

# Why are Taboos Still Used?

Yuni Saputri

{[yunisaputriindonesia@gmail.com](mailto:yunisaputriindonesia@gmail.com)}

Historical Studies Department, Nalanda University, India

**Abstract.** Taboos emerge in society regarding religion, society, law, and even because ecological. Taboos are frequently classified as "sacred" acts; thus, breaking taboos is a serious deviant act that may lead to feelings of shame and guilt as well as indirect or direct negative repercussions from society. Many people believe and follow taboos. There are several reasons why taboos are still trusted and followed by the community because taboos are supported by cultural traditions and religious norms, and taboos are a socially approved practice for a long time. However, sometimes the taboos are not logical and irrational. Nevertheless, taboos are still used in society. Even though the taboos abuse science in modern aspects today. In this paper, I would like to elaborate on why taboos still exist and are still appreciated today.

**Keywords:** taboo, norms, culture, modern era.

## 1 Definition of Taboo

Human behavior really isn't purely governed by logical decision-making. Society creates its own significant social values and standards to guide behavior, which must be followed by group encouragement. These behaviors and thoughts are naturally supported by society. The outcomes of these behavioral memorandums of understanding were identified as social rules and taboos. These social rules and taboos have a valuable influence on human life. The norms and taboos of our society govern how we begin to behave, dress, eat, and drive, as well as our sexual lives. Anthropologists have analyzed many taboos in different societies or ethnicities[1].

The term "taboo" originated in Polynesia (the Tongan words "tabu" or "tapu") and first appeared in the 18th century in English. Some actions identified as not allowed to be eaten, touched, or put in, the term Polynesian native has the meaning of the local term prohibited. Taboo is a word derived from the Tongan introduced by Captain James Cook in the 1770s. Cook traveled through the Pacific Islands, observing Polynesian peoples[2]. Captain Cook and his shipmates recorded the term taboo as a significant local word meaning forbidden, such as when something should not be eaten, touched, or included, in Polynesian community journals[3]. Taboo may be associated with primitive culture because of its origins. According to researchers, this is a mistake because taboos exist in both primitive and modern societies[4].

The definition of taboo, According to the Encyclopedia Britannica, the taboo is "the prohibition of actions rooted in the belief that the behavior is too sacred and holy or dangerous and condemnable for the ordinary individual to undertake"[1]. The Oxford English Dictionary defines taboo as "a religious or social practice that forbids or restricts specific behaviors or associations with particular individuals, places, or things"[2].

Furthermore, in the Encyclopedia Britannica written by Northcote W. Thomas, an anthropologist, it is stated that the taboo includes the following 3 things: 1) it is a sacred character (dirty/unclean) of humans or objects; 2) the type of prohibition that results from this character, and 3) the purity (or defilement) that results from the violation of the prohibition/abstinence[5].

In general, taboos are strong social prohibitions against words, actions, objects, and people that are deemed undesirable by a particular group, culture, society, or religion. Taboo violations are normally inexcusable and can be deemed offensive. Some taboo acts or habits are even forbidden by law, and their violation can result in sanctions. Taboos are considered humiliating, disgraceful, and inhumane treatment by the surrounding community. Individuals who violate taboos will be punished by society[6].

The list of taboos and their weight in society can fluctuate with time. Some taboos could weaken or even vanish, while others could strengthen or worsen. Because taboo is dynamic. It is not static. The power of the taboo is determined by how many people believe in and follow the taboo as a taboo[1]. Because taboo is a dynamic product culture, there will be differences in how taboo is in the past and present society. In this paper, we will discuss in detail what the form of taboo is and why some taboos are still maintained.

## **2 Type Of Taboo**

Taboos are actions and boundaries that arise based on the cultural experience of the community[1]. Therefore, anthropologists distinguish taboos into several categories based on the origin of the prohibition. From a sociological review, the scholar classifies there are nine types of taboos, namely: (1) individual taboos and social taboos, (2) reproductive life taboos, (3) taboos for women, (4) taboos on sexual relations, (5) the taboo on death and people of the deceased, (6) the taboo on foreigners, (7) the taboo of holy people, kings, tribal chiefs, nobles, and religious figures, (8) the taboo on sacred places, (9) the taboo on food[7].

But broadly speaking, taboos can be grouped into four categories. That is:

### **1. Taboo of cultural/social**

Social taboo is strictly based on societal consensus considered an inappropriate action inside the cultural group. Taboo also departed from social norms and culture. Taboo culture is a taboo that is followed from generation to generation and is expressed orally to protect the culture that has been firmly held in society. According to Northcote W. Thomas in the Encyclopedia Britannica, taboo in society and culture has many purposes, namely: 1) protect important people such as tribal chiefs, traditional leaders, community leaders, etc; 2) protect people who are considered weak, such as women, children, and ordinary people in general from the power or influence of magic; 3) provide care for the dangers that occur due to handling or making contact with dead

bodies, from eating certain foods, etc.; 4) maintain the activities of tribal chiefs such as in the birth process, initiation process, marriage, and sexual relations; 5) guarding humans against wrath and demanding gods and spirits; 6) securing newborn babies and small children who have a sympathetic relationship with their parents. Taboos are also held for the community of the thieves who will take the object[6].

