

Taboo Expressions in the Nyoro Language: Descriptions and Analyses

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Abstract

This paper examines taboo and bad omens in the Nyoro society, which relate to all sections of people (setting aside taboos relating to clan regulations). Taboos and bad omens reflect individuals' relationships with the society and the entire world. They both regulate the conducts of individuals. Taboo expressions are deconstructed into four clauses, namely, commandments, violations, consequences, and reasons, in order to clarify what is overtly expressed and what is not through logical analyses. This study tries to analyse taboo expressions from a functional perspective, to the largest possible extent, seeking the hidden reasons behind their expression. Taboos stipulate violations like normal warnings, but they are always paired with a scarring consequence which hides the real reason, whereas normal warnings express the real reason without the consequence of the violation. Taboos express prohibitions that one can control, regardless of whether one observes them, while bad omens refer to what one should do when one encounters an inevitable evil force.

Key words

taboo; bad omen; logical analysis; hidden reason; Nyoro

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1. Introduction

We find taboos in many areas of Africa. In Japan too, we have taboos. Maybe taboos are found almost everywhere in the world. In this paper, the term ‘taboo’ refers to expressions similar to the common Japanese saying: ‘If you whistle in the night, a devil will come’.

Taboos tie to wide-ranging aspects of daily life. Various disciplines are interested in them. However, few studies comprehensively examine numerous taboos that stem from one ethnic group. One such study is Yoneyama’s (1990) analysis of taboos, including bad omens, within the Tembo people of eastern Congo. Unfortunately, this publication does not textualise Tembo phrases and clauses. It merely uses translations, and misses the logical structure analyses.

This paper presents a field research about the Nyoro people¹ in western Uganda from 2008 to 2017. It corresponds to the text study aspect of language research.² This paper aims to analyse taboo expressions and related bad omens in Nyoro in terms of form and content, based on linguistic descriptions. It clarifies in particular the logical form and content by deconstructing expressions into clauses and laying them out to show what are included as taboo expressions and bad omens.³

2. Taboos and bad omens

Nyoro has three terms concerning taboos, as shown in (1):

¹ The Nyoro are a Bantu-speaking people with a population of 967,000, according to Simons and Fennig (2018). They are mostly agriculturalists, cultivating bananas, millet, potatoes, and coffee, among others. Cows also have a certain role in their economy. Their language, Nyoro (or Orunyoro with the augment and prefix), has a near genealogical relationship with neighbouring languages, especially Tooro, Nkore, and Kiga.

² As for Nyoro texts, the author has published three papers in Japanese, namely: ‘Greeting Formulas in Nyoro’ (Kaji, 2012), ‘Euphemistic and Figurative Expressions in Nyoro’ (Kaji, 2013), and ‘Personal Names in Nyoro’ (Kaji, 2018).

³ This is a slightly revised version of the author’s paper under the same title, published in 2019 in Japanese.

- (1) a. *i:hâno* (sg.), *amahâno* (pl.) ‘taboo, prohibition’
b. *ekisirâ:ni* (sg.), *ebisirâ:ni* (pl.) ‘bad omen, ill presage’
c. *omuzîro* (sg.), *emizîro* (pl.) ‘totem’

As an example of *i:hâno* (1a),⁴ in Nyoro, they say ‘a boy should not sit on the cooking stove’, and the consequence, which is not expressed, is that ‘if a boy sits on the cooking stove, his father dies’.⁵ This is similar to the Japanese taboo: ‘If you whistle in the night, a devil will come’. In other words, taboos are prohibitive expressions that produce scary consequences.

Nyoro also has what is called *ekisirâ:ni* (1b) or bad omens and ill presage. ‘When you embark on a journey, you should stop if you see a rat cut across the road’ is one such example. In Japan, people often say, ‘if a chopstick breaks when eating, this is a bad omen’ and ‘if tea leave axes float vertically in your cup, this is a good omen’. However, in Nyoro, the author was not able to dig up good omens, only bad ones.

Finally, the Nyoro society is composed of clans that possess a totem, *omuzîro* (1c). Totems have a set of rules which are closely related to taboos. For example, the Abagwê:ri clan has *engâbi* or ‘bushbuck’ as their totem and they have a series of prohibitions related to this animal (e.g., not to eat it). This prohibition, in Nyoro understanding, serves as an explanation similar to Islam declarations to not eat pork. In other words, whereas *i:hâno* concerns the whole of Nyoro society, *omuzîro* only concerns the clan. The following sections only deal with the *i:hâno* taboos and those of *ekisirâ:ni* that are related to them. Clan taboos are omitted in this paper because they represent inherent clan problems and must be

⁴ In what follows, only the singular form is used.

⁵ The same thing is said for girls: ‘A girl should not sit on the cooking stove’. The consequence is ‘if a girl sits on the cooking stove, her mother dies’.

discussed in association with them. This is beyond the scope of this research.

3. Structure of taboo expressions

The essential aspect of *i:hâno* taboo expressions is the prohibition ‘to not do’ or a negative commandment. However, a taboo expression necessarily contains, although does not always overtly expresses, a violation and its consequential result, as (2) below indicates (e.g., if you do that, this will happen). In most cases, the result of a violation entails ill luck, such as dying or figuring in an accident. As taboo expressions imply clauses, the following discussion deconstructs them to clarify each included clause.

- (2) logical structure of taboo expressions:
 - a. commandment (prohibition in most cases)
 - b. violation
 - c. consequence

The aforementioned example, ‘a boy should not sit on the cooking stove’, can be analysed using a linguistic analysis as shown in (3) and a logical structure analysis as shown in (4) below.

- (3) a. Omwó:ǰó t'aiká:rrá haihêga.
b. o-mu-odžo ti a-ikarr-a ha-i-hega.
c. Aug1-NPr1-boy not he-sit-Fin NPr16-NPr5-cooking stone⁶
d. A boy should not sit on the cooking stove.⁷
- (4) a. commandment: A boy should not sit on the cooking stove.
b. violation: A boy sits on the cooking stove.
(b'. violative condition: If a boy sits on a cooking stove)
c. consequence: His father dies.

