

# The Enduring Influence of Taboos in Social Regulation: Insights from the Peki Community, Volta Region, Ghana



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## ABSTRACT

Generally, taboos denote proscriptions, moral tenets, and, to some appreciable degree, a pedagogical tool. In African traditional societies, taboos indicate what should or should not be done, and how to interact with members of society, the environment, the deities, and the ancestors. These taboos ensure balance and harmony between the deities and the community, among members of society and between the community and nature. Typically, taboos are socio-religious constructs that draw on both traditions as well as religion to function. All societies institute clearly defined taboos to direct community members' behaviour in line with society's values. The main purpose of this paper was to study taboos as a control mechanism among the Pekis with the view of outlining some notable taboos in Peki and to assess the present state of taboos in Peki. The study employed the qualitative method of enquiry which was largely underpinned by the phenomenological method of enquiry. Purposive sampling was adopted to collect germane information for the study. The paper discovered that taboos permeate all aspects of life and occupy a central place in the effort of traditional African societies to ensure proper social behaviour within the community. The study proposes that there is an urgent need to develop and deploy policies to serve as a sort of affirmative action to safeguard, harness and modify taboos to suit the demands of our present society without undermining tradition or societal values. This paper contributes to the debate on African Religious Traditions and social control.

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## Publication History

Received: 3<sup>rd</sup> July, 2024

Accepted: 7<sup>th</sup> October, 2024

Published online:

29<sup>th</sup> November, 2024

*Keywords: Social Control, Taboos, Relevance of Taboos.*

## INTRODUCTION

God put his laws into the heart of the African and He endowed him with a sense of proper moral judgement; hence, his conscience has always instructed him that there are forbidden things which, when done, will bring to him a chain of hostile effects. These forbidden things are called taboos (*tabu*).<sup>1</sup> Taboo constitutes a set of prohibited acts, which forbids the violation of things which are considered very holy or getting involved with that which is regarded as unclean destructive and terrible. The disregard of this is followed immediately by supernatural sanctions which range from inexplicable ailments, misfortunes, and at worse mysterious deaths.<sup>2</sup> Traditionally, the Pekis hold the view that defying society's norms and

<sup>1</sup> O. Awolalu and P.A. Dopamu, *West Africa Traditional Religion* (Ibadan: Oniboje Press and Book Industries, 1979). 212

<sup>2</sup> Awolalu and Dopamu, *West Africa Traditional Religion* . 212

expectations puts the individual and the entire group at the mercy of many mishaps. Over time, some of these societal norms and expectations—also known as mores—have become what are deemed prohibitions or taboos. These taboos are enforced on two levels. On an individual level, people fear that they will suffer a series of life-threatening misfortunes. The second is on a communal level where the offender's actions affect the entire community. For this reason, everyone abides by the rules; otherwise, the community as a whole suffers. However, if there is a violation of any taboo, it is necessary to placate the person or spirit that has offended. How the placation is executed typically involves extensive expenditure on materials, human labour, dedication, and rigorous rituals that are enough to discourage individuals from breaking taboos.<sup>3</sup> Africans have always strived to live in harmony with others and with spirits. This notion of harmonious living is guided by specific injunctions, some of which are purely sociological, whereas others have religious overtones. All in all, these injunctions are intended to engender peace in the community. The main focus of the present study has been on studying taboos as a formidable means of social control. This paper claims that a myriad of taboos exist in Peki and that these taboos are instituted to engender peace as well as harmony in society. However, the study only treated some of the notable ones, pointing out their relevance in ensuring order within the Peki community.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

The Polynesian word *tabu* which in simple terms denotes 'forbidden' can be used to point to all forms of proscriptions.<sup>4</sup> According to Quirk, the taboo is "... something that is forbidden to speak of, touch, do, etc, because of religious reasons or because it is not their custom."<sup>5</sup> Taboo meant uncleanness. The individual who violated the taboo was considered unclean and thus he was severed from society until he was purged. Freud says, "Taboo can be seen as forbidden acts or prohibitions against certain things."<sup>6</sup> Restrictions were placed on certain acts or against certain things which the society did not cherish. Both Quirk and Freud consider taboos to encompass all things forbidden because society brands them as unclean and thus not cherished. This is true, however, they seem to have lost sight of the fact that tabooed places like the sacred grooves are not unclean, they are respected and cherished hence they are tabooed because they are holy sites. Hornby sees taboo as "... prohibition applying to something that is forbidden or set apart because it is sacred, consecrated or unclean and therefore is considered dangerous."<sup>7</sup> This was to ensure that sacred things did not get in touch with profane and that anything unclean did not mingle with things that were sacred or holy. However, Hanks describes it as "... forbidden to general use or place under prohibition."<sup>8</sup> There were certain things as well as places which were not open to public consumption. Such places or things were more often than not considered dangerous to both the individual and society; thus, clearly defined bans were instituted to keep the community and community members safe. According to Anderson, taboo stems predominantly from the dread of the unknown, strange, and abnormal encounter in a "human pattern."<sup>9</sup> The dread of the unknown, coupled with the inexplicable mysteries surrounding human existence as well as the world, made men reflect on the unknown. This dread of the unknown enabled men to develop and observe proscriptions to regulate their behaviour so that they may not attract the unwanted attention of the unknown and ultimately keep them safe.

Violating a taboo is to wilfully or unintentionally breach the caveats established by society as regards their belief such as 'felling a sacred tree and killing a sacred animal.'<sup>10</sup> Defying taboos whether knowingly or unknowingly is an offence to which sanctions must apply. For example, in Achebe's book, *Things Fall Apart*, Okonkwo was exiled from Umofia for homicide. His crime was accidental but it was taboo to commit homicide in Umofia. Okonkwo had to serve seven years in exile before being worthy to go back and live among his folks in Umofia.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>3</sup> These pacification of purgative rituals tend to have religious undertones. After the placation, the faultier(s) is made to go through a series of ritual cleansing to restore the individual back to normalcy. The ritual cleansing is known as '*fafla*' among the Pekis.

