

# **The Value of African Taboos for Biodiversity and Sustainable Development**

**Joseph Osei**

## **Abstract**

Many ecologists and experts on sustainable development have long recognized that traditional worldviews and practices are more earth-friendly and consistent with biodiversity than modern or western ways of life. They also recognize that biodiversity is not just an important component of sound ecology, but a necessary condition for both sound ecology and sustainable development. While the experts are right about the causal connection between these traditional worldviews and biodiversity, they leave the reader wondering how the worldviews are applied to achieve biodiversity. This paper aims at filling in this explanatory gap by arguing that, in the case of African traditional worldviews, taboos represent the best explanation for their successful ecological practices that enhance biodiversity and sustainable development.

## **Introduction**

Biodiversity or the provision of renewable resources to all living organisms has been recognized by leading ecologists as a necessary condition for sustainable development. Without biodiversity the western model of modernization and development with its over-emphasis on materialism, industrialization, consumerism and the profit motive without social responsibility cannot be sustained. Consequently, the western concept of sustainable development which has little or no room for biodiversity has become, in the words of Martin Andreas Wienecke, “an oxymoron” Wienecke (2005:70). In the attempt to solve this problem experts have turned their attention to the traditional worldviews and ways of life in which humans lived close to nature and recognized the connectivity and interdependence of all living things, human, plants and animals. While the experts are right about the role of the traditional worldviews in biodiversity, they leave the reader wondering how the world views are applied to achieve biodiversity.

In his ‘Sustainability and the Role of Biodiversity’ Wienecke comes close to offering a solution when he states, “Positive values towards the use of natural resources were inculcated (in traditional African societies) from generation to generation by means of proverbs, stories, songs, and religious ceremonies or rituals.” (Wienecke:88) Although taboos are well known to everyone familiar with anthropological or ethnographic studies of traditional societies, taboos is surprisingly missing from this list of actual or potential explanations for their successful ecological practices.

This paper aims at filling in this explanatory gap by arguing that African taboos, which have unfortunately been marginalized from contemporary intellectual discourse together with African Traditional Religion (in which it is embedded), offers the best explanation for the successful ecological practices of the traditional people towards biodiversity. The paper further argues that with the appropriate modifications and interpretations taboos could be transformed into highly effective instruments for promoting biodiversity and hence for sustaining (holistic) development.

Towards these objectives the paper has been divided into four sections: Section I deals with the concept of taboos in general and its meaning within the context of traditional African societies and their value for morality and science in general. Section II deals with various types of taboos and how they enhance biodiversity such as environmental taboos, health and medical taboos, and family planning and personal safety taboos. Section III presents a general discussion of taboos with focus on counter-productive taboos, the metaphysical openness of taboos, the epistemological status of taboos and their implications for the future of taboos, biodiversity, and sustainable development.

## **The Meaning of Taboos and Their Moral and Scientific Values**

This section covers the meaning of taboos, as well as their actual and potential moral and scientific values from ethnographic, anthropological and philosophical perspectives. The insight from this section will help prepare our minds for the main argument in Section II showing how taboos are deployed for promoting biodiversity.

### ***The Meaning of Taboos***

Etymologically speaking, 'taboo' is a derivation of the Polynesian term 'tabu' which means forbidden. It is similar to the **sacer** in the Greek, **Kadesh** in Hebrew and **Nso** in Igbo language of Nigeria. In Akan, it is known as **mmusu**. Within its historical context taboo was a sacred term for a set of cultic or religious prohibitions instituted by traditional religious authorities as instruments for moral motivation, guidance, and objectivity for protecting the sanctity of their shrines and the well being of their worshipping communities. The term is also applicable to any sort of social prohibition imposed by the leadership of a community regarding certain times, places, actions, events, and people etc. especially, but not exclusively, for religious reasons for the well-being. of the society. Taboo may therefore be used in two senses. The narrower sense represents the cultic or purely religious usage, while the broader sense represents its usage in socio-economic and political contexts. Therefore cultic or religious taboos represent a subset of taboos, but not taboos as a whole set. For the same reason, religion is useful, but not a necessary condition for the existence and existential application of taboos.

Both the narrow and the broad usages of the term are evident in Akan and Ewe discourses on taboos. The closest equivalent to taboo in the Akan is '**akyiwade**', i.e. that which is forbidden or prohibited and '**musuo**'. The latter term is however reserved for prohibitions against very serious or extraordinary moral evils such as murder, suicide, rape, incest and religious sacrilege. Therefore while all **akyiwade** are taboos, not all taboos are **musuo**. (Gyekye 1995) Unless otherwise specified, both senses of the term will be used in the rest of this paper as appropriate.

Among the Akans and Ewes of West Africa, most taboos are taken seriously since they are believed to have been imposed by traditional rulers and priests on their behalf and in the general interest of the community. They may be promulgated and transmitted in the form of religious ordinances, creeds or vows. Hence, unlike ordinary wrongs, taboos are taken more seriously and the **mmusu** type of taboos may require blood sacrifices for the appeasement and forgiveness of the gods and ancestors etc. who might, according to the traditional belief, otherwise visit their wrath on the living in the form of epidemics, drought and infertility etc. It is curious but also true that many African Christians and Moslems included the highly educated do not doubt the efficacy of such sanctions from the gods and the ancestors. Since these -taboo sanctions are believed to be instantaneous and "automatic" unlike sanctions in other religions that have to wait till the end of life or stand to be mitigated by God's mercy and forgiveness, most people out of prudence will not deliberately violate them, even if they are skeptical of their metaphysical presuppositions. Consequently, the value of taboos as sources of moral guidance and motivation for social order cannot be dismissed **a priori**.

