

THE MEDIA AND THE NEED TO HARNESS TRADITIONAL TABOOS AND INJUNCTIONS FOR SOCIAL COHESION IN NIGERIA

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ABSTRACT

Despite development in different spheres of life, the Nigerian society remains socially fragmented. The altruistic philosophy reminiscent of the African socio-political pantheon has been eroded and replaced by the western model which emphasizes individualism. This has bred the endemic corruption that continues to weigh down on societal development. It is in the light of this that this paper focuses on traditional taboos and injunctions as a means of fostering social cohesion in the Nigerian society. The paper opines that proper harnessing of traditional taboos and injunctions will engender social cohesion and stem the tide of corruption. The paper advocates that the media have a role to play. It equally identifies certain challenges facing the media in their performance of this role. The paper concludes that legislation should be used to back the revitalization of these taboos towards, societal development.

Keywords: Social cohesion, Taboos, Media.

INTRODUCTION

The need for social cohesion in Nigeria cannot be over-emphasized. This is more so when the country continues to witness occurrences that are reminders of the need for better social interaction. Originally, the African society is one that displays communal features, as the various cultures seem to have some common features. For example, all cultures in Africa have respect for old age. In other words, one must have respect for an older person. Such respect is usually displayed in the way pleasantries are exchanged, when two people meet. The attitudinal display of respect for age can also be noticed in any discussion. There is a limit to what one can say about an older person as well as what to say before an elder.

The way Africans relate to themselves always ensures that one's problem becomes the problem of the entire community, as every other person would want to offer a solution. In years past, it was the norm for every acquisition, except personal effects to be communally based. Nobody could do without the tribe (or community). Personal achievement was that of the community. Summing up the typical African society of the time, Ibagere (2010:11-12) submits that:

...every achievement was to the glory of the tribe. Everybody was closely knit and whatever happened to one became known to all in a very short time. Every property was communally acquired. This accounts for why such things as songs and dances are not the property of any single person as it is in the western world where laws make an individual exclusive owner of his music. Apart from personal effects and a few belongings, there was hardly anyone whose wealth was greater than (those of) the others.

The above reflects the true African society in which there was hardly the need to envy another person and covet his property. Even education was a communal acquisition. A community would contribute money and choose an individual that would acquire education at whatever level. The person would then return home and utilize his educational expertise for the benefit of the community.

In the same vein, a representative of a community was merely a messenger. He was sent only because he could best articulate the community's position and vigorously canvass benefits in favour of the community. He was never chosen to represent himself and appropriate what should come to the community, for his personal aggrandizement. A child was thus the property of the entire community and be subjected to discipline as dictated by the laws of the community. Any adult had the right to punish the child irrespective of that child's biological origin as a means of correcting the child. For such a society to remain as an entity there is the need for social cohesion. In pursuance of social cohesion laws are usually enacted and without a normal (or modern) security system such as the police force to maintain law and order, the society would have to rely on other means to maintain the social order. It is in this regard that taboos and injunctions became relevant factors needed by the African society to maintain its socio-political balance. There are certain bounds a person must not exceed if he is not to offend the laws of the land. Restrictions are therefore put in place ostensibly to check individual excesses. Most of these restrictions are deeply rooted in the traditional religion of the people.

However, these restrictions (or injunctions and taboos) have continued to be less relevant in today's daily existence. This is to the extent that some attitudes and behaviours which were outright taboos with serious consequences in the past are no longer regarded as violations. For example, different signs used as warning against trespass are no longer respected or recognized. Noting the erosion of the norms and values, Ibagere (2010:5). Observes that:

The effect of Westernization which has now translated to globalization is quite devastating to Africa in the sense of a lamentable, and sometimes deliberate alteration or outright destruction of values and norms of African people and societies.

It is therefore the adoption by Africans of Western ideals, which continue to view certain traditional norms as uncivilized, that is largely responsible for the diminishing value attached to these practices. This development has resulted in some attitudinal orientation that has continued to engender our under development as a continent. For example, the endemic corruption in Nigeria results from the lack of value that could be attached to taboos that should check the practice. It is therefore contended here that a return to our traditional values featuring taboos and other injunctions would rescue us from the clutches of underdevelopment.

It is in the light of the foregoing submission that this paper examines how traditional taboos and injunctions can be harnessed towards realizing social cohesion that has been completely eroded in favour of a culture of individualism that is characteristic of social fragmentation. It is advocated here that such an endeavour requires the contribution of the media, whose role is equally discussed.

