The Role of Social Taboos in Natural Resource Management

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Abstract

Indigenous Ecological Knowledge has received much needed attention in recent years, particularly on account of the role it plays in natural resource management. Informal social institutions and local belief systems are inherent to indigenous societies and are considered key to the protection of natural habitats that have been consecrated as sacred sites by them and social taboos and social norms as mechanisms through which they operate. Social taboos exist throughout the world and have been known to dictate the way behaviours are guided and regulated in society. Despite their immense potential of augmenting natural resource governance and biodiversity conservation practices, social taboos and social norms have been truly undermined and their effectiveness questioned which has seriously threatened their sustainability. Nevertheless, these taboos persist as key factors in regulating the exploitation and management of natural resources even to this day. This paper is an attempt to understand the role played by social taboos in natural resource governance and biodiversity conservation.

Key Words: Social taboos, natural resource management

Introduction

Social taboos exist throughout the world and have been known to dictate the way behaviours are guided and regulated in society and "continue to exert their power, playing a crucial role in every aspect of our lives" (Holden 4). Margaret Mead defines taboo as "a negative sanction, a prohibition whose infringement results in an automatic penalty without human or superhuman mediation" (as cited in Steiner 22). Colding and Folke (584) define them as "a prohibition imposed by social custom or as a protective measure". "Taboo is concerned (I) with all the social mechanisms of obedience which have ritual significance; (2) with specific and restrictive behaviour in dangerous situations… (3) With protection of individuals who are in danger, and (4) with the protection of society from those endangered - and therefore dangerous –

persons…Taboo is an element of all those situations in which attitudes to values are expressed in terms of danger behaviour" (Steiner 20). Taboos are dynamic in nature and are constantly evolving and changing, across cultures and across time (Holden 2001, Burridge 2012, Golden and Comaroff 2015).

It was in his account of the Polynesians that Captain James Cook, in his third voyage around the world as the captain of HMS 'Resolution', first used the term taboo. "Cook realised that the term taboo was common throughout Polynesia and could be applied to many different things, animate and inanimate, living and dead. It could mean something, or someone, that was set apart, or consecrated for a special use or purpose…The term also applied to restrictions placed upon certain members of the society…The basic meaning in both Melanesian and Polynesian languages of

taboo or tapu is 'off limits'(Holden 5). The term 'off limits' denotes a restriction or a ban, the violation of which results in punishment as deemed fit by the society depending on the severity of the case. Thus, when writing about the Polynesians, Cook describes the *tapu's* 'mysterious significance' and religious connotation that perhaps binds the people from any kind of breach. Rev. William Ellis while writing on the Hawaii states that "The prohibitions and requisitions of the *tabu* were strictly enforced, and every breach of them punished with death, unless the delinquents had some very powerful friends who were either priests or chiefs. They were generally offered in sacrifice, strangled or dispatched with a club or a stone within the precincts of the *heiou*, or they were burnt…An institution so universal in its influence and so inflexible in its demands contributed very materially to the bondage and oppression of the natives in general. The king, sacred chiefs and priests appear to have been the only persons to whom its application was easy; the great mass of the people were at no period of their existence exempt from its influence, and no circumstance in life could excuse their obedience to its demands" (as cited in Steiner 48). "At this point, it may appear that taboos serve to control a society, or certain sections of a society, to structure it through a system of hierarchies and differentiation, to separate one community from another and, on a psychological level, to separate the self from others and the adult citizen from the oral, anal and Œdipal obsessions of childhood. Those who dare to break the rules or to transgress the boundaries may achieve considerable power; on the other hand they may be killed or incarcerated for their 'crimes'" (Holden 20). "Indeed, today, just as in the past, the transgression of social or cultural codes can lead to exclusion, isolation, or even death" (Holden 4).

In summarizing the essential elements of Polynesian taboo, Margaret Mead (1937) describes it as:

a) any prohibitions enforced automatically, that is, the punishment followed inevitably without external mediation; b) or the edicts of chiefs and priests, which are supported either by the superior mana (magical power) of these individuals or by the temporal or spiritual forces which they have under their control; c) prohibitions against theft or trespass for which the sanctions are specific magic formulae; d) religious prohibitions which are referred in native theology to the decree of some deity or spirit; e) any prohibitions which carry no penalties beyond the anxiety and embarrassment arising from a breach of strongly entrenched custom (as cited in Holden 5).

