

**THE CONCEPT OF TABOO IN IGBO SPIRITUALITY: A
PHILOSOPHICAL EXAMINATION**

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Abstract

This study is concerned about the concept of taboo as it affects the spirituality of man in Igbo society. The interest of this research is embedded on the following questions: Has taboo a network of spiritual relationship in man or is it limited with the physical nature of man? Is the offence of taboo here on earth actually identified in the spiritual world? Does it really affect the gods, spirits or the ancestors? What is the relationship between man and spirits? Does man really need to appease the spirits for the sake of peace and success of his life? How does taboo affects man's spirituality? Employing the methods of analysis and hermeneutics, this study attempts to address the above questions and some spiritual issues alike. Focus is on the Igbo ethnic group, one among the African races.

Keywords: Spirituality, Philosophy, Taboo, Ancestors, Igbo Society, Nso Ala

Introduction

The question concerning taboo in Igbo worldview is intimately tied with their spirituality. The word "taboo" though, has an inevitable connection between the visible and the invisible, the Divine and the man. But it has a more fundamental network of spiritual relationship in man. Ordinarily, taboo appears to be a mere defilement of land (ala) but it is beyond that. There is a metaphysical reality found in the establishment of the concept in Igbo worldview. Ala (land) itself is taken to be the Earth spirit (or Earth

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goddess) that provides life nourishment, protection as well as being the principal custodian of all laws that ensures peace and harmony among the people. *Ala* is kept in high esteem for the sake of human life. It is the spirit behind the fertility of humanity and agriculture.

According to Oguejiofor (2002, 27):

Ala is the owner of all (Aninwe). Its power is much greater than that of mere human being (Anikammadu). It is the abode of the ancestors, and the land of the spirits. It is the most dreaded guardian of morality, and thus taboos are taken as defilement of Ala (Nso ala).

Ala is the most important deity in Igbo society as it automatically and necessarily becomes the guardian of morality. The influence it has on the people shows that all moral and social authority is derived from it. Being the Earth goddess, it is placed sacred and deeply respected because of its role in the affairs of man and spirits. Therefore, taboo (*nso ala*) is not just held to safeguard the earth and humanity but most importantly the spirit world.

What makes the spirit world so important to man? Why is man so concerned about the world he does not live? The Igbo believe in the spiritual nature of man. It is to their utmost assurance that man still lives in the spirit world after here on earth. The spirit world (*ala mmuo*) is believed to be located in one place or another beneath the earth. This gives the priority of the importance of *ala*, the earth spirit, the guardian of morality, who is responsible for every kind of fertility and of course the keeper of mankind. Man returns to the spirit world when once he dies to join the ancestors who have died before him. Basden (1966, 274) points out that "the wish of every Igbo man or woman is to rest among the souls of their ancestors, and it is a very real and poignant hope".

It is based on the above reasons and for the fact that the spirit world is believed to be the final home for man that the Igbo so much maintained that one should not be involved in the offence of taboos. The ancestors, the gods and the earth spirit (*ala mmuo*) will not welcome one who put oneself in such ugly incidents. In fact, the person begins to receive the punishment here on earth before he dies and meets the awaiting punishment in the spirit world.

Thereupon, there are some abnormal signs that are believed to happen among those who got themselves in the offence of taboo. Such signs include: Swollen up of the body, eating of feces, sands, walls or inedible materials and different sorts of abnormal behaviors especially in time of sickness. Sometimes, the person makes an open confession before he dies. If on the circumstance the person dies, the family members must perform some rituals (or a kind of sacrifice) before the deceased will be buried. This will purify the offender (the deceased) and as well appease the ancestors and the earth spirit (*ala mmuo*) without which terrible things like sudden death, famine, epidemic etc will begin to fall upon the family. The ancestors who are believed to be spiritually present all round the family and the community will begin to decline from their protection. This is why the concept of taboo appears to be more spiritually inclined than physical in Igbo society. The ancestors who are accredited with superiority and enriched with spiritual powers are expected to protect the human beings and prosper their undertakings. However, this study submits that the establishment of taboo has both spiritual and physical impacts on man, and that its main purpose is to ensure public peace, unity and stability of the Igbo society.