The Nyoro expression in (3a) is written with a broad phonetic transcription and (3b) is a morphological division of each word, followed by glossing in (3c). Finally, (3d) indicates the English meaning. In the logical structure analysis of (4), (4a) shows the negative commandment (prohibition) which is what is expressed in (3). The following violation in (4b) is actually expressed as a violative condition, as in (4b'). Finally, the consequence (4c) ends the statement.

As the logical structure in (4) indicates, taboo expressions in Nyoro consist of commandments, violations, and consequences. The consequence in particular is expressed as if by causal laws with the temporal development of a deed in the way of 'commandment (prohibition) → violation →

⁶ The abbreviations used are as follows. Aug: augment (a kind of article); Clit: clitic; Fin: final; NPr: nominal prefix; ObjRel: object relative; Perf: perfective; PPr: pronominal prefix; Prefin: prefinal; Subj: subjective; SubRel: subject relative. Nyoro is a class language. The numbers after NPr are the class numbers of the nouns in question. For simplicity, 'he/she' is used rather than SPr1 (subject prefix of class 1) for humans. To clarify what 'it' refers to, the class number is put down as 'it7' ('it' refers to a class 7 noun). See Kaji (2015) for an outline of Nyoro's noun class system.

⁷ The cooking stove is called *i:hêga* (sg.), *amahêga* (pl.) (or *i:hîga* (sg.), and *amahîga* (pl.)) in Nyoro (Kaji, 2015). It is made with stones, usually three, to stabilize a pan during cooking. It is located in the centre of a kitchen and appears to be a good stool when a pan is not on it. However, one has to be careful because it may be very hot even when the fire has already been put out.

consequence'. Significantly, there is an illogical leap in the process of violation to consequence, as one does not know why the father would die if a boy sits on the cooking stove. Another important point about Nyoro taboo expressions is that, in most cases, there is a hidden reason for the prohibition of a deed. One would assume that the reason why the boy should not sit on a cooking stove is to avoid getting burnt. However, the taboo does not declare this reason. Rather, it states 'do not sit on the cooking stove, because your father will die'. Therefore, it is necessary to add another element, the hidden reason, in addition to (2) and (4), when considering the logical structure of the taboo expressions.

- (5) a. commandment: A boy should not sit on the cooking stove.
- b. violation: A boy sits on the cooking stove.
- (b'. violative condition: If a boy sits on the cooking stove)
- c. consequence: His father dies.
- d. reason: The boy may get burnt.

Returning to the question on why would the father die, what this really means is that 'do not sit on the cooking stove, because you may get burnt'. However, as children frequently do not listen or take the adults' advice, the warning was turned into: 'If you sit on such a place, your father may die'. The child does not grasp the meaning and may be surprised by the leap from cooking stove to father's death. At that point, a father may enter the scene, saying that he suddenly feels pain in the belly, and may even add, 'ow, I am dying'. The child would be very surprised and promise never to sit on a cooking stove. Hearing that, the father would say in relief: 'My pain is gradually diminishing'.

What is important here is that the child does not understand the logical relationship between sitting

on the stove and the father's death. Observed closely, it comes across as a causal correlation of time in the process of violation resulting in ill luck. In reality, no such causal correlation exists as it is not possible for a parent to die as a direct or indirect consequence of a child sitting on the cooking stove. What is meant here is a degree expression, in that sitting on the cooking stove is as bad as the death of a parent. However, the child thinks that such a causal correlation exists. The leap in logic here is intended to make a causal correlation difficult to understand. If it were easy to understand, children may try to find a way to make the parent not die even if they sit on the cooking stove. Depending on the degree of the leap in logic, it will be more effective and the child will not make such efforts.

The following is another example related to a husband's dignity.

- (6) a. Omukázi t'asembézá epáma y'embógô hálí í:bâ.
b. o-mu-kazi ti a-sembez-a e-n-ama ya e-m-bogo
c. Aug1-Npr1-wife not she-serve-Fin Aug9-NPr9-meat of9 Aug9-NPr9-buffalo
b. ha-li iba.
c. NPr16-is[SubRel] her.husband
d. The wife should not serve buffalo meat in the presence of her husband.
- (7) a. commandment: The wife should not serve buffalo meat in the presence of her husband.
b. violation: The wife serves buffalo meat in the presence of her husband.
(b'. violative condition: If the wife serves buffalo meat in the presence of her husband)
c. consequence: Her husband will be impotent.
d. reason: Buffalo meat represents the husband's dignity, which the wife should not debase.

Buffaloes are difficult to hunt and their meat is a symbol of the husband's dignity. When serving the table, the wife can carve certain meats, such as beef or chicken, but not buffalo, because it is the husband who must carve and serve it. If the wife does, it violates the husband's dignity. In taboo language, this is expressed as 'the husband will be impotent'.

4. Affirmative and negative commandments

Commandments are overwhelmingly negative in Nyoro taboo expressions, such as those shown in (3) and (6), but some affirmative commandments have also appeared, such as that shown in (8).

- (8) a. Omwisíkí aika:rra há:nsî akubíre amagûru.
- b. o-mu-isiki a-ikarr-a ha-n-si a-kub-ire
- c. Aug1-NPr1-girl she-sit-Fin NPr16-NPr9-ground she-fold-Perf [SubjRel]
- b. a-ma-guru.
- c. Aug6-NPr6-leg
- d. A girl must bend her legs when she sits on the ground.
- (9) a. commandment: A girl must bend her legs when she sits on the ground.
- b. violation: A girl does not bend her legs when she sits on the ground.
- (b'. violative condition: If a girl does not bend her legs when she sits on the ground)
- c. consequence: She will become sterile.

Here we have an affirmative commandment 'Bend the legs when you sit on the ground!' which can be changed to a negative commandment 'Do not stretch your legs when you sit on the ground!' by making

it prohibitive, as in (10).

- (10) a. negative commandment (prohibition): A girl should not stretch her legs when she sits on the ground.
- b. violation: A girl stretches her legs when she sits on the ground.
- (b'. violative condition: If a girl stretches her legs when she sits on the ground)
- c. consequence: She will become sterile.

As a logical analysis of (8), (9) and (10) are the same. The author, in a position to attach weight to expressive ways in Nyoro, considers the first clause as a commandment, which is either an affirmative commandment or a negative commandment, this latter being a prohibition. In this regard, negative commandments or prohibitions are much more prominent, as taboos essentially serve to ban people from conducting certain actions.⁸ The hidden reason can be deduced as ‘if a girl does not bend her legs when she sits on the ground, her underwear or even her intimate parts can be seen, which must be avoided’.