### ***The Moral Value of Taboos***

Every moral system requires the existence of guiding principles, source(s) of motivation, and some grounds for objectivity. Additionally, some moral systems also provide moral transformation. Taboos represent the main source of guiding principles regulating and directing the behavior of individuals and the community towards the Supreme Being and especially the gods and the ancestors in African traditional societies. The motivation for abiding by the normative principles are provided and reinforced by the religious sanctions from the gods and the ancestors or directly from the Supreme Being. Their cultic code of ethics, written or verbal, serve as a point of reference in determining traditional law-breakers and in the adjudication of ensuing cases at the traditional courts and shrines. Those found guilty of serious moral or legal violations are made to undergo ritual cleansing as a means of moral or ontological purification and transformation.

Reflecting on moral and social values of taboos in general, the philosopher of culture Ernst Cassirer has rightly noted that the restrictions on individual license or, freedom which are due to respect for a

known and friendly power or powers, allied to man, however trivial or absurd they may appear to the modern mind in details, contain within them "germinant principles of social progress and moral order." (Cassier:106) The taboos, he explains, are mostly about don'ts and have the tendency to make us passive and consequently, conservative and since they dwell on fear they also tend to make men superstitious. However, despite all its obvious defects, Cassier observes, the taboo system was the only system of social restriction and obligation in the early stages of human development. It was, Cassier has stressed, "the cornerstone of the whole social order." and "There was no part of the social system that was not regulated and governed by taboos." (Cassier:106) For example, Cassier cites the relation between rulers and subjects, political life, sexual life, family life as well as economic life.

The taboo system was the main source of bonding in all human relations and transactions in traditional societies. Eventually religious leaders, who made obeying such restrictions religious obligations (Cassier:108), assimilated them into the "great religions". Since African Traditional Religion is not considered one of the "great religions", the taboos associated with it are unfortunately discarded as "savage taboos" by Cassier and like-minded philosophers and anthropologists and consequently marginalized from moral discourse. Contrary to such views, this paper will show in the next section that even if African Traditional Religion fails to satisfy the necessary and sufficient conditions for being characterized as a major religious tradition on their terms, the taboos associated with the religion are by no means "savage". The reason (to be elaborated in the next section,) is that while African taboos are given ostensibly mystical or personal explanations, most of them have underlying verifiable rational or scientific explanations. It will also be shown that some of the taboos consist of moral principles comparable in their usefulness to any system of taboos or code of ethics found in other cultures, including The Golden Rule, Natural Law Theory and Kant's Categorical Imperative as a source of moral guidance, moral motivation and objective grounds for determining right and wrong even in moral dilemmas and other controversial moral cases.

### ***The Scientific Value of Taboos***

Taboos are typically presented in the idiom of 'personal' expressions since their promulgation and sanctions are attributed to the gods and the ancestors or beings with will and intentions. For this reason, attempts to explain in phenomenological terms why certain actions are permissible or forbidden have been termed 'personal explanations' since they reflect the will or intention of certain supernatural beings. Personal explanations are therefore contrasted with naturalistic or scientific explanations since unlike personal explanations they appeal to physical laws of time, space, mechanism and psychological states to explain (unusual) phenomena.

Like most traditional African taboos, Akan and Ewe taboos typically have not only personal explanations but also rational or scientific explanations. For example, incest is a serious taboo Akan and Ewe traditions and the personal explanation is that sexual acts within the family is an abomination that of blood mixing that offends the ancestors and the gods. But from their collective experience over the centuries, as the wise elders will disclose under appropriate circumstances, they know that such intra-family sexual intercourses do not only breed conflicts that break up families but also breed inexplicable abnormal births, birth defects and diseases. So the incest taboo is their rational solution in accordance with the disaster avoidance rationality used by most conservative thinkers under such circumstances. With the advancement of modern science we can now appreciate their wisdom since it now well known that incest is responsible for hemophilia and other debilitating birth defects as the gene pool within the family is corrupted by the “unnatural” sexual acts and inbreeding.

In subsequent sections I will discuss more examples from environmental, medical, economic and family planning taboos etc. to demonstrate that while taboos may be dressed in the garb of mystical personal explanations, they represent valuable scientific or rational explanations relevant for enhancing biodiversity even in the 21st century. This should come as no surprise to anyone familiar with the historical link between the life and culture of ancient Egypt during the Middle Kingdom and the life and culture of the traditional Africans of today. For as Isaac Newton observed after researching the scholarship of ancient Egyptians, whom he credited with the discovery of the heliocentric system,

The spirit of the Egyptian is to be found in their vestal (i.e. secret and sacred ) ceremonies, for it was their way to deliver their mysteries, that is their philosophy of things, about the common way of thinking, under the veil of religious rites and hieroglyphic symbols.(Newton: 549)

### ***Taboos and their Value for Biodiversity and Sustainable Development***

In this section, I discuss various forms of scientific taboos and how they are used in traditional societies for promoting biodiversity. I argue that behind the facade of the well known personal or mystical explanations, there are profound scientific or rational explanations with notable implications for biodiversity.

