

Rationale of Taboo Practices in Akwamu in the Eastern Region of Ghana

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Abstract

Beliefs and practices of taboos promote unity and corporation among the people of Akwamu. A qualitative approach and phenomenological design were employed in this study. The main instruments used in gathering relevant data for the study were interview, observation and relevant information from documentary sources. In all, forty respondents comprising family heads, chiefs, queen mothers, Christians and Muslims were purposively selected for the study based on their knowledge in the relevance of taboo practices in Akwamu traditional area. The findings of the study indicated that taboos have played significant roles in the lives of the people of Akwamu in the past and continue to play similar roles in contemporary times among the people. It is therefore recommended that financial assistance must be given to the chieftaincy institution to organize training workshops and durbars to increase people's awareness about the importance of taboos in the Akwamu society.

Keywords

Akwamu, Chieftaincy, Deity, Eastern Region, Ghana, Practices, Rationale, Taboo

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1. Introduction and Background

This paper presents the outcome of the rationale of Taboo practices in Akwamu in the Eastern Region of Ghana. The paper is structured into five (5) main sections namely; the Introduction and Background, Review of the Literature, Methodology, Findings and Discussion and the Conclusion. The first section introduces the structure of the paper, the context and aims and objectives of the paper. The literature review section reviews the relevant literature on taboo practices in the traditional society. The methodology section presents a broad description of the methodology and procedures adopted in the conduct of the study on the rationale or the philosophical explanations which underpin the practice of the taboos. Findings resulting from the study are presented and discussed in the section following the methodology and

conclusion and recommendations.

Taboos reveal that the Supreme Being, the gods and the ancestors are real and have powers which can influence human activities. Taboos indicate that the sacred spiritual beings must not be defiled since they act as a link between the supernatural ruling powers and the living [1]. Taboos are a means of social control and serve as agents of religious and social integration which help in uniting people into one common behaviour, hence they are obeyed so as to avoid punishment from the deities and ancestors [1]. In a Ghanaian traditional society like Akwamu, the significant role of taboos cannot be underestimated [2]. Despite the tide of modernity and cultural imports, contemporary Akwamu traditional society remains attached to some of its fundamental values such as taboos. Although the Akwamu people have felt the impact of the full weight of the influence of Western culture, they have continued to cling on to some

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of their cherished values including taboos. They still believe in the reality of taboos as mechanisms of social control and order from time immemorial. They hold on to taboos as crucial indigenous social control mechanisms that are used in enforcing desirable human behaviour. They also believe that violation of taboos would bring misfortune such as barrenness on people who violate them. In view of this, no one is prepared to act in ways that will invite the wrath of the ancestors. Those found guilty of serious moral or legal violations of taboos are made to undergo ritual cleansing as a means of moral purification and transformation. The roles played by taboos make Edward Cassier concludes that though taboos are not written in any revealed law, people learn them, practise them and teach others in the society [3].

In his study of the Akan people, Gyekye posits that the closest equivalent to taboo in the Akan is “Akyiwade”, something which is forbidden or prohibited, and “mmusuo” [4]. The latter term is however reserved for prohibitions against very serious or extraordinary moral evils such as murder, suicide, rape, incest and religious sacrilege. Taboos may be promulgated and transmitted in the form of religious ordinances, creeds or vows. For this reason, taboos are taken more seriously and the ‘mmusuo’ type of taboos may require blood sacrifice for the pacification and forgiveness of the gods and ancestors who might visit their wrath on the living in the form of epidemics, drought and infertility [5]. Since these taboo sanctions are believed to be instantaneous and automatic, most people will not intentionally violate them, even if they are doubtful of their metaphysical presuppositions.

The threat associated with taboo makes traditional societies live morally acceptable behaviour and as Ackah puts it, the sins or offences which are believed to be taboo, because punishments for them are automatic make people refrain from committing them for fear of inevitable consequences [6]. A critical deduction from Ackah’s assertion is that taboo is not a culture to be waved off so easily, because it is a fruit of every traditional society and Akwamu being no exception. The erosion and lost of taboos raise concern about the future of taboos in indigenous societies in general and Akwamu traditional society in particular, because should things continue this way, Akwamu people will not be able to harness the full potential of social control mechanisms for her people and society as far as morality is concerned. This study sought to examine examine the philosophical explanations of taboos among Akwamu people in the eastern region of Ghana.

2. Review of Literature on the Concept of Taboo

Taboo, etymologically speaking is a derivation of the

Polynesian term “tapu” which means “forbidden” [7]. It is comparable to the word “sacer” in Latin, Kadesh in Hebrew, “NSO” in Igbo language and of Nigeria and “Mmusuo” in the indigenous Akan language of Ghana [8]. According to Omobola, within its historical context, taboo was a sacred term for a set of cultic or religious prohibitions instituted by traditional religious authorities as instruments for moral motivation, guidance and objectivity for protecting the sanctity of their shrines and the wellbeing of the society [9]. The term is also applicable to any sort of social prohibition imposed by the leadership of a community regarding certain times, places, events and people, especially, but not exclusively for religious reasons and the wellbeing of the society. The concept of taboo has been studied for a long time from different perspectives and disciplinary angles. The term is used by psychologists, sociologists, anthropologists and religious scholars alike. Mention can be made of Sigmund Freud, Franz Steiner and David Spain in the fields of psychology, sociology and anthropology respectively.