Similar to (8), (11) is an affirmative commandment, but differs in that it is followed by a negative commandment. This affirmative-negative commandment sequence is not customary, but their co-occurrence indicates that they represent the same thing.⁹

⁸ Thus far, 17 out of the 118 collected taboo expressions are affirmative commandments.

⁹ The sequence of a negative commandment after an affirmative one (or an affirmative commandment after a negative one) repeats the same content and is not considered a formal representation, as it is more common to omit the latter part. The author recorded example (11) as the informant had said it, but that very person did not repeat the latter part when asked to say it during another occasion.

- (11) a. Ekyadá:di, bakizí:ká ab'o:rugá:ndâ; tibakinágâ.
 b. e-ki-ada:di, ba-ki-zi:k-a a-ba o-ru-ganda; ti ba-ki-nag-a.
 c. Aug7-NPr7-afterbirth they2-it7-bury-Fin Aug2-of2 Aug11-NPr11clan not they2-it7-throw-Fin
 d. An afterbirth must be buried by a clan member. It must never be thrown away.
- (12) a. commandment: An afterbirth must be buried by a clan member.
 b. violation: An afterbirth is thrown away without being buried.
 (b'. violative condition: If an afterbirth is thrown away carelessly without being buried)
 c. consequence: It will be eaten by a dog and the baby will die.
 d. reason: One must clean up after the birth properly.

5. Prohibition or violations and their consequences

Since taboos are essentially prohibiting certain conducts, it is quite natural that their expressions have become prohibitive. However, in some taboos only a violation and its consequence are expressed without a prohibition. Example (13) is one such case.

- (13) a. Obu ogobézá ow’omukâgo, ozimba ê:nda.
- b. obu o-gobez-a o-wa o-mu-kago, o-zimb-a
- c. when you(sg.)-betray-Fin Aug1-of1 Aug3-NPr3-pactof.blood you(sg.)-swell-Fin
- b. e-n-da.
- c. Aug9-NPr9-belly
- d. If you betray a friend with whom you concluded a blood pact,¹⁰ your belly will swell.
- (14) a. commandment: You must not betray a friend with whom you concluded a blood pact.
- b. violation: You betray a friend with whom you concluded a blood pact.
- (b’.violative condition: If you betray a friend with whom you concluded a blood pact)
- c. consequence: Your belly will swell.
- d. reason: You must never betray a friend with whom you concluded a blood pact.

In this example, the reason for the prohibition is clear, and although it is not overtly expressed, it is known to everyone and not hidden. In this regard, this taboo differs from the others, although the consequence derived from the violation is illogical and a threat (i.e., your belly will swell). What is important in this example is that it is an evidence of a complementary distribution between the prohibition, and the violation and its consequence. That is, in (3) and (6), as well as (8) and (11), only the commandment, affirmative or negative, is expressed, while the violation and consequence are not. In example (13), in contrast, only the violation and its consequence are expressed, while the

¹⁰ *Omukâgo* (sg.), *emikâgo* (pl.) ‘pact of blood’ is a ritual whereby two persons cut one’s own finger, take a coffee bean with the blood of the other person, and swallow it. A strong friendship is kept throughout one’s life, as the two persons make a fealty to each other in this way.

commandment is not.¹¹

We can reverse these expressions as follows. If the negative commandment ‘a boy should not sit on the cooking stove’ in (3) is expressed with the violation and the consequence, the expression will be like (15). In addition, the expressions of violation and consequence in (13) can be changed to a prohibitive one, as in (16).

(15) If a boy sits on a cooking stove, his father dies.

(16) You must never betray a friend with whom you concluded a blood pact.

Based on this, we can say that (17) is about taboo expressions in Nyoro.

- (17) a. In expressing a taboo, either the commandment (affirmative or negative), or the violation and the consequence are expressed. They cannot be expressed at the same time.
- b. The majority of taboo expressions present a negative commandment or prohibition. Those expressing the violation and consequences are few.¹²

¹¹ Even though a complementary distribution between two aspects is confirmed, they cannot directly be considered as one unit. Although the English [h] and [ŋ], for example, have a complementary distribution, they do not constitute one phoneme. Phonetic similarity, such as the Japanese [ʃ] and [s] for /s/, is necessary. In (3), the commandment ‘a boy should not sit on the cooking stove’ and the violation ‘a boy sits on the cooking stove’ have a commonality, but the consequence ‘his father dies’ has no relation with the commandment. To consider them as one unit, the consequence must be considered as incidental to the violation. Although (11) may initially seem to be in complementary distribution, it is not, because the latter part is an addition. While the two concerned elements do not appear simultaneously in complementary distribution, they appear at the same time in (11).

¹² Example (51), cited later in respect to bad omen, expresses the violation and consequence, not the commandment. In contrast, many taboo expressions in Japanese reflect the violation and consequence, without a commandment, such as ‘if you whistle in the night, a devil will come’.

6. Difference between normal warnings and taboo expressions

Using and examining normal warning expressions that imply a prohibition can help clarify the characteristics of taboo expressions. For example, it is sometimes said in Japan that ‘if you drink too much water before going to bed, you will wet your bed’. If we logically analyse this expression, we will obtain (18).

(18) non-taboo expression: If you drink too much water before going to bed, you will wet your bed.

a. commandment: You should not drink too much water before going to bed.

b. violation: You drink too much water before going to bed.

(b'. violative condition: If you drink too much water before going to bed)

c. consequence: None.

d. reason: You will wet your bed.

In (18), the commandment is not directly expressed as in (13). However, it is clear that (18) is a negative commandment, because if you violate it, bed will be wet.

Using the word ‘result’ here is intentional, equivalent to ‘the reason’ in logical analyses, as it reflects the difference with the consequence of the logical analysis of (5). Specifically, this expression does not contain a scary consequence, such as parental death, swelling of the belly, or figuring in an accident. Rather, it references the real reason why one should not commit the violation. Thus, the passage from violation to reason is natural, as everyone understands it easily.