<sup>4</sup> Kwesi Sarpong, *Ghana in Retrospect; Some Aspects of Ghanaian Culture* (Accra: Ghana Publishing Corporation, 1974). 51

<sup>5</sup> Randolph. Quirk, *Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English* (London: Longman, 1978).5650.

<sup>6</sup> Sigmund Freud, *Totem and Taboo* (London: Rout ledge and Kegan Paul. 1975).32

<sup>7</sup> A. Sydney Hornby, *Advanced Learners, Dictionary* (London: Oxford University Press, 1924).437

<sup>8</sup> Patrick Hanks, "Encyclopedic World Dictionary," (London: Heady Hamlyn. 1971). 1584

<sup>9</sup> J. N. Dalrymple. Anderson, *The World Religious* (Great Britain: Unwin Brothers, 1975). 17.

<sup>10</sup> F. Chidozie Ogbalu, *Igbo Institutions and Culture* (Onitsha: University Press, 1981). 199.

<sup>11</sup> Chinua Achebe, *Things Fall Apart*, (Anchor Books Random House Inc New York 1994). 115-116

In this regard, Metuh avows that customary punishments for homicide are clearly distinguished between the social, moral and religious aspects of the taboo that has been violated this further suggests that different sets of punishments may apply depending on the nature of the taboo that has been committed.<sup>12</sup>

Ayisi highlights the repercussions of breaching taboos by noting that, upon breaching a taboo, a purgative ritual should be conducted without delay.-Failing to undergo the necessary purgative ritual will, as believed, put the culprit, his family as well and the entire community at the mercy of spiritual retribution particularly when the taboo which has been violated is a religious one.<sup>13</sup> The core of the above is that, once there is a violation of a taboo, purgative rituals become *cine-qua-non*. For example, in Achebe's book *Things Fall Apart*, the priest of *Ani* spelt the doom that could befall Okonkwo and the whole clan for violating the earth goddess.

'The evil you have done can ruin the whole clan. The earth goddess whom you have insulted may refuse to give us her increase and we all shall perish.... You will bring to the shrine of Ani tomorrow one she-goat, one hen, a length of cloth and a hundred cowries.'<sup>14</sup>

The above is indicative of the extensive nature of the spiritual retributions which follow the breach of taboos, the heavy fines that accompany it, and the need for a purgatory ritual without which all members of the society shall suffer punishments.

### Social Control

Onyima submits that social control could mean an organised set of behaviours, beliefs, attitudes and norms around which the lives of community members revolve.<sup>15</sup> He argues further that social control is the means by which the society maintains solidity and order in the community. In the name of social control, strong and positive relationships are established. Onyima is right when he argues that, where there are very little or no elaborate measures of social control, the community would experience high levels of deviance, which is a potential source of vices and crimes.<sup>16</sup> Ogburn and Nimkoff define social control as the patterns of pressure, which are used to uphold order, and time-honoured rules in a society.<sup>17</sup> From an institutional standpoint, social control is the 'instrument for the conscious and planned management of socialized human activities.'<sup>18</sup> In Nukunya's view, social control is a scheme to maintain law and order in the community and also instigate the community members to conform to the established standards of behaviour. He adds that, in all human societies, people are taught from childhood to internalize the norms and values of society to distinguish between right and wrong to pursue the good and avoid the bad. He agrees with Durkheim that, despite the elaborate social systems found in all human societies, deviant behaviours are still present in society. However, such people, according to him, should not be allowed to pursue their deviant behaviours as it will cripple the order in the society. In this regard, Nukunya says that societies have developed mechanisms to deal with recalcitrant individuals some of which may include taboos.<sup>19</sup> In this connection, we claim that social order constitutes a system of well-connected cultural norms, social institutions, as well as accepted behavioural patterns that sustain and regulate ways of behaving such that peace prevails within the community.

### The Nature of Taboos in Ghana

Taboos feature prominently in most Ghanaian societies and are concerned about ensuring order in society. They are seen as proscriptions on things thought of as holy or occasionally unsafe to engage with, particularly in all African tribes, either because they are forbidden by religion or because they are deemed

<sup>12</sup> Metuh, .E. Ikenga. *God and Man in African Religion: A case Study of the Igbo of Nigeria*. (London: Cassel. 1981).111

<sup>13</sup> O. Eric Ayisi, *An Introduction to the Study of African Culture* (London: Heinemann, 1972). 91

<sup>14</sup> Achebe, *Things Fall Apart*. 25

<sup>15</sup> Blessing Nonye Onyima, "Traditional Methods of Social Control in Afikpo North Local Government Area, Ebonyi State South Eastern Nigeria," *UNIZIK Journal of Religion and Human Relations* 7, no. 2 (2015): 95.

<sup>16</sup> Onyima, "Traditional Methods of Social Control in Afikpo North Local Government Area, Ebonyi State South Eastern Nigeria." 95

<sup>17</sup> Sociology Guide, "Meaning of Social Control ," accessed April 27, 2024, [www.sociologicalguide.com/social-control/meaning-of-social-control.php](http://www.sociologicalguide.com/social-control/meaning-of-social-control.php).

<sup>18</sup> Michalis Lianos, "Social Control after Foucault," *Surveillance and Society* 1 (2003): 3.