The debate about the relevance of traditional values to societal wellbeing has compelled anthropologists to posit a crucial distinction between “primitive” and “modern” societies and taboo has played an important role in establishing this distinction. For instance, British anthropologist, Mary Douglas’ analysis of the concept of pollution and taboo identified two types of cultures as far as the sanctions attached to taboos on pollution are concerned. Douglas notes that with modern societies, pollution is a matter of hygiene or etiquette which only becomes grave in so far as it may create societal embarrassment. The sanctions are social sanctions, contempt, perhaps even police action. However, in the primitive societies, the effects of pollution are much more wide ranging. Thus, a grave pollution is a religious offence. By this distinction between the functions of taboos in primitive and modern society, anthropologists relegate the importance of traditional beliefs and practices to the primitive society. Thus, taboo has little to contribute to modern society, since it relates solely to primitive societies [10]. Holden however disagrees with anthropologists who argue that taboo is a feature of primitive society, claiming that it is inaccurate to describe taboo as having little to contribute to modern society, because in these modern African traditional societies, taboo plays important role in the daily lives of the people. According to Holden, because Douglas thinks that the term “taboo” dates back to the early colonial era when it was assumed that it was associated with primitive societies, it has little to contribute in solving contemporary problems in modern African traditional societies. In his view, taboo is not a feature of primitive societies but it is a characteristic of any society therefore it is possible to see taboo functioning in modern African

traditional societies [11]. The researcher illustrates an example among the Akan in Ghana to support Holden's claim. Among the Akan in Ghana, it is a taboo to have sex in the bush because those who indulge in it expose themselves to the risk of being bitten by venomous creatures like the snake, the scorpion and the spider [12].

Sigmund Freud argues that the meaning of taboo can be viewed from two directions. On the one hand, it means sacred or consecrated, whilst on the other, it means unclean or contaminated. Emile Durkheim also views taboo from two directions, thus the "sacred" and "profane". He argues that the sacred refers to things set apart by humans as requiring special religious treatment. On other hand, the 'profane' is the realm of routine experience. Taboo being viewed as profane and sacred proposed by Freud and Durkheim is evident in African traditional societies. In African traditional society like Ghana, taboo is used in two ways, thus the spiritual usage and socio-political usage. As has been stated by Freud and Durkheim, the spiritual usage of taboo according to Sarpong requires religious treatment, whilst the socio-political usage of taboo is believed to have been imposed by traditional leaders in the general interest of people in the community [13]. He illustrates his point with an example that among the Akan, it is a taboo to use abusive words against a chief and whoever does that has offended the ancestors who are being represented by the chief and animal sacrifice is needed to cleanse the chief and also to ask forgiveness from the ancestors. On the hand, taboos associated with theft and assault cases are dealt with payment of fine to serve as deterrent to members in the community [13]. The assertion raised by Sapong makes Parrinder to conclude that ancestors are originators and custodians of taboos, Fisher's understanding of this relationship is that, a taboo is an offence against ancestors and the Supreme Being [14, 15]. This claim by Fisher confirms that taboo is an obligation and not a choice and violating it attracts the wrath of the ancestors. Taboo then becomes a prohibition which when violated produces automatically on the offender a state of ritual disability and only relieved when the relief is possible by a ceremony of purification [16].

The roles of taboo according to Donald Steiner are seen in maintaining harmony between God, spirits and human beings [17]. Laurenti Magesa agrees with Steiner and contends that the harmony which taboo maintains is ruled by moral order which is preserved by tradition and if followed has the power to ensure a bountiful life for humanity [18]. According to him, just as Christianity or Islam, traditional African religion defines how people ought to live by integrating the natural, the human and the spiritual and that the moral teaching of

African Religion delineates distinctive values, norms, and principles to follow so that life might be abundant for all, infusing community life with meaning and harmony. Magesa concludes that taboos are seen as moral codes intended to create harmony and order in the society [19]. To throw more light on the role of taboos, Mrchay Andemariam argues that taboos clarify which attitudes and behaviour are not acceptable because they do not preserve the social code of behaving, hence breaking of a taboo endangers life and is seen as wrong because it interrupts peace and harmony [20].

Joseph Osei also argues that every moral system requires the existence of guiding principles about what is not acceptable in the society. He stresses that in a society where there is no police, taboos serve as moral values. To a certain extent, taboos are better than modern law enforcing agencies, because in most cases, breaking of a taboo is associated with an automatic punishment that one does not have to be caught punished [8]. Adebayo Adedeji also contends that taboos are formulated in the olden days to guide and regulate the activities of the citizens against evil deeds and for self-protection. He explains further that in several parts of African societies, it was an offence to whistle in the night and this was done to avoid evil spirit and also to promote peace and stability [21]. In the work of Emmanuel A. Afe, taboos form one of the measures used to achieve peace and tranquility among the people of the old Ondo province and other Africa societies [22].

Commenting on the role of taboos in checking of moral behaviour, John Mbiti states that among the Amhara of Ethiopia, taboos forbid the use of certain words which are thought to be offensive in various contexts. Thus, a word like "take" in Gurage language is phonetically the same as the Amharic word, "having intercourse". They therefore view it as a taboo to pronounce the word. If it becomes necessary to say it, it is whispered. It is therefore wrong to break such taboos. Mbiti emphasises that one is morally wrong to molest or steal from another member of the community and adds that even if the act goes unnoticed, the invisible members of the community will punish the offender. He concludes that morally good acts include politeness, kindness, and truthfulness, practicing justice in public life and keeping the community custom [23]. The economic welfare of the community is also ensured by means of certain taboos. These taboos as Ackah points out are designated to influence the means of production, distribution and management of wealth at both individual and national levels. For example, shifting of boundaries without authorization, stealing of private or communal property and leasing but not selling land are taboos that gear towards a fair distribution of resources in the community [24].

Considering taboos' contribution to religious welfare of the

community, Edward Idowu posits that since priests and diviners are in charge of religious welfare of the community, they have countless taboos surrounding them. In citing examples, he says that among the Yoruba of Nigeria, priests eat certain food only and not allowed to mix with other people. They are also prohibited from wearing certain clothes. Adherence to these taboos according to Idowu ensures peaceful co-existence between the living and the divinities. Idowu illustrates further that traditional African believers observe certain taboos which include swearing by the gods or ancestors for fun, pouring libation at a shrine with one's sandals on or clothes not off the shoulder, showing disrespect to the priest or diviner as well as visiting the shrine right after having sex without taking a bath. These taboos as Idowu puts it promote holiness and righteousness and ultimately lead to a general communal welfare [25].