Both the taboo expressions of (13) and the non-taboo expression of (18) aim to prohibit a conduct, which is not expressed directly, and their violation produces a result of some sort. However, most taboo

expressions hide the true reason and predicate a consequence with some leap in logic. As earlier noted, children do not understand why their parents would die if they sit on a cooking stove. If the given reason was ‘they get burnt’, then it would be the same as (18) and everyone would easily understand the process from violation to reason. However, it would also no longer be a threat and thus not be an effective taboo expression.

Why, then, do people say such a thing as ‘parents die’? One could say ‘you will have an accident’ or ‘you cannot get married’. The conduct is anti-cultural and relate it to being as bad as a parent’s death. Nonetheless, it is natural for people to choose the most effective expression for the persons in question. Therefore, ‘your parent will die’ is the most effective expression to make children listen in this case.

7. Easy and difficult to understand expressions of taboo

Among the Nyoro taboo expressions, there are many whose conduct prohibitions are easy to understand. This section provides some such examples. First, example (19) is probably understandable from a hygiene standpoint, although the expression does not state ‘because of hygienic concerns’, but ‘because the testicles swell’.¹³

¹³ For women, the equivalent is: ‘If they urinate in a garden of sweet potatoes, they become sterile’.

(19) a. Omusáidza t'apá:rá omumusírí gw'ebitakúlí.

b. o-mu-saidza ti a-ja:r-a o-mu-mu-siri gwa

c. Aug1-NPr1-man not he-urinate-Fin Aug18-NPr18-NPr3-garden of3

b. e-bi-takuli.

c. Aug8-NPr8-sweet.potato

d. A man should not urinate in a garden of sweet potatoes.

(20) a. commandment: A man should not urinate in a garden of sweet potatoes.

b. violation: A man urinates in a garden of sweet potatoes.

(b'. violative condition: If a man urinates in a garden of sweet potatoes)

c. consequence: The man's testicles will swell.

d. reason: A man should not urinate on sweet potatoes, because they are an important food source.

Next, we examine (21).

(21) a. Omwá:na mwó:dzó t'akwá:tá bapá:ja omumbâdzu, rû:ndi habiŋwé:ká by'ensôni.

b. o-mu-ana mu-odzo ti a-kwat-a ba-ja:ja o-mu-m-badzu,

c. Aug1-NPr1-child NPr1-boy not he-touch-Fin NPr2-sister Aug18-NPr18-NPr10-side

b. rundi ha-bi-ŋweka bya e-n-soni.

c. or NPr16-NPr8-part of8 Aug9-NPr9-shame

d. A boy should not touch his sister's side or lower abdomen.

- (22) a. commandment: A boy should not touch his sister's side or lower abdomen.
 b. violation: A boy touches his sister's side or lower abdomen.
 (b'. violative condition: If a boy touches his sister's side or lower abdomen)
 c. consequence: His father will have an accident.
 d. reason: A boy should avoid touches that may lead to sexual activity with his sister.

Anyone can understand this taboo in relation to sexual matters, but the consequence of the violation is intimidating. As the father's accident cannot be prevented, regardless of how careful a boy is, it must never happen. Therefore, a boy should never touch his sister's side or lower abdomen. In example (23), which relates to in-law relationships, a sexual factor is once again strongly prominent.

- (23) a. Omusáidža t'ályá ebyokúlyá na jinazâ:ra.
 b. o-mu-saidža ti a-li-a e-bi-okulya na jina-za:ra.
 c. Aug1-NPr1-man not he-eat-Fin Aug8-Npr8-eating with his mother-in-law
 d. A man should not have a meal with his mother-in-law.

- (24) a. commandment: A man should not have a meal with his mother-in-law.
 b. violation: A man has a meal with his mother-in-law.
 (b'. violative condition: If a man has a meal with his mother-in-law)
 c. consequence: Serious calamities, such as accidents, will happen to him.
 d. reason: Having a meal with his mother-in-law will increase familiarity, which may eventually lead to sexual relations. A man should avoid such a thing.

The next one, (25), may appear difficult to grasp at first glance, but it is comprehensible if considered simply. It is similar to the Japanese expression ‘if you whistle at night, a burglar (or devil) comes’.

(25) a. Omusáidža t’asulízá ekírô.

b. o-mu-saidža ti a-suliz-a e-ki-ro.

c. Aug1-NPr1-man not he-whistle-Fin Aug7-NPr7-night

d. A man should not whistle at night.¹⁴

(26) a. commandment: A man should not whistle at night.

b. violation: A man whistles at night.

(b’ .violative condition: If a man whistles at night)

c. consequence: His family perishes.

d. reason: As we cannot see clearly at night, if you whistle, people will know there is a house in the vicinity and that may attract a thief or burglar.

Moreover, women’s menstruation is one of the major themes of taboo expression. Example (27) is just one of the many related expressions.

¹⁴ Whistling itself is a taboo for women.

- (27) a. Omwisíki¹⁵ t'akámá ê:nte álí omubigérê.¹⁶
- b. o-mu-isiki ti a-kam-a e-n-te a-li
- c. Aug1-NPr1-girl not she-milk-Fin Aug9-NPr9-cow she-is[SubjRel]
- b. o-mu-bi-gere.
- c. Aug18-NPr18-Npr8-foot
- d. A menstruating woman should not milk cows.
- (28) a. commandment: A menstruating woman should not milk cows.
- b. violation: A menstruating woman milks cows.
- (b'.violative condition: If a menstruating woman milks cows)
- c. consequence: The nipples of the cows will clog and yield no milk. The cows will die.
- d. reason: People should make arrangements to exempt menstruating women from heavy work.

This taboo is probably adopted in many cow-raising areas of the world. The Nyoro explains that ‘if a menstruating woman milks cows, the milk could be stained with menstrual blood’. Although it is reasonable to fear contamination, this seems to be a made-up excuse to the author. Milking cows is heavy labour. A woman may have a difficult menstrual period and would need time to rest in her condition. Thus, giving her the time to rest without pushing herself in such situation is a thoughtful consideration.

The following expression (29) ‘a menstruating woman should not go gathering winged ants at night’

¹⁵ *omwisíki* literally means ‘girl’ (see the gloss). However, it designates a wide range of stages, from three or four year-old to before reaching *omukázi* ‘mature female, wife’. For this reason, it is translated as ‘woman’ rather than ‘girl’ depending on the context.