<sup>19</sup> G.K. Nukunya, *Tradition and Change in Ghana: An Introduction to Sociology*, 2nd ed. (Accra: Ghana Universities Press, 2007). 93

obnoxious. Seen in a broader light, taboos mainly function as a means of protection as well as a pedagogical tool as they teach the dos and don'ts of society to members of society. Taboos are embedded in every facet of life of the Africans.<sup>20</sup> There are taboos to regulate his relationship with others, the spirits and even himself. Taboos are extensive, widespread and practically affect every element of African society. The acceptance and observance of taboos stem from the notion that several undesirable consequences could befall the culprits who deliberately or inadvertently breach taboos. There are general taboos that apply to all members of the community. It is expected that all citizens in society will respect such taboos. Individuals who violate or fail to honour such taboos open themselves up for spiritual or physical retribution or both.<sup>21</sup> Additionally, there are other taboos which may only apply to particular categories of people. For instance, it is taboo for some people to kill and feed on certain animals because those animals are revered as totems by those people. The concept of Mana is intimately related to taboo. This is similarly Polynesian in origin and alludes to an 'impersonal power' that is typically connected to sacred objects like the Ark of the Covenant some kings etc. Such power is believed to be extremely dangerous around individuals who are ill-equipped to handle such power.<sup>22</sup> The connection between taboo, mana, and sacred is fairly clear. Wherever mana' exists, so is the sacred. However, where there are taboos, the sacred may not always exist, as some taboos are merely sociological rather than religious in nature. Overall, among traditional people, the sacred is prevalent in taboos and related to the supernatural. The spiritual authority that underpins these prohibitions wields a power that is difficult to define. Taboos have been shown to exist in various societies around the world. Most taboos are typically upheld by customary systems, although a small number of them have the support of the state and are, therefore, legally enforceable. While this may not be the same across the board, there are other cultures that have several taboos ingrained in the legal systems, for example, the Ewes, Akans, and other groups; these taboos serve as moral codes as well as guidelines for appropriate behaviour.

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

### The Sacralisation Theory

The framework principle is a fundamental truth claim employed as a hypothesis that underpins an argument.<sup>23</sup> Durkheim's theory of sacralisation undergirds the study.<sup>24</sup> The theory is employed as a lens to examine and clarify the data collected, from the research questions. 'Sacralization' is defined as the process of imbuing an object or act with the quality of sacredness.<sup>25</sup> The goal of sacralization is to make a physical object, a class of people, or particular behaviours sacred or an idea holy.<sup>26</sup>

This conferment of sacredness on the object is done by members of society so that the sacred object, person, place or words are given unique attributes that set them apart such that they are viewed as distinct from its readily apparent attributes.<sup>27</sup> Sacralised things are treated with the utmost respect, special veneration, and prominence.<sup>28</sup> The divine and holy nature of a sacralised object is largely exemplified by the many taboos that surround it.<sup>29</sup>

Thus, the taboos dictate proper and acceptable behaviour towards a sacralised object. Also, it dictates proscribed acts towards the sacred and everything society holds dear. Sacred taboos hold the power to automatically command conduct,<sup>30</sup> and their observances are done not only for religious reasons

<sup>20</sup> Deji Ayegboyan and Charles Jegede, "Divinities," in *Encyclopedia of African Religion*, ed. Molefi Asante and Ama Mazama (Thousand Oaks California: SAGE Publications, Inc., 2009).1 <https://doi.org/10.4135/9781412964623.n139>.

<sup>21</sup> Chris Abotchie, *Social Control in Traditional Southern Ewe Land of Ghana*, 2nd ed. (Accra: University Press, 1997).89.

<sup>22</sup> Sarpong, *Ghana in Retrospect; Some Aspects of Ghanaian Culture*. 51.

<sup>23</sup> Samuel Asiedu-Amoako and Michael Kwadwo Ntiamoah, "Environmental Ethics in Akyem Abuakwa: Developing the Ecological Zone through the African Worldview," *E-Journal of Humanities, Arts and Social Sciences*, September 28, 2020, 187, <https://doi.org/10.38159/ehass.2020097>.

<sup>24</sup> Emile Durkheim, "The Elementary Forms of Religious Life," in *Social Theory Re-Wired* (Routledge, 2016), 52–67; Douglas A Marshall, "Temptation, Tradition, and Taboo: A Theory of Sacralization," *Sociological Theory* 28, no. 1 (2010): 64.

<sup>25</sup> Marshall, "Temptation, Tradition, and Taboo: A Theory of Sacralization." 66

<sup>26</sup> Mircea Eliade, "The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion," (New York: *Harvest Book, Brace & World Inc* 1959.) 24, 39, 59.

<sup>27</sup> Marshall, "Temptation, Tradition, and Taboo: A Theory of Sacralization." 65

<sup>28</sup> Edward Shils, *The Constitution of Society*. (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1982). 78

<sup>29</sup> Sigmund Freud, *Totem and Taboo: Some Points of Agreement between the Mental Lives of Savages and Neurotics* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1913) 34; Roger Caillois, *Man and the Sacred* (University of Illinois Press, 2001).43.

<sup>30</sup> Emile Durkheim, "Elementary Forms of Religious Life," in *Social Theory Re-Wired* (Routledge, 2016), 52–67.

but also for sociological reasons.<sup>31</sup> When developed, these taboos become widespread and quickly serve as a preventive measure so that society members do not trespass or get tempted to disregard them because disregarding the taboos leads to mass opprobrium and an urgent need for purging.<sup>32</sup> Because sacred taboos are definitive, breaking them cannot be justified in any way. Instead, the offender will be punished severely to dissuade others from emulating morally corrupt and undesirable social behaviour.<sup>33</sup>

## METHODOLOGY

In the quest to assess and understand how taboos engender social order, the study employed the qualitative approach which was underpinned by phenomenology. Cox opines that the reason for the use of the phenomenological approach is to illuminate the specifics and to identify a phenomenon just as it is perceived in a situation. It is designed to objectively explain a phenomenon through experiences.<sup>34</sup> For this reason, Husserl says that the fundamental supposition of phenomenology is that of “going back to the things themselves”.<sup>35</sup>