In Madagascar, the importance of taboos cannot be understated. Alan Ruud observes that taboos are omnipresent in the daily lives of the people and that if one clashes with the taboos, he or she will find himself or herself up against many difficulties [26]. According to Ruud, a taboo can be translated as a prohibition referring to what one is not allowed to do, objects which one must not come into contact with, words which must not be uttered and places which must be avoided [26]. Margaret Brown observes that taboos are generally observed for two reasons. First, they are a means through which individuals display respect for their ancestors and for their elders. Thus, taboos link individuals to their ancestors and living relatives. She contends that sharing the same taboos allows people to identify with their clans or ethnic groups. She said that by not observing ancestral taboos, individuals bring dishonour to their ancestors and can find themselves socially alienated from their community. Brown is of the view that by passing down lineage and societal norms to their children in the form of taboos, elders use their authority to naturalize the existing order [27]. The second reason for which taboos are observed according to Brown is out of fear. People believe that violating their taboos invites misfortune in the form of illness, crop failure or even death. In her case study in the Northeast of Madagascar, Brown found that most of the villagers who adhered to taboos said that there was one simple reason for their adherence to taboos and that is fear for leprosy. Almost everyone she encountered was convinced that this illness is the outcome of eating a particular taboo food. It can be inferred from Browns' assertion that every society has a shared values and standards of acceptable behaviour that members are encouraged to follow. These values have a huge effect on their lives and that the way they behave, dress, eat as well as their sexual lives are all governed by the taboos to identify themselves as one people in that society.

In a similar research conducted by Maurice Bloch in Madagascar society, he observes that months and weeks have definite destinies that must be observed as taboos. These destinies make people know what is good or bad and what is useful or harmful and they frequently take this into account in their everyday activities [28]. He also observes that in the Southern Highlands, the traditional priests impose specific days that people are not allowed to work as part of their destiny. These days are part of the general taboos for larger communities. Again, some days are made taboos by specific families or groups after some dramatic event happened and the family believes that by starting a day, it will avoid having these events repeat themselves. For example, Bloch mentions that death by lightning may be regarded as a sign that the family should not work on that particular day anymore [29].

Every moral system requires the existence of guiding principles. Additionally, some moral systems also provide moral transformation. In African traditional societies, taboos represent the main source of guiding principles regulating and directing the behaviour of individuals and the community towards the Supreme Being and especially the gods and the ancestors. The motivation for abiding by these principles is provided and reinforced by the religious sanctions from the gods and the ancestors or directly from the Supreme Being. As Peter Sarpong puts it, "the authority behind the interdict of taboos rests in some kind of supernatural power and the penalty consequent upon infringement of a taboo is believed to be brought about by the mere fact of performing the forbidden act and those found guilty for violating taboos are made to undergo ritual cleansing to cleanse the community of the abomination [13]. It must be evident that any religion that can provide taboos for the promotion of a good moral system in the society is an asset but not a hindrance to development. Taboos are an attempt by African traditional societies to promote morality among individuals in the community. It is therefore evident from the above that taboos play effective role in protecting the physical and emotional security of the lives and liberties of the people in the society.

3. Methodology

A qualitative approach and phenomenological design were employed in this study. Triangulation was used to test the consistency of findings obtained through interview, observation and relevant information from documentary sources. The population for this study included all the heads in tradition and religious institutions in Akwamu traditional area (family heads, sub-chiefs, queen mothers, Christians and Muslims) in the Eastern Region of Ghana. Purposive sampling technique was used to select the sample for this study. All the forty (40) respondents comprising three (3)

family heads, six (6) sub-chiefs, one (1) queen mother, fifteen (15) Christians and fifteen (15) Muslims based on their knowledge in the relevance of taboo practices in contemporary Akwamu traditional society were selected for the study. The qualitative data was analysed by the use of the interpretative method based on the themes arrived at during the data collection. The themes were related to the research question and interpreted on the number of issues raised by respondents.

4. Findings and Discussions

This part of the study presented philosophical explanations which underpin the practice of the taboos among the traditional Akwamu people. Chiefs, queen mothers, family heads and non-traditionalists were interviewed to express their views on taboos under study and to ascertain their opinion on the rationale behind the taboos. The intention here is to find out from the respondents, their worldview of taboos and how they affect the daily lives of the people of Akwamu traditional area.

4.1. Chieftaincy Taboos in Akwamu Traditional Society

This section sought to present respondents' views on the various taboos which are associated with chieftaincy in Akwamu traditional society. Thus the respondents were asked to identify the various chieftaincy taboos that they observe or practise in Akwamu traditional society. They were also asked to explain the rationale or the philosophical explanation of chieftaincy taboos in Akwamu traditional society. Again, the respondents were made to share their views on how chieftaincy taboos influence the ethical lives of the people and appropriate sanctions meted out against those who violate chieftaincy taboos. In all, two chiefs were each selected from Akwamufie, Senchi and Atimpoku for an in-depth interview on the subject matter mentioned above. The choice of the chiefs was based on the conviction that they have in-depth knowledge in chieftaincy issues in Akwamu traditional society. Below is the table of responses.

Table 1. Chieftaincy taboos.

Types of chieftaincy taboos	No of respondents
1. It is a taboo for a chief to breach an oath sworn.	1
2. A chief is forbidden to eat food prepared by a woman in her menstrual period.	2
3. A chief is forbidden to set eyes on dead body.	6
4. It is a taboo to say that the "chief is dead".	2
5. It is a taboo to eat fresh yam before ritual is performed to the gods.	1
6. It is a taboo to mention the bare name of the chief.	1

Source: Interview with sub-chiefs in Akwamu traditional society, 2017.

Table 1 above presents the analysis of responses obtained from 6 sub-chiefs who were asked to identify taboos associated with chieftaincy in Akwamu traditional society. From the table, 1 respondent indicated that it is a taboo for a chief to breach an oath sworn, 2 respondents said that a chief is forbidden to eat food prepared by a woman in her menstrual period, whilst all the respondents agreed that a chief is forbidden to set eyes on dead body. Also, 2 respondents answered that it is a taboo to say that the "chief is dead". With taboos related to dietary and conduct, 2 respondents answered saying that it is a taboo for a chief to eat fresh yam before ritual is performed to the gods and it is also a taboo to mention the bare name of the chief respectively. The analysis above shows that each respondent at least has an idea about chieftaincy taboos in Akwamu Traditional society.

