

# Sins and Taboos: A Case Study of the Tonga People's Taboos

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## Abstract

Sins and Taboos is an analysis of what taboos are, and how taboos relate to sins (as viewed through the lens of the Tonga speech community) in Southern Zambia. The Western definition of Taboos seems inadequate when compared with Tonga's definition. Generally speaking, a taboo is a prohibition within the context of a given community based on its cultural norms and practices. This article focuses on an anthropological and historical interpretation of scripture. It has been conducted on a semi-structured interview with the Tonga speaking people who are pastoralists and polygamists. The results of this study do apply across the theological landscape of Mission, Theology, Practical theology and Christian anthropology.

## Keywords

Prohibition, Sins, Taboos, *Kutondwa*, *Malweza*, Tonga Speaking People

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## 1. Introduction

This article, Sins and Taboos, analyzes the Tonga speaking people of Zambia and their anthropological relationship and understanding of sins and taboos. A noticeable gap in what taboos are is visible in a lack of a clear understanding of what taboos are in the Western world. A relative analysis with the Tonga people of Southern Zambia comes in handy to help us respond to this gap. Tonga is a language spoken by a group of Bantu speaking people, ethnically referred to as Batonga found in the Southern and Central provinces of Zambia. Linguistically, Tonga belongs to a group of languages called the Bantu Botatwe, which means "three people." It is referred to as Bantu Botatwe because the group comprises three languages which are mutually intelligible. These languages are Ila, Lenje and

Tonga. The Tonga language is also related to other languages such as, *We, Toka, Leya, Totela, Subiya, Fwe, Twa* and *Shango*.

All these speak closely related dialects, stated Harriet Hambizi (Hambizi, 2023: p. 11) as well as Khama Hang'ombe, Minyono Mwembe and Charton Siatumbu (Hang'ombe et al., 2020: p. 14). Khama Hang'ombe, Minyono Mwembe and Charton Siatumbu (Hang'ombe et al., 2020: p. 14) later refer to Guthrie (1948) that he classified Tonga as M64 and is found in group 60 of Zone M where it is the fourth language with three dialects, *Tonga, Toka* and *Leya*. This is where Guthrie, in his classification of Bantu languages, places Tonga (40/3/1) in Zone 40 in group 3 where it is a cluster of languages with four dialects: Plateau Tonga, Valley Tonga, the *We* and *Totela*. Tonga, also known as *Chitonga* is spoken in southern and central provinces of Zambia as well as in parts of Lusaka province. In the central province, Tonga speakers are concentrated around Kabwe rural and Mumbwa district. Tonga is also spoken by the Batonga people of Zimbabwe especially those found around the area of Gokwe North, Gokwe South, Nkayi, Nyaminyami and Victoria Falls areas.

The Tonga people are a tribe within Zambia's 72 tribes found mainly in the Southern part of Zambia and belong to a Banthu Botatwe ethnic grouping. The Tonga people speak *Citonga* and have a rich understanding of the relationship between sin and taboo, which brings out the three basic understandings of taboos, which are similar to most tribes in Zambia. Hambizi (2023: p. 1) puts it that they are a Bantu-speaking people who inhabit the southern portion of Zambia and neighboring areas of northern Zimbabwe around Gokwe North, Gokwe South, Nkayi, Nyaminyami and in the areas of the Victoria Falls. These numbers were more than one million in the early 21st century. Generally, the Tonga people are pastoralists and mostly polygamists.

## 2. Definition of Taboos

The word taboo draws its historical usage from as way back as 1777 when an English navigator, Captain Cook, used and defined the word. He first noted the word during his visit to the island of Tongatapu which is an Island of the kingdom of Tonga (not related to the Tonga Speaking people). He first noted the word as *tabu* from *tapu* which is a variant of Polynesian languages but later translated it as taboo. Meryem Babou (Babou, 2014: p. 27) says the word "tabu" is an Austronesian term which specifically originates from Polynesia. Emmanuel Abeku Essel (Essel, 2018: p. 372) however thinks that the concept of a "taboo" is difficult to define as the word is borrowed from a Polynesian language. The difficulty comes in on the grounds that the word is foreign to English.

It was later that the word got translated into English by Captain Cook and became "taboo" meaning "sacred" or "ritual prohibition." In defining taboos, Yuni Saputri (Saputri, 2023: p. 1) stated that Captain Cook understood a taboo as a significant local word meaning forbidden, when something should not be eaten, touched, or included, in the Polynesian community adding further that, a taboo

holds a governance role on how we begin to behave, dress, eat, and drive, as well as sexual interactions.