This approach facilitated a close interaction with the phenomenon in its natural setting. Furthermore, some ethical principles underpinned the study. Each respondent was treated with equal levels of fairness and respect and details on the study's objective were made known to the respondents. Before participating in the study, the researchers sought and obtained the consent of all participants to record their responses on tape for analysis and to have their names mentioned when relevant. Respondents were also informed of their right to decline questions or end the interview when they chose. Purposive sampling was adopted in the collection of relevant information, in which respondents were purposively selected based on their in-depth knowledge of the topic under consideration. This was done in line with Cresswell's avowal that purposive sampling helps in choosing interlocutors as well as materials, relevant to the study.<sup>36</sup> Accordingly, the primary data was drawn from extensive interviews with fifteen (15) discussants from five of eight communities in the Peki traditional area. (Avenile, Blengo, Dzake, Tsame and Wudome). The bulk of the responders (nine) came from Avenile, with two coming from Blengo and Dzake respectively and one from Tsame and Wudome, respectively. A priestess, a paramount chief, a clan chief, a herbalist, and two traditional priests participated in the study. Teachers, artisans, and businessmen and women made up the bulk of the participants in the discussion. Unfortunately, because the selected discussants from Adzokoe, Afeviwofe, and Dzobati continually postponed interviews, the researchers could not speak to them. The main information from these interviews was supplemented by observations and analyses of pertinent literature.

## PRESENTATION OF FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

### A Brief Geographical Sketch of Peki

Peki is an Ewe subgroup located within the South Dayi District in the Volta region of Ghana. They are referred to as the inland Ewes. Peki is composed of eight sub-towns, which include Adzokoe, Afeviwofe, Avenile, Blengo, Dzake, Dzobati Tsame and Wudome. Each of the aforementioned towns has its own chief. However, all of these sub-chiefs are headed by Deiga Kwadzo Dei XII who is the current paramount chief of the Peki traditional area.

### The Notion of Taboos among the Pekis

The word for taboo among the Pekis is *Numawɔmawɔ wo*.<sup>37</sup> It is used to denote that which is forbidden. Violators of taboos bring disaster not only to themselves but to the community at large. The Pekis know and trust the genuineness of the taboo. As such, they do not regard them as simply unfounded irrational beliefs. They also believe that keeping taboos gives joy, happiness, wealth, comfort, and a long life. The

<sup>31</sup> Philip. Thody, *Don't Do It! A Dictionary of the Forbidden* (St. Martin's, New York, 1997).84.

<sup>32</sup> Philip E Tetlock et al., “The Psychology of the Unthinkable: Taboo Trade-Offs, Forbidden Base Rates, and Heretical Counterfactuals.,” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 78, no. 5 (2000): 853; See Ayisi, *An Introduction to the Study of African Culture*.9.

<sup>33</sup> Freud, *Totem and Taboo: Some Points of Agreement between the Mental Lives of Savages and Neurotics*.34.

<sup>34</sup> James L. Cox, *Expressing the Sacred: An Introduction to the Phenomenology of Religion* (Harare: University of Zimbabwe Publications, 1992). 15

<sup>35</sup> Edmund Husserl, *The Shorter Logical Investigations* (Routledge, 2002).21.

<sup>36</sup> John W. Cresswell, *Research Design: Qualitative and Quantitative Approaches* (California: Sage, 1994).148.

<sup>37</sup> *Numawɔmawɔ wo*. This means things which have be banned. It include words, action, etc which are strictly forbidden in society.

Pekis also believe that violation of the taboos brings about misfortune and misery to the person who violates it.

Additionally, they maintain that everything that might be interpreted as sinful, immoral, or at odds with social standards and values is encapsulated within the brackets of *Numawɔmawɔ wo*. In an interview with Togbe Gavu, he asserted that “the belief that breaking a taboo implies directly offending the community, the gods, and other people is the foundation of the Pekis' concept of taboos.”<sup>38</sup> The field study also revealed that there are beliefs among the Pekis that influence their actions. Thus, they are banned from doing certain things. According to Ameyibor Kwesi, “There has always been the thought that blatant disregard for taboos is certainly an affront to the deities as well as to society. This idea is still popular today.”<sup>39</sup> He added “If the appropriate purgatory rituals are not carried out on time, then they (the deities) will visit those who have violated the taboos and, in some cases, the entire community with divine retribution. Thus, the people observed and honoured the taboos because treating the taboos with contempt would put him and the whole community at the mercy of both social and religious opprobrium.”<sup>40</sup> In an interview with Togbe Sukpa, he stated that among the Pekis, *numawɔmawɔ wo* is what is forbidden and it finds expression in both religious as well as in the socio-cultural space. He emphasised that taboos might be employed in two ways: spiritually and socially-politically.<sup>41</sup>

The researchers observed that taboos were widespread among the populace because taboos are regarded seriously because people think that traditional leaders or priests instituted them in their best interests and for their benefit. Therefore, pointing out the socio-political use of taboos. They may be promulgated and passed down as vows, principles, or religious ordinances. Therefore, in contrast to regular wrongs, taboo may necessitate ritualistic sacrifices as a form of atonement in order to appease the deities and ancestors, who may otherwise exact their vengeance on the living through draughts, infertility, and epidemics.

Togbe Gavu in the interview pointed out that in contrast to punishments in other religions that could wait until a specific time or possibly be lessened or averted by 'God's love and clemency', punishments for violating taboos are seen to be immediate and inevitable.<sup>42</sup> For instance, it was often believed that violating any taboo instituted in the name of deities such as *Duveh*,<sup>43</sup> *Amimli*,<sup>44</sup> *Abia*,<sup>45</sup> etc. would result in immediate consequences. Thus responsible individuals would not purposefully break them, even if they have their beliefs about such deities.<sup>46</sup> From the foregoing, one cannot undervalue the importance of taboos as a social control measure among the Pekis.