The social functions of taboos are numerous as they act as forms of social control and protective mechanism. Anthropologists have recognized the importance of taboos in societies and the social functions they play. Colding and Folke while discussing the contributions of anthropologists to the study of taboos have highlighted their various social functions.

"Anthropologists have ascribed various social functions to taboos. Durkheim (1915) hypothesized that taboos function to distinguish between sacred and profane entities in a culture. Frazer (1922) related taboos to animist and magical belief systems. Malinowski (1922) proposed that taboos serve psychological ends. Also, taboos may mark power and status of persons in some cultures (e.g., Frazer

1922, Bodley 1994)…Cultural materialists and ecologically oriented anthropologists, such as Harris (1971, 1979) and Rappaport (1968), have argued that taboos serve ecological adaptations (Colding and Folke 585).

Social Taboos in Natural Resource Management

In recent years, Indigenous Ecological Knowledge has received much needed attention particularly on account of the role it plays in natural resource management. "Indigenous peoples with a historical continuity of resource use practices often possess a broad knowledge base of the behaviour of complex ecological systems in their own localities" (Gadgil, Berkes and Folke 151). Indigenous Ecological Knowledge refers to an aggregate of information, practices and belief system of people and their dynamic relationship with their natural environment such that their perception of their natural world is imbedded in their cultural systems manifested through their customs and traditions. "Resource management mechanisms and practices of traditional knowledge systems often constitute an integrated system of knowledge, practices, and beliefs handed down through generations by cultural transmission. Such knowledge systems differ from contemporary ones in being moral, ethically based, spiritual, intuitive, and holistic" (Colding and Folke 594). "It is in this context that the knowledge of indigenous societies accumulated over historical time, is of significance" (Gadgil, Berkes and Folke 151). Informal social institutions and local belief systems are inherent to indigenous societies and are considered key to the protection of natural habitats that have been consecrated as sacred sites by them and social taboos and social norms as mechanisms through which they operate. "Ecologists increasingly emphasize that biological conservation and ecosystem management require a human dimension to be effective…Social institutions play a key role in this respect " (Colding and Folke 584). Despite their immense potential of augmenting natural resource governance and biodiversity conservation practices, social taboos and social norms have been truly undermined and their effectiveness questioned which has seriously threatened their sustainability. "In spite of the conservation values associated with traditional belief systems, in most cases, they tend to be downplayed in the design of natural resource governance frameworks; this has been a major cause of the failure of most environmental management regimes" (Yeboah-Assiamah, Muller and Domfeh 3). Nevertheless, these taboos persist as key factors in regulating the exploitation and management of natural resources even to this day. Colding and Folke (586) have identified six categories (Table 1) of nature related social taboos which they refer to as resource and habitat taboos (RHTs) which are grouped on the basis of their conservation and resource management functions.

TABLE 1. Resource and habitat taboos (RHTs) and their nature conservation and resource management functions.

Category	Function
Segment taboos	Regulate resource withdrawal
Temporal taboos	Regulate access to resources in time

Method taboos	Regulate methods of resource withdrawal
Life history taboos	Regulate withdrawal of vulnerable life history stages of species
Specific-species taboos	Total protection to species in time and space
Habitat taboos	Restrict access and use of resources in time and space

(Source: Colding and Folke 586).

Colding and Folke have identified, analyzed and categorized the Resource and Habitat Taboos (RHTs) on the basis of their conservation and resource management functions and "if adhered to, RHTs may offer local protection to species including threatened, endemic, and keystone species and contribute to the conservation of habitats, and of biodiversity both temporally and spatially" (592).

Sanctions and Compliance

"Social taboos represent good examples of informal institutions" (as cited in Colding and Folke 584). "Many local-level institutions for resource management are informal, based on cultural norms and conventions of society. Such intuitions are widespread among local resource users that design their own norms and rules" (Colding and Folke 413) and "based on cultural norms that do not depend on government for either promulgation or enforcement" (Rasmussen and Posner 369).