#### ***Environmental Taboos***

The term environmental taboos has been reserved for taboos intended by traditional authorities for the regulation of the ethical use of the environment in view of its resources for the ecology and sustainable development.

The examples in Akan and Ewe include:

1. Clearing of sacred forests or bushes
2. Felling of forbidden timber species
3. Hunting of animals or fishing during forbidden seasons and sacred days.
4. Eating of totem animals such as tortoise, parrots and eagles.
5. Eating of sacred animals or fish
6. Digging of graves for burial without due authorization from the chief or other traditional authorities.

According to the elders violating any of these taboos will incur the wrath of the gods, including the earth goddess **Asase Yaa**, and the goddess of the sea **Maame Wata**. Evidently, traditional African peasants knew that cutting all or most of the available forests will not only deprive the future generations of rare plants and animals, but will also affect the delicate balance between plants and animals as well as humans and their needs for food, medicine, space, clean water, and clean air etc. The point to note then is that long before environmental consciousness began to have a grip on the western mind, it has been part and parcel of the traditional African mind from time immemorial.

Yet, writing as late as 1992, Professor Tedros Kiros of Harvard University could write and condemn the refusal of the traditional African farmer to cut down certain forests as economically unintelligent. A reasonable African, he argues, must not refuse to cut the trees. "Refusing to cut the trees so as to feed the hungry is foolish and destructive."(Kiros,1992: 127 ) Such a condemnation in the absence of any sustained effort to explore possible alternative scientific or rational explanations for their attitude towards the sacred forest is unwarranted.

As evident to most indigenous scholars and down-to earth anthropologists, as opposed to armed-anthropologists, there are various scientific and rational explanations to the attitudes of traditional people known to many of the elders or wise men and women in the traditional societies. In many cases forests, usually about one mile square, are reserved for the burial of their kings, queens and other royals. Since these royals used to be or are buried with golden and silver ornaments which could be dug out for the state treasury in case of war, natural disaster or similar emergencies, such forests were out of bounds for most people. In the past they were effectively secured from robbery or abuse just by being declared "sacred" or a taboo by the appropriate authorities and rituals.

Further, the elders though illiterate knew from experience that some of the forests served as natural wind breakers, natural foliage or cover for small streams and watersheds necessary for their survival and well-being as well as the well-being of the fish and plants depending on them. They are also the

home of certain rare plants and animals that need to be preserved for medicinal, food, and educational purposes.

### *Medical Health Taboos*

The term medical health taboos refers to taboos aimed at protecting and promoting human health. Preventing illnesses and diseases in traditional societies was critical for human survival since these societies could not boast of some of the breakthroughs in modern medicine such as the discovery and use of penicillin and antibiotics as well as vaccinations and immunizations against various killer-diseases. The following taboos exemplify both the diversity and complexity of the taboos used in preventive medicine.

It is a taboo to have sex in the bush: While this is said to offend the near-by gods and the earth goddess (Asaase Yaa) who may strike the offenders with venereal and other diseases, several scientific explanations can be given for this taboo. For instance, it helps to ensure that sex does not take place in an unsafe environment such as the bush where there are dangerous insects, scorpions and snakes, not to mention microorganisms. There's also the possibility of a heart attack or bleeding on the part of any of the parties, which could prove fatal, especially, if the farm or bush is far from home. It is also to deter the incidents of rape, which often occurs in the bus, and related health-risks.

It is a taboo to sing while taking your bath: It is feared that one will mysteriously lose the mother to death just by refusing to stop such a habit. The scientific explanation for this is not hard to discern. Soaps used in the olden days were highly acidic and therefore poisonous if swallowed in sufficiently large quantities. The essence of the taboo then is to prevent people from the harmful effect of unsafe traditional soap. Given the special bonding between mothers and their children in traditional societies where children are breast-fed for one year or more, the possibility of causing death of one's own mother is for most Africans, the worst case scenario in life.

It is a taboo to leave soup overnight without putting in charcoal: The personal explanation to this taboo is that a ghost who visits the house at night might dip his/her finger in it. As a result whoever eats the soup the next day may fall sick and die. The scientific explanation for this taboo is very interesting. Since charcoal is known to have the natural properties for absorbing the carbon content of liquids and thus prevent the action of micro-organisms on the soup, the soup with charcoal can therefore stay overnight without going bad. The taboo is therefore intended for the medical protection and well being of the community.

It is a taboo for a widow/widower to be at the cemetery for their spouses' burial: The personal explanation is that this will disturb the peaceful separation and departure of the deceased to the world of souls. Consequently, it is believed that the ghost of the dead spouse would visit the offending spouse at night and might take him/her away spiritually.

Mysterious as this taboo might appear it is associated with a very plausible scientific explanation. In psychological terms, the wise elders explain that it is aimed at protecting the mental health or emotion well-being of the bereaved spouse. The moment of burial marks a definite point of separation and the bereaved spouse could be overpowered by extreme emotions. In extreme cases this could result in the collapse or death of the bereaved. For similar reasons children are also forbidden from seeing dead bodies, especially their own relatives and friends.

