

Psychological Perceptions and Values in Some Selected Beliefs and Taboos of the Denkyira Ethnic Group in Ghana

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ABSTRACT

The Denkyiras are one of the ethnic groups in the Central Region of Ghana. Their forefathers instituted various taboos which were used as stringent measures to control anticipated social problems indirectly without recourse to questioning. The Denkyira assigned superstitious meanings to their taboos to make them very sacred and more terrifying. They associated the taboos with God, their gods, and the ancestors and decreed that offenders will incur their wrath and the punishments often have repercussions on the individual offender and the society at large. Owing to this, the people of Denkyira have since time immemorial observed the taboos of their descents religiously without knowing their meaning because most of the people were illiterate and could not interpret them in scientific terms. This has necessitated this paper to give scientific, psychological and sociological meanings to explain some selected taboos. The researcher, himself, a native Denkyira, has lived among the people for a long time and having observed from experience, found out from the elderly, chiefs, queen mothers, traditional priests, has come out with the empirical meanings to some selected taboos and beliefs of his people.

Definition of Terms

Ancestors:	Dead people who led lives in their life time that are worthy of emulation and are revered
Superstition:	Beliefs that have no empirical basis
“Bragoro”:	Puberty rites for females at menarche
“Kyiribra”:	Rites for people who defy “bragoro” and gets pregnant
“Abosom”:	Gods
“Asaase yaa”:	Earth goddess
“Fufuo”	Denkyira staple food that is made of pounded plantain and cassava
“Akan”	A collection of Twi speaking ethnic groups found mainly in Ghana

1.1 Definition of Taboo

(Boahen, 1999) defines taboo as the various things that society considers as sacred which, its members are not permitted to taint them by the laws of that society. These sacred things form part of the Akan cultural and religious beliefs. The enactments of the Akan laws are strictly based on their taboos and abominations.

On his part, (Sarpong, 1974) points out that a taboo is a rule of behaviour which is associated with a belief that infraction will result in an inevitable change in the ritual status of the person who fails to keep the rule. Sarpong explains that the authority behind the sanctions on taboos rests in some kind of supernatural power, albeit indefinable.

Taboos are prohibitions against an item, person, or type of behaviour. In religious taboos, the forbidden item is believed to be either unclean or sacred, and the taboo is imposed for protection against the item's power. Prohibitions against incest and marriage within certain groups are examples of behavioural taboos. Some taboos are not wholly a matter of religion, but are rather more concerned with social relationships; an example is the observance of caste. Common taboo areas include death, divorce, and mental illness (Microsoft Encarta, 2005).

1.2 Background

The Denkyira is one of the Akan groups of Ghana who have various beliefs that manifest themselves in what they consider as abominations and taboos. Most of these taboos are associated with strenuous punishments

whiles others are considered as empty taboos. The empty taboos or beliefs according to the Akans do not attract any punishment in the sense that a breach of such a taboo in effect, will have no adverse repercussions on the offender, the community, or the society at large. The institution of the beliefs and its concomitant punishments and interpretations are intelligent ways/means by which the Denkyira associate with life experiences. These they believed would ensure that a strict adherence would lead to the development of the society. These worked to perfection in the olden days when every member of the community obliged to the tenets of the laws built out of the taboos. It was upheld as a social responsibility every citizen had to abide by without questioning.

Adherence and observation of the taboos of the community helps in the obedience of the laws of the society and makes them (laws) work efficiently. The taboos also help in the proper upbringing of the younger generation and thus bring freedom and satisfaction. The Denkyiras claim their taboos assist in curbing the menace of wildfires, prevention of diseases and unnecessary deaths.

The beliefs and taboos of the Denkyiras are deeply rooted in the powers of the gods and the ancestors who wield the authority to reward the community with good omen and punish defaulters of social rules and obligations as well. They are held in higher esteem as they are also known for their compassion and the good things they bestow on the community. The Denkyiras insisted that non adherence to the taboos makes the community incur the wrath of the gods and ancestors. The associated punishment meted to the community, included drought, famine, plague, and epidemics. Everybody became aware that if they breached the laws or taboos, the gods and ancestors will cause an outbreak of infectious diseases, hunger and even deaths. When it thus happened, the gods and the ancestors have to be pacified through the pouring of libation with strong alcoholic drinks such as schnapps and the slaughtering of a number of sheep and fowls in ritual performance to cleanse the 'filth' or wrong doing.

To avert the calamity that will befall the community as a result of non-compliance and non-adherence of the tenets of societal beliefs, the elderly sanctioned some taboos to serve as the kingpin rules that everybody should obey. Conforming to this taboos meant the development of the society as a result of the good omen that the gods and ancestors bestow on the community and its people.