SOCIAL COHESION, TRADITIONAL TABOOS AND INJUNCTIONS

Social cohesion can be viewed in several ways. The organisation for economic cooperation and Development (OECD) submits that:

A cohesive society works towards the well-being of all its members, fights exclusion and marginalization, creates a sense of belonging, promotes trust, and offers its members the opportunity of upward mobility (2012).

The above submission, when critically analyzed would epitomize the society which the African society typifies. However, Carron and Brawley (2000) have gone further to be more specific in their definition of social cohesion. According to them:

Cohesion can be more specifically defined as the tendency for a group to be in unity while working towards a goal or to satisfy the emotional needs of its members.

A cohesive society then, would work towards common goals and objectives with the general good of the society forming the motivating force behind every endeavour.

Taboos, on the other hand, have been defined in various ways. They have their significance depending on the degree of the consequences on those who commit such taboos. A taboo in one society may have no significance in another society. A taboo is therefore only relevant based on the value attached to it. According to *Wikipedia*;

A taboo is a vehement prohibition of an action based on the belief that such behaviour is either too sacred or too accursed for ordinary individuals to undertake, under threat of supernatural punishment.

The *Merriam Webster Dictionary* goes further in its definition. Becoming more specific, it states that a taboo is:

1. A prohibition against touching saying, or doing something for fear of immediate harm from a supernatural force.
2. A prohibition imposed by social custom or as a protective measure.

From the definitions of both dictionaries, it could be seen that taboos are believed to have supernatural forces behind them such that those who transgress or violate such prohibitions considered as taboos would suffer some punishment. Such punishment is usually visited on the transgressor by the supernatural forces without any physical intervention. No ritual may therefore be performed to invoke such punishment on the transgressor.

An injunction, on the other hand, is a statement forbidding the doing of a particular act, the performance of which may compel the person who has placed the injunction to punish the violator. The major difference between a taboo and an injunction is that a taboo is universal to particular society while an injunction may be personal to the person making the injunction. However, an injunction is usually declared with a recognizable sign that majority of the people can understand. When an injunction assumes wide acceptance, it eventually becomes

taboo. Taboos originally had religious significance. But an injunction acts mostly on the social plane. According to Odejobi:

Taboo was a sacred term for a set of cultic or religious prohibitions instituted by traditional religious activities as instruments for moral motivation, guidance and objectivity for protecting the sanctity of their shrines and the well-being of their worshipping communities (2013).

It is clear from the above that within the historical context, taboos have more of religious significance and they are used for moral violations. For example, the Tiv of the North Central geo – political region of Nigeria derive their concept of morality from religion, which has Aondo as the Supreme Being that orders the norms which the people abide by. This point is well noted by Ihuah (2002) who states that the Tiv did not create their own norms. Not even their ancestors did. “ Rather, such moral norms are developed by Aondo himself and placed under the custody of the spiritual force” (139).

Taboos play a complementary role on the social plane. On this, Odejobi submits that:

The term is also applicable to any sort of social prohibition imposed by the leadership of a community regarding certain times, places, actions, events and peoples in order to regulate contacts between a particular circumstances but not exclusively for religious reason for the well-being of the society (2013).

It is clear then that taboos and injunctions have both religious and social significance. Taboos came into existence as a result of certain needs that had to be satisfied. In attempting to fathom reasons for the evolution of taboos, Thorpe (1967) highlights seven reasons why taboos came into being. According to him, taboos evolved to:

- (a) Avoid accident
- (b) Have respect for religion
- (c) Respect elders
- (d) Obey rules of cleanliness
- (e) Teach moral values
- (f) Guide against being wasteful
- (g) Explain things that are difficult to understand (cited in Odejobi, 2013).

The above are all factors needed to regulate the society. According to Afe (2013), “taboos represented the main source of guiding principles regulating and directing the behaviour of individuals and the community ultimately towards the supreme being...” The main purpose of taboos, then, is the regulation of the conduct of individuals for social balance and order. This is in the sense that any traditional society employs them in social control as well as a means of compelling obligation from the people. As noted by Afe (2013), “in Yorubaland, taboo still forms one of the veritable instruments used in combating corruption within the society or in unveiling indecency in office”.

Well applied taboos have the capacity of instituting a well ordered society in which one is compelled to be concerned about the welfare of his neighbor, in order to be free from the consequences of his indifference. Idowu and Dopamu (1980) sum it up in a Yoruba proverb

which translation goes thus: “*if our neighbor eats the inedible and we do not warn him/her, his/her difficulty in breathing at night will not allow us to sleep (cited in Afe, 2013).*”

It is clear then that taboos and injunctions are usually put in place for the purpose of social control and societal advancement. New taboos can be created as a result of changing social conditions and standards (*Encyclopedia Britannica*). This of course, depends on the experiences of the particular society in question.