The Igbo Conception of Taboo

When properly examined, it becomes clearer that the notion of taboo in Igbo worldview has a replete of metaphysical reality in its establishment. The English word of "taboo" may appear so simple compared to the abundance and complexity of the term in Igbo language. The word "taboo" is named *aru* or *nso ala* in Igbo. For the sake of emphasis, this paper will use *nso ala* and taboo inter changeably. *Nsoala* literally means prohibitions against an item (especially sacred ones like land), person, or type of behavior. The root of this world has two unique meaning that gives the background of what *nso ala* is all about in Igbo society. The word *nso* implies two different things though connotatively related. One expresses negative, and one positive. On the negative sense, it means "avoidance" or "prohibition", that is, what one must avoid, or what one is prohibited from doing. On the other hand, the same word *nso* means "holy". The two senses of the word seem to be related because every holy thing such as spirits, priests, shrines etc, is surrounded by a set of prohibitions. Ordinary people may, on the advice of a priest or diviner, adopt and practice certain prohibitions and thus achieve a limited level of holiness. It would appear therefore, that prohibitions create or preserve

the status of holiness (*nso*), while the breach of prohibitions (*nso*) results in pollution or unholiness. This means that in all ramifications, *nso* is just “a sacred prohibition” (Nwagbala 2002, 317). *Ala* in its particularity is also like the term *nso*. *Ala* (soil, land or earth) is central to the entire existence of the Igbo. It is a deity and its nature is so central and vital to the Igbo people because it is the land that the ancestors are buried and their souls and bodies also rest finally on it (Nnoli, 2001, 50). This makes *ala* to become both cosmic (as physical) and spiritual (as divine) associated with every individual or community whose life is considered worthy to extend beyond the physical world. *Ala* is so much present in the life of Igbo people and that is why any defilement of it is termed taboo. In the course of avoidance, Echeruo (1979, 19) makes the observation thus:

One divinity however, was beyond the capriciousness of the Igbo man that divinity is neither Igwe, nor even Chukwu, but *Ala*, the goddess of the earth. She was the one deity which no man or woman and no community could afford to offend, much less discard. If ever there was a supreme god among the Igbo it was *Ala*.

The nature of *ala* is so important that it is believed to be the determinant of fortune or success. It remains everlasting present (*Alagboso*), and as well keeps things in order. For this reason *ala* is sacred. Any offence against *ala* is a taboo (*nso ala*). It is recognized as the earth deity and the guardian of morality. It is in control of everybody and all kinds of fertility that man can think of. It is in between the visible and invisible. It is the root form of communication between the ancestors and human beings.

By implication, *nso ala* is an offence against land, earth deity and humanity. Any abominable act like sheading of innocent blood, stealing, suicide, violation of oaths etc is a taboo – an offence against land and humanity. Nwagbala (2002, 318) points out that:

A person who breaks any ‘*nso ala*’ is said to have polluted or defiled the land, ‘*Omeru alu*’ (he committed pollution) or ‘*oruru ala*’ (he defiled the land) Abominations are serious offences, which are believed to threaten the cosmic and social order. The breach of ‘*nso ala*’ generally incurs for the offender a state of pollution and the threat of supernatural sanctions.

This expresses the degree of what is meant by taboo in Igbo community, that the offender is condemned face not just supernatural sanction but

also from the fellow human being. Apart from the calamity that may befall on the offender, the punishment and stigmatization given to him/her is also a difficult task. For instance, the offender could be excommunicated socially or banished from the community, and if he dies within this period, he will not be given a full funeral rite. Besides, he can never be an ancestor. He will end up an evil wandering spirit who can only be chased away by the rites of ichu aja (sacrifice) and not venerated (Arinze 1970, 35).

By and large, taboo is seen as norms that does not need any kind of violation whether voluntarily or involuntarily. Any violation attracts divine punishment. An offence of taboo is an unusual happenings and a threat to the natural order. Taboo puts the ontological equilibrium of Igbo community in jeopardy. It does not only affect the relationship of man to man, it affects also the spiritual beings. It is not just a concerned affair of man alone. "Igbo society is not fragmented into areas for human act and for divine attention. The community has a religious wholeness. With every human social activity divinized, taboos for better life are couched into all Igbo works and behavior" (Adibe 2006, 52). Both are harmoniously chained together in such that none can be reconciled to the detriment of the other. Hence, taboo has an inseparable connection with spirituality.