Although, these taboos were seen as social prohibitions purported to please the gods and ancestors, our forebear had instituted them for either scientific or psychological reasons which were not overt in the minds of the people in the community. All that the upcoming members of the society were told was to be mindful all the time not to breach any of the taboos so as not to incur the wrath of the ancestors even though they had both scientific and psychological implications.

For this reason, it is prudent to unearth the scientific and psychological interpretations that are associated with selected Denkyira Taboos which hitherto became the norm and have served as the guiding principles that kept society alive in times when there were no hospitals and other facilities and amenities that could be used to salvage any negative effects that could have a toll on their lives.

The reverence given to some of these traditional believes is gradually loosing grounds among the Denkyira in Ghana with the advent of foreign religion and formal education. This has led to the breakdown of adherence to traditional laws that were used to protect the forests, animals, rivers, fishes and the properties of the society as well as the well-being of the people as a whole.

2.1 Scientific Explanations to the Denkyira Superstitions and Taboos

The superstitions and the taboos that became the norm of the Denkyira society though seem to the people as ordained rules bequeathed to the society by their ancestors, had scientific meanings which the elderly did not declare explicitly because they were mostly illiterates. Empirical studies on these taboos that kept the society going indicate the scientific interpretations to selected taboos as they are explained below.

Among the people of Denkyira, it is forbidden to sing while bathing and if you do so, the elderly intimidated that one's mother will die. For the fact that nobody would not want to facilitate the death of his or her own mother, they abided by that and up to date, at this modern times, scarcely do people sing when bathing. The scientific interpretation to this taboo is that there is the likelihood that some of the foam or lather would enter the person's mouth. This taboo therefore, was made to prevent the acidic and harmful chemicals in the soap from accidentally entering the mouth to avert the negative consequence that could even result to death.

Sweeping the room in the night was prohibited and if anybody dares to sweep in the night, it is said the person would invite witches, wizards, and evil spirits home. For fear of the evil spirits and witches and their nefarious activities, that are detrimental to the individual and to the community as a whole, the people adhered to this taboo religiously. But the study revealed that this is attributed to the fact that most of the people owned valuable and precious items that could be swept away unseen because most of the indigenous houses in the ancient times did not have lights and the tendency of sweeping gold dust and nuggets away in the night was predictable.

In the olden days, the elders and their children gathered by the fire side in the evenings to tell and listen to Ananse stories (folk tales) after meals before going to bed as a form of entertainment. These contained derivations of wisdom and life experiences. Children's interest in these stories make them develop the feeling of gathering to tell Ananse stories and folk tales in the afternoons but their parents warn them it is a taboo to gather and tell Ananse stories in the afternoon otherwise, they will grow horns on their knees knowing very well this is an impossibility. This is said to discourage children from using precious day times to gather and tell folk stories at the detriment of household chores and other works that require their services.

In the Denkyira communities, it is a taboo to go into certain forests to cut down trees. In an attempt to do so, it is said that one will meet the gods of the land and will see blood ooze out of the cut tree. The scientific implication of not cutting down trees is to promote afforestation. It is also forbidden to hunt in the forest at certain times in the year, because the gods (abosom) and or "asase yaa" the earth goddess will turn into an animal or a beast, attack, and cause the defaulter to die instantly. Communities that are located in the forest zones of Ghana in general, forbid hunting and farming in the forest at some days and some periods of the year. It is also a taboo for a hunter to kill an animal and refuse to eat. Worst of all of the offences is a farmer or hunter who kills game that is young, pregnant or fending for their young ones. It is believed that such a person might also not have children or lose his children if he kills a pregnant or young game. The scientific explanation to this taboo is that those days are believed to be the breeding time of the species. No one therefore is expected to disturb the animals so that they can breed, multiply and grow in abundance for future consumption. This is also to ensure that the species are conserved.

The Denkyira villages observe one day out of the seven days of the week and certain specific days such as "Akwasidae", "Awukudae", "Fofie" are set aside as sacred or taboo days. During these days, people are not supposed to go to the farm and cultivate the land or go to the riverside for fishing. Anyone who contravenes this taboo is dragged to the chief's palace to answer queries and is made to pacify the gods by paying a specified number of sheep and bottles of schnapps. The belief was that people will disturb the earth goddess and her children during these sacred days that the goddesses feast their children and made it a great taboo for anyone to cultivate the land or fish on those days. The scientific implication of this was that, if people did not catch fish on those days, there is the likelihood of increased reproduction of fingerlings. It is also a way of protecting fishes and their fingerlings from being caught which eventually was a way to boost the stock of fishes in the river. It also helps in curbing extinction of vulnerable fishes that have low reproduction rates. The explanation to this taboo shows that staying away from work on those days will enable people rest after six days of continuous work in order to regain full strength and vitality to tackle their jobs with zeal and vigour the next day.

