

## Taboos and quirks of human behaviour

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Taboo is a proscription of behaviour that affects everyday life. Tabooed topics typically include: bodies and their effluvia (sweat, snot, faeces, menstrual fluid, etc.); the organs and acts of sex, micturition and defecation; diseases, death, killing (including hunting and fishing); naming, addressing, touching, viewing persons and sacred beings, objects and places; food gathering, preparation, and consumption (Allan and Burridge 2006).

When Captain James Cook (1728–79) and his surgeon on the *Resolution* William Anderson (died 1778) first encountered the term *taboo* (or *tabu*) in 1777 they used it to describe the behaviour of Polynesians towards things that were not to be done, entered, seen or touched (Cook 1893: 91; Cook 1967: 129, 135, 176, 948). Such taboos are, in some form, almost universal. Cook 1893: 91 reported a constraint against Tahitian women eating with men except when they could remain unobserved by other Tahitians. It is an example of a taboo on bad manners, one subject to the social sanction of severe disapproval – rather than putting the violator’s life in danger, as some taboos do. Taboos arise out of social constraints on the individual’s behaviour where it can cause discomfort, harm or injury. People are at metaphysical risk when dealing with sacred persons, objects and places; they are at physical risk from powerful earthly persons, dangerous creatures, and disease. A person’s soul or bodily effluvia may put them at metaphysical, moral, or physical risk and may contaminate others; a social act may breach constraints on polite behaviour. Infractions of taboos can lead to illness or death as well as to the lesser penalties of corporal punishment, incarceration, social ostracism, or mere disapproval. Even an unintended contravention of taboo risks condemnation and censure; generally, people can and do avoid tabooed behaviour unless they intend to violate a taboo.

A 19<sup>th</sup> century view, attributable directly to Wundt’s ‘folk psychology’ (Wundt 1927) is a belief attributed to so-called ‘primitive peoples’ that there is a ‘demonic’ power within a tabooed object comparable with the dangerous power of a Polynesian chief or the Emperor of Japan or Satan himself. The effect on whomsoever comes into inappropriate – if not downright unlawful – contact with a tabooed person or thing is severely detrimental to the perpetrator (see Freud 1950: 21–24). This was the common (but not universal) interpretation of the term *taboo* among anthropologists. Mead 1937, for instance, restricts the term *taboo* ‘to

describe prohibition against participation in any situation of such inherent danger that the very act of participation will recoil upon the violator of the taboo.' It is as if the tabooed object were like a radioactive fuel rod which will have dire effects on anyone who comes into direct contact with it unless they know how to protect themselves. 'Cases are on record in which persons who had unwittingly broken a taboo actually died of terror on discovering their fatal error' writes Frazer 1875: 17. To violate a taboo can lead to the auto da fé of the perpetrator. In old Hawai'i a commoner who had sex with his sister was put to death. A woman who commits adultery can be stoned to death under Sharia law in parts of northern Nigeria today. Under Governor George W Bush a convicted murderer was very likely to be executed in the U.S. state of Texas. According to the Bible, God told Moses 'You shall not permit a sorceress to live' (*Exodus* 22:18); implementing scripture, hundreds of heretics and witches were burned in Europe when Christianity had more political power than it does today. Although most taboo violations do not result in capital punishment, there are plenty of other sanctions on behaviour prohibited under the law – whether this is law as conceived and promulgated in a modern nation state or traditional lore in 18<sup>th</sup> century Polynesia. That which is illegal is ipso facto taboo by the very fact that it is prohibited behaviour. But, as we have already seen there is more that falls under the heading of taboo.

There are taboos in which notions of uncleanness are the motivating factor. Many communities taboo physical contact with a menstruating woman, believing that it pollutes males in particular. According to Schwarz 2001, Navajo people frequently attribute severe arthritis, rheumatism and becoming hunchbacked or similarly deformed to inappropriate contact with menstrual blood – whose odour reputedly causes headaches. When menstruating, Navajo women cannot go into a sweathouse, a cornfield, or to ceremonies, they cannot weave baskets, butcher meat, ride horses, or sleep with either husband or children. Women are required to be very careful to cleanse themselves, and contaminated clothing and sheets have to be washed separately lest the pollution spread to other linen. Elsewhere in the world many places of worship taboo menstruating women because they would defile holy sites. The Balinese used to prefer one storey buildings so that unclean feet (and worse) would not pass above their heads; they still avoid walking under washing lines where garments that have been in contact with unclean parts of the body might pass over their heads. Many communities taboo contact with a corpse such that no-one who has touched the cadaver is permitted to handle food.