The Igbo Worldview on Spirituality

Spirituality as an invisible phenomenon is indispensable in Igbo society just as many societies cannot deny the fact of its existence. Of interest here is the philosophy behind spirituality in Igbo communal life. This spirituality is the bedrock that unites the Igbo as a common society. It shapes the object of their beliefs through which the practices of their communality, put together make them unique from other part of the world. They express their spirituality through their numerous rituals. Such practices showcase how deep they value anything spirituality. It is one out of the major practices of the Igbo that has been long in existence even from the prehistoric time. Anyiwo (2013) argues in addition that:

The spiritual system of Ndi Igbo (the Igbo people) is one of the oldest on Earth. The roots of Igbo spirituality is the same as the roots of every other African Community. Igbo spirituality predates Islam, Christianity, Judaism and every other-ism that one can think of. If there are any similarities between the traditional practices of

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the Igbo and those of other religions, it is because they were borrowed from our ancestors, and not the other way round.

In Igbo society, therefore, spirituality is a fundamental guide to the behavioral traits of both individuals and groups. It goes further to guide decisions of daily life. Individuals experience spirituality based on one's mental process and intention. Spirituality is also experienced in group in as much as the people involved share the same vision and targets. This, in effect, explains the unifying mindset of the people in accordance with their traditional and cultural practices.

The practice of spirituality in Igbo society remains central to humanity because it acts as a mediator between the living and the death, the visible and the invisible realities. These common practices (the spiritual values, respects, solidarity, rituals etc) sustain and prosper the spiritual growth of members within the community. Growing spiritually involves living a good and decent life that is worth of emulation. Spirituality in Igbo society is not just to make rituals, sacrifices, beckoning on deities and ancestors etc. It requires disciplining oneself such that one will not have a questionable character among the people. Those who lived their life well before they moved to the spirit world are believed to be with the ancestors. The ancestors are strongly attached with Igbo spirituality. The ancestors are always beckoned especially in time of needs because they are the role models who act as the spiritual guides to the people. The mindsets of the ancestors are known for the common good which is in line with Igbo spirituality. They are entrusted with the responsibility to protect their families left in the world from any danger or disaster. And in order to thrive among the living, the Igbo community will have to live by the dictates of the ancestors through their tradition and loyalty. This is why:

The Igbo people believe that a deity or an ancestral spirit might himself appear in any human or animal form or send a visible agent to communicate and deal with human beings. There is no strict dichotomy of the natural and supernatural worlds. They are just different orders of beings and existence, which are in constant interaction and communication. The main difference is that beings in the visible order are always there for ordinary eyes to see, while the spirits are symbolized by natural appearances, and human

Thus, the Igbo do not only care for the human beings but as well the spirits. This is why it is arguably favored that they adhere to the instructions of the spiritual guide either from the deity or ancestors, thereby making them to be spiritually disciplined.

The philosophy behind the spiritual discipline is to maintain harmonious relationship between human beings and spirits (or divines). According to McBrien (1989), spiritual discipline is a process whose purpose is nothing but to comprehend the connection between the divine and the secular. By implication, the process remains that man will have to live a virtuous life in order to achieve perfection. When the body, soul and spirit of man follow the direction of virtue and natural order, the perfection is actualized. This perfection is when there is a harmonious relationship between the divine and humanity, for Igbo spirituality is also embedded in supernatural reality. Why should there be such relationship? It is because what is good for humans is considered to be good for other realities both the living and the death. It is believed that human being is an integral part of the spiritual world. Man shall one day join the ancestors in the spiritual world.

The Interconnectedness of Taboo and Spirituality

The relationship between taboo and spirituality in Igbo society is more of a direct connectivity between the earth (*elu-uwa* or *ala mmadu*) and the spirit world (*ala mmuo*). In that, there are two categories of beings each residing to its particular world. This particular worldview is not limited within the Igbo society but Africa at large. It is in view of this that Metuh (1992, 51) asserts that:

All beings known to African worldviews belongs to their worlds – the visible world (Ala mmadu) and the invisible world (Ala mmuo) The invisible world is made up of the heavenly realm, said to be the home of the creator and deities; and the spirit land; the home of ancestors.

Elu-uwa and *ala mmuno* are two different worlds but realities are perceived from both of the worlds. The gods and the ancestors who dwell in *ala mmuo* are also believed to relate with humans who live in *elu-uwa*. Nwala

has it that the gods and other created beings interact in their different abodes. The gods abode is *Ala mmuo*. And human abode or the earth is *Ala mmadu* (Nwala 1985, 30). On the realms of interaction there is no sharp line separating the two. This interaction that co-exists between the two worlds establishes the correspondent connection between taboo and spirituality. Taboo influences negatively in the worldly relationship with the other. It is believed that taboo affects also the spiritual beings (the ancestors) as they are acknowledged to participate on daily family life. It is traditionally conceived as a natural phenomenon that the spirits interacts in different forms with the living creatures. No wonder, Nwala maintains that it is difficult to strictly distinguish the natural from the spiritual since both are in constant communication and also share common relationship as a single entity (Nwala 1985, 31-34). Be that as it may, taboo has both direct and indirect relation with Igbo spirituality. It directly affects the body, the soul and the human spirit especially when the offender is facing the resultant effect of the taboo. While it indirectly affect the spirit world as calamities and misfortunes are believed to come from the angry ancestors or gods. Both the visible and invisible beings share the forces and problems coming from taboo.