¹⁶ *omubigérê* ‘between the feet’ is a euphemistic expression of ‘menstruant’. The same can be said of *murwáire* ‘sick’ in (29) and *omukwê:zi* ‘in the month’ in (31). See Kaji (2013).

is probably provided for the same reason.

- (29) a. Omwisíkí murwáire t'agé:ndá kukwá:ta é:nswâ ekírô.
b. o-mu-isiki mu-rwaire ti a-gend-a ku-kwat-a e-n-swa
c. Aug1-NPr1-girl NPr1-sick, not she-go-Fin to-catch-Fin Aug10-NPr10-termite
b. e-ki-ro.
c. Aug7-Npr7-night
d. A menstruating woman should not go gathering winged ants at night.
- (30) a. commandment: A menstruating woman should not go gathering winged ants at night.
b. violation: A menstruating woman goes to gather winged ants at night.
(b'. violative condition: If a menstruating woman goes gathering winged ants at night)
c. consequence: Winged ants will not come out from the holes of their anthills.
d. reason: A menstruating woman should not have to do hard work.

Gathering winged ants is tough work, as one would have to walk through the total darkness around three in the morning with a torch to light the path. When asked why a menstruating woman should not do this, the response was that winged ants will not come out from the holes of their anthill, because they are sensitive to the smell of blood. Although the causal connection between the smell of blood and winged ants is unclear to the author, people probably use this reason presumably to let women rest.

What is important here is that menstruation itself is not the excuse. Women's work is versatile and if they do not work because of menstruation, many things will stop and society will not function. Therefore, it seems that people consider certain things as taboos for which it is easy to find a seemingly

plausible reason to reduce women's tasks. However, there are other taboos relating to women's menstruation that are not as easy to understand, as in (31) and (32).

(31) a. Omwisíkí t'agurúká amagúru ga jîna álí omukwê:zi.

b. o-mu-isiki ti a-guruk-a a-ma-guru ga jîna

c. Aug1-NPr1-girl, not she-strides.over-Fin Aug6-NPr6-leg of6 her.mother

b. a-li o-mu-ku-ezi.

c. she-is[SubjRel] Aug18-NPr16-Npr15-month

d. A menstruating woman should not stride over the legs of her mother sitting on the ground.

(32) a. commandment: A menstruating woman should not stride over the legs of her mother sitting on the ground.

b. violation: A menstruating woman strides over the legs of her mother sitting on the ground.

(b'. violative condition: If a menstruating woman strides over the legs of her mother sitting on the ground)

c. consequence: Her mother dies.

d. Reason: ?

The Nyoro society attaches weight to seniority. Hence, children must obey their fathers and mothers. It is normally impossible, from this standpoint, that a daughter would stride over the legs of her mother sitting on the ground, stretching the legs, regardless of whether or not the daughter is menstruating. When asked for the reason, people say that 'it is to avoid imbruing the mother with menstrual blood'. It

is important to note that only old women sit on the ground and stretch their legs in the first place.¹⁷ Young women do not sit on the ground stretching their legs. Men, who sit on a chair, do not sit on the ground either. Therefore, only elderly women can be targeted to stride over. Interpreted symbolically, it could be an opposition between young women who menstruate and older menopausal women, reflecting that one should not nullify the hierarchical relationship.

Other taboos concerning striding, such as (33), are easy to understand.

- (33) a. Omusáidza t'agurúká omwá:ná wê.
b. o-mu-saidza ti a-guruk-a o-mu-ana u-e.
c. Aug1-NPr1-man not he-stride.over-Fin Aug1-NPr1-child PPr1-his
d. A man should not stride over a child sleeping on the floor.
- (34) a. commandment: A man (i.e. father) should not stride over a child sleeping on the floor.
b. violation: A man strides over a child sleeping on the floor.
(b'. violative condition: If a man strides over a child sleeping on the floor)
c. consequence: The child will die or get silly.
d. reason: If you stride over children, you may accidentally step on them, which must be avoided.

After spending much time in Africa, the author reflected on the hidden reasons behind the taboo expressions and noticed that many stem from the notion of being careful about certain things in daily

¹⁷ For the reason, they say that many old women have leg joint problems.

life or a society's accepted conventions and manners. Generally speaking, these taboos can be understood from a functionalist or pragmatic viewpoint, as a major means of controlling people's actions in a traditional society.

8. Making conventional deeds taboo

In the previous section, some examples, such as (32), have hidden reasons that are difficult to discern. However, there are many taboos, which we can call customary, for which we do not necessarily need to search for a hidden reason, such as example (35).

- (35) a. Omukázi obu á:bá azáire, t'ályá é:nswâ rû:ndi enkó:lê.
 b. o-mu-kazi obu a-ba-a a-za:r-ire, ti a-li-a
 c. Aug1-NPr1-woman when she-is-Fin she-bear-Perf not she-eat-Fin
 b. e-n-swa rundi e-n-ko:le.
 c. Aug10-NPr10-termite or Aug10-NPr10-cowpea
 d. A woman should not eat winged ants nor cowpeas after delivery (for about three months).
- (36) a. commandment: A woman should not eat winged ants or cowpeas after delivery (for about three months).
 b. violation: A woman eats winged ants or cowpeas after delivery (within about three months).
 (b'. violative condition: If a woman eats winged ants or cowpeas after delivery (within about three months)
 c. consequence: The woman will have a stomach ache and her belly will swell.
 d. reason: customary

We do not find an hidden reason in (36d),¹⁸ but it is equipped with a commandment, violation, and consequence, as shown in (36a,b,c). Judging from this we may say that the essential elements that constitute a taboo in Nyoro are commandment, violation, and consequence, and although the reason is found in many of them, it can be dispensed with for what is called customary or conventional. More properly, we can say that all taboo expressions have four constituents, namely: commandment, violation, consequence, and reason. For some, however, the hidden reason is lost throughout the course of history. In these cases, the taboos are called customary or conventional. Therefore, for them, being customary or conventional has become their existential reason. The existence of these taboo expressions seems to indicate that they represent diverse conduct regulations in daily life or cultural norms in the broad sense of the word.

Example (37) is a tabooization of a customary practice concerning wedding arrangements.