In the rural Denkyira communities, located in the forest areas, it is also a taboo for people to fetch young snails until they are matured. During the early days of the snails, they do not hibernate but come out in abundance, and move in their numbers to feed themselves. The elderly warned that if people hunted the young snails and ate

them, the community suffers the punishment of having the pregnant giving birth to children with autism, buffoons, and unhealthy children affected with cerebral palsy and so on. The scientific sense in this is to ensure that the snails grow and become nutritious and also to increase in reproduction and to avoid extinction.

Incest, which is, having sexual relationship with one's own family members and direct siblings, is regarded as an anti-social act and a grievous taboo to engage in in Denkyira. The scientific explanation of this taboo is that, it is believed that if there is a genetic disease in the family, incest will cause it to manifest itself in their children. Inbreeding may develop undesirable traits but marrying from outside the family (outbreeding) will eliminate the danger of hereditary diseases.

The extraordinary behaviour of twins makes the Denkyira believe that they possess magical powers which they could use to destroy things and harm people and are perceived to bring bad luck and bad omen to the couple who gave birth to twins and the family as well. This is attributed to the fact that they are two people born from the same womb at the same time (day). This belief could be dispelled by the scientific explanation that twins are formed when the zygote formed after fertilization is split into two to develop two individuals or when two eggs are released from the ovary and two sperms fertilize them to form two individuals. Twins are human beings like everybody else. All human beings are formed by the same fundamental process whether it is one person, twins, triplets, quadruplets, etc. Therefore twins have no exceptional supernatural powers than any other people. The behaviour they portray may be character traits that might be hereditary or influenced by the environment or by peers.

Among the Denkyira, it is a taboo for a woman to fetch water from the riverside during her menstrual period and that if they breached this taboo; they will incur the wrath of the gods. The belief is that they are unclean and might contaminate the water.

Whistling in the night is something that the Denkyira abhor and threaten that dwarfs or beasts will visit the family and cause mayhem in the house. Indeed, no dwarf or beast would come to the house but this is explained that people need rest at night time and are likely to have gone to bed. Whistling in the night would disturb and cause people to awake up instead of having their rest.

In the rural Denkyira communities, it is a taboo to bring firewood bundled with palm fronds home. The same sentiment is expressed with the issue of bringing long firewood home and the gravity of the punishments meted to the offenders involved in breaching these two taboos is the same. Similar to this, is the prohibition of bringing a bunch or bunches of palm fruits home. Flouting this taboo resulted in the summoning of the offender to the chief's palace where, the one is made to pacify the gods by slaughtering a sheep, accompanied by a specified number of schnapps and money. This is attributed to the fact that the chaff of the bunch of palm fruit and the palm fronds that are unwrapped would become rubbish and when decomposed, they make the community dirty, choke gutters and become breeding grounds for mosquitoes, diseases and sicknesses.

Traditional potters are not supposed to feed or beat the child when working with clay. The scientific reason associated with this is that clay compounds are mostly infested by worms and feeding the child would result in transferring micro-organisms such as worms or germs to the child who would consequently develop diseases and sicknesses.

The people of Denkyira hold the belief that people should not play outside when there is a torrential rain; they have to plant a cutlass in the open space before they can play or work in the rains else they will be struck by thunder. To them, by planting the cutlass in the open space, the cutlass will serve as a lightening arrester should there be lighting following the torrential rains.

Most communities forbid bringing sugar cane to the village or community following the adage that states that "the one who brings sugar cane home brings housefly home." It is well known that a swan of flies including

bees and houseflies feed on the rubbish produced by the chaff of the sugar cane. These flies then become a source of transmitting bacteria that cause sicknesses such as dysentery and cholera.

It is the belief of the people of Denkyira that children who constantly eat without fish or meat are likely to suffer from bodily odour to the extent that they will be despised by other people in the community. Meats contain proteins that assist in the healthy growth of the child and children who lack proteins in the food they eat will be retarded in growth and suffer from nutritional other health issues.

It is also a taboo to pound “fufuo” in the night. This was and continues to be a measure to forestall the tendency of pounding or mixing insects, dangerous and foreign materials which could not be seen because during the night, majority of the people used lanterns which could not provide adequate task light for the pounding of “fufuo” in night time. Fufuo supposed to be malleable and pounding in the night would not allow unwanted spots, bumps and fragments of the wooden pestle to be removed. Scientifically, fufuo is a heavy food that takes time to digest for metabolism to take place and if it is eaten in the night it may not digest and may cause flatulence in the stomach, uneasiness during sleep and stomach upsets.