"In most societies, sanctions against violations of taboos may be determined and meted out by chiefs and leaders" (Colding and Folke 595). These sanctions may include fines imposed in the form of monetary fines, non-monetary (payment in livestock, agricultural produce, community service, etc.), community isolation and exclusion in societal affairs (religious as well as secular) and excommunication which results not only in penalty to the transgressor but often times extended to their kins as well. The severity of the case generally decides the kind of sanction imposed and may include one or a combination of sanctions. "Norms are enforced by internalized values, by refusals to interact with the offender, by disapproval of his actions, and sometimes by private violence…and are an attractive method of social control because a rule may be desirable but too costly a project for the state to undertake relative to the benefits" (Rasmussen and Posner 370). The categorization of sanctions differ among scholars, however the basic tenets remain the same. Rasmussen and Posner (371) have classified sanctions into various types.

1. Automatic sanctions. The violator's action carries its own penalty because of its not being coordinated with the actions of others.

2. Guilt. The violator feels bad about his violation as a result of his education and upbringing, quite apart from external consequences.

3. Shame. The violator feels that his action has lowered himself either in his own eyes or in the eyes of other people.

4. Informational sanctions. The violator's action conveys information about himself that he would rather others not know.

5. Bilateral costly sanctions. The violator is punished by the actions of and at the

expense of just one other person, whose identity is specified by the norm.

6. Multilateral costly sanctions. The violator is punished by the actions and at the expense of many other people.

A norm can be enforced by more than one sanction—indeed, by all six…All six sanctions have analogies in rewards for adherence to norms or for actions beyond the call of duty. A reward can take the form of a feeling of a duty well done, material gratitude from one or more people, the automatic gain from coordinated interaction with someone else, the signaling of desirable qualities, or the good opinion of others.

"Walsh (2002) details the complex relationship that occurs between the transgressors of taboos and the living and spiritual authorities imposing them…By transgressing taboos, the imposing authority itself is threatened. Walsh (2002) notes, "When such transgressions occur… it is the places themselves, and not the taboos, that are said to be 'broken' (*robaka*), and it is the authorities that govern these places, as well as the valued continuities they guarantee that are endangered" (Cinner 21). The interconnectedness of taboos, social sanctions and compliance in such societies are customarily linked to ancestor veneration. Hence, in societies that have a spiritual connection with resource utilization, compliance level have been found to be high given that violations of taboos are often regarded as sacrilege.

Conclusion
Social taboos are rooted in cultural norms sanctioned by society, however, their usefulness are often times threatened by erosion as local communities transform,

some having lost their effectiveness while others survive and persist and continue to guide effective resource management practices. Furthermore, it is important to recognize the dangers of the blind conviction of the "noble savage" in such settings and acknowledge that indigenous populations "base resource management on other rationales than most Western nature management and conservation systems" which may be "problematic to consider in biological conservation schemes, since they depart from contemporary notions of conservation" (Colding and Folke 595). "In spite of the conservation values associated with traditional belief systems, in most cases, they tend to be downplayed in the design of natural resource governance frameworks; this has been a major cause of the failure of most environmental management regimes" (Osei-Tutu 114). Perhaps one of the main reasons for failure of integrating Indigenous ecological knowledge (social taboos) into contemporary conservation efforts is probably attributed to the lack of understanding of the spiritual role the taboos play and the extend of their hold on the communities who practice them. Effective integration of social taboos into the "modern conservation context will require a thorough understanding of the history, spiritual role, spiritual leaders and rules associated with each location" (Cinder 22). "To retain their influence on resource use practice in contemporary local communities, resource management taboos need to have instrumental relevance in addition to their mythical relevance" (Osei-Tutu 114). "Informal institutions may offer advantages in partnership designs of biodiversity conservation and ecosystem management, involving

cooperation between conservationists and local human communities"(Colding and Folke 584). A serious attempt on integrating participatory approaches in the conservation and management of natural resources, highlighting emic perspectives, is crucial at this juncture and due recognition to informal institutions is long overdue given the ecological value that they endow to efforts of natural resource management and biodiversity conservation.

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