This is to say, a taboo is usually imposed by social custom or as a control or protective measure. The Webster Dictionary offers that a definition of taboo as an activity or behavior that is considered completely unacceptable or forbidden. It further says that a taboo is a prohibition from engaging in an activity or behavior through social rules, laws, religious doctrine and even by conscience. Despite many scholars giving various related definitions of the word taboo in the Western World, it is inadequately defined. We can only agree with Saputri (Saputri, 2023: p. 1) when he defines a taboo as something that is banned on grounds of moral taste, or banned for constituting a risk and also as something forbidden to profane use or contact because they are held to be dangerous supernatural powers. In this article, however, it has been brought out that the Western definition of a taboo is insufficient when compared with the Tonga version of *kutondwa* (prohibition) (noun) in the actions is *citondwa* (doing a prohibit-able act) (verb).

Interestingly, though, Tongas hold a different yet rich view on taboos. They use words like “*kutondwa*” or “*citondwa*” which literally means taboo, whereas, when encountered taboos become “*Malweza*” loosely understood in English as taboo yet in Tonga like many tribes in Zambia “*malweza*” is not actually a taboo but does mean the act of seeing or the manifestation of a taboo equally related to curses because one has seen or violated the forbidden. The latter are rituals, which are acts of atonement due to *Malweza*. *Kutondwa* in Tonga means prohibition which society does not permit as it goes against the virtues and norms of society. The Tonga people’s views of taboos (as a forbidden act—*citondwa*) lead directly or indirectly to misfortunes on the part of the perpetrator. It is these encountered misfortunes which are called *malweza*. Equally the Tonga people hold a plural for a taboo (*kutondwa*) by deploying words like *zitondwa* or *hytondwa* (nouns) and *zilatondwa* or *hylatondwa* to mean those or they are forbidden taboos.

True to this understanding, taboos are not Western. On the other hand, many other tribes in Zambia would begin with *malweza* to define taboos as the Chewas of Eastern Zambia call it *Maloza*. However, the Tonga people hold that taboos not only affect the perpetrator but the environment as well, thus taboos in Tonga cover a wider scope in terms of definition compared to other tribes. Misfortunes on the victim of the taboos can be so severe. Interestingly, the primary cause of taboos in the Tonga land is sin and societal prohibited social norms. A cat chasing you or a white snake or miscarriage can be a result of taboos both to an individual or society. Wise men will have to be consulted to end the curse of a taboo. These wise men are elderly statemen who hold a lot of knowledge and understanding about their culture and norms. In general terms, these wise men (mostly men and on a lesser inclusion, women) hold an understanding of traditional medicines and hold knowledge about taboo rituals which is very important in breaking the curses that come with the effects of social taboos.

### 3. The Relationship between Sin and a Taboo in the Tonga Culture

The Western definition of a taboo is arguably insufficient when compared with the Tonga version of *kutondwa* (prohibition) (noun) in the actions is *citondwa* (doing a prohibit-able act) (verb). The closest word for a taboo in the Western to that of the Tonga people is *malweza* (i.e., being chased by a cat or seeing a white snake). Chen Z. Oren, Karen Hofmann, Robert Taibbi, and Wei-Chien Lee (Oren et al., 2019) offer that when a behavior or practice significantly deviates from a social norm, it may be classified as taboo. This is true with the basic understanding of a taboo as a social norm. On the one hand, Chen Z. Oren et al. state that people raised within the culture are highly unlikely to do the act and are highly likely to judge people who violate the taboo because they are acquainted with what that culture demands. However, deviants are always capable of overlooking the agreed upon social norm and causing a taboo.

The Tongas, though, hold that a taboo is a verb; thus, there must be a noun in this case *kutondwa*. For the Tongas, *kutondwa* is a deep word that means more than the Western understanding of a taboo as it serves as a source of a taboo. We will later on offer a full anthropological review of the Tonga *kutondwa*. Peter Altmann, Anna Angelini, and Abra Spiciarich (Altmann et al., 2020: p. 27) draw in an interesting angle as they offered the historical view on taboos saying, “Before considering which kinds of meat were prohibited and in which specific occasions meat-related bans were observed, it might be useful to recall how the notions of “taboo” and purity were conceptualized and expressed in the Mesopotamian vocabulary.” Oren et al. (2019) offer that a taboo is a social or cultural banning of an act. Although the act might not be illegal or punished, it is strongly derided. And that every culture has some behaviors that are considered taboo. Food, dress, bodily functions, language, topics of discussion and courtship are common themes. Some of these taboos can be based on religious beliefs (i.e., the Jewish food and moral taboos found in Leviticus).