It is also a taboo to talk while eating: In terms of personal explanation, it is feared that one's mother would die if one breaks this taboo. The scientific counterpart to this personal explanation is simply that the prohibition is necessary to prevent people from getting choked. Food choking is a common phenomenon in Africa since many ethnic foods made from mashed corn, cassava, yam, and plantain have to be swallowed with soup or sauce without chewing. These include balls of **fufu**, **akple** and **toozaafe especially** with very oily palm-kernel and groundnut paste soups etc.

### ***Economic Taboos***

A good number of taboos are designed to influence the means of production, distribution and management of wealth at both the individual and social or national levels. Hence they are appropriately termed Economic Taboos. Examples of Akan and Ewe Economic taboos include the following:

1. Stealing of private or communal property, especially things of considerable value placed under the custody of the gods or ancestors.
2. Shifting of farm boundaries without authorization
3. Farming near watersheds and or destroying sacred forests and bushes
4. Felling forbidden timber trees without the prior authorization of the Chief
5. Selling or leasing a piece of land without the prior approval of the Chief, the custodian of all lands on behalf of all the people including the unborn

Since economic growth and the fair distribution of resources are essential to the (overall) development of any state it must be acknowledged that any efforts towards the realization of economic growth and the fair distribution of national resources is ipso facto, a contribution towards the development of the state in question. The taboos in question, do not only protect, private and state property but also ensure that no one, including the chief, can monopolize the land which is the

greatest natural asset in any economy. Since taboos are metaphysically open, their effectiveness for economic growth could further be enhanced if the chiefs and other traditional authorities in places with frequent bush-fire could be encouraged to educate their people during traditional assemblies and ceremonies. Existing beneficial taboos could be boosted with new ritual sacrifices and oaths or vows by both the chiefs and their subjects.

### ***Birth Control Taboos***

Although it has been known for decades that the earth like a space ship has its limiting capacities population growth is often not regarded as an environmental problem in the popular press. But as argued by Wienecke unless the question of overpopulation is taken seriously all attempts at dealing with environmental degradation will fail. (Wienecke, 2005:74) Traditional elders have however long appreciated the symbiotic relationship between plants and animals as well as humans. While it will be too much of an exaggeration to suggest that they had a global perspective on this symbiotic relationship, they were certainly aware of the consequences of disturbing the ecological balance within their specific geographical areas. Therefore while using taboos to limit the quantity of trees or plants, and animals that could be cut or consumed to avoid jeopardizing the carrying capacities of their local areas, they also devised several means of ensuring that humans did not multiply beyond the carrying capacity of the area or did not have to resort to invasion of their neighbors or attack each other for survival.

Among these were family planning taboos. In order to motivate compliance, especially among the less matured or uncompromising members of the community towards spaced and cautious childbirths, the wise elders deployed several pro-family planning taboos. . The following taboos exemplify the traditional rules for birth control.

It is a taboo to have sex with a teenager before her puberty rites (bragro): Traditional young girls had to be cleared for sex and marriage through the puberty rites, a common rite de passage from girlhood to womanhood or maturity. Older women of the community with the prior approval of the traditional queen perform a set of rituals aimed at preparing the young girl though informal sex and marriage education. Other topics they might be taught include how to take good care of their bodies especially during menstruation periods and pregnancy, as well as how to care for their husbands and babies and to space out child births.

In this connection it is interesting to note a recent research work by Nana Baffour Professor Boakye-Boateng of the Institute of African Studies, University of Ghana. Nana doubles as a professor and the chief near Kumasi, the second most populous city in Ghana. In response to increasing cases of

teenage pregnancy in his traditional area of jurisdiction in the 1980's, he introduced a taboo with severe sanctions for both male and female violators to minimize teenage pregnancy among the girls in junior and senior secondary schools. Three years later it was found that only one girl-child in the traditional area - with hundreds of schoolgirls- had violated the taboo and become pregnant. Even so, according to Nana, the taboo was so effective that her parents hid the pregnant girl and was unable to come to the public anytime the chief visited the town.

The famous East African philosopher Oruka was, according to Gail Presbey, who has been closely studying his life and works, was convinced that western experts of family planning who worked previously in traditional communities failed because they misunderstood the beliefs and desires of the traditional people. Before his death Oruka claimed to have found from his interviews with the traditional people, traditional wisdom that could help improve family planning policies in Africa. "Progressive Modernization" he argued, "should entail humbly searching" for what is worthwhile in the traditional value system, instead of discarding everything African. (Presbey, 2000:524)

It is a taboo to have sex with a woman in the bush: As explained earlier under Medical and Health Taboos, having sex in the bush does not only offend the gods, but could be deadly in view of the possibility of infections, especially for the woman, and the possibility of heart attack for the man. It is also too easy to see how permitting casual sex in the bush could result in multiple rape attacks in the bush where the chances of being caught or helped is minimal for the perpetrator and the victim respectively.

For example they should not have sex with their husbands when they are in their menstrual periods and too soon after child-births.