### Taboos Prevalent in Peki

Since there is no clear divide between social life and religious life in Africa, a classification of taboos without overlaps is nearly impossible. However, from a general standpoint, taboos may first be classified into general taboos and in a more limited sense, specific taboos. Further divisions within these classifications will be made going forward.

### General Taboos

These are taboos, which refer to a set of restrictions on items, words, acts, etc. that are considered inappropriate within a specific society or subculture. These forms of taboos may be referred to as general taboos, as they are supposed to be known by everyone in society. Examples include a ban on farming on certain days and walking into specific areas under certain situations. Murder, in all its forms, and sexual conduct in the bush are examples of general taboos.

Another general taboo among the Pekis which came to light during the study is the taboo about death. Discussing death among the people of Peki is not easy to fathom because those who suffer death

<sup>38</sup> Interview with Togbe Gavu . (Togbe Gavu is the priest of *Duveh*) on 3<sup>rd</sup> December, 2022 at Peki Dzake

<sup>39</sup> Ameyibor Ernest Kwesi (Lecturer. Ghana Institute of Languages) in discussion with the authors at Peki-Avetile, 12 May, 2021.

<sup>40</sup> Ameyibor Ernest Kwesi (Lecturer. Ghana Institute of Languages) in discussion with the authors at Peki-Avetile, 12 May, 2021.

<sup>41</sup> Interview with Togbe Sukpa at Peki Avetile 8<sup>th</sup> February 2022.

<sup>42</sup> Interview with Togbe Gavu . (Togbe Gavu is the priest of *Duveh*) on 3<sup>rd</sup> December, 2022 at Peki Dzake.

<sup>43</sup> *Duveh* is recognised as the state deity in the Peki traditional area. It is usually referred to as *Togbe Duveh*.

<sup>44</sup> *Amimli* is also recognised as the linguist of *Duveh* within the pantheon of deities across the Peki traditional area.

<sup>45</sup> *Abia* is also another powerful deity in Peki Avetile.

<sup>46</sup> Interview with Togbe Sukpa at Peki Avetile 8<sup>th</sup> February 2022.

do not come to recount exactly what it feels like. The researchers guess that is why the Pekis call it *de ma gbɔ nu gbe*.<sup>47</sup> The Pekis classify death into (a) *vuku*.<sup>48</sup> (b) *Ku nwie*.<sup>49</sup> Different sets of taboos apply to the type of death a person suffers. For example, deaths through suicide, gunshots, sorcery or through the activities of a witch, are termed *vuku*.<sup>50</sup> Funerals for such people are not held in the town. Such funerals are conducted at the cemetery. It is taboo for such corpses to be brought to town. Also, when one suffers a *vuku*, the family of the deceased will be made to provide items to cleanse the town and prevent such occurrences in the future. Failure on the part of the family to comply with such directives is taboo.

Death as a result of old age, and death during wars, are considered *ku nwie*. The corpses of such individuals are given a proper burial. It is also a taboo not to perform a befitting burial for such people. The belief is that the spirit of the deceased may not be accepted in *hogbe*<sup>51</sup> and his earthly kin may suffer a plethora of punishments.<sup>52</sup> To an appreciable level, general taboos at some points could be said to be deity restrictions and expectations which are expected to be known by all.

### General taboos about places (Sacred Grooves and Rivers)

No one fetches from *Abia*, *Angabu* and *Tongloe* on Wednesdays. Menstruating women are not to fetch from the rivers. Nobody is expected to dump refuse, defecate, or cut the vegetation along these rivers. Anyone who violates these taboos will certainly incur the displeasure of the river deity. For example, anyone who fetches from *Angabu* on Wednesdays violates the taboos of *Angabu*. Individuals who defy *Angabu* get bitten by the black cobra (*Gleyibor*). The *Gleyibor* is seen as the river deity (*Angabu*).<sup>53</sup>

From the above, it is clear that the use of waterbodies and sacred sites is governed by taboos. The study findings showed that while certain portions of the forest and bodies of water are instrumentally used to serve human needs in the Peki, they also hold great spiritual significance and are therefore highly valued. Some types of natural plants (trees) are considered sacred because they are thought to be the homes of the deities that watch over them. Thus, it is forbidden to enter into such forests, fall certain trees, or violate such sacred locations, in any way. The findings from the study reveal that sacred sites include *Tongloe*,<sup>54</sup> *Abia*, *Angabu*, *Amimli*,<sup>55</sup> *Goasime*<sup>56</sup> and *Avegome*.<sup>57</sup> Menstruating women are discouraged from visiting any of these sites and these women are considered ritually unclean. Felling trees and hunting in any of these sites is strictly forbidden, particularly *Avegome* and *Goasime*. Punishments for violating such tabooed sites include the risk of getting temporarily lost or disappearing forever, and, in some cases, becoming insane.<sup>58</sup>

## Specific Taboos

### Specific taboos for Priests and Chiefs

Priests and priestesses are people who have been carefully selected and set aside to oversee all religious activities on behalf of the chief who can also function as the high priest for his community.<sup>59</sup> Among the Pekis, the traditional priest features prominently in society given the numerous religious and social functions he performs in the maintenance of religious and social order.<sup>60</sup> Just like the chiefs, there are specific taboos (religious) taboos associated with his person and also the divine office he occupies. According to Togbe Gavu, it is taboo for the priest of *Duveh* to appear in any regalia that deviates from

<sup>47</sup> *De ma gbɔ nu gbe*. This literally means a journey which when made, has no return.

<sup>48</sup> Interview with Broni Sai. (Clerk at Peki Magistrate Court) on 18<sup>th</sup> November, 2022.

