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Taboo

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The word *taboo* derives from the Tongan *tabu* which came to notice toward the end of the eighteenth century. Taboos are proscriptions of behavior arising out of social constraints on the individual's behavior where it is perceived to be a potential cause of 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, disease, and contaminated food. A person's soul or bodily effluvia (sweat, feces, menstrual fluid, etc.) may put them at metaphysical, moral, or physical risk and may contaminate others; a social act may breach constraints on politic and/or polite behavior. 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 avoid tabooed behavior unless they intend to violate a taboo.

Religious ideology is a fecund source for taboo with dire consequences for transgressors. 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 unfettered political power. Under some Islamic regimes the Sharia is interpreted to rule that a woman who commits adultery can be stoned to death.

Killing people is taboo in most societies. Nevertheless, human sacrifice has been practiced to propitiate gods or natural forces that it was thought would otherwise harm the community. Killing enemies is normally approved 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 Bible sanctions execution for murder in Exodus 21:12 and the wartime murder of males and abduction of females in Numbers 25 and 31 – still common practice in today's world.

There are taboos in which notions of uncleanness are the motivating factor. Many communities forbid contact with a corpse such that no one who has touched the cadaver is permitted to handle food. More pervasive is that very many communities forbid physical contact with a menstruating woman, believing it pollutes males. Across the world, many places of worship forbid menstruating women because they would defile holy sites.

Genital mutilation, often referred to as "circumcision," is practiced on both males and females. It is usually perpetrated by



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adults on children under religious auspices. The excuse, when any is offered, is that it benefits the physiological and moral health of the victim and, thence, the community. In the West, female genital mutilation (FGM) is generally tabooed and often illegal but, until very recently, male genital mutilation has not been seen in the same light – partly because it has long been practiced in the West and partly because removal of the foreskin does not adversely affect male sexual abilities. The situation is very different for FGM, of which there are three types: clitoridectomy (Type I), the added excision of the labia minora (Type II), full infibulation (Type III), which removes part of the labia majora too, leaving nothing 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 (World Health Organization 2008). With Type III, the adult woman will often suffer reverse infibulation to allow for sexual intercourse, sometimes 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 will often 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.

FGM is described by UNICEF as “one of the worst violations of the Convention on the Rights of the Child” (www.unicef.org/pon96/womfgm.htm) because it is usually performed on girls between the ages of four and eight, but up to menarche. FGM is inflicted on about two million girls a year, mostly by people with no medical training who perform the cutting without anesthetic, sterilization, or the use of proper medical instruments. The result is often scarring and/or obstructed flow

of urine and menstrual blood, which leads to urinary- and reproductive-tract infections and infertility. Infibulated women have a 70 percent increase in postpartum hemorrhage compared to women without FGM.

One motive for FGM is to decrease the risk of female promiscuity, since it reduces and may remove the woman’s sexual pleasure – though this is sometimes hotly disputed (Lightfoot-Klein 1989). Infibulation supposedly provides a proof of virginity, which is a necessary condition for marriage in many FGM communities such that men cannot marry uncircumcised women; hence FGM creates an economic advantage by permitting parents to demand a high bridal price. So, the push for a universal prohibition on FGM is unlikely to succeed any time soon.

There is an assumption that both accidental breach and defiance of 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. However, those who violate a taboo can often purify themselves or be purified by confessing their sin and submitting to a ritual. For instance, Catholic Christians confess their sins to a priest and are given absolution on behalf of God.

There is no such thing as an absolute taboo – one that holds for all worlds, times, and contexts. *Taboo* refers to a proscription of behavior for a specifiable community of one or more persons at a specifiable time in specifiable contexts. Some taboos are enshrined in legal enforcement such that breaking the law violates a taboo; but social attitudes mutate and laws get repealed or revised as what was once taboo is reevaluated. And, to the contrary, once acceptable behaviors are made



illegal as institutionalized taboos. In principle, any kind of behavior can be tabooed. For behavior 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.

SEE ALSO: Animality and Women; Clitoridectomy, Female Genital Cutting Practices, and Law; Double Standard; Gender Identities and Socialization; Human Rights, International Laws and Policies on; Purity Versus Pollution; Reproductive Health; Sex and Culture

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FURTHER READING

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