It has thus become imperative for the Nigerian society, however, does not need to create new taboos. The body of taboos of the various tribes is sufficient. What is needed is their revitalization as they seem to have lost relevance due to disregard for them as a result of the influence of Westernization which translates into globalization. This is well noted by Asabor (2011) who opines that “the infiltration of Western culture into our society is doing us more harm than good”. He claims that it is the unprecedented advances in transportation and communication that are responsible for the manifestation of Western culture in Nigeria.

Nigerian society to revitalize and emphasize the efficacy of the traditional taboos and injunctions of the various communities to stem the tide of dangerous acculturation that has continued to erode our social essence. The danger in unguarded acculturation showed in the threat by homosexuality which is a taboo but is regarded as a normal way of life in Western countries. To save the society from this cultural threat, the taboo became elevated to the status of statutory prohibition when a law was passed to criminalize its practice.

It is clear then that most highly revered taboos are fast losing their relevance and efficacy as a result of the adoption of the elements of western culture. The result of this is social fragmentation with its accompanying culture of selfish individualism. The class divisions resulting from this lead to bitter political struggles as different communities’ local governments and states battle for a share of national resources. This eventually culminates in selfish enrichment of the political class to the detriment of the generality of the populace. The political class will, in turn, support the prevalence of the political system by entrenching diversity as an essential part of democracy since it operates to enhance their continuous plunder of national resources for their personal aggrandizement.

The need for the revitalization of these traditional taboos is thus germane to the cohesion of the Nigerian society. It is only through social cohesion that the country can engage in proper development that would situate her properly among the comity of nations.

HARNESSING TRADITIONAL TABOOS AND INJUNCTIONS

There are taboos for virtually every important social endeavour in every community in Nigeria. Thus we have taboos for cleanliness, for respect, for good conduct in office, as well as sexual taboos. However, rather than examine the entire pantheon of taboos in Nigeria (which is an impossible task), three areas have been selected for analysis. These are covenant, good conduct while occupying a position of authority, and lying after swearing to tell the truth. The taboos associated with these areas of social life, if revitalized, would enhance a stronger society. It is the assumption here that their essence has been eroded, hence the need to revitalize them as a means of harnessing them for societal advancement.

A covenant regulates the relationship of individuals as well as between individuals and the divinity. Idowu (1975:150) states that “though every covenant has a ritualistic basis,

nevertheless the obligations which are the outcome are ethical". So, the concern in a covenant is not the ritual or religious basis but its socio – political essence. A covenant of particular relevance is the Ovo among the Isoko people of Delta State in the South – South geopolitical region of Nigeria. It is a kind of relationship entered into by two or more communities which then refer to themselves as Oriovo. The term Oriovo connotes the eating of one thing, or entering into a bond. According to Onibere (1980:109) "indeed it is common knowledge that those enclosed in this type of relationship refer casually to themselves as brothers and sisters". After the bond has been sealed, it becomes a taboo to work against the interest of each other. The taboo covers such areas as spilling each other's blood or stealing the other's property. Members of such communities are not expected to fight to the extent of causing injury to themselves. It is believed that some disaster would befall those who commit any taboo in this regard.

Another taboo has to do with abuse of office. This correlates with the earlier submission of Afe (2013) who states that "in Yorubaland taboos still form one of the veritable instruments used in combating corruption in the society and unveiling indecency in office". Among the Isoko people of Delta State, it is a taboo to embezzle money belonging to the family. It is also a taboo to misappropriate any family property. The punishment is swollen body that could lead to death unless there is timely confession by the offender, who may then be cleansed by a family prayer session led by the head of the family. This way the ancestors might forgive him and he would be saved from imminent death.

Another serious taboo is lying before the gods or ancestors. Most times, offenders would be warned about the consequences of lying when the truth needs to be told. This may be after an allegation has been levied against a person and he/she denies the allegation. The relevant shrine becomes the place where some rituals may be performed to expose who is lying. This is quite common in Benin Kingdom in Edo State, south-south geopolitical region of Nigeria, where one of the leading chiefs (Esogban of Benin) oversees the process. According to the Esogban of Benin Kingdom, Chief David Edebiri (2014:1) the process is used to disable witches who kill people and stall development in the kingdom. Usually, death is the ultimate consequence of those who deny (or lie). Chief Edebiri declares that "they died because they denied. If they did not deny, we know what to do and they will remain alive" (2014:7). According to him taking charge of the process is part of his social responsibility duty to the kingdom.