The ontological challenge of sin is in its definition, “missing the mark”, as it leaves room for all wrongs to be viewed as sin, whereby a taboo is defined as a social or religious custom prohibiting or restricting a particular practice or forbidding association with a particular person, place, or thing. The Tonga people define a sin as *cibi* singular and *hyibi* or *zibi* plural noun. Taboos are not sins because they are cultural and differ from one ethnic group to another. They hold that taboos as prohibition (*kutondwa*), are breaking socially held beliefs and activities such as incest, insulting elders, bestiality and other such abominable acts. In as much as taboos are not law in the Tonga-land, the introduction of taboos is made mostly by traditional leaders for social control and morality in their groups. In holding a similar view, Chris Drew (Drew, 2023) holds that a taboo is an action that is frowned upon and considered inappropriate to practice or even talk about within a cultural group of which its synonym is prohibition.

As though Altmann, Angelini, and Spiciarich (Altmann et al., 2020: p. 43) do

agree with the Tonga's definition of taboos, who avowed that when dealing with prohibitions, the word "taboo" comes to mind. They add that this word belongs to a series of terms gleaned by anthropologists in the nineteenth century from non-Western cultures (such as totem, manna, potlatch, and so on) and functioned as an incantatory vocabulary. Altmann, Angelini, and Spiciarich (Altmann et al., 2020: p. 45) go on to say that this term (prohibition) is used to qualify those elements that endanger the preservation of purity. This concept applies to everything that repels and horrifies, and must therefore be removed or put aside from the gods; it is variously translated with "abjection," "abomination," and sometimes "taboo"; however, "aversion," which (from an etymological perspective) involves the idea of diversion, aptly renders its meaning.

On the other hand, not all taboos are a result of sin, in as much as, not all sins are taboos. A few examples can be given from within the Tonga and much of the Zambian tribes on their understanding of taboos such as parents undressing in the presence of their children (children seeing their parents' nakedness), having sex in the presence of your children or discussing with your children where babies (sex related topics) come from are taboos yet not sins. Equally, having sex with a woman who has just given birth, incest, having sex with the dead or an animal, a man having a sexual affair with his father's other wives, a man entering his daughter's bedroom even if she is not there, having sex with a woman who is on her period etc. Interestingly, it is socially taboo for grown children to enter their parents' bedroom, and parents of the opposite gender cannot enter their children's bedroom. The other example is from the eastern Zambian tribes who hold that a woman who is on her menstrual is not in a position to add salt to food and a woman who is on her menstrual cannot go into tomato field as it was expected that the tomatoes would wither, such also is not a sin. However, there are taboos which are a product of sin (there is a need to define sin somewhere so that a clear distinction is made and boundaries drawn) such as incest, insulting elders and insulting gods are taken as sins.

Notably again, taboos within most of Zambia have changed. A good example of what was a taboo and no longer is, a woman adding salt to food when cooking while menstruating a woman on her menstrual circle visiting specified fields is no longer seen as taboos. Generally, all social taboos are capable of changing, unlike moral taboos. For example, in the Tonga land, most of them believe that speaking of how many animals one has or to speak of how much crop one has harvested is a taboo. Such taboos can be broken though with difficulty as they are more social/moral in nature.

Altmann, Angelini, and Spiciarich (Altmann et al., 2020: p. 34) however link evil (sin) to food taboos too. They also argue that there is a link that is found in connecting grilled meat and leprosy and that this particular food was defined in the text as a "taboo to Sin," (Altmann et al., 2020: p. 39). For the English people, for example, a taboo can mean many things which does include disclosure of what others view as a secret message which would include ailment. But for the Tongas

an information-based action is not a taboo unless it borders on, for example, the unpermitted disclosure of a king's death. Based on the debate on Jim Harries debate the word taboo is un-European. Jim Harries (Harries, 2015: p. 157) holds that it was James Cook who discovered taboo in Polynesia.

Following his discovery the term taboo (or *tabu*) has been borrowed from Polynesian and incorporated into English and other European languages. Agreeing with Harries helps this article put up an argument that Europe therefore hold no greater understanding of taboos, compared with the Tonga people on the etymologically meaning. The word taboo as a verb must draw its strength from a noun in this case the Tonga's *kutondwa*. Prohibition is too general a term, taking for example going to swim in the middle of a dark night in the river is prohibited yet it is not a taboo. If only prohibition could be defined within the context of morality and cultural norms then the English prohibition could come close to *kutondwa* of the Tonga people.