<sup>49</sup> *Ku nwie*. This also literal means natural or proper denotes deaths that comes as a result of old age and also death on the battle field is considered proper way to die according to the Pekis.

<sup>50</sup> *Vuku*. This literally means an accidental or bloody death. This type of death encompasses suicide, deaths through sorcery or the activities of a witch and any type of death that may cause blood to be discharged from the body of the individual.

<sup>51</sup> *Hogbe* this literally means the ancestral home.

<sup>52</sup> Interview with Broni Sai. (Clerk at Peki Magistrate Court) on 18<sup>th</sup> November, 2022 at Peki Avetile.

<sup>53</sup> Interview with Broni Sai. (Clerk at Peki Magistrate Court) at Peki Avetile 29<sup>th</sup> December 2021.

<sup>54</sup> *Tongloe* is a river body located in the mountains of Peki Wudome.

<sup>55</sup> *Abia*, *Angabu* and *Amimli*, are also river bodies located in the mountains of Peki Avetile.

<sup>56</sup> *Goasime* is a sacred grove which is located at Peki Blengo. *Goasime* is usually visited once a year when the annual *Tedudu* festival is being held.

<sup>57</sup> *Avegome* is also a sacred grove where the Chiefs and Queens are usually buried.

<sup>58</sup> Interview with Ago Victoria (Ago Victoria is the priestess of *Amimli*). on 5<sup>th</sup> December, 2022 at Peki Avetile

<sup>59</sup> Interview with Togbe Gavu (Gavu is the priest of *Duveh*.) on 7<sup>th</sup> December, 2022 at Peki Dzake.

<sup>60</sup> Theophilus-Neil Quarcoopome, "West African Traditional Religion," (Ibadan: African Universities Press. 1987). 77

the colour black or blue-black. He is also not expected to feed on the black snail, nor is he expected to feed on the eggplant.<sup>61</sup> He is the only one who is entitled to enter into the innermost part of *Duveh* shrine.<sup>62</sup> According to Togbe Gavu, it is taboo for him to accept bribes in order to distort justice. Also, it is taboo for the priest to enter Togbe *Duveh*'s chamber after having sex with his wife. More so, he is not expected to have an extramarital affair with another woman who is not his 'wife'.<sup>63</sup>

Due to their regal standing and the mystical and spiritual nature of the office they occupy, chiefs observe several taboos. If a chief violates the taboos of his divine office, there is no doubt about the punishment he'll face. These repercussions could manifest as strange illnesses that the chief contracts, or in the worst situations, the entire village suffers alongside him.<sup>64</sup> The word to employ when discussing the chief is euphemism. Because it is considered taboo to openly announce the chief's death.<sup>65</sup>

Another set of taboos associated with the office of the chief is the taboos about his palace. Togbe Sukpa VI indicated that, just like the shrine of the chief priest, the palace of the chief holds religious significance. As a rule, no dead bodies are to be kept in the palace. Some taboos bar menstruating women from entering the palace or making any contact with the chief as they are considered ritually unclean. It is taboo for any other person to indulge in sex in or around the palace. Again, it is taboo for the chief to have an extramarital affair with any other woman within or outside the palace.<sup>66</sup> Similarly, no one is expected to indulge in sex with the wife of the chief for it is a heavy taboo with a heavy punishment. Usually, infidelity with the wife of the chief is punishable by death.<sup>67</sup> According to Sarpong, the consequences of breaking a taboo may befall a whole society and an individual both mystically and physically.<sup>68</sup>

### ***Specific taboos for pregnant women***

Pregnant women are cherished among Pekis because as a result of procreation, they contribute to the growth of the community in terms of number. In light of this, much attention and care is paid to women in the form of taboos. These taboos are intended to ensure safe delivery and, more importantly, protection for the mother and the foetus. Some notable taboos for pregnant women in Peki include the following;

A pregnant woman is not expected to take any form of intoxicant as it has the potential to deform the baby even before it is born.<sup>69</sup> A pregnant woman is not expected to have any extramarital affair with anybody. She is expected to remain faithful to her husband only, this helps to banish any suspicion which may be hanging on the paternity of the child. The belief is that abstaining from sex even from one's husband promotes safe delivery.<sup>70</sup>

Again, it is taboo for the pregnant woman to make fun of those who are physically challenged or deformed in a particular way as this gesture is enough to make her have a child who can be equally physically challenged or worse.<sup>71</sup> Also, a pregnant woman is not supposed to be seen eating in public. The belief is that when the pregnant woman is seen eating, for example, pawpaw in public, any person who knows the dark arts could harm the baby in her womb through what she is eating. Also, the skin of the baby can become dark, spotty and rough like pawpaw seeds. Again, it is taboo for a pregnant woman to bathe outside as it puts her at the mercy of malicious spirits who are mostly functional at night.<sup>72</sup> Also, it is taboo for a pregnant woman to play mischief with animals, especially domestic animals. The idea is

<sup>61</sup> Interview with Togbe Gavu. (Togbe Gavu is the priest of *Duveh*) on 3<sup>rd</sup> December, 2022

<sup>62</sup> *Duveh*'s shrine is indeed a huge compound with three main chambers. The first chamber is where meetings and other social functions may be held. The priest may live there with his wife and children. The second chamber is where the *Duvehnua* and the *xholusi* perform rituals. The third chamber, is the room in which Togbe *Duveh* is said to reside. This third chamber is actually the 'Hol of Holies' in Peki.