It is a taboo to have sex with a woman during her menstrual period and shortly after childbirth: The personal explanation for these taboos is that the woman in these stages has impure blood that will pollute the male spiritually and turn him into a wimp easily dominated not only by other males but also by his own wife. Behind this veil of mystical explanation however is the well known biological fact that it is not safe to have sexual intercourse in both instances for both the male and the female. The male can easily get an infection from the impure blood in the menstrual discharge and the female can also be easily receive infection from the male because of the unusual susceptibility to infection during these periods. Besides the fear of infection, there is also the need for the man to wait while the woman recuperates from the internal injuries and stress accompanying childbirth. The new mother also needs time to regain her physical and emotional strength so she can breast feed the new baby and nurture him or her for several months before she returns to normal sex life with her spouse. If they men are found to be impatient during these waiting periods, the new mothers are

expected to return to their mothers' home until they are ready for sex. This period of physical and psychological recuperation is also a period essential for consciously or unconsciously spacing child birth.

It is a taboo to have sex with a close relative: This taboos was used to illustrate scientific taboos in Section II. But it's important to stress that the taboo and similar ones protect human life by prohibiting sexual acts that could cause genetic diseases including hemophilia and other birth defects. Form both psychological and sociological perspectives, it is also not hard to discern the rational behind the taboo. Since a house divided against itself cannot stand, it is a moral imperative to prohibit such intra-family sexual acts in order to avoid the Oedipus complex syndrome and its variations.

More important for this section however is the fact that the taboo helps to decrease unwanted pregnancies by prohibiting sex with ones' close relatives. It is easy to imagine the frequency of pregnancies within families if brothers and sisters, sons and daughters, did not have to seek sexual partners outside of their homes. So even if birth control was not part of the original rationale for this taboo it cannot be denied that it is a positive bye-product of this same taboo issued primarily on medical and health grounds.

### ***Personal Safety Taboos***

1. It is a (serious) taboo to commit murder. (mmusu)
2. It is a (serious ) taboo to commit suicide (mmusu)

As observed earlier by Professor Gyekye, Akans have two conceptions of taboos, ordinary and extraordinary. And not surprisingly, murder is among these extraordinary or serious taboos, especially if the victims are pregnant and the crime is committed in the house or near water resources. For they are deemed extremely offensive not only to the gods and ancestors but also by Asase Yaa ( the Earth goddess) and the Supreme Being since every human being is believed to be a child of the Supreme Being and under the care of the subordinate spirits. The sanctions against murder are consequently of the severest kind and does not exclude the death penalty after due process in traditional courts of adjudication. in addition, the wrath of the gods and ancestors could also be visited on the living, especially the traditional elders, if they fail to perform purification rites including animal sacrifices to the gods, ancestors and Asase Yaa and libation-prayers to the Supreme Being at the appropriate time.

For similar 'personal' reasons suicide is also strongly forbidden with very strong sanctions. Among these strong sanctions are the denial of proper burial rites for the dead body, animal sacrifices to be

made by the family of the deceased to the gods and ancestors. The cost of purification rites to be performed by traditional priests for the house or the place where the evil occurred is also to be borne by family members of the deceased. The denial of proper burial rites among the Akans and Ewes constitutes a very serious punishment as it disgraces not only the dead, but also the present and future members of his/her extended family.

The rational explanations for both of these taboos and their corresponding penalties should not be hard to uncover. From their collective experience over the centuries, members of the traditional societies have come to realize that if their numbers reduce below a certain minimum, they could be attacked and destroyed not only by their human enemies but also by wild beasts in their environment. A diminishing population will also be unable to provide the necessary protection for certain vulnerable plants and animals. The role humans play is sustaining biodiversity and the whole ecological system. Cognizant of the role humans play in balancing the ecological system, murder and suicide are therefore strongly prohibited forbidden by extraordinary taboos, among other reasons, to ensure that their societies had enough people living in a relatively peaceful and stable environments to sustain a balanced ecological system.

## **General Discussion on Taboos and Development**

In this final section, I discuss three issues pertinent to a proper understanding of taboos and its limits as a source of moral and scientific values for biodiversity and development.

'Development' as used in in this paper, does not mean mere economic growth or westernization but **"The total sum of a country C's well-being virtues minus the total sum of the country's well-being vices."** (Osei,1995:39) While well-being virtues include modernization, democratization qualitative education, and critical consciousness, the well-being vices include dependency, bribery and corruption, unwarranted military interventions, dictatorships and the abuse of human rights etc.

Consequently, if one could show that a given set of taboos, xyz, promote some well-being virtues and help diminish some well-being vices one would have shown by implication that some taboos promote development. By the same token taboos and other moral practices that undermine modernization, health and safety as well as biodiversity should be considered counter-productive or detrimental towards Africa's developmental objectives.

To dispel the erroneous impression that some readers might have after taking cognizance of the foregoing taboos and their productive values, I first discuss examples of counter-productive taboos and how to avoid or mitigate their impact on biodiversity and sustainable development. Second I

discuss the metaphysical and epistemological aspects of taboos to show that they are neither closed nor absolute as portrayed in some philosophical and anthropological literature. The third issue involves the future of taboos with some suggestions on how taboos could be modified to become even more effective instruments for transmitting and applying these values for biodiversity and sustainable development as defined above.