Concerning the rationale underpinning chieftaincy taboos, one of the chiefs said that *"oath swearing is a solemn promise which invokes divine witness regarding the action or the behaviour of the chief"*. He explained that *"oath swearing is to provide the political direction of the chief towards his subjects. "To him, when a chief is installed into office, he takes an oath before the elders and his subjects promising to abide by the moral and religious injunctions attached to the stool which he has willingly accepted to occupy". He cited himself as an example saying that "when he became a chief at Senchi, he swore an oath to defend his people in times of war and also he declared his preparedness to die for his people in a battle rather than to run away from his enemy. He further explained that oath swearing is a contract between the chief and his subjects that he is ever ready to defend them all the time, whether in rain or shine. He added that oath swearing is to serve as a reference point for destoolment of a chief should he breach the oath he has sworn"*.

On his take on how oath swearing influences the lives of the people of Akwamu, he said that *"oath swearing serves as a guide to the chief to do the right thing, because he has sworn that he will defend his people in any difficult situation they find themselves"*. He also said that *"oath swearing brings unity among members in the community because the chief is always ready to defend his people and this promotes the welfare of the people"*. He went further to say that *"those who obey taboo rules are blessed by the ancestors"*. On the question of sanctions imposed on a chief when he violates an oath, the respondent said that *"when a chief violates an oath of allegiance that he sworn to the elders and his subjects he is destooled by the kingmakers"*. This practice is buttressed by Busia that oath swearing is a seal of approval of a chief and any misuse of the oath is the transgression of an ethnic taboo [30].

In connection with a chief forbidden to eat food prepared by a woman in her menstrual period, there were diverse opinions among the two respondents as far as the rationale behind it is concerned. For instance, one respondent said that *“blood connotes uncleanness and so the woman is not supposed to get near the chief, lest she defiles the sacredness of his stool”*. He explained that blood is dangerous, therefore it reduces the powers of the chief. He cited Leviticus chapter 15:19-20 to buttress his point [31]. He said that *“when a woman is in her menstrual period, she becomes ceremonially unclean and anyone who touches her during that time will be unclean”*.

However, the other respondent who had a contrary view in relation to chieftaincy taboo in connection with menstruation said that *“for him, he has no problem with a woman in her menstrual period and he does not see anything wrong with eating food prepared by a woman in her menstrual period especially his wife”*. He explained that *“he being a Christian, the Old Testament ceremonial law which forbids uncleanness has been replaced by Jesus’ blood sacrifice for paying for the sins of humanity once and for all. For this reason, he does not see anything wrong with eating his wife’s food when she is in her menstrual period”*. This seems to suggest that some Christians chiefs do not take traditional values seriously as a result of their Christian values. His assertion corroborates with Assimeng’s statement that tradition appears to have been overlooked in this contemporary times because of Christian faith.

On the rationale explaining why a chief is forbidden to set eyes on dead body, all the respondents had the same idea with different explanations. For instance, two (2) of the respondents explained that the dead do not have life therefore it is unclean. Two other respondents explained that the chief is seen as a royal person therefore he should not deal with things considered unclean. The rest of the respondents also explained that seeing dead body would render the chief powerless. This finding is in support with Owusu’s claim that a chief who comes into contact with menstruating women renders himself powerless [32].

One other chieftaincy taboo which the respondents explained the rationale behind it is a taboo which forbids one to say that *“the king is dead”*. According to one respondent, when a chief die, you can say that *“Ɔhene kɔ n’akura”*, which means the king has gone to his village. Another respondent also said that when a king dies, you can say that *“odupɔn atutu”*, which also means a mighty tree has fallen. Concerning the philosophy or rationale behind the above taboo, the respondents gave different explanations. For instance, one of the respondents explained that *“the reasons why Akwamus regard their chief as mortal gods, after death he who goes to rest with his ancestors after a job well done on earth. It is therefore very disrespectful to equate the king with a mere*

man who “dies” in the Akwamu traditional society”. The other informant explained that *“the rationale for not saying the king is dead is that the king is in charge of the preservation of law, peace and order within his kingdom and therefore whenever the death of the king is announced, it will affect law and order in the community”*. The study was in support previous findings that the dignity which is associated with the chief and his office is symbolised by particular prohibitions [33].

In an explanation to the rationale behind observance of this taboo associated with a chief forbidden to eat new yam before a ritual is performed, the respondent elucidated that:

“in the olden days, yam was the only common food on Akwamu land and so people could harvest yam when it was not matured for consumption and it was found out that they were being attacked by diarrhoea when they ate the new yam. The chief gave his personal experience that when a new yam is ready for consumption, he travels to a place called “Suntwiri” which is a village community at Senchi to perform a purification ritual to the gods before he can eat the new yam. He explained further that unfortunately a tree has fallen on the god to destroy it and so he was preparing to put it in shape before he can perform the ritual. He said, in view of that for the past three months, he has never eaten yam. He also said that when the ritual is performed, it is believed that the god has eaten it and has blessed it for human consumption”.

When the researcher asked the chief if there is any sanction attached to this taboo, he said that *“if the chief eats the yam without following the instruction, he will develop a severe cough called “Nsamanwa” or “ghost cough”*. When the respondent was asked how the public gets to know when they can now eat the new yam, he answered that *“after the ritual has been performed, a small festival is celebrated at the palace where the new yam is cooked and after the chief has been served to eat the yam, everyone gathered there is served”*. This is done to officially inform the general public that they can now harvest the new yam for consumption. Failure to comply with this tradition will lead to severe famine in the community. The above analysis shows that among the Akwamus, the chief’s diet is governed by strict taboo rules and this supports findings which posit that the dignity which is associated with the chief is symbolised by particular prohibitions which include language, diet, demeanour and etiquette [33].