<sup>63</sup> Interview with Togbe Gavu. Togbe Gavu is the priest of *Duveh* on 3<sup>rd</sup> December, 2022

<sup>64</sup> This is true because most of the taboos that govern the chieftaincy institution, tend to take a more religious outlook and these taboos are not only binding on the chief but on the whole community as well. Ameyibor Kwesi explains that, there are proscriptions which regulates how the chief relates to his subordinates. For example, it is a taboo for a menstruating woman to exchange handshakes with the chief. This is because menstruating women are considered ritually unclean and thus a taboo for them make any sort of contact with the chief

<sup>65</sup> Interview with Ampofo Onigas. An elder of the Agodake Clan in Peki on 30<sup>th</sup> November, 2022

<sup>66</sup> Interview with Deiga Kwadzo Dei XII (Paramount Chief of Peki Traditional Area) at Peki Blengo. 18th February 2022.

<sup>67</sup> Interview with Togbe Sukpa VI. Chief of the Agodake Clan in Peki on 19<sup>th</sup> November, 2022 at Peki Avetile. See also Nukunya, *Tradition and change in Ghana*.100. Abotchie, *Social Control in Traditional Southern Ewe Land of Ghana*.56

<sup>68</sup> Sarpong, *Ghana in Retrospect; Some Aspects of Ghanaian Culture*. 53

<sup>69</sup> Interview with Nyasor Veronica. (Teacher at Anyinabasi D.AVolta-Region) on 18<sup>th</sup> November, 2022 at Peki Avetile

<sup>70</sup> Interview with Bronni Sai. (Clerk at Peki Magistrate Court) on 18<sup>th</sup> November, 2022 at Peki Avetile.

<sup>71</sup> Interview with Ameyibor Ernest. (Lecturer at Ghana Institute of Languages.) on 16<sup>th</sup> November, 2022 at Accra

<sup>72</sup> Interview with Nyasor Akosua. (A business woman) on 23<sup>rd</sup> November, 2022 at Peki Avetile.

that the harm she may inflict on those animals may be visited upon her child in good measure. In severe cases, the child may die in her womb.<sup>73</sup>

### **Major Taboos**

These forms of taboos may encompass taboos which have a sociological outlook, those which have a religious outlook and those that can overlap (those that could have both a sociological as well as a religious outlook) in some cases, the violation of some taboos are classified as simply abominable (*Busu*). Examples of such major taboos include;

#### ***Incest***

Not everyone may agree on the precise definition of the word incest. Any form of sexual activity involving members of the same family is generally frowned upon, regardless of how different cultures may view incest. Almost every human society disapproves of this behaviour and eventually taboos it. Such a taboo is primarily in place to avert intermarriages and interbreeding within the same family. The idea of engaging in sexual activity with one's own family is naturally abhorrent to people. The correct relationship that exists between members of the same family should not be confused with the relationship that should exist between a wife and a husband, for there is no recognised society in the world that encourages copulation between children and parents.<sup>74</sup>

#### ***Murder***

Murder in all its forms (matricide, patricide, fratricide suicide etc) is considered a major taboo in Peki. It is taboo to take one's life or that of another for any reason. This is so because in the minds of the Pekis, life, particularly human life is something which only *Mawu* can give thus He is the only one who is expected to take it. Anyone who takes life wilfully or inadvertently has violated a major taboo. As much as taking the life of another is taboo, it is a grave abomination to take the life of a pregnant woman.<sup>75</sup>

#### ***Homosexuality***

The natural order of sex is between a male and a female.<sup>76</sup> Any deviation from this order is a taboo, one that is treated with serious repugnance. Among the Pekis, homosexuality is a concept people give very little thought to; hence, it is not even discussed. However, such a deviation from the regular pattern of sex is frowned upon as it undercuts the true purpose of sex and is treated with disgust as well.<sup>77</sup> Even though the issue of same-sex marriage is never discussed in the Peki cultural milieu, whoever is caught in any behaviour which suggests homosexual tendencies, qualifies for stark sanctions.

#### ***Bestiality***

Just like incest, a taboo act like bestiality,<sup>78</sup> is treated with disgust. Among the Pekis, violating a taboo act such as bestiality is a crime not fit to be discussed, as it is so incendiary. The mass opprobrium such an act receives though possibly not rational, is firm, fast and harsh. Ameyibor Kwesi stated in an interview that, though bestiality is highly prohibited, it happens but on an infrequent level because one who engages in any form of sexual relationship with an animal is mentally not sound or engages in the act for some diabolic ritual purposes.<sup>79</sup> Punishment for individuals who violate such taboos is determined by the priest, the chief and his council of elders. Sanctions may take the form of banishments, heavy fines, death (in very extreme cases) etc.

### **Minor Taboos**

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<sup>73</sup> Interview with Nyasor Veronica. (Teacher at Anyinabasi D.AVolta-Region) on 18<sup>th</sup> November, 2022

<sup>74</sup> Sarpong, *Ghana in Retrospect; Some Aspects of Ghanaian Culture*.55.

<sup>75</sup> Interview with Togbe Twum (Herbalist and a Farmer) on 2<sup>nd</sup> February 2022 at Peki Wudome.

<sup>76</sup> Proverbs 30:19.

<sup>77</sup> See also, S Mokhobo, 'AIDS and the Mining Industry', in *Chomber of Mines Newsletter*. August/October. 11989. 22

<sup>78</sup> Interview with Ameyibor Kwesi. (Lecturer at Ghana Institute of Languages.) on 16<sup>th</sup> November, 2022 at Accra; S Mokhobo, "AIDS and the Mining Industry," *Chomber of Mines Newsletter*, August 1989.

<sup>79</sup> Interview with Ameyibor Kwesi. (Lecturer at Ghana Institute of Languages.) on 16<sup>th</sup> November, 2022. Accra

Sexual intercourse between couples at midday, death during pregnancy or childbirth, and pounding of *fufu* at night are some minor taboos among the people of Peki. Also, bringing a bunch of firewood home and failing to cut the tether is a taboo. It is taboo for men to eat directly from the cooking pot.<sup>80</sup>

### **The current state of taboos in Peki**

The study revealed that owing to the many social changes which have occurred in Peki,<sup>81</sup> it is safe to say and conclude that the original state of some taboos is not as it used to be. Some have been significantly altered. Some taboos have been relaxed whereas others have been obliterated.