In all these and similar cases, there is an assumption that both accidental breach and defiance of the taboo will be followed by some kind of trouble to the offender, such as lack of

success in hunting, fishing, or other business, and the sickness or the death of the offender or one of their relatives. In many communities, a person who meets with an accident or fails to achieve some goal will infer, as will others, that s/he has in some manner committed a breach of taboo. Generally speaking we do have the power to avoid tabooed behaviour. When a breach can be ascribed to 'bad karma', there remains a suspicion that the perpetrator is somehow responsible for having sinned in a former life. Even ascribing a breach to 'bad luck' is barely excusable: Why is this person's luck bad? That question has a negative presupposition. The conclusion must be that any violation of taboo, however innocently committed, risks condemnation.

Those who violate a taboo can often purify themselves or be purified by confessing their sin and submitting to a ritual. The *Oxford English Dictionary* 1989 quotes from Cook's *Voyage to the Pacific* ii. xi. (1785) I. 410: 'When the *taboo* is incurred, by paying obeisance to a great personage, it is thus easily washed off.' Hopley describes a Kikuyu ritual for legitimizing and purifying an incestuous relationship.

It sometimes happens, however, that a young man unwittingly marries a cousin; for instance, if a part of the family moves away to another locality a man might become acquainted with a girl and marry her before he discovered the relationship. In such a case the *thahu* [or *ngahu*, the result of the violation of the taboo] is removable, the elders take a sheep and place it on the woman's shoulders, and it is then killed, the intestines are taken out and the elders solemnly sever them with a sharp splinter of wood [...] and they announce that they are cutting the clan "*kutinyarurira*," by which they mean that they are severing the bond of blood relationship that exists between the pair. A medicine man then comes and purifies the couple. (Hopley 1910: 438)

Christians confess their sins to a priest and are given absolution on behalf of God. In the 1820s a convict from the particularly vicious penal settlement at Macquarie Harbour in Tasmania stabbed a fellow convict in order to be hanged as means of escape. Asked by the chaplain why he didn't just commit suicide: "Oh," he replied, "the case is quite different. If I kill myself I shall immediately descend to the bottomless pit, but if I kill another I would be sent to Hobart Town and tried for my life; if found guilty, the parson would attend me, and then I would be sure of going to Heaven" (Hughes 1987: 379).

Until very recently women among the Nguni peoples of southern Africa practised *hlonipha* – respect expressed through avoidance of personal names of a husband's father and lineal

males in his ascending generations.<sup>1</sup> Personal names of chiefs are tabooed for everyone, along with similar sounding words. Children do not pronounce the names of their parents or the parents' siblings; the personal names of siblings are avoided after puberty; a wife avoids her husband's name and this is often reciprocated. Why is the naming taboo on her husband's ascending male line practised by wives and, principally, pre-menopausal wives? Marriage in Nguni societies is patrilocal: the wife moves into the new husband's father's homestead, she is said to 'go on a long journey' towards integration – at death – into the husband's family. She is, therefore, an outsider rendered regularly impure by menstruation. A wife must not appear bare-headed and bare-breasted before her parents-in-law, or look them in the eye or point at them; she does not enter the father-in-law's hut, nor speak to him directly, nor eat his leftovers; nor can she enter the cattle kraal (i.e. mess with the homestead's wealth). All senior male affines are treated the same way as the father-in-law; so there is a large number of personal names and similar sounding words that the wife must not utter. Her predicament is made more difficult by the fact that Nguni personal names are often taken directly from general vocabulary: e.g. *Mandala* "strength", *Siqandulo* "grindstone", *Langelihle* "nice day". Unless the name-bearer is present, a new wife may be merely reprimanded for not practising *hlonipha*; but frequent breaches of the taboo will cause her to be returned to her father and she can only go back to the husband's homestead with apologies and a goat or two to sacrifice to his ancestors. Violations of *hlonipha* are sacrilegious: they risk sickness, madness or some worse tragedy being visited on the homestead. *Hlonipha* is not practised by a son-in-law, although there are constraints on touching or eating together with his mother-in-law; she, however, must cover her head and breasts in the presence of her son-in-law. It is women who bear the weight of restrictive practice under *hlonipha*.