Also, why people are forbidden to mention the bare name of a chief in Akwamu traditional society was explained. In this explanation, one chief said that *“when a chief assumes office, a ritual is performed to transform him from his original status to another status which is considered as sacred”*. This

is because he is named after a stool which has ancestral name. He said that *“after the installation of the chief, his former name has become a taboo which should not be mentioned”*. When the researcher asked why it is a taboo to mention the former name, the respondent explained that *“the philosophy behind this taboo is to prevent the chief from using the same name with other people in the community because of his status. He went further to say that if the chief’s bare name is mentioned, it will offend the ancestor whose name he bears”*. He again said that *“if the chief’s name is wrongly mentioned, it will attract serious punishment such as payment of fines in the form of schnnapps, sheep and money”*. An encounter with the chief is in the with a previous study, postulate that when a person is installed as a chief, his name has been transformed to a status which is spiritually higher and that places him humanly higher than his subjects [34].

4.2. Totemic Taboos in Akwamu Traditional Society

The content of this section is derived from an exclusive interview conducted in Akwamufie with Nana Samanhyia, Gyasawahene of Akwamu traditional area and the chief of staff for Akwamu paramountcy. He has an in-depth knowledge about the history of the warthog or the bush-pig and the taboo associated with it. The interview was intended to solicit his view on why the warthog became a totem for the Akwamus and why the Akwamus observe the taboo associated with the warthog.

Giving the reason why the Akwamus are forbidden to eat bush-pig, it was explained by the respondent that *“in 1732, a great war occurred at Nyanoase between the Akwamus and the Akuapems, Guans, Gas and the Akyems. The Akuapems and their allies thought that their freedom had been curtailed by the Akwamus, therefore all those tribes rose against the Akwamus”*.

He said that:

“one thing about the Akwamus was that they always took along their stool and gods along whenever they were at war with their enemies. Nana Samanhyia explained that during the war between the Akwamus and the Akuapems, they run away to Akwamufie and were pursued by their enemies until they got to a spot between the present day Senchi and Atimpoku on the West bank of the River Volta with their stool and the gods. When they got to the bank of the River Volta, one of the gods was believed to have changed into a bush-pig which is called by the Akwamus as “kɔkɔte” and created a safe way for the Akwamus to cross over the River Volta”.

He explained again that *“when the bush pig crossed over the*

River Volta, it went to settle at a spot and that spot became the present day “Akwamufie”. The informant explained that *“because the bush-pig saved the Akwamus from their enemies to cross the River Volta, the bush-pig became their protector as well as their saviour, therefore they were forbidden to eat it”*.

The researcher found out from the respondent whether the taboo associated with the bush-pig is limited to everyone who lives in Akwamu traditional society or to specific people. The respondent explained that *“the taboo is limited to only the royal family of Akwamus, but non- royals can eat bush-pig, except that one can prepare and eat it in the bush far away from the community”*. He said that *“one condition which is attached to those who eat the bush-pig is that, they are not allowed to get close to the paramount chief’s stool as well as the shrine at Akwamu”*.

In his explanation to why members of the royal family are forbidden to eat the bush pig, he alluded to the fact that

“they are responsible for all rituals connected to the paramount stool and the shrine, therefore if they eat the bush pig, they will pollute themselves and this will further pollute the spirits of the stool and the shrine. Also, all non-royal members of Akwamu are permitted to eat the bush pig and if they eat it, they are forbidden to perform any ritual connected to the paramount stool and the shrine otherwise they will defile them”.

On the question of sanctions associated with breaking taboo associated with the bush-pig, the respondent explained that if one is caught eating the bush pig, he or she will be made to offer seven sheep, seven schnnapps and amount of money as a punishment. He said that *“the sheep and the schnnapps are used to perform purification rituals to appease the gods and the ancestors of the shrine and the stool respectively”*. On the issue of those who break taboos associated with the bush-pig without being caught, the respondent said that:

“those persons confess their sins to the chief’s linguist who intends send the offenders to “Nana mmratohehene” who is responsible for those who violate taboos in the community to be punished according to tradition. Purification ritual is performed to appease the gods and the ancestors, otherwise the victim and the whole community will suffer from calamities such as famine and mysterious death”.

He also said that because the bush-pig protected the Akwamus from Nyanoase to their present settlement, there has been a close relationship between them and the bush-pig which is now their god who protects them. Therefore, as a sustainer of the community, there are certain behaviour that the god of the bush-pig prohibits. The respondent used his

personal experience to explain dangers associated with breaking a taboo associated with the bush-pig. He said “his daughter developed a severe measles when she unknowingly ate from a plate which had been used to serve bush-pig meat. She was taken to different hospitals, but the sickness did not go and the deity of the community was consulted and it was disclosed that she had eaten from a plate served with bush-pig meat. A purification ritual was performed before she was relieved. This finding agrees with a similar research that failure to observe taboos associated with deities may result in mishaps such as ill-luck, disease and untimely death [8].

According to the respondent, it is believed by the Akwamus that the bush-pig is regarded as a companion and a helper with supernatural powers and must be accorded much respect. They believe that to kill a bush-pig is tantamount to killing a human being. The respondent explained that *“killing a bush pig is considered as a murder and who ever violates that custom is visited with a disaster”*. This finding also supports an assertion that totems have strong psychological effects on an individual and for that matter anyone who breaks the taboos can contract mental or physical illnesses [35].

In a related interview with one family head in Akwamufie, it was realised that people often get drown in the River Volta as a result of violating totemic taboos. He said that *“the bush pig has a link with the spirit of the River Volta, therefore if one violates the taboos, he or she is punished by the spirit of the Volta”*. He said that:

“a family member violated the taboo related to the bush-pig and his family members started getting drowned one after the other. The deity of Akwamu was consulted and it was realized that a member of the family had violated a taboo by bringing bush-pig meat to the community. The family was asked to provide seven sheep and seven schnapps for a purification ritual to pacify the gods. Immediately after the purification ritual, the family members were freed from the catastrophe”.

From the above discussions, one realizes that unlike other totems which are meant for health and biodiversity purposes in other traditional societies such as Nkodurom in Ashanti region of Ghana, the totemic taboo in Akwamu traditional society is purely for religious purpose because their observations are to revere the gods for saving their lives from their enemies in times of crisis. This finding supports assertion that taboos are used for different purposes.