2. 2 Psychological implications of Taboos and Beliefs

The people of Denkyira insisted that one should not greet when he or she is on the way to the toilet (i.e. responding to nature’s call). They claim greeting while on the way to the toilet, the person will incur bad luck. This is done to prevent people from the inconveniences associated with being delayed unduly by the respondent that may result in the act of defecating or soiling one’s self. This in itself is not healthy and also, a disgraceful act that may leave an indelible social mark on him or her.

A teenage Denkyira girl who does not go through the rituals of puberty rites or initiation popularly called “Bragoro” before becoming pregnant commits an offence that is tantamount to the punishment of being banished from the community to live in the middle of the thick forest and to be used to pacify the Gods. This is done by taking the disobedient girl through the rites of “kyiribra”. This taboo has both psychological and scientific meanings. The effect of this taboo is to prevent girls from teenage pregnancies and early marriage which is so prevalent in some communities in modern day Ghana and to instill discipline and good moral habits in the young girls. It is also a way to instill abstinence from sex among teenage girls to help them gain honour and dignity for themselves after successfully going through the puberty rites and marriage rites endorsed by the families of would be couple. That, teenagers would abstain from sex at early stage will minimize the contraction of sexually transmitted diseases such as HIV AIDS, syphilis, among others has scientific connotation.

Killing one’s self is considered as a heinous crime and greatest taboo in the Denkyira communities. Anybody who tried to commit suicide or did that faced humiliation and was expected to be decapitated. The event of suicide causes a stir in the atmosphere in the village community and thus brings humiliation to the family as a result of the treatment of disdain meted to the body. People were barred from touching the deceased (suicide) as well. The psychological implications are that the person who kills himself proclaims himself as an enemy of everybody. It is assumed that the person who commits suicide does not confide and trust anybody in the society. To avoid disgrace and to serve as a deterrent to other people wanting to take their own lives, the dead body is maltreated and not given befitting burial and no funeral celebrations are organized in memory of him or her. That people were not to touch the dead body meant that they could be contaminated by the poison the person might have used.

Cohabitation or sexual intercourse in the bush was and continues to be anti-social because it threatens the life of the society. The reason is that the multiplication of the human race is dependent on sexual intercourse. This act of sexual intercourse is held in higher esteem and consequently regarded by the people of the Denkyira society as a sacred act. Psychological and scientific explanations to this are that those who engage in in sexual intercourse in the bush expose themselves to the risk of being bitten by venomous creatures such as snakes, spiders, tarantulas, scorpions and etc. This is because the Akan communities are situated in forests areas that

habour dangerous creatures. Sexual activities in the bush reduce the level of the human dignity to a state that is comparable to the animal kingdom. This is considered an offence against the ancestors and the gods of the land. The punishment associated with this act is the cost of pacifying the gods and ancestors by slaughtering sheep and spilling the blood onto the feet of the offenders.

It was a taboo to drive across a river and not blow the horns. Whoever flouted this committed an offence that was punishable by the gods. It is the belief of the Denkyira that the river goddesses may be bathing their children on the road and they may not hear or see the vehicle coming and that the vehicle will run over the children and kill them. This is explained that, previously, people including the young ones went to fetch water from the stream and if drivers did not blow their horns may kill somebody if he/she does not hear the noise of the cars.

3. Conclusions

From observation, the meanings assigned to the taboos by the Denkyira though were not empirical;

1. They adhered to them to serve as checks against social vices and misdemeanours.
2. The strict adherence of the taboos has scientific bases though their forefathers did not explicitly express them to be the essence for which the taboos were instituted.
3. Psychologically, the taboos have gone a long way to build good morals, attitudes and behaviours among the rank and file of the people in Denkyira.
4. Good upbringing has been the keynote or catchword in the institution of taboos among the Denkyira as children who abided by the taboos were nurtured to bring honour, glory and fame to themselves as they become responsible and respectable citizens.
5. People in the community lived harmoniously as they ensured that everybody did his part to ensure that others do not flout the taboos to avert untold calamities and hardships.

4. Recommendations/Suggestions

1. The people in the Denkyira communities especially the youth of today should not see the taboos as anachronistic rather; they should see them as the foundation upon which the dignity of the society they find themselves in was built.
2. Better and further empirical explanations and interpretations should be given to other taboos that were not captured in this research activity to make everybody who finds him or herself in the culture of the Denkyira understand them and live by them.
3. Knowing and understanding the empirical values of the taboos and upholding them will forestall avoidable catastrophes and calamities such as drought, famine, bush burning, extinction of animals and fishes, disaster, and above all, pandemic of diseases.
4. Keeping to the taboos would in a broader sense help produce law abiding students, community members, citizens and as well foster discipline in the communities across board.
5. As part of the social studies syllabus, the scientific interpretations of the various taboos in the Ghanaian communities should be taught in schools in Ghana to help preserve the fundamental laws that have sustained and propelled society to this far.

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