What explains the practice of *hlonipha*? Basically, it risks putting the male name bearer in harm's way. Note that it is the sound of the name and of all syllables within it that must be avoided. This is because calling a name draws attention to the name-bearer, and also to the

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1. *Hlonipha* (*isihlonipho sabafazi* "wives' avoidance language") achieves phonetic deformation through consonant substitution, e.g. Zulu *ulucha* for *ulunya* "cruelty", *xabuka* for *qabuka* "wake up" (*x* is a lateral click [l], *q* a palatal click [tʃ]), *umugca* for *umuhla* "day"; consonant deletion, e.g. Xhosa *eka* from *hleka* "laugh", *umenze* from *umlenze* "leg". There is also transfer of a noun from one class (gender) to another: e.g. Xhosa *intsana* (class 9) from *usana* "baby" (class 2) or *intsapho* from *usapho* "family". In addition to phonetic deformation, there is lexical substitution e.g. Swati *imphitsa* "dog" for *inja* "dog", *kutinta* "sit at ease" for *kuhlala* "sit", *inkhuleko* "thing to be tethered" for *imbuti* "goat", and obscure ones like Zulu *ebhodwe* "in the cooking pot" for *enzansi* "at the coast". There is also neologism, e.g. Zulu *inhlendla* for *isizense* "scissors", *ukukathula* for *ukuxosha* "to drive away"; and borrowing from another language, e.g. Xhosa *umilisi* "maize" from Afrikaans *mielies*, *ukupeya* "money" from English *pay*, and *izambane* "potato" from Zulu. (See Herbert 1990: 460, 468)

caller. To use a male in-law's name draws attention to the name bearer and puts him at risk. A name is not called after dark lest it draw the attention of a ghost or a witch – or perhaps it is one of these which is calling. As in many societies, the names of dread diseases and dangerous animals are not spoken for similar reasons. Also, for a wife to utter her father-in-law's name belittles him. A wife has low status within the homestead and may even be ordered about by her husband's younger brothers. She will not be addressed by her personal name but, instead, as the daughter of her father or of her clan; once she has a child, she is addressed as mother of that child. All this marks her as an outsider. Any behaviour that focuses attention on her is disallowed: a wife is not permitted to talk loudly or to call out (to a child, for instance, she has to get another child to do this). The wife must avoid drawing attention to herself. Because she retains allegiance to her birth group and their ancestors, she is an outsider. Outsiders are possible aggressors and may practise witchcraft; and a wife is statistically the most likely person in a household to be accused of witchcraft. So, if a wife inadvertently violates *hlonipha*, she spits on the ground and denies she is calling her father-in-law's (or other male in-law's) name. The wife's practice of *hlonipha*, therefore, is a display of deference to the husband's family and of concern for their well-being.

Taboo is more than ritual prohibition and avoidance. We have seen that infractions of taboos can be dangerous to the individual and to his or her society; they can lead (or it is believed that they can lead) to illness or death. But there are also milder kinds of taboo whose violation results in the lesser penalties of corporal punishment, incarceration, social ostracism, or mere disapproval. Humans are social beings and every human being is a member of at least a gender, a family, a generation and – normally – also friendship, recreational, and occupational groups. An individual's behaviour is subject to sanction within these groups and by the larger community. Some groups, for example the family and sports team supporters, have unwritten conventions governing behavioural standards; others, local or national government, have written regulations or laws. Groups with written regulations also have unwritten conventions governing appropriate behaviour. In all cases, sanctions on behaviour arise from beliefs supposedly held in common by a consensus of members of the community or from an authoritative body within the group. Although Freud 1950: 18 has claimed that 'Taboo prohibitions have no grounds and are of unknown origin', it seems obvious that taboos normally arise out of social constraints on the individual's behaviour. They arise in cases where the individual's acts can cause discomfort, harm or injury to him- or herself and to others. The constraint on behaviour is imposed by someone or some physical or metaphysical force that the individual believes has some authority or power over them – the

law, the gods, the society in which one lives, even proprioceptions (as in the self-imposed proscription *Chocolates are taboo for me, they give me migraine*).