(37) a. Omukázi obu aswé:rwâ, bamutwa:ra hakasákâ nibamwegésá eby'a:mákâ.

b. o-mu-kazi obu a-swer-w-a, ba-mu-twar-a

c. Aug1-NPr1-woman when she-marry-Pass-Fin they2-her-take-Fin

b. ha-ka-saka ni ba-mu-eges-a e-bya a-ma-ka.

c. NPr18-NPr12-bush Prog they2-her-instruct-Fin Aug8-of8 Aug6-NPr6-house

d. When a woman gets married, they (i.e., women of the village) take her in the bush and
instruct her on domestic affairs.

¹⁸ We could find a reason in food science. If so, (35) will be categorized as an example with a hardly understandable hidden reason.

- (38) a. commandment: When a woman marries, women in the village take her in the bush and instruct her on domestic affairs.
- b. violation: When a woman marries, women in the village do not take her in the bush and do not instruct her on domestic affairs.
- (b'. violative condition: When a woman marries, if women of the village do not take her in the bush and do not instruct her on domestic affairs)
- c. consequence: The marriage will be broke and the bride's wealth must be returned.
- d. reason: customary

9. Form of commandment expressions

In this section, we check the expressive form of commandments in taboo expressions. Normally, commandment expressions use the general present tense for verbs, affirmative or negative. All the examples shown up to here follow this form. This general present tense expresses general truths, such as 'the earth turns' or 'water flows in the river'. Expressing human conduct in this form entails a compelling force that humans are intrinsically supposed to do certain things in the affirmative and that they should intrinsically avoid certain things in the negative. In addition to the general present verb tense, commandment expressions use the present form for the defective verb *-ina* 'have', followed by infinitives (English equivalent of 'have to'), as in (39), and the verb *okusemê:rra* 'to be supposed to do' in the perfective form, as in (40). Moreover, although fewer in number, some use the expressions 'there is no', as in (41), or 'it is bad to do', as in (42).

- (39) a. Omusáidza t'áina kulí:ra omusefulíyâ.
 b. o-mu-saidza ti a-ina ku-li-ir-a o-mu-sefuliya.
 c. Aug1-NPr1-man not he-has to-eat-App1-Fin Aug18-NPr18-cooking.pan
 d. A man should not directly eat from a cooking pan.
- (40) a. T'osemerí:ré okusendekeréza pokozâ:ra.
 b. ti o-semerr-ire o-ku-sendekerez-a joko-za:ra.
 c. not you(sg.)-be.supposed-Perf Aug15-to-escort-Fin your.mother-in.law
 d. You (son-in-law) should not set your mother-in-law on her way.
- (41) a. Busáhó mú:ntu akwá:ta enkerê:mbe omumútwê oihiréhó jína.
 b. bu-sa ho mu-ntu a-kwat-a
 c. NPr14-nothing Clit16(there) NPr1-person he-touch-Fin[SubRel]
 b. e-n-kerembe o-mu-mu-twe o-ih-ire
 c. Aug9-NPr9-newborn.baby Aug18-NPr18-NPr3-head you(sg.)-remove-Perf
 b. hó jina.
 c. Clit16(there) its.mother
 d. There is nobody except the mother who touches the head of a newborn baby.
- (42) a. Kiba kíbí okwe▷mé:rra haigúru hakítú:ro eky'eitâka.
 b. ki-ba-a ki-bí o-ku-emerr-a ha-i-guru
 c. it7-be-Fin NPr7-bad Aug15-NPr15-stand-Fin NPr16-NPr5-above
 b. ha-ki-tu:ro e-kyá e-i-taka.
 c. NPr16-NPr7-grave Aug7-of7 Aug5-NPr5-soil
 d. It is bad to stand on a mounded grave.

10. Bad omens

An *ekisirâ:ni*, indicating ‘bad omen or ill presage’, resembles a taboo and instigates a certain hesitancy. Example (43) below appears to be a typical example of a bad omen.

- (43) a. Obu ó:bá n’o:rubátá orugê:ndo, embéba t’efwanganízá omuhâ:nda.
 b. obuo-ba-a ni o-rubat-a o-ru-gendo e-m-beba
 c. when you(sg.)-be-Fin Prog you(sg.)-walk-Fin Aug11-NPr11-journey Aug9-NPr9-rat
 b. ti e-ƒwanganiz-a o-mu-handa.
 c. not it9-cross-Fin Aug3-NPr3-road
 d. When you embark on a journey, a rat should not cross the road.
- (44) a. commandment: A rat should not cross the road when you embark on a journey.
 b. violation: A rat crosses the road when you embark on a journey.
 (b’. violative condition: If a rat crosses the road when you embark on a journey)
 c. consequence: You will be involved in an accident.
 d. reason: ?

If the bad omen in (43) would have the same logical structure as taboos, it will be similar to (44).

However, there is one big difference in that an uncontrollable event, that is a rat crossing the road, may arise in it. With taboos, one can decide what to do regardless of whether one observes the commandment or not (i.e., sit on the cooking stove or not, or sit on the ground with bended legs or not). However, with bad omen, one can of course decide whether to continue the journey or not, but the person has no control

over a rat crossing the road. The author thinks that it is quite characteristic of bad omens or ill presage that things that are out of one's control occur. Moreover, the hidden reason for this prohibition is unclear.

Similarly, in example (45), an uncontrollable event that an owl hoots on the rooftop at night occurs. It is also a bad omen. The Nyoro people, when hearing an owl hoot at the top of their house, immediately throw a burning stick to chase it away.

(45) a. Ensindizi t'efúrá ekíró é:rí haigúru y'é:ndzú.

b. e-n-sindizi ti e-ʃur-a e-ki-ro e-ri ha-i-guru

c. Aug9-NPr9-owl not it9-cry-Fin Aug7-NPr7-night it9-is[SubRel] NPr16-NPr5-above

b. ya e-n-dzu.

c. of9 Aug9-NPr9-house

d. A owl should not hoot on the rooftop at night.

(46) a. commandment: An owl should not hoot on the rooftop at night.

b. violation: An owl hoots on the rooftop at night.

(b'. violative condition: If an owl hoots on the rooftop at night)

c. consequence: Someone in the house will die.

d. reason: ?