4.3. Deity Taboos in Akwamu Traditional Society

One important deity which continues to receive cultic attention in the Akwamu traditional area is “Obosom

Ayensu”. This section is intended to solicit the respondent’s view on the said deity which is situated at Akwamufie, the traditional capital of Akwamu traditional area. This has to do with taboos which are associated with the deity, the rationale for the observation of the deity and finally the significant role of the deity. The information about the deity was gathered from one of the sub-chiefs of Akwamu traditional area called “Nana Samanhyia” who acts as the chief of staff for the Akwamu paramountcy. He granted the interview on behalf of the queen mother of Akwamu traditional area in the person of Nana Afrakoma II who is in charge of the deity.

According to the respondent, “Obosom Ayensu was deposited by the first chief who founded Akwamu traditional society when they migrated from Nyanoase to the present day Akwamufie in the person of Otumfoɔ Agyen Kɔkɔbo”. He said that:

“Ɔkɔmfo Anokye once lived in Akwamu and when he was leaving for Kumasi, he prophesied that before the Akwamus could survive, two “Odum” trees had to germinate mysteriously in the town. He explained that it is for this reason that we find two “odum” trees grown directly in front of the deity which is traditionally called “obosom Ayesu”.. According to the respondent, it is only members from the royal family who qualify to visit the deity for sacrificial duties. Again, he said that when the wall surrounding the deity is broken down, it is only the royals who qualify to repair it and it has to take place deep in the night in their nakedness to show a sign of respect to the deity. He further explained that it is only the royal who can eat the sheep used for the sacrifice to the deity. The reason given was that those who offer the sacrifice at that time are considered sacred because the deity frowns upon something which is considered as unholy”.

On the question of taboos associated with the deity, it was explained that it is a taboo to carry corpse in front of the deity. He explained that the deity hates anything which is not pure therefore it is a taboo for corpse to pass in front of the deity. Concerning the significance of the deity, the respondent enumerated several of them. One of them said that it protects the Akwamu community from their enemies from spiritual attacks. It also protects the chief from any calamity. Another important role of the deity is that it represents the main source of rules regulating and directing the behaviour of individuals and the community towards the gods and ancestors. He reiterated that carrying corpse in front of the deity is an action which is traditionally unacceptable therefore breaking the taboo is physically and mystically disastrous to the society which can suffer calamities such as famine, drought and death as punishment from the gods. Consequently, ritual or sacrifice has to be made to appease

the gods when such taboos are broken. Therefore to avert such calamity, the family that violated the taboo is summoned to the palace and is made to provide seven sheep and seven schnapps for purification ritual to appease the deity. He concluded by saying that the main reason for this purification ritual is to sanctify the sacredness of the deity and to ensure absolute respect for the deity in order to promote social order in Akwamu traditional society.

4.4. Ecological Taboos Among the Akwamu People

This part analysis ecological taboos among the Akwamus. Three (3) respondents who have in-depth knowledge in these taboos were interviewed to seek their opinion about taboos associated with the sacred grove and dog in Akwamu traditional society. The respondents were also asked to give the rationale for the practice of these taboos mentioned above. Table two below shows types of ecological taboos practiced among the Akwamus.

Table 2. Ecological taboos in Akwamu traditional society.

Ecological Taboos	No of respondents
1. It is a taboo for non-royal of Akwamu to enter the sacred grove.	1
2. It is a taboo to shoot gun in the sacred grove.	1
3. It is a taboo to harvest snail and other animals in the sacred grove.	1
4. It is a taboo to kill or rear dog in Akwamu traditional area.	2

Source: Interview with sub-chiefs and a family head in Akwamu traditional society, 2017.

Table 2 presents ecological taboos practised among the Akwamus. From the analysis, 1 respondent said that it is a taboo for non-royal of Akwamu to enter the sacred grove. Concerning a taboo not to shoot gun and harvest snails and other animals in the sacred grove, only 1 respondent each answered these taboos. However, 2 respondents said that it is a taboo to kill or rear dog in Akwamu traditional area.

Concerning the philosophical explanation underpinning the practice of taboos associated with the sacred grove, the respondent said that the sacred grove which is located in Akwamu traditional society is known as “abosom mpo”, meaning the dwelling place of the gods. The sacred grove is located near the Volta River and is about 100 metres away from Akwamufie. It comprises of objects such as trees, stones and a small water body whose source is the Volta River. It is located close to the Volta River. According to the respondent, the grove used to be a burial ground of traditional rulers of Akwamu. It is strictly protected by taboos for religious purposes. According to the respondent, the sacred grove of Akwamu is a place where the paramount chief and other sub-chiefs perform all rituals during Adaye

and Odwira festivals. It is also a place where all Akwamu spirits and power live. These spirits move breath and length across the communities to protect the people and that is more reason why there is no police station at Akwamufie. He said that when any enemy tries to enter Akwamu with bad intention, the gods in the sacred grove will disclose it to the traditional leaders through the chief priest.

The respondent recounted that there was a conflict between the Akwamus and the Ewes over a piece of land and the Ewes decided to flock Akwamu with their weapons but they were not able to enter Akwamu community because a big tree from the sacred grove mysteriously fell to block the road to prevent the Ewes' entry into the town. Upon their return, the tree moved back to its original position. This explains why there is no police station at Akwamufie. According to him, the Akwamus believe that the fear of repercussions including barrenness and even death plays a role in the continued preservation of the sacred grove in Akwamu traditional society. Therefore, it is expected that everybody accords the grove with maximum respect through the taboos associated with it. Also, only the paramount chief, sub chiefs and executioners qualify to enter the sacred grove for ritual purposes, and unknown person can be instantly killed by the executioners when enters the sacred grove. He said that “*if one violates any of the taboos associated with the grove, he or she faces serious punishment and high prices of atonement, including making sacrifices and performing certain rituals to avert any ill-health and death*”. Also, if one attempts to harvest the snails, the person will get missing for three days in the grove. He said that “*the mysterious aspect of it is that the person would be seen carrying the snails by the roadside but he or she cannot see anybody passing by the road*”. According to the respondent, “*the snails are edible but permission has to be granted from the palace before one can harvest them*”. He noted that “*the sacred grove is holy and sacred where the royals bring sacrifices to the gods, therefore the place is protected from misuse by unauthorized individuals*”.