To an outsider many prohibitions are perplexing and seem silly. But they are among the common values that link the people of a community together. What one group values another scorns. Shared taboos are therefore a sign of social cohesion. Moreover, as part of a wider belief system they provide the basis people need to function in an otherwise confused and hostile environment. The rites and rituals that accompany taboos give the feeling of control over situations where ordinary mortals have little or none – such as death, illness, bodily functions and even the weather in those communities that still practice rain ceremonies. Mary Douglas' anthropological study of ritual pollution offers insights here. As she saw it (Douglas 1966), the distinction between cleanliness and filth stems from the basic human need to structure experience and render it understandable. That which is taboo threatens chaos and disorder.

Nothing is taboo for all people under all circumstances for all time. There is an endless list of behaviours 'tabooed' yet nonetheless practised at some time in (pre)history by people for whom they are presumably not taboo (for example, many Egyptian Pharaohs married and had children with their sisters or daughters). If a so-called taboo is flouted, it does not function as a taboo for the perpetrator. This does not affect its status as a taboo in the community and perhaps not for the violator at other times in his or her life. Although a taboo can be accidentally breached without the violator putting aside the taboo, when the violation is deliberate, the taboo is not merely ineffectual but inoperative.

Killing people is taboo in most societies; though from time to time and in various places, human sacrifice has been practised, usually to propitiate gods or natural forces that it is thought would otherwise harm the community. Killing enemies gets rewarded everywhere and judicial execution of traitors and murderers is common. Some Islamists believe that blowing themselves up along with a few infidels leads to Paradise. The Christian God said to Moses 'He that smiteth a man, so that he die, shall be surely put to death' (*Exodus* 21: 12). Yet in the Bible we find human sacrifice approved in the murder of an Israelite and a Midianitish woman 'so [that] the plague was stayed from the children of Israel' (*Numbers* 25: 8). God had it in for the Midianites; he told Moses to 'vex ... and smite them' (*Numbers* 25: 17) 'And [the Israelites] warred against the Midianites as the Lord commanded Moses; and they slew all the males', burned their cities, and looted their cattle and chattels (*Numbers* 31: 7–11). Then Moses sent the Israelites back to complete the Lord's work by killing all male

children and women of child-bearing age, keeping other females ‘for yourselves’ (*Numbers* 31: 17–18). God’s work or not, this is military behaviour that would be tabooed today and might lead to a war crimes trial. We are forced to conclude that every taboo must be specified for a particular community of people for a specified context at a given place and time. There is no such thing as an absolute taboo – one that holds for all worlds, times, and contexts.

As originally used in the Pacific islands when first visited by Europeans, taboos prohibited certain people, particularly women, either permanently or temporarily, from certain actions, from contact with certain things and certain other people. A tabooed person was ostracized. The term taboo came to be used of similar customs elsewhere in the world, especially where taboos arose from respect for and fear of metaphysical powers; it was extended to political and social affairs and generalized to the interdiction of the use or practice of anything, especially an expression or topic considered offensive and therefore avoided or prohibited by social custom. Where something physical or metaphysical is said to be tabooed, what is in fact tabooed is its interaction with an individual, a specified group of persons, or, perhaps, the whole community. In short, *taboo* refers to a proscription of behaviour for a specifiable community of one or more persons at a specifiable time in specifiable contexts. In principle, any kind of behaviour can be tabooed. For behaviour to be proscribed it must be perceived as in some way harmful to an individual or their community; but the degree of harm can fall anywhere on a scale from a breach of etiquette to downright fatality.

### **Who dares taboo female genital cutting?**

Usually inflicted on girls aged 4 to 12, FGM is one of the worst violations of the Convention on the Rights of the Child. (<http://www.unicef.org/pon96/womfgm.htm>)