As in (43) and (45), animals often appear as things that have nothing to do with one's intentions. However, not all animal appearances are bad omens. The dog in example (47) is not a bad omen, but a taboo because you can ensure that a dog does not go into the bed.

- (47) a. É:mbwá t'ebyá:má omukitábu ky'omû:ntu.
 b. e-m-bwa ti e-byam-a o-mu-ki-tabu kya o-mu-ntu
 c. Aug9-NPr9-dog not it9-sleep-Fin Aug18-NPr18-NPr7-bed of7 Aug1-NPr1-person
 d. A dog should not sleep in a person's bed.
- (48) a. commandment: You should distance a dog so that it may not sleep in your bed.
 b. violation: A dog sleeps in your bed.
 (b'. violative condition: If a dog sleeps in your bed)
 c. consequence: You will have an accident or be bitten by a snake.
 d. reason: Dogs may have disease-causing germs, as they eat faeces or rats. Therefore, one should keep them away from the bed, which must be kept clean.

Next, let us examine example (49) in which a bird appears, and which might be thought of as an example of a bad omen. However, the author sees it as a taboo expression. The point is to discern what is meant by the expression.

- (49) a. Ekijóni tikirábá hagátí omú:ndzû.
 b. e-ki-ŋ-oni ti ki-rab-a ha-gati o-mu-n-dzû.
 c. Aug7-NPr7-NPr9-bird not it7-pass-Fin Aug16-centre Aug18-NPr18-NPr9-house
 d. A bird should not fly through a house.

- (50) a. commandment: You should not leave the doors of your house open.
- b. violation: You leave the doors of your house open.
- (b'. violative condition: If you leave the doors of your house open)
- c. consequence: A family member dies.
- d. reason: The doors of the house must be properly kept closed to ensure that thieves or burglars may not enter.

The author understands that a bird flying through the house means that the doors of the house are not properly closed. If this is regarded as representing an event of major force, one might take it as a bad omen. However, one can prevent a bird from flying through the house. This does not mean to control birds but the doors so that such a thing does not occur. If one does not control the situation, a horrible consequence will occur: a family member dies. This is the essence of taboos.

Sometimes, people are also out of our control. In example (51), when someone visits you, it is up to them whether they will bring you a gift or what gift they bring. If a person visits you empty-handed, it is a bad omen.

- (51) a. Omugéni obu aídžá, atáina kí:ntu kyô:na, tibamusá:rrá enkôko.
- b. o-mu-geñi obu a-idž-a, a-ta-ina ki-ntu ki-ona,
- c. Aug1-NPr1-visitor when he-come-Fin he-not-have[SubRel] NPr7-thing PPr7-any,
- b. ti ba-mu-sar-ir-a e-n-koko.
- c. not they2-him-slaughter-for-Fin Aug9-NPr9-chicken
- d. When a visitor comes empty-handed, you should not slaughter a chicken.

- (52) a. commandment: When a person arrives at a visit, he/she should not come empty-handed.
- b. violation: A visitor comes empty-handed.
- (b'. violative condition: If a visitor comes empty-handed)
- c. consequence: Something bad may occur. Therefore, it is not necessary to slaughter a chicken as an offering to the guest.
- d. reason: ?

In the Nyoro society, when people visit, they usually bring whatever gift they could. This is a question of etiquette. Men normally bring bananas and women bring beans, millet, maize flour, etc.¹⁹ If people receive guests, they entertain them with a slaughtered chicken, but if a visitor comes empty-handed, they do not. Paying someone a visit without bringing anything is equivalent to a bad omen. The countervailing measure will be to keep talking to them until they leave without offering anything.

11. Is it all utilitarian?

One of the analytic characteristics in this paper is the consideration of loaded meanings in the logical analysis of taboo expressions. What are they, really? It is beneficial to understand the existential reasons for taboos, functionally or pragmatically, because there are so many of them to analyse.

At the same time, the author does not think that all taboos are understandable from these perspectives. For instance, in (53), the only way one can rationalise the reason why a woman should not dig a burial pit is to say that it is customary. In the Nyoro society, women are not supposed to come to

¹⁹ In the past, men usually brought local beer in a calabash, but that is rare now.

a grave until the dead body arrives at the burial pit. Women come to the grave accompanying the casket.

A symbolic analysis might reveal a causal correlation between the burial pits and women.

(53) a. Omwisíkí t'alímá ekitû:ro.

b. o-mu-isiki ti a-lim-a e-ki-tu:ro.

c. Aug1-NPr2-girl not she-dig-Fin Aug7-NPr7-burial.pit

d. A woman should not dig a burial pit.

(54) a. commandment: A woman should not dig a burial pit.

b. violation: A woman digs a burial pit.

(b'. violative condition: If a woman digs a burial pit)

c. consequence: Her parents die.

d. reason: customary

Also concerning death, there is a rule that a man has to sleep once with a woman other than his wife when he finishes mourning, as evidenced in (55). This can be considered a self-willed pretext for men's outlets of sexual desire. But can things be so cockeyed? When asked about women's case, people say that as women are immune to death uncleanness in the first place, they do not need to do such a thing. Indeed, as it is men who dig a burial pit or carry a casket and women do not. Hence, women are considered less unclean.

- (55) a. Omusáidza abya:ma n'omukázi murú:ndi gúmû kuturúka orúfû
 b. o-mu-saidza a-byam-a na o-mu-kazi mu-rundi gu-mu
 c. Aug1-NPr1-man he-sleep-Fin with Aug1-NPr1-woman NPr3-time NPr3-one
 b. ku-turuk-a o-ru-fu.
 c. to-go.out-Fin Aug11-NPr11-death
 d. A man must sleep once with a woman (other than his wife) to finish mourning.
- (56) a. commandment: A man must sleep once with a woman other than his wife to finish mourning.
 b. violation: A man does not sleep with a woman other than his wife to finish mourning.
 (b'. violative condition: If a man does not sleep with a woman other than his wife to finish mourning)
 c. consequence: The man has an unfortunate experience, such as a traffic accident.
 d. reason: A man must sleep once with a woman other than his wife to wash away the uncleanliness of death.

Let us look at an example of a cock in (57). If a cock crows at night, the father orders his child to slaughter it (for food). From a purely utilitarian point of view, eating the cock can be considered as an excuse, but this reasoning may not be suitable. Rather, it seems that a symbolic way of reasoning is more appropriate, as in (58d).

