly to observe the procession of the deity's symbol.
6. ***Burial Prohibition*****:** During the *Ereghezi* festival, it is prohibited to conduct burials or dig the ground. This is because the festival is a time of joy, happiness, and peace, akin to Christmas, and not meant for sorrow, sadness, or mourning.
7. ***Prohibition of Labor*****:** During this period, individuals are prohibited from visiting the river, farm, or any other location as it is designated for prayer and not for engaging in labor or activities. This underscores the solemnity and focus on spiritual devotion during this specific time, emphasizing the importance of dedicating oneself wholly to prayer and reflection rather than worldly tasks.

The Sociological Effects of Taboos Attached to the Festival of Egherezi Deity of Ekae Community

Positive Effects of Taboos of the Ereghezi Deity Festival

A native of *Ekae* community, affirms that adherence to the taboos of the *Ereghezi* Deity Festival fosters prosperity, moral discipline, and social order. Ereghezi, once human and now revered as a spiritual protector of the marginalized and oppressed, is believed to enforce justice. Taboos such as the prohibition of theft are highly effective; stolen property is often returned once the deity is invoked. The fear of divine retribution has cultivated ethical behavior and communal harmony, reinforcing the spiritual authority and societal relevance of the festival (F. Okabor, personal communication, June 5, 2021).

Socio-Spiritual Impacts of the Ereghezi Festival and Taboos on the Ekae Community

Chief Priest Ohen Imafidon Igbinosa of the Ekae community outlines several significant impacts of the *Ereghezi* festival and the observance of its associated taboos on the well-being and cohesion of the people (I. Igbinosa, personal communication, March 19, 2024).

1. ***Protection and Health***: The *Ereghezi* deity is perceived as a spiritual shield, offering constant protection to the community. Prayers directed to the deity are believed to guard against external aggression and ensure the physical well-being of adherents. According to the chief priest, the worship of *Ereghezi* has been credited with the

prevention and healing of various illnesses and diseases, thereby reinforcing its health-related significance within the community.

2. ***Hope and Fertility***: *Ereghezi* is also regarded as a source of hope for individuals facing life challenges, particularly issues related to fertility. Women struggling with infertility reportedly receive divine intervention, leading to conception and safe childbirth. This belief underscores the deity's perceived nurturing role, especially in addressing the reproductive needs of women.
3. ***Agricultural Support***: In the agrarian context, the deity is venerated for providing favorable conditions during farming seasons. Community members believe that invoking *Ereghezi's* assistance results in protection of crops and abundant harvests, thus contributing to food security and economic stability.
4. ***Prevention of Evil and Crime***: *Ereghezi* is seen as a guardian spirit, protecting the community from malevolent forces and social vices. The chief priest recalls that prior to the introduction of Christianity and Islam, incidences of crime such as armed robbery were virtually non-existent. The deity's spiritual oversight was believed to deter harmful behaviors, fostering a peaceful and morally upright society.

These elements reflect the holistic influence of *Ereghezi* on the physical, psychological, spiritual, and socio-economic well-being of the Ekae community.

Negative Effects of Taboos of the Ereghezi Deity Festival

The taboos of the *Ereghezi* Deity Festival have caused tension, particularly with Christians, due to restrictions on women's movement and worship during the Usa ritual—especially when it coincides with Sunday services. These conflicts have led to perceived discrimination, social segregation, religious suppression, theft, and property damage.

As a result, reverence for the deity has declined, participation in the festival has reduced, and sacred taboos are increasingly defiled. The festival's original spirit of unity and celebration has eroded, with quarrels now common in the Ekae community.

The ongoing religious-cultural conflict has triggered political, economic, and social disruptions, weakening intercommunal bonds, increasing polarization, and causing behavioral issues such as hostility, poor communication, infrastructure neglect, and low community morale. These challenges have led to voluntary migration as residents flee the growing unrest.

Effects of Breaking Taboos in the *Ereghezi* Deity Festival

Chief Priest Ohen Imafidon Igbinosa explains that violating taboos linked to the *Ereghezi* festival invites severe spiritual consequences. The deity, symbolized by a lion, is believed to mete out retribution by supernaturally selecting and killing a goat at the offender's home, symbolizing divine judgment. Such acts are seen as warnings, with continued disobedience potentially resulting in death unless the offense is confessed and atonement rituals are performed. A major taboo involves women witnessing the deity's symbol during the Usa ritual night, which may cause extreme physical afflictions like organ swelling. However, prompt confession and appeasement can restore spiritual balance (I. Igbinosa, personal communication, March 19, 2024).

Conclusion

Religion, as generally conceived, encompasses belief in the supernatural coupled with a framework of ethical conduct. As captured in the sociological effects of taboos in *Ereghezi* deity festival, there are the positive effect that strengthened the morality of community and people and also solidify the potency of worship of *Ereghezi* deity, there was also, the negative effect which established the religious crisis with Christianity community. Each religious tradition holds significance and offers valuable insights for mutual learning. It is imperative that no religious system assumes superiority over others. Instead, a posture of mutual encouragement, appreciation, and condemnation of negative aspects should prevail. Such an approach fosters harmony and understanding among the monotheistic traditions of African Traditional Religion and other religions, thereby nurturing an environment of peace, love, unity, and comprehension.

While it's true that taboos have often been overlooked in development discussions, it is not taboo to revisit values that have been neglected or abandoned in the past. Rediscovering and elevating the significance of taboos could promote biodiversity and foster genuine, sustainable development in Africa. Christians have the opportunity to align with and incorporate taboos that reinforce ethical principles within cultural context.

Recommendations

Preservation of Cultural Heritage: There is a critical need to respect and preserve indigenous cultural heritage, such as the *Ereghezi* festival, as it serves as a catalyst for cultural diversity and a foundation for sustainable development within communities.

Promoting Interreligious Dialogue: It is essential for adherents of other religious traditions not to trivialize or dismiss the taboos associated with the *Ereghezi* festival or African Traditional Religion. Through constructive and respectful dialogue, taboos that are oppressive or discriminatory can be reviewed or abolished, while those that reinforce moral integrity and community values should be preserved and promoted alongside compatible ethical teachings in other belief systems.

Preservation of Ethical and Communal Values in Taboos: Taboos that promote ethical conduct, social responsibility, and communal harmony should be retained. Integrating such values across religious and cultural boundaries can foster ethically balanced, inclusive, and resilient societies.

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