## 2. Taboo of religion

Taboo religion is something banned and prohibit from religion. The Dictionary of Religious also provides almost the same definition for the term taboo, namely “a restriction or ban on potent and sacred things.”[5] For instance, Hindus are forbidden to eat cows because cows are considered sacred animals in their religion. Likewise, Muslims are not allowed to eat pork. Because pigs in Islam are disgusting animals.

## 3. Taboo of word

Taboo words are words that should not be spoken. Sanctions or restrictions at institutional and individual levels on the assumption that speaking a taboo word will cause some harm[5]. Taboo words should not be said because considered contained in the word is inappropriate and cursed. If the word is spoken it will cause havoc. The word taboo has the meaning of prohibited or avoided actions. When an action is said to be taboo, then everything related to that action is also considered taboo. In everyday life, there are many taboo words related to such meanings[8].

## 4. Taboo of food

Food taboos are rules that govern what foods are acceptable to eat and how they should be consumed. This also applies to drinks. Religion and culture impose some dietary restrictions. The most common taboo in Indonesian society until now, is the food taboo. This taboo becomes important in the prohibition to consume certain foods because there are several threats or punishments for people who consume them. Within this threat, there are supernatural and mystical powers that may be able to punish those who violate this taboo[9].

For example, in the human life cycle, including in the process of pregnancy. Many myths and dietary restrictions control food for women more than men, especially pregnant women. Taboo food for pregnant women is not always conducive to health, for example; the taboo to eat certain foods often causes malnutrition for both the mother and the baby. The various taboos that exist sometimes when examined can actually be a rationalization of their poverty or fear condition. Cultural factors, whether social, economic, political, or cultural processes affect what types of food people choose; how to process them, how to consume them, when and where they eat, and so on[10]. Supporting this idea, we can argue that food, from a socio-cultural perspective, has a wider definition beyond just nutrition because it is associated with the elements of trust, status, prestige, solidarity, and peace[11].

### **3 Factors Influencing Society in Taboo Tradition**

Belief in taboos is caused by two main factors, namely internal factors such as family, education, and religious understanding, and external factors such as the social and cultural environment of the community that has been transmitted through generations. People's belief in taboos has an

influence on the religious experience that people feel which is where they are more secure, comfortable, and peaceful when following or not violating taboos[12].

Broadly, the factors that influence society so that the taboo is still maintained are as follows:

#### 1. Social Factor

Social factors that influence taboos are still maintained including many things. Including the life around them (parents, family, neighbors). Family is the most affected person in life, whatever becomes a tradition in life, will continue to be maintained forever and produce something good. And this factor is very long related to other factors such as emotional, educational, economic, and religious.

#### 2. Culture Factor

For the community, especially the laity, taboos are natural and have been entrenched, even if there are people who violate them and do not follow they will be labeled by the laity as people who do not respect the customs that have been inherited by their parents (customary elders)[12].

#### 3. Education Factor

Formal and non-formal education also has an influence on people's belief in taboo. Where the provisions obtained from the learning process at school, home or family play a very important role in this.

#### 4. Religion Factor

It is undeniable that religion has a great role in the formation of human character. Humans who have a strong religion tend to behave positively because for them religion is a protector through the norms that exist in it. All of these are religious commands, as is the function of religion, one of which is to prevent evil. For adherents of Islam, of course, the color of their thinking is the dogma of Islam in the form of the Qur'an and al-Hadith. Everything in the Qur'an and the Hadith of the Apostle calls on Muslims to always implement what has been determined (Amar ma'ruf nahi mungkar)[12].

## **4 Change and Transision Taboo**

### **4.1 Space and time in taboos**

Taboo shifted from the past to the future. The function of the taboo depends on space and time reasonably generated for certain circumstances. The list of taboos and their importance may change over time. Some taboos may weaken or even disappear, while others may become stronger and more dominant. Ex: in Indonesia the past culture, children don't allow to go out after dark. Because something bad will happen. But now, there are children who come out at night because of electricity.