### ***A Counter-productive Taboos***

Since all the taboos discussed so far tend to be productive or pro-development as argued, the impression one may get is that all taboos are productive. That however would be unwarranted and a hasty generalization. For there are many taboos not mentioned or discussed in the foregoing that are or could be counter-productive with regards to the goals of sustainable development. Such taboos include but are not limited to the following:

- (1) Taboos that restrict the eating of eggs or meat by children and pregnant women.
- 2) Taboos that prolong the number of days farmers cannot go to do farm work after each death in the community. Until recently some parts of **Asante** had two weeks as the limit and local authorities sanctioned farmers breaking the taboo.
- (3) Taboos that protect such heinous institutions like the **Trokosi** System in Southeast Ghana by which virgins are sent to shrines against their will to serve as atonements for the sins of their relatives found guilty of rape, theft or murder etc. Many still maintain that it is a taboo to free such victims from their virtual enslavement.
- (4) Taboos that encourage female genital - mutilation (misleadingly termed female circumcision) given the abuse of human rights, the physical and emotional torture, and the risk of infertility, infection and life involved. Many traditionalists especially the elderly women still believe it is a taboo to marry the “uncircumcised” women.

Using development as broadly conceived as our yardstick, it must be evident that the above taboos are counter-productive since they do not promote the well being of the people concerned. The dietary taboos for instance are bound to affect the health of children and pregnant women. Without adequate protein- intake from eggs and meat the children are likely to become protein-deficient and develop what the Gas call **Korshiorkor**. This does not only retard their physical growth but also their intellectual development, since proteins are essential for the development of the brain. The infants born to the pregnant women denied of such diets are also liable to **Korshiorkor** and its multiple side effects. The effects of this protein deficiency on pregnant women are equally significant since many of them are likely to become, anemic, a condition that tends to increase maternal mortality in the local areas affected by the taboos.

The second set of taboos is also detrimental to development since they affect economic productivity

by unnecessarily limiting the number of working days in the week for farmers. In some parts of Asante including the Kokofu-Mensase area under the spiritual jurisdiction of an **obosom** called **Kankamea**, it was, until recently, a taboo for farmers to work on their farms on the death of a citizen of the area until the one has been buried. It was also a taboo to go to farm on the day of the funeral and two days after. The only exception was when one had to go to fetch food for domestic (but not for commercial) purposes. After a series of criticisms initiated in the 1980's in news paper articles some of these restrictions have however been limited by the judicious intervention of district administrative secretaries. Unless such unnecessary **taboo** restrictions on farming activities are checked, food productivity could be seriously affected, especially where the number of deaths per year is significant and the taboos are taken uncritically and seriously by many.

The taboos in numbers 3 and 4 are in clear violation of the human rights of the victims concerned. They tend to degrade the female suggesting that they are inferior to men. They also put the young girls at unnecessary risk mostly against their wish. To temper with a female's sex organ for the sole purpose of meeting the interest of her future husband at the expense of her own pleasure or health and psychological well-being is to treat her as a mere sex object. Such acts are therefore to be condemned as dehumanizing and unjust. Since respect for human rights are essential to any meaningful conception of development, such taboos should be seen as counter-productive for developing nations.

Equally dehumanizing and unjust are the taboos perpetuating the practice of the **Trokosi** system and cruel widowhood rites. The virgins of the **Trokosi** system no matter the alleged benefits to society - are evidently in bondage or slavery. They have no rights and are totally under the tyranny of the chief priests who use them as instruments for his sexual gratification and as instruments of economic production on their farms.

The United Nations Charter on Human Rights, condemns all such acts as inhumane, degrading and unjust when it states in Article 3 and 4: "Everyone has the right to life, liberty, and security of person." and "No one shall be subjected to torture or to cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishments."

To the extent that the above taboos violate these human rights provisions they are inconsistent with human well being, and consequently inconsistent with a holistic conception of development. This is more so in this post-Beijing era when all people in authority - political or religious- have been sensitized to the exploitation, oppression and repression of women at the global level and the need to intensify efforts aimed at their immediate and total liberation. The persuasive argument by Mrs. R. Clinton at the Beijing Conference was not meant just to impress rhetorically, but to inspire both men

and women to take the rights of women seriously. “Women are human. Therefore, women’s rights are also human rights.” She argued.

### ***The Metaphysical Openness of Taboos***

One may think that since taboos are associated with traditional societies there could be no opportunity for adding new ones in the sense that they are metaphysically closed. Fortunately, that is not the case. Taboos remain traditional, but like constitutional provisions and other legal principles they are open to modification, deletion, supplementation or new interpretations to meet compelling existential circumstances. The openness is implicitly confirmed and justified in the popular Akan proverb that maintains “It is not a taboo to go back to retrieve values that one has forgotten.” and another which states, “As long our heads are in place, we should not rule out the wearing of hats.”

In this connection, it is interesting to recall the result of the experiment in (in what Karl Popper might term) “social engineering” conducted Professor Boateng of the University of Ghana who doubles as a traditional chief in Ashanti, and a research fellow at the Institute of African Studies. As noted earlier under medical and health taboos, by the institutionalization of the taboo against sexual activities with school girls, the professor has demonstrated that taboos are not metaphysically closed and that it open for new ones.

Similarly some well-educated chiefs serving as traditional rulers in the Northern part of Ghana have also used taboos to curb unwarranted bush fires that often threaten not only human lives but also plants and animals, not to mention the unbearable climatic conditions they create in these sub-Saharan regions.