The three types of taboos focused upon illustrate vividly the efficacy of social cohesion through their use. These three, if elevated to the level of national significance would definitely reduce the level of criminal indulgence in practices that need to be expunged from our socio-political configuration, which continue to weigh down on our quest for meaningful development. For example, if communities are made to enter into the Ovo covenant it would compel the cessation of communal strife that continues to result in loss of lives. Communities are constantly at war with themselves all over the country with attendant loss of human lives. A covenant such as the Ovo would end such strife as no community would thereafter work against the interest of the other lest it suffers disaster of monumental proportion. An example of the efficacy of the covenant is the communal war between Igbide and Emede communities in Isoko. The war ended in 1988 after bitter battles that resulted in loss of lives for more than three years. The Ovo covenant entered into by both communities has sustained the peace since then.

Abuse of office with massive corruption would be eradicated if the taboo associated with misappropriation of family property is elevated to national level. It is the lack of appropriate punishment for corruption that continues to encourage what Richard Joseph (1991) has referred to as the politics of prebendalism that rewards only cronies to the detriment of the generality of the populace. Government officials loot the treasury with impunity. In most cases, development projects are abandoned as contractors who should execute such projects pocket the money meant for their execution without any punishment because they are highly placed political party officials or their cronies. An invocation of the relevant taboo in this regard whereby the offender would die of a swollen body would stop such fraudulent practice.

In the same vein, the taboo of lying as it is in Benin Kingdom is most needed to check official corruption. Public servants usually take oath of office but turn round to use the office for personal aggrandizement through deliberate malfeasance. They would then defend their action viciously. An oath administered using the Benin formula would go a long way in deterring those contemplating abuse of office. Oath of office is usually taken using the Holy Bible or the Koran. But these are usually broken without any consequence. This is because the Christian God, for instance, is a merciful and forgiving God. But the gods of Africa are gods of retribution who visit transgressors with dire consequence unless there is timely intervention by way of necessary penance and propitiation.

It is therefore very necessary for some of Nigeria's traditional taboos and injunctions to be elevated to national level in order to stem the tide of social fragmentation that has resulted from the country's integration into the mainstream of globalization. This position is hereby advocated in view of the failure of the law to curb corruption that is the bane of development and social cohesion.

ROLE OF THE MEDIA

The proper harnessing of taboos and injunctions for social cohesion is an exercise of mass mobilization towards the adoption of the relevant taboos and injunctions. Imoh (2009:111) has suggested that "communication for popular participation in large scale programmes is a learning process that requires institutional and operational changes". It is in this light that the campaign for the national adoption of taboos for social cohesion requires a large scale campaign. This would largely depend on the media; because it involves social change. This change has to be in reverse from the cherished western ideals that connote globalization. It has been noted that globalization has tended to lead the Nigerian society away from cohesion and into further fragmentation. This has created the conducive atmosphere needed for corruption to thrive. Thus corruption has assumed the level of a national norm. It is therefore imperative that traditional methods be used to engender social cohesion first before integration into the global mainstream.

One of the ways the media can contribute towards harnessing these traditional taboos for social cohesion is gradual elevation of these taboos through appropriate focus on them, with the aim of educating people about them. Proper analysis would lead to their general adoption. By elevation, the media would thus sectionalize those that are local. This should be followed by the eventual nationalizing of those that are sectional. The result would be an acceptable set of national taboos, that are acceptable to all. This is where the rural media are of utmost significance. To enhance the elevation of local taboos, the rural media must facilitate the exchange of information with other community media as well as the national media.

Describing this exchange, Ibagere and Anyanwu (2010:52) state that “in purveying information about the community while extending that from the national media to the community, the information order will (sic) be rearranged”. The prevailing order is for only information from the national media to be disseminated to the sub-urban areas without even getting to the rural areas sufficiently. In this regard then, the media have the duty to seek out the relevant taboos and project them to the level of national acceptance.

Once these taboos have been nationally acknowledged and accepted, the need to avoid them would naturally culminate in the creation of new norms in the society. The media then should be in vanguard of the creation of new norms which translates to the avoidance of these taboos and refraining from committing crimes that amount to taboos. For example, it would become a norm to ensure that one’s neighbor’s interest is protected because it would amount to committing the Oriovo taboo by doing otherwise.