- (57) a. Enkóko empâ:ngi t'ekó:ká kurúga sá:ha é:mû kuhíka sá:ha munâ:na ez'e:kírô.
 b. e-n-koko e-m-pangi ti e-ko:k-a kuruga sa:ha e-mu
 c. Aug9-NPr9-chicken Aug9-NPr9-cock not it9-crow-Fin from hour NPr9-one
 b. kuhika sa:ha mu-na:na e-za e-ki-ro.
 c. till hour NPr3-eight Aug10-of10 Aug7-NPr7-night
 d. A cock must not crow in the night from 7pm to 2am.
- (58) a. commandment: A cock must not crow in the night from 7pm to 2am.
 b. violation: A cock crows in the night from 7pm to 2am.
 (b'. violative condition: If a cock crows in the night from 7pm to 2am)
 c. consequence: The head of the family dies.
 d. reason: Cocks are supposed to crow at the break of dawn. For them to crow in the night from 7pm to 2am is to disturb the order, which must be maintained.

Finally, example (59) is related to how a person ought to live in a community.

- (59) a. Obu osá:ngá ense:néne zigwî:re, ote:ra endú:rû abá:ntu báidǵé bazikwá:tê.
 b. obu o-sang-a e-n-se:nene zi-gu-ire, o-te:r-a
 c. when you(sg.)-find-Fin Aug10-NPr10-grasshopper they10-fall-Perf you(sg.)-beat-Fin
 b. e-n-du:ru a-ba-ntu ba-idǵ-e ba-zi-kwat-e.
 c. Aug9-NPr9-shout Aug2-NPr2-person they2-come-Subj they2-them10-catch-Subj
 d. When you find that grasshoppers have fallen on the ground, you ought to yell out so that people (of the village) come and catch them (together).

- (60) a. commandment: When you find that grasshoppers have fallen on the ground, you ought to yell out so that people (of the village) come and catch them (together).
- b. violation: You do not yell out when you find grasshoppers that have fallen on the ground.
- (b'. violative condition: When you find grasshoppers that have fallen on the ground and you do not yell out)
- c. consequence: You will be involved in an accident or bitten by a snake.
- d. reason: Grasshoppers are a Nyoro delicacy. They are to be shared by all people, not to be kept to oneself.²⁰

12. Conclusions

During the linguistic surveys in Africa, various texts were gathered, including Nyoro taboo expressions, which have never been documented in any research. Although the collected taboos are limited in number, a certain pattern began to emerge during the writing of this paper, that is, taboos are a major dynamic in regulating human conduct. They are a force that enables one to discipline oneself and take good care of others. They also play a major social role in traditional societies.²¹

With respect to the formal aspects of logical structure, taboo expressions in Nyoro have four indispensable constituents consisting of clauses with a subject and predicate, namely: commandments, violations, consequences, and reasons. Those expressed among the four are either the commandment

²⁰ Grasshoppers begin to appear in mid-November. For the Nyoro, they are a precious gift from the heavens that arrive before Christmas.

²¹ T. Yoneyama, a Japanese anthropologist, conducted a detailed study on taboos among the Tembo in the eastern part of the Congo (then Zaire), writing that ‘the existence of a series of *kisira* gives a code of conducts to people’ (Yoneyama 1990: 151). Yoneyama (1990) does not distinguish between taboos and bad omens. Instead, both are referred to as *kisira*, a Swahili word pronounced with a Tembo accent. In Tembo, it is called *músiró* (sg.), *mísiró* (pl.).

alone or the violation with the consequence. Both are not expressed at the same time, except in rare cases, as in (13). Either way is correct, but characteristically, many express the commandment alone, which can be either affirmative or negative (i.e., prohibition). The overwhelming majority are negative commandments, which is considered natural because taboos primarily aim to prohibit conducts.

What is most important is that taboos are always paired with scarring consequences. The process from violation to consequence represents a form of causal law by temporal development. However, a leap in logic emerges here, as this process hides the existential reasons for the taboos. Specifically, taboos necessarily have a real reason, which is hidden and never expressed, but which explains why it exists. Because of its hidden nature, it can be forgotten and lost over time. In this sense, customary taboos are those whose reason is lost and established as such.

In contrast to taboos, normal warnings like (18), which represent a prohibition and not a taboo, have a commandment, a violation, and a reason, but not a consequence. What is expressed overtly is usually the violation, as a violative condition, and the reason. This is a major difference between taboos and normal warnings.

Additionally, the Nyoro society has bad omens that are related to taboos. They declare that there are things one cannot control in this world and they teach how to handle them if they were to arise. They also play the role of aphorisms for one to live by in society.

Taboos are numerous in Nyoro,²² with diverse contents. They include a variety of topics, such as etiquette-like manners, things to avoid from a hygienic-physiological viewpoint, sexual matters, things related to conventions and customs (e.g. conducts that laws regulate in other societies), and others.

²² At present the author has collected and analysed 130 taboos and bad omens. However, the number seems to go far beyond 1,000.

As taboos are wide and subdivided into a range of topics, it is clear that the researcher cannot just use one approach of analysis. Japanese folklorists, for example, have intensively collected and analysed taboos, bad omens, ill presage, and auspices in Japan, under the category of folkloric belief (*zokushin*). Itabashi (1998) is an excellent example of such Japanese works. However, they take a symbolic way of analysis as much as possible.²³

The author, by contrast, first takes a practical and functional approach when analysing the reasons behind taboo expressions. Indeed, those related to etiquette-like manners and hygienic-physiological matters are easily understood from this perspective. In fact, analysing the taboo expressions of one ethnic group (numbering over 1,000) is impossible without such an approach. In this regard, as stated earlier, the author does not think it is beneficial, nor possible to analyse all taboos with a practical and functional approach. The interpretations must be done according to each case and in an integrated manner.

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²³ Concerning the contrast of day and night, Itabashi (1998: 105-106) noted that ‘when they ban to hang out laundry at night, it is sure that laundry will not dry easily and that it is not good because laundry may get wet with night dew. But these are weak as reasons to prohibit, because the prohibition does not come from a practical reason but from their sense of cultural order to distinguish between night and day, and night behaviours and daytime behaviours’.

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