The findings of the study suggest that the influx of imported religious traditions has challenged most of the structures of society and taboos have not been spared. According to Togbe Kumi, "One thing we must know is that Christianity as it was brought to us, is in very sharp contrast with almost everything that our own culture represents. Most of the doctrines of the Christians fly in the face of the traditions of society."

<sup>82</sup> His observation is similar to Nukunya's assertion that the arrival of foreign religions such as Christianity has challenged and weakened the belief in the divinities and customs, taboos and norms that form the basis of social order in Peki.<sup>83</sup> Also, due to a lot of education, these taboos seem to be slowly disappearing. Observations from the field study suggest that formal education has debased most of the taboos which once held sway in the community. However, some taboos continue to exist in Peki and are accorded the needed respect. Klem Kwami indicated that although he is a Christian, an elder in the Wesleyan church, and has had tertiary education, however, he still observes the taboo of *Duveh* and also abides by all the rules that govern the society. He stated, "I do not worship *Duveh* however, I abide by all 'his' taboos except those that fly in the face of my Christian faith."<sup>84</sup>

Also, further findings from the study suggest that a section of the population considers taboos to be backward because of modernisation. Modernisation is expected to help any society progress and to be well informed about how to behave to sustain order and to be able to know the positive and negative consequences of any action that people take in their societies. Surprisingly, the very essence of modernity has been misconstrued to mean a sharp disconnect with the past and everything positive it has to offer as a result some community members think taboos are, for the most part, irrational, superstitious, and irrelevant and retard progress.

### **Taboos as Social Control Mechanism in Peki**

Taboos deal with the question of 'dos and don'ts, forbidden actions, words as well as places. In Peki, taboos are incorporated into ethical norms concerned with regulating both the public as well as the public behaviour of community members. Ideally, the conduct of community members must by default have the well-being of the entire community at heart. Through taboos, the conduct of the individuals is regulated to ensure order within the society. Any breach of the taboos of a society is regarded as immoral, and evil and undercuts the order within the society, as a result, appropriate sanctions must apply. In Peki, taboos are rooted in a stark belief that man must observe rules or injunctions instituted by the community which are intended to regulate the behaviour of community members by making them conform to the standards of society and also make them imbibe societal virtues and eschew bad conducts.

Taboos play a crucial role in shaping social behaviour and maintaining social order in Peki as they serve as a measure of controlling the behaviour of individuals in ways that conform to societal standards. By establishing clearly defined boundaries of what is considered acceptable and unacceptable, taboos help to define the moral fabric of a society. Taboos also serve as a mechanism for reinforcing societal values and beliefs. They act as a form of social control, discouraging behaviours that can be seen as harmful, immoral, or threatening to the social order. Violating a taboo often carries severe consequences, such as social ostracism, banishment, heavy fines, and death penalties in some cases, and also puts the whole community at the mercy of spiritual retribution, which can manifest itself in many ways. Taboos are not simply avoidance rules that are merely observed by the people of Peki. A second

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<sup>80</sup> Interview with Togbe Appiah Kodzo (Business man) at Peki Blengo. 13<sup>th</sup> February 2022.

<sup>81</sup> This indicates the influx of imported religious tradition like Islam and Christianity and the advent of formal education.

<sup>82</sup> Interview with Togbe Kumi (Traditional priest, Farmer) at Peki Dzake on 2<sup>nd</sup> February 2022.

<sup>83</sup> Nukunya, *Tradition and Change in Ghana: An Introduction to Sociology*.144.

<sup>84</sup> Interview with Klem Kwami (Wood technician) at Peki-Avetile 15<sup>th</sup> February 2022

and deeper look at these taboos reveals that taboos do not only serve as an instrument to control the behaviour of the indigenes, but they also function as a pedagogical tool aimed at inculcating desirable behaviour that can ensure the longevity and continuity of the society rather than a social, cultural or religious construct, intended to punish.

## RECOMMENDATION

This paper postulates that order is crucial to the growth of society and one of the ways of ensuring order and controlling the behaviour of people in society is through taboos. Despite the influence of foreign religious values and some secularizing trends, taboos continue to exist and are still being observed. The researchers recommend that a holistic conservation policy to be implemented to enhance Ghanaian taboos as an appreciable sort of affirmative action. It is not lost on the researchers that some taboos are capable of disrupting development; however, they recommend that such taboos be thought through and redesigned to suit modern trends without compromising societal values or be completely discarded if they can undercut development. Also, traditional leaders need to take appropriate steps with regard to sensitising community members, particularly immigrants with the taboos of the community.

## CONCLUSION

The thrust of this study has been to discuss some notable taboos among the people of Peki in Ghana and their relevance for social control. It brought to the fore some notable taboos, some of which were found to have religious overtones whereas others have cultural underpinnings, some also could double as a religious and a cultural taboo at once. Taboo everywhere differs. Some taboos are universally important, whereas others are very specific to a particular person. Most taboos rely on the appeal to tradition for their function. Now, as seen in the whole discussion, taboos are intended to teach, guide and direct people's behaviour in Peki. It helps in the socio-political, and religious life of a society. It is clear that if all these taboos had not been instituted to influence people's lives in ways that would engender order, there would have been disorder in the society. One should not lose sight of the fact that men typically follow their interests and, in the process, they wilfully or inadvertently violate clearly defined taboos. The absence of proper checks on the behaviour of community members undercuts the order in the community. Thus the relevance of taboos as a control measure in Peki, cannot be understated. However, there is a need for more studies to be conducted into a complex socio-religious construct like taboo not only as a potential tool for social control but also as a tool for development.

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