These new norms, having been created would need some proactive action to ensure their adoption. The media are needed to encourage the people to adopt these norms. Ibagere (2010:206) notes this and opines that “... The mass media must persuade the people to adopt the new norms created”. According to him, “it is the mass media that should make the people see and be convinced about the advantages of adopting the new norms” (206). The point being made here is that, once the taboos have been elevated to the level of national significance the media should engage in persuasion of the people to accept them as relevant factors in their social life. One of the ways by which the media can persuade the people to accept these taboos is to emphasize and defend their efficacy. The media can succeed in this task only when they are credible. Credibility can be achieved through objectivity and fairness in their dissemination of information. Thus they have the responsibility of purveying the truth backed with objective critical analysis of phenomena. The media can enhance the harnessing of these taboos for social cohesion through the mobilization of the people towards their acceptance and adoption of new norms. Adeseye (2008:176) submits that the process goes through the stages of “selection, interpretation and prescription”. Film, for instance has the capacity to play this role effectively. As Okwilagwe (2008:59), rightly notes:

The film is a uniquely effective medium in mediating human experience, in creating atmosphere/ environment for creative imagination and for building the inner resources of members of a society.

The mobilization of the populace to adopt these taboos as efficient social stabilization determinants should be enhanced by the defence of these taboos as necessary for societal existence. The media should lead in this regard. The people will only accept and adopt them when they are stoutly defended rather than abandoning them at the slightest threat by elements of foreign culture.

CHALLENGES FACING THE MEDIA

The use of the media to harness traditional taboos for social cohesion faces some challenges that may hamper the media’s effectiveness. One major challenge is the problem of acceptance. It is not easy for a people to accept the taboos of others which they have never recognized as relevant to their existence. Thus, even when they know about them, they may resort to constitutional guarantees of freedom to reject such taboos as violating their fundamental right. So they may frustrate the entrenchment of such taboos in the social

system, no matter the effort of the media. Even when backed by law, western nations may oppose such law in favour of those intent on its violation, as they have done with regards to the Nigerian anti-gay law. Nigeria and other African countries such as Zimbabwe are vigorously defending the anti-gay law that continues to receive severe condemnation from western countries. Yet the practice is a taboo with serious consequences in many communities, as Emmanuel Uduaghan (Governor of Delta State) has rightly noted. According to him, "... if it is known that in (a) family, there are married gays, the danger is that the taboo emanating from that might affect others who are straight..." (2014). The challenge then is that of acceptance and elevation to the status of a national norm.

Flowing from the above is the effect of globalization (nay westernization) with its accompanying media imperialism. Media imperialism affects our media in several ways whereby our media systems continue to adopt western standards of purveying information. This does not guarantee effective communication to the extent of having their messages affect the people positively. Omoera and Ibagere (2010: 14) after reviewing the phenomenon of media imperialism conclude that "...it is obvious that media imperialism will continue to be part of the Nigerian television for sometime". This situation is replicated in other media as well, thereby making people to prefer foreign media content. With social media expanding and contributing towards making the world a global village, it will be a herculean task for the Nigerian media to succeed in entrenching traditional taboos as an essential part of the Nigerian social system.

Another challenge facing the media is the endemic corruption that is now a national norm. The phenomenon has made the media to be ineffective, as people would ordinarily suspect the media of projecting the interest of certain patrons. Ibagere (2013:76) has noted that:

In a situation where corruption remains an endemic virus that has sourced itself deep into the core of societal values, it can hardly be expected that the media would perform with any modicum of objectivity. The leading exponents of the endemic corruption are the elites, whether political, economic, social or academic. They are either the owners of the media or cronies of government who are equally inherently corrupt.

These people will always strive to put the media at their service instead of that of the majority, thereby feathering their own nests to the detriment of the people. With the grim picture of the media painted above, it would be quite impossible for the media to perform adequately, no matter their commitment. Their corrupt patrons and owners may not allow them the leverage to perform their role effectively. The credibility of the media therefore will continue to be a hindrance to the people's acceptance of their messages about the adoption of traditional taboos as relevant in their social life.

CONCLUSION

It is clear from the foregoing that the problem of social fragmentation which continues to be encouraged and enhanced by globalization will continue for some time. Unless a drastic action is taken to stem the tide, the Nigerian society may have no cultural identity in some years to come. This is because the people, through massive strides in communication and transportation have continued to drift away from traditional cultural practices towards western cultural elements. The use of taboos to foster social cohesion is therefore invaluable.

Because of the challenges in entrenching them in the social system, it is hereby recommended that their entrenchment should be backed by statutory provisions, like in same – sex marriage that is outlawed. The adoption of these taboos will stem the ravaging corruption and ensure a better society that would support development in all spheres and place the country on the right pedestal in global affairs.

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