*Female genital cutting* (FGC) also known as *female genital mutilation* (FGM) and *female circumcision* is practised in Africa in a band that spreads east from Senegal across the Sahel, up throughout Sudan and Egypt and down south to Kenya and Tanzania, then back west through Uganda, the Central African Republic and throughout West Africa. FGC is most commonly performed between the ages of four and eight, but up to menarche. There are three types of FGC ranging in severity from clitoridectomy (Type I) to the added excision of the labia minora (Type II) to full infibulation or ‘pharaonic circumcision’ (Type III) which removes part of the labia majora too so that nothing remains of the normal anatomy of the genitalia, except for a wall of flesh from the pubis to the anus, with the exception of a pencil-size opening at the inferior portion of the vulva to allow urine and menstrual blood to pass through. In the latter case, the adult woman will often suffer reverse infibulation to allow for

sexual intercourse; this may be effected by the husband using a knife on their wedding night. During childbirth, the enlargement is too small to allow vaginal delivery and so the infibulation must be opened completely by enlarging the vagina with deep episiotomies. Afterwards, the mother may insist that what is left of her vulva be closed again so that her husband does not reject her nor her friends and family ostracize her.

What explains the practice of FGC, which is illegal in many Western countries and often regarded as sadistic mutilation of girls and women? Evidence from Egyptian mummies shows both clitoridectomy and infibulation occurred in Pharaonic times. Although it is sometimes claimed that the practice was spread from Egypt by Arab traders, there is no evidence for this. It is notable that FGC transcends both culture and religion. It seems likely that one motive for it is to decrease the risk of female promiscuity, since it reduces and may remove the woman's sexual pleasure. This ill-effect, however, is firmly disputed by some infibulated women who do undoubtedly enjoy orgasm, see Lightfoot-Klein 1989: 85f. Nevertheless, FGC is most likely to have negative effects on the woman's sexual pleasure. Infibulation probably provides a proof of virginity, which is a necessary condition for marriage in many FGC societies; this creates an economic advantage in that parents may demand a high bridal price. Furthermore, in some societies, men are forbidden to marry uncircumcised women. Another reason given for FGC is that removal of secreting parts of the genitalia maintains cleanliness. This is surely spurious because FGC cannot prevent micturition and menstruation, nor, one would guess, vaginal secretions resulting from sexual arousal. FGC is sometimes claimed to cure depression, hysteria, and insanity. This is almost certainly pure myth. It is reported that the Mossi of Burkina Faso and the Igbos of Nigeria believe that babies will die if they touch the clitoris during birth; once again, this is incorrect. Finally, it is sometimes claimed that FGC enhances beauty and that FGC prolongs the sexual pleasure of men; of course, the same can be said of those Western women who insert rings through their clitoris and labia.

Most FGC is inflicted on about two million girls a year by people who have had no medical training and who perform the cutting without anaesthetic, sterilization, or the use of proper medical instruments. Most girls survive, but the procedure can lead to death through shock from immense pain, excessive bleeding, or infection. There is often scarring or obstructed flow of urine and menstrual blood, which leads to urinary and reproductive-tract infections and infertility. According to the World Health Organization, all types of FGC pose an increased risk of death to the baby (15% for Type I, 32% for Type II, and 55% for Type III). Infibulated women were 30% more at risk for caesarean sections and had a 70% increase

in postpartum haemorrhage compared to women without FGC. 10 to 20 per thousand babies in Africa die during delivery as a result of the mothers having undergone genital cutting.

According to a joint WHO-UNICEF-UNFPA paper, 'female genital mutilation is an infringement on the physical and psychosexual integrity of women and girls, is a form of violence against them, and is therefore universally unacceptable' (World Health Organization 1997: 1). Shouldn't it therefore be tabooed everywhere? My answer is that, like the appraisal of beauty or terrorism, FGC is a matter of personal preference. The problem is that FGC (like male circumcision) is committed almost exclusively on children, and it is the preferences of the child's parents which dominate, and those preferences reflect the society in which they live. Parents need for their daughter to be socially acceptable. To be proscribed in FGC communities, female genital cutting would need to be accepted as an injurious practice. Mothers would have to accept that they themselves had been harmed by their own parents; next, they would need to persuade their menfolk that FGC should be tabooed. It is not going to happen any day soon.

## **In conclusion**

In this paper I first surveyed what can be meant by *taboo*. I then turned to the practice of FGC to ask why there are many communities in which it is not tabooed. The answer takes us back to the fact that *taboo* refers to a proscription of behaviour for a specifiable community at a specifiable time in specifiable contexts. For behaviour to be proscribed it must be perceived as in some way harmful to an individual or their community. That is not case in those communities that practice FGC.

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