In terms of significant role of the sacred grove, the respondent explained that it is purely religious and nothing else because the place is regarded as the abode of the gods who protect the people of Akwamu society. The respondent noted that unlike other sacred groves in Ghana such as Tano sacred grove in Kumasi which play conservationist role by protecting water bodies and also for medicinal purposes, the sacred grove at Akwamu is particularly meant to protect the gods who are believed to protect the inhabitants against their enemies. The religious dimension which the Akwamu attach to sacred grove is in line with Adarkwa Dadzie's assertion that sacred grove refers to as “Nananompow” or ancestral grove which is fully protected by local religious beliefs [37].

The findings further corroborate with Awuah-Nyamekye's statement that sacred groves are indigenous reserves that have been strictly protected in many centuries ago due to their religious and cultural significance [38]. Also, the discussion reveals that any non-royal person who enters the sacred grove will be killed supports a study conducted by Rattray that one's failure to adhere to taboos associated with sacred groves leads to ill-luck and sometimes death [39].

According to a respondent, the Akwamus belong to the "Aduana" or "Abrade" clan therefore their totem is a dog. According to oral tradition, the Aduana had a dog which went out to search for food and on seeing fire, the dog thought it was food and doing so got its mouth seriously burnt. When the owner saw it coming with the fire, he said, "m'atwea, woabrɛ me adee", meaning, "my dog, you have brought me something worthy". This gave birth to the name of the Aduana people "Aduana Atwea Abrade". The totem or the symbol of Aduana is the "dog and fire". The symbolic qualities of the dog are honesty, industriousness, humility and friendliness. Most "Aduana" people believe that at the time of creation, their ancestors descended from the sky on a golden stool. It is for this reason that the official emblem of Akwamu State is a dog placed on a golden stool.

Among the Akwamus, not only is the killing of dogs a taboo, but rearing them is also a taboo. The respondent explained that the reason why a dog is not supposed to be killed or reared is that the dog serves as identity which binds the Akwamus together. This supports a study conducted by Alun that killing a totemic animal is a taboo because people who believe themselves to be of one blood and descendents of common ancestors are bound together by common faith [40]. On the question of why are dogs are not reared in Akwamu traditional society, the respondent said that:

"people will be tempted to kill when it offends them. He further emphasised that sometimes a dog can bring dirty things from the bush to the house and this may cause one to kill it. Therefore, in order not to break the bond between them and the dog, they decided not to rear it".

The respondent gave an account of why a dog is not reared in Akwamu traditional society. He said that dogs were being reared at Akwamu some years ago, because when he was at age fourteen (14), he saw dogs all over the places. He said that this practice was put to a stop because it was realized that dogs were bringing bones of bush-pig into the community and it was very difficult to identify owners of such dogs to be punished for breaking a taboo. It was therefore expedient on the part of the traditional leaders to ban rearing of dogs in Akwamu in order not to attract the bones of bush-pig into the community to defile the stool. This shows that when taboos exist, there are provisions

usually made for community to safeguard its prohibitions and demands and efforts are made to control the easy flouting of taboos.

Another respondent who had a contradictory view about taboos related to dogs said that when he became a chief, he was told that it was a taboo to rear dogs in the community because dogs were not to get closer to the shrine in the community. The rationale was to prevent the dogs from picking bones and meat which had been used as sacrifice to the gods to dirty the community. He however said,

"that having noticed the security role being played by dogs in general, he did not ban rearing of dogs in the community but he rather encouraged an erection of a big wall around the shrine so that dogs would not get access to the place. This initiative has helped to curb theft cases in the community".

This finding however contradicts Andemariam's claim that breaking of a taboo endangers life and seen as wrong because it interrupts peace and harmony [41].

4.5. Taboo Days in Akwamu Traditional Society

This section analysis "taboo days" among the people of Akwamu. This looks at the forms of taboos associated with "taboo days" and also to examine the rationale behind the observance of these taboos. Table 3 below illustrates the responses.

Table 3. Taboo days in Akwamu traditional society.

Forms of taboo days
1. It is a taboo to travel during taboo days.
2. It is a taboo to visit the farm during taboo days.
3. It is a taboo to go on fishing during taboo days.
4. It is a taboo to organise funeral during taboo days.

Source: Interview with Opanyin Kwabena Awuah, 2017

Table 3 above shows identifies forms of taboo days observed in Akwamu traditional society. According to the respondent, during these days one is forbidden to travel, visit the farm, fish and to organise funeral. According to him, "taboo days" are called "nkyida or nnabone by the Akwamus. He explained that "Nkyida" literally means "hateful day". Similarly, he said that taboo days are also called "nnabone" which comes from the two Akan words, "da" (day) and "bone" (bad). This means that the words "nkyida" and "nnabone" are used interchangeably in Akwamu traditional area to denote "taboo days". In his explanation, he said that "taboo days" or "nnabone" are sacred days are intended for sacrifice to be offered to the ancestors and it is expected that no one works on that day in the community. The respondent indicated further that even though the taboo days are sacred days for the ancestors, they are also hateful or bad days for

people because of the repercussion or misfortune people go through when they violate the taboo rules. He noted that, there are countless number of misfortunes that befall on people who infringe upon the restrictions put in place during these taboo days. He gave a story about a man who never enjoyed a single rain on his farm for a whole year in the community because he visited the farm during these taboo days.

Adae festival in Akwamu traditional area, Adae days are considered “nnabOne” or bad days. According to the respondent, Adae days are bad days because they are observed as special days for worship of the ancestors who become very active in these days. It is for this reason that everyday living in the community must be part of the celebration to accord great respect to the ancestors for protecting them throughout the year. During these taboo days, whoever violates the law would face serious misfortune such as death, accident or experiencing ghost.