Equally Altmann, Angelini, and Spiciarich (Altmann et al., 2020: p. 1) contend that within a given context biblical food prohibitions are taboos. The dietary prohibitions of the Hebrew Bible however, have long fascinated biblical scholars as well as anthropologists, and, more recently, have started to draw the attention of archeologists noting that the biblical food prohibitions constitute an excellent object for comparative and interdisciplinary approaches for several reasons: their very materiality, their nature as comparative objects between cultures, and their nature as an anthropological object concluded Altmann, Angelini and Spiciarich.

Harries (2015: p. 158) however finds it at odds that Captain Cook discovered taboos as a discovery. He adds that such a discovery to have been a discovery implies that those who discovered it found it foreign, ending up describing it using a borrowed word. He concludes by saying that this is particularly surprising because taboo concepts are replete in the Bible. For the Tongas, however, food only becomes a taboo when someone else eats what was meant for the gods. When a taboo is to be broken, the Tonga conducts a ritual which in most cases involves food or death of an animal so that its blood can be used to cleanse the person who broke the taboo. It is prudent to mention that in scripture, Jesus' blood accomplishes the same tasks of salvation and breaking social taboos.

#### **4. Biblical Taboos (Abominations)**

There are notable passages on taboos in the bible both in the Old Testament and New Testament. For example, Jesus meeting the Samaritan woman in Sychar at Jacob's well was a cultural taboo. The Jewish norm initially did not permit a man to be at a well at the time Christ met the Samaritan woman. Additionally, it was taboo for a Jew, especially a Jewish man, to talk to a Samaritan woman. It is Trillia Newbell (Newbell, 2019), a feminist theologian who argues that cultural lines, religious lines, ethnic lines, and gender lines mark dramatic rings around that well. But here's the thing about Jesus: he's not afraid to cross lines.

Newbell is right when she argues that Jesus did not sin by speaking with the

woman alone. Nor did he sin by speaking with a Samaritan, someone culturally and religiously unlike him. The consistency of what Trillia Newbell is arguing qualifies the argument that not all taboos are sin. Cyril Chavis (Chavis, 2020) offers a screaming title on John 4 saying, “A Scandalous Mission”, directly referring to the encounter Jesus had with the Samaritan woman. Chavis holds that a scandal is something that causes general public outrage by a perceived offense against morality, a law, or the social norm. Jesus’ course of action at the well offended the Jewish sensibilities of His disciples. Chavis continued by saying that this shows us the culturally challenging power of the mission of Christ.

Altmann, Angelini and Spiciarich (Altmann et al., 2020: p. 4), based their argument on scripture, hold their thoughts on food taboos. Mmbulaheni Ramulondi, Helene de Wet and Nontuthuko Rosemary Ntuli (Ramulondi et al., 2021: p. 2) define food taboos as food and beverages that people abstain from consuming for religious, cultural, or hygienic reasons. Ramulondi et al. (2021: p. 2) argues that most pregnant women (with reference to South Africa) often lack access to a healthy diet that provides for their increased nutritional requirements because of some food taboos. Even in the life of Israel food taboos were seen as problematic. For the biblical restoration of the food taboo, a man was to keep away. Scripture offers again that man was not to make dirty that which God has made clean (1 Corinthians 8:1 - 11; Romans 8:7; Acts 10:1 - 11:18). Scripture links food taboos to sin. This pattern is consistent with the Tonga culture as taboos are linked to societal sins. Additionally, like the sin act, anyone who indulges in a taboo must be punished as the only way out is ritualistic pardons.

Moreover, Meryem Babou (Babou, 2014) thinks that a taboo is a phenomenon which is characterized by behaviors that are believed to be supernaturally forbidden or regarded as immoral or improper to society, on such basis, scripture both in the Old Testament and New Testament is consistent of prohibitions and the way-out rituals. A classic example is found in Leviticus 17 (Eating Blood Forbidden—one who eats blood must be cut off from the people), while Leviticus 18 avows unlawful sexual relations. Like in the Tonga culture no one was/is to approach any close relative to have sexual relations with them. The consistent fact about this incest taboo is the shared blood. An incest taboo covers parents and siblings. Whereas, in 1 Corinthians 5:1, scripture holds on the grounds that sexual immorality among you with a relative was a taboo unheard of even amongst pagans.