Taboo in Igbo spirituality is taken very serious because of fear of deadly sanction that may likely come from the spirit world. Taboo appears to defile the home of spirits – the home of the ancestors. The home of ancestors is regarded as an ideal model on how to live a good life on earth. One who is inflicted with taboo will not access the ancestral home. So, the Igbo worldview of taboo is closely linked to spirituality because it defiles the nature with which man originated and shall as well go back for final rest. Taboo does not add value or respect to the spiritual source of inheritance shared by Igbo community. Thus, in effect, is of great importance to debunk and keep away from taboo completely. Total abstinence from taboo encourages spiritual discipline which in turn brings peace to the spirits and humanity.

Avoidance of taboo is the true means in which the traditional Igbo society enforces harmony. It is a means of measuring the ethics of the society such that the values of society will continue to exist from one generation to the other. Through this traditional life of sanctity, harmony and equilibrium are maintained between the visible and invisible world which is the highest achievement in Igbo spirituality. Adibe (2006, 520) rightly points out that:

Every offence against the taboos is a disruption of the harmony in the ontological order of good relationship of God and man, and of man and man. The Igbo custom and tradition is all – together called *Omenani*. Some offences are against God, some against deities and ancestors, while others are against human society. An offence can be immoral, anti-social, and irreligious. All evil acts are *ajo ihe*. Transgressions against the deities are *nso ala*. An abomination against earth deity is *alu*.

Therefore, the worldview of taboo as concerned with spirituality is completely unethical in Igbo cosmology. It destabilizes the Igbo spiritual guide.

The value and respects accorded to spiritual world is so great that people seek for justice from the very world. It is assumed that the ancestors and the gods who forbid taboo, and who witness anything done in secret maintain the law and order within the society. Since taboo is not only condemned on the earth, and while some taboos may be done in secret, the act of tabooing among the Igbo people is highly regulated by the fear of being punished by the spirits. For instance, when in doubt, the accused person is asked to swear to a particular spirit in order to proclaim justice. Arinze indicates that in serious incidents, the defendant apparently chooses a strong spirit to swear to, one who has the reputation of acting promptly without wasting time in getting the offenders (Arinze 2008, 55-6). Moreover, spirits are not visible and they have greater power to support or harm people. Because of this, people give that value and respect to the spirits in order to be free from punishment. This practice of spirituality forms an ethical guide and particularly for the control of taboo in Igbo society.

Conclusion

This study has presented an extensive analysis and interpretation of the concept of taboo as it concerns the nature of Igbo spirituality. Basic emphasis is the underlying connectivity between taboo and spirituality; how taboo affects the Igbo spiritual system. Taboo causes a tremendous battle between humans and spiritual powers, and how to manage and combat the spiritual forces is only to avoid taboo and live a good and decent life. Life for Igbo man is sacred, an integral whole that is believed to be given and controlled by spiritual beings. Life for the Igbo is conceived and accepted to be indivisible with communal background

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associated with gods, spirits and ancestors. Based on this reality, Igbo people have an interesting attitude of preserving the human life by avoiding the offence of taboo. It is through the avoidance of taboo that the Igbo people aspire to maintain a healthy balance with spiritual forces in the society.

Upon the above realities, some looming questions therein are: why should man allow himself to be controlled by spiritual forces? Why should man allow the spiritual beings to have an affair with the offence of the earth? Sometimes an offender of a particular taboo is sent out of the community, and the question is: Will that solve the problem along with the ancestors? Why should the control of taboo not limited within the jurisdiction of man like every other offence? Moreover, some avoidable misfortune are considered outside the consequence of taboo but believed to be one's bad luck or the will of gods. What is the logicity behind the fact that the gods and ancestors who guide and protect the living should allow misfortunes to befall upon man for no reason? It is obvious that the major problem associated with Igbo spirituality is that it does not give room for criticism and logical discussions. This single reason makes it appear archaic, harsh and dogmatic in nature. However, it is an aged long tradition that has been working for the Igbo people.

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