### ***The Epistemological Status of Taboos***

Another interesting feature of taboos is that they are epistemologically overridable. This means, they are not construed as absolute or eternal and therefore unchanging or incommensurable rules. To say that a taboo is overridable means that where there is a conflict between taboo X and taboo Y or other rule or law Z, more morally compelling than taboo X, X can and should yield priority of place to taboo Y or rule Z. The ultimate yardstick for evaluating the imperatives and for determining the most compelling is, for the traditional African, the well being of the community.

So, for example, if it is a taboo to shout your mother’s name in the middle of the night but doing so is likely to help her revive after collapsing, one is morally justified, and even obligated, in breaking or setting aside the taboo for the moment. Among the Akans although it is manifestly a serious incest taboo or **mmusu** to have sex with one’s own mother or to do anything that might be interpreted as violating this serious taboo, their belief in the overridability of taboos and its justification is expressed

graphically in this maxim. "If it is necessary for one to remove a foreign object from one's mother's vagina, and one does so with his penis, he has not violated the incest taboo."

Similarly, while it is (generally) a taboo to carry anything in a palm leaf basket (**bede**) to the king's palace, it is also said, emphatically that notwithstanding this general prohibition, "It is not a taboo to carry nuggets of gold in a palm leaf basket into the king's palace." Unlike the Divine Command Theory and other absolutist moral theories, the justification is clearly not to be found in the authority of any religious or political authority, but the well being of the community as whole. This however does not imply as Professor Gyekye maintains that communal well-being is "the sole criterion of goodness in Akan ethics" (Gyekye,1995:132) since Akans consider other moral values such as individual human rights and principles of justice in determining their moral obligations.

Further and for the purpose of this paper, it is also important to stress that the taboo moral prohibitions are applicable to the cruel treatment of animals, including those that are of no known value to humans. For example, it is believed that maltreating animals such as cats and certain rare birds could lead them to curse the perpetrators to suffer horrible calamities and even death.

In terms of the moral epistemology developed and popularized by Sir W. D. Ross, (Ross:1930) this means that the African prohibitions are to be construed as **prima facie** obligations subject to overriding by more stringent obligations such as permitting 'entry' in the two cases cited above. One is for saving lives; the other is for ending mass poverty and misery in order to maximize the well being of the community. In the idiom of contemporary epistemological defeasibility theorists, the ordinary taboos stand until they are 'defeated' by stronger taboos or higher-order moral considerations. Taboos are therefore unlike the absolute or Categorical Imperatives of Immanuel Kant presented as absolute or unconditional and non-overridable moral prescriptions, since secondary or meta-ethical rules about the application of taboos permit reasonable exceptions as necessitated by special circumstances. Since conflict resolution often requires seeking compromises by allowing certain **prima facie** moral values to be overridden by more stringent ones, when it comes to moral or legal conflict-resolution, the taboo imperatives of the traditional societies should be seen as ethically superior to the Categorical Imperatives of Kantian Ethics and similar moral principles cast in absolute and consequently non-overridable epistemological terms.

Unfortunately some of the early anthropologists to Africa such as Levy Bruhl, the author of *Primitive Mentality*, failed to understand the moral epistemology of the traditional people in permitting such exceptions, and wrongly interpreted the exceptions as evidence of their ignorance of the Law of Non-contradiction. From such mistaken premises he drew the unfortunate conclusion that the

savage mind was pre-logical and thus paved the way for the Euro-centric projection and subsequent humiliation of the African as the "Other." (Mazrui: 1981:26)

A close study of taboos as demonstrated above will therefore help clear some of the misconceptions of the African and the prejudices against him and his traditional beliefs and practices so he could be considered a partner rather than an instrument or a passive beneficiary of development exported from the west.

### ***The Future of Taboos***

The metaphysical openness and the epistemological overridability of taboos have interesting consequences for the future of taboos in general. For example, since by their nature, taboos, (at least within the Akan and Ewe areas in our study) are - unlike the absolute laws of the Medes and the Persians or Categorical Imperatives of Kantian Ethics- both open and overridable, they are open to supplementation as well as modification, deletion, and reinterpretation to suit new contexts. In order to curb the recent increases in bush-fires, grave-looting, rape, incest, the mysterious serial murder of over 40 women in Accra, Ghana; and especially the spread of AIDS throughout Africa, The Ghana National House of Chiefs and similar traditional institutions in other parts of Africa and the developing world, could be charged with instituting or re-viewing and redeploying certain taboos that could aid sustainable development.

Following the publication of Professor Agyakwa's *The Wisdom of Our Fathers*, based on his PHD dissertation on the epistemological gap between Western and African ways of knowing, some teachers of science, science education, and African Philosophy etc. at various levels of education have incorporated the analysis of traditional taboos to promote scientific thinking. As argued by Agyakwa, it is easier for African students used to the personal explanations of taboos to understand scientific explanations of phenomena if the personal explanations are used as stepping stones to the scientific or western ways of knowing. In other words, the traditional taboos can be used to bridge the epistemological gap between the traditional methods of knowing and the western or scientific methods of knowing to facilitate development. (Agyakwa: 1981)

In Ghana for example, the study of taboos and their rational or scientific explanations have been introduced in some high schools and are being advocated in mass education programs for adults (Oduro Mensah: 2001) Articulating the value of this critical method of science education in Africa, Awokoya maintained that one of the first jobs of science education in Africa is "to eliminate a great deal of superstition... to explain natural phenomena in terms of the natural as distinct from the supernatural." (Awokoya:1961).

Depending on the religious orientation of those involved, traditional rulers may require that certain prayers are said in public for forgiveness or religious rituals are performed for the pacification of the gods and the ancestors or the Supreme Being etc. Since it is believed that such rituals are necessary for the spiritual protection of the offender as well as the offended and their extended families from curses and calamities, the taboos are in most cases taken more seriously than constitutional laws and their corresponding legal sanctions. Taboos and their sanctions are however not recommended as substitutes for the latter, but only as supplements in modern constitutional governments. The complexity of the problems confronting African societies is by far beyond the scope of the widest re-conceptualization and pragmatic application of taboos.

## **Conclusion**

The foregoing exposition and analysis of various types of taboos ranging from the moral, the scientific to the, environmental, medical and health, economic, birth control and life protection taboos, have demonstrated that most African traditional taboos as seen in the paradigm cases of Akan and Ewe taboos enhance, the goals of sustainable development by promoting biodiversity. The question of counter-productive taboos has also been addressed to show the limits of the applicability of taboos to biodiversity. Since taboos are considered non-absolute and hence overridable as well as open to modification and supplementation or abolition however, the challenge to the present generation now is to analyze them objectively and critically and to make the necessary deletions, supplementations or modifications without prejudice to their own scientific or religious orientations as part of their contribution towards the accelerated but sustainable development of the whole continent.

While it is undeniable that taboos have been marginalized for so long in development discourse, the Akan Philosopher reminds us in the spirit of **Sankofaism** that “It is not a taboos to go back for values one has forgotten or left in the past.” Rediscovering and enhancing the value of taboos might well be returning to “the stone which the builders had rejected” in the course of securing biodiversity and constructing authentic and sustainable development in Africa.

## References

- ACKAH, A. C. *Akan Ethics: A Study of the Moral Ideas and the Moral Behaviour of the Akan Tribes of Ghana*, Accra. Ghana University Press. 1988.
- AGYAKWA, Kofi O. *Akan Epistemology and Western Thought*. Unpublished PhD Dissertation, Teacher's College, Columbia, USA. 1974
- AGYAKWA, Kofi .O. *The Educational Wisdom of our Fathers*, Cape Coast, Cape Coast University Press, Ghana, 1978.
- AWOKOYA, S.O. 'Science Education in Africa.' Paper presented at the African Summer Study, Endicott House, Watertown, M.A. Educational Services Incorporated, 1961. quoted in (Oduro-Mensah, 2001:126)
- CASSIER, Ernest, *An Essay on Man Introduction to a Philosophy of Human Culture*. New Haven and London, Yale University Press 1972.
- DANQUAH, Akan Laws and Customs, London, Frank Cass, 1928 p. 115 ff.
- GYEKYE, Kwame. *An Essay on African Philosophical Thought: The Akan conceptual Scheme* Philadelphia, Temple University Press, 1995.
- GYEKYE African Cultural Values: An Introduction Sankofa Publishing Company, Philadelphia, Pa. 1996 [p.101]
- HOLLING , C.S. 2004 From Complex Regions to Complex Worlds.  
<http://www.ecologyandsociety.org/vol9/iss1/art11/print.pdf>
- IDOWU, E. Bolaji *African Traditional Religion: A Definition* SCM Press Ltd. 1973, Trowbridge and Esher, Great Britain, 1973
- KUDADJIE, Joshua and OSEI, Joseph. 'Understanding African Cosmology: Its Content and Contribution to Worldview, Community and Development of Science, *Faith Science and African Culture: African Cosmology and Africa's Contribution to Science*. ed C W. Du Toit Pretoria, University of South, Africa, 1998.
- MAZRUI, Ali, *The African Condition* , New York, Cambridge University Press, 1988
- NEWTON, Isaac, *Principia* (Revised Translation) Berkeley, University of California Press, 1960 p.549
- ODURO-MENSAH D. 'Toward the Development of Adult Science Education in Developing Countries' *Legon journal of the Humanities*. Vol. 12 1999- 2001.
- OSEI Joseph *Contemporary African Philosophy and Development: An Asset or Liability* UMI, Ann Arbor, MI, 1991
- OSEI, Joseph 'Towards the Philosophy of Development: Africa's Dilemma of Development and the Way out,' *International Third World Studies Journal and Review*, Vol 7, 1995.
- OSEI, Joseph. 'The Philosophical Bases of Human Rights in African Traditional Culture: The Akan Example'. *Human Rights Issues in Ghana: A Forum on Human on Human Rights* sponsored by the Konrad-Adenauer Foundation of Germany and the Faculty of Law, University of Ghana, 1998. Chapter 3. pp. 23-39.
- PRESBEY, Gail M. *The Journal of Value Inquiry* 34; 517-528, 2000.
- ROSS , W. D. *The Right and the Good*, Oxford, The Clarendon Press, 1930. 18-33,

WIENECKE, M.A. Sustainability and the Role of Biodiversity: The Impact of Anthropogenic Activities. *Journal for Sustainable Development in Africa*, vol.. no.. <http://www.isd-africa.com>

WIREDU, Kwasi. *Philosophy and An African Culture*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980.

WRIGHT, Wright. ed. *African Philosophy* University Press of America, Boston, 1984.

WWF, 1993. Biodiversity. <http://users.westnet.gr/~cgian/biodiversity.htm>