A legend has it that my mother’s tribe (Kunda), literally translated as “Sex”, gets its name from a taboo which King Mambwe, then a Senior Bisa Chief committed with his blood sister. For the Kunda people such an act was not just out of culture but a prohibition. This taboo amongst the Kundas still holds as a deliverance ritual to the extent of getting the lead of the punishment of such a taboo seems yet to be done. The Kunda people, unlike the Tongas, proudly pronounce male sexual appetites as Thomas Aquinas would put it as products of rational appetites. An admission is held that “*ubukunda ni anakazi na walwa*” (meaning being Kunda is

women and beer).

## 5. The Role of Wise Men

The value of taboos in the Tonga land as is in much of Zambia is that society is kept in check. Mostly all moral taboos like not incest and profane words to a god are moral taboos whereas all menstrual taboos are hygiene taboos. On the other hand, insulting elders can be classified under social taboos. It is important to note that all biblical food taboos are social taboos and fewer sins. It is on such a basis that the New Testament did not find it difficult to reform (Acts 11). Chris Drew (Drew, 2023) argues that some taboos are legally enforceable, while others are simply considered to be poor taste. In fact, most taboos are enforced not by governments but by subtle social signals that demonstrate disapproval of taboo behaviors. However, as for Tongas, the enforcement is the preserve of the Wise Men. It is important to understand that some of these wise men are traditional leaders. The importance of a wise man being a traditional leader is that it bridges the spiritual with traditional leadership.

Progressively, Tongas have a deeper understanding of what taboos are. For them a taboo as a verb is a product of a prohibition (*kutondwa*) a noun. In other words, there must be a cause for a taboo to happen. In *citondwa* a Tonga would be explaining what has occurred as an act that will cause a taboo (*malweza*). For a Tonga person a taboo (*malweza*) is only explainable from what one has met or seen which is unusual such as being chased by a cat, cats crying in the night, meeting a white snake, finding an elderly woman having intercourse with a minor and so forth. When a taboo has happened or seen, wise men of the community are to be consulted. The result often ends in rituals being performed to cleanse the person or community of the consequences of the taboo. This is surely different from the western understanding of a taboo. A good question from this analysis would be, does the western world have taboos? Moreover, Barus et al. (2018) argue like Julia Kristeva (Kristeva, 2024: p. 9) that a taboo is sacred, consecrated, and on the other uncanny, dangerous, forbidden, and unclean. Thus “taboo” has about it a sense of something unapproachable and it is principally expressed in prohibitions and restrictions. Thus, a sacred taboo needs a wise man for cleansing.

- Tonga formula of taboos

*Kutondwa* (Taboo) → *Citondwa* → leading to *malweza* → bad luck or curse  
 → misfortune → rituals

*Citondwa* leads to *malweza* which attracts a curse or bad luck which leads to misfortune(s) needing cleansing by performing rituals by the Wise men (traditional leaders). The diagrammatic representation of the manifestation of taboos in the Tonga community brings to the fore the importance of wise men or traditional leaders or ancestors in the cleansing and forgiveness for committing a prohibited act.

## 6. Conclusion

In conclusion, the offered argument has been that the Tonga people's anthropology of taboos is richer than that of the Western World. This article on sins and taboos has proven that the Tonga definition, application and understanding of a taboo is richer as *kutondwa* of the Tongas must be understood from within prohibitions. On the other hand, Jim Harries has argued that James Cook imported taboos for the West. Thus, the West is seen to be falling short of the understanding of taboos like the Tonga people do. The Tonga people hold a three-stage understanding of taboos with *kutondwa* as a noun and a verb in *citondwa* as well as *malweza*. This is where *citondwa* does not lead to misfortune but to *malweza*. However, *citondwa* leads to *malweza*, which attracts a curse ending in misfortune, which needs cleansing by performing rituals.

The way out of *malweza* is a manifested act of taboo, and rituals are conducted by Wise Men. It has also been understood that sin shares a relationship with a taboo, though not all sins are taboos and that not all taboos are, as a result, a sin. We have learnt of social taboos and moral taboos and that social taboos have the ability to change. The paper has equally underscored that the bible holds within its taboos. That is both in the Old Testament and the New Testament. In Matthew 4, for example, it was within the Jewish cultural understanding that at certain hours, no man was allowed to go to the well later on talking with a Samaritan woman.

## Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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