In explanation the rational of these taboo days, the respondent said that the restrictions placed on farming, travelling and funeral during taboo days help to promote the sustainable use of natural environment by giving the land and other parts of the environment some rest in order to regenerate itself. He cited an instance where a ban on fishing on the Volta during Adae festival helps the fish which are believed to be the gods of the Volta to grow for more production. He also said that refraining from travelling and organizing funerals during taboo days are to encourage all the people in the community to attend the festivals. He explained that Akwamu traditional area is prominently a farming community and if injunction is not put in place, people will not honour the traditional practices such as Adae festival. The respondent noted that because there are nine ‘Adaes’ in the Akwamu calendar year, people get nine days’ rest within that period and this goes a long way to enhance their health. The respondent gave an account of an episode that led to a several deaths in the various communities of Akwamu traditional society some years ago. This misfortune compelled the traditional leaders do consult the state god called “Obosom Ayensu” at “Akwamufie” and it was revealed that farming activities throughout the week without any rest had accounted for the rampant death in the community. Traditional leaders per their wisdom instituted the taboo days in order to curb the situation.

Based on the foregoing discussion, one argues that the traditional Akwamu people’s attitude towards taboo days is a positive approach not only to promote their health, but also to restrict them on the need to conserve their environment. This idea is in line with Awuah-Nyamekye’s assertion that with Akan societies, while all aspects of the universe are seen as God’s creation and must be protected, elements of creation

that serve as courses of sustenance for life, such as trees, animals and rivers are given more attention [42].

4.6. Suicide Taboos in Akwamu Traditional Society

In Akwamu traditional society for instance, death by suicide or self-inflicted death is literally inferred to as “ahokum” or “boapawuo”. Examples of suicidal deaths in Akwamu society are death from self-inflicted, gunshot, death from self-drowning, death from deliberate ingestion of substances never intended for human consumption, death from deliberate hanging and death from deliberately jumping from a high place. It is believed among the Akwamus that when a person dies through suicide, the deceased may have done some wrong and that discovery of which would bring a disgrace to the person, therefore he or she would take his or her life to avert the humiliation. According to Nana Otuaben, the proper sayings which often go with suicide in Akan are, “fereɛ ne owuo deɛ, fanyinam owuo”, meaning, “it is better to die than be dishonored”, and “aninguase mfata ɔkani ba”, meaning “*disgrace does not befit the status of an Akan*”. This suggests that one would want to end his or life to avoid being disgraced and this may be one of the causes of suicide. According to him, it is a taboo to give a befitting burial to a person who died through suicide. Thus, there is no time set aside for people to pay tribute to the deceased neither would there be a post-burial thanksgiving service to the deceased. There is no singing of dirges, no drumming or dancing and no wake-keeping ceremony. Also, it is a taboo to send the death to the house if the deceased died through suicide. The reason being that the dead is considered contaminated and therefore its long stay in the community can have adverse effect on the community. It is therefore quickly dispatched to the cemetery and quickly interred in a hurriedly-dug grave. The respondent explained that it is believed if a befitting burial is accorded the deceased person, similar suicide will occur in the family.

As indicated by the respondent, Akwamus believe that self-inflicted death is dirty, polluting and defiling. Also, the fear of being affected by the disease which killed the person prevents the corpse being taken to the house. There is the belief among the Akwamus that unless propitiatory rituals are performed to ease the anger of the gods of the land, community members will inescapably suffer their wrath. To avert the anger of the gods, an offering of a prescribed number of sheep or fowls is sacrificed to appease the gods. Libation is also poured to call upon the gods to pardon the sin of the deceased and a request is made so that the spirits do not punish the living because of the suicide, rather the punishment falls squarely on the deceased himself. The respondent added that suicide is not

a good thing because it brings shame onto the family and so why would a family try to prolong its shame and agony by keeping the body around?

Concerning the consequences of violating mortuary rituals for people who die through suicide, the respondent explained that violation of the taboo will incur the wrath of the ancestors and other spirits of the land. In an eye-witness report on 8th May 2010 by the respondent who is a native of Atimpoku which is a suburb of Akwamu traditional area, a large group of youth armed themselves with guns, knives and other weapons and stormed the chief's palace of Atimpoku to accuse him and his elders of corruption and malfeasance in matters relating to traditional mortuary rites. According to the youth, perennial harvest from their farming activities had ceased over the past four years. In addition, community members had suffered numerous calamity including accidents and untimely deaths. The youth attributed these misfortunes to the chief and his elders because they were alleged to have taken bribes from families whose relatives had died through suicides under the guise of consulting the ancestors of the land to obtain permission for the bereaved families to hold burial and funeral rites. The youth suspected that the woes of their community were as a result of a breach of tradition. The foregoing discussion makes one conclude that in Akwamu traditional society, suicide is regarded as an abomination against the living, the departed ancestors as well as the gods of the land.

5. Conclusions and Recommendations

The study has underlined taboos which are associated with chieftaincy, totems, deity, taboo days, suicide and sacred grove among the people of Akwamu traditional society. The findings of the study indicated among other things how taboos have played significant roles in the lives of the people of Akwamu in the past and continue to play similar roles in contemporary times among the people. For example, taboos which were instituted by traditional leaders to direct the political directions of chiefs in the past are still relevant in contemporary times.

It was also concluded that, deity taboos which were revered and feared in the past are still accorded much respect in contemporary times among the people because of its divine powers. It is for this reason why the deity called "obosom ayensu" in Akwamu traditional area still receives cultic attention in recent times. Other taboos which are still relevant in the lives of the people of Akwamu from the past are those connected with the sacred grove, suicide and "taboo days". These customary regulations worked very well in the olden days and are still relevant in contemporary times even though

the sanctions attached to these taboos have been toned down as a result of respect for human rights which give some amount of freedom to individuals. For example, from the study, it was found out that a ban which was placed on travelling during taboo days has been lifted to give people freedom of movement.

Beliefs and practices of taboos promote unity and corporation among the people of Akwamu. It is therefore recommended that financial assistance must be given to the chieftaincy institution to organize training workshops and durbars to increase people's awareness about the importance of taboos to the Akwamu society.

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