Example action yang dulunya taboo adalah wanita yang merokok. Indonesian culture clearly provides certain stereotypes about women and men. Men are considered individuals who have masculine such as strong, dominant, rational, and so on. While women are considered to have a feminine nature, soft, emotional, sensitive, loving, and so on. The understanding of the differences between men and women in society then leads to a grouping between social

behavior, namely appropriate and inappropriate behavior, and expected and unwanted behavior from men and women. Smoking behavior in women has become a debate about its ethics in certain societies which eventually raises various assumptions. Smoking is considered not something that is commonly done by women because women who smoke are considered as negative characteristics. Along with the development of an increasingly modern society, smoking is no longer considered taboo. In several areas, the presence of women smoking in public becomes a common sight. The level of need for a modern lifestyle makes community members, especially women, try new things in their lives. In this case, of course, there are many factors that cause women to finally choose to consume cigarettes

#### **4.2 Between virtual and reality**

In the modern day, society forms its own taboo. Because taboos appear based on cultural changes that occur from time to time. Some taboos arise because society requires prohibition in society. With technology, virtual interactions emerge. Taboo also propagates in the virtual world. The taboo that is common in society in the past and now is taboo words. Words that become taboo are still avoided, both in virtual and in reality. For example racist words, ridicule, and words of sarcasm. Modern days, how does society have a vision of “nudity” in reality and virtual? Both of them are still taboo. Is it taboo when someone followed and then unfollows someone else Instagram?

From this example, it can be concluded that:

1. Taboo is dynamic to keep up with the times. Taboo modern.
2. Taboos can be adopted by the past and modern.

### **5 How Taboo in Modern-Day and Why the Taboo Still Exist**

Modern-day taboos exist in all types of societies. Because taboos appear based on cultural experience. And culture is fickle. Likewise, taboos will evolve along with the times. Because in society, taboo functions as a fabric of society. Taboo is an unwritten law but is followed by many people. Taboos also are able to regulate and maintain human behavior. Even in some community groups, taboos guide human behavior to interact with nature[13]. For example, the people of Papua and Maluku (regions in Indonesia) apply the Sasi system to take marine products. The Sasi system is a time set for local residents to collect marine products in their customary territory. Residents can only catch fish at certain times. thus, marine flora and fauna can reproduce properly before being harvested.

Taboos or prohibitions always exist in all socio-cultural, especially in the culture of primitive societies. Various studies, especially those conducted by Westerners, show how taboo-taboo (abstinence taboos) always appears in various socio-religious activities of the community. Therefore, when engaging in social activities, people always pay attention to whether there are any taboos associated with their activities in order to avoid practicing things that are prohibited by their culture's taboos.

The taboo is thought to be/contain moral messages for those who believe in it, therefore when individual desires to undertake something, they are often forced to cancel it because it is considered contrary or prohibited in the taboo they believe in.

The prohibitions in taboos can be divided into two, namely 1. The visible meaning and function of taboos 2. What cannot be understood in other words is irrational. These two types of taboos continue to be practiced by people who don't even know where the taboos come from. As Wundt said about taboo, taboo is an unwritten code of human law. He also argues that the idea of taboo includes all customs or habits that express fear of a particular object related to the idea of worship or actions that refer to it[1]. He also stated that taboos in the culture of society have existed for a long time, even before humans knew religion.

Even though we don't understand these taboos rationally, they are considered taboo and sacred by society. Therefore, the community as much as possible will avoid doing things that are prohibited in the taboo[9]. Taboo is also considered the glue of society that can explain the reality and existing culture so as to provide guidance on what is real and important for the life of a community group[4]. This is what makes taboos persist in society today.

Taboos are categorized as "sacred" acts, therefore breaking a taboo is a serious deviant act that can lead to feelings of guilt or shame, as well as direct or indirect social sanctions. Here taboo functions in 2 ways 1. as a human boundary with other humans, 2. prohibition of humans related to religion.

It should be understood, the power of taboo lies in the percentage of people who still believe and follow it. If the number of people who follow one taboo is still large, then the taboo remains a forbidden rule. On the other hand, if people feel that a taboo has lost its function and value in society, then people will leave it. But not all types of taboos will be easily abandoned by society. Religious taboos are the only taboos that will not be abandoned because religious taboos are considered sacred.

An example of an abandoned taboo is the issue of education. Belief in one of the taboos that almost no longer exists because of the tradition or mindset of the previous layman where every time after finishing high school or the equivalent, boys stop studying, they are more likely to work than continue their education to the next level, and girls tend to be married off. His parents when a candidate arrived and proposed to him and at this time it is not like that anymore. Because people are starting to feel the benefits of this taboo have diminished.

Taboos have many meanings for individuals who persist to use them in their lives. Although it is difficult to rationalize the modern mind, individuals continue to have faith in, obey, and avoid contravening taboos because of the legacy of the minds of ancient people who must have wisdom. If the individual violates, serious consequences will ensue the individual. The consequences of taboo are classified as follows: physical suffering and supernatural powers. Physical suffering, including illness, accidents, and other adversities. Can also manifest psychically as mental disorders, insanity, stress, and death[14]. While supernatural powers such as evil spirits interfere.

The consequences of taboos in modern society can also be in the form of moral sanctions that apply in society such as being ostracized and shunned, which will befall the taboo violator. The sanctions for violating the taboo can be light, moderate, or even very severe depending on the extent to which the community sanctifies the taboo and the extent to which the taboo is customary law that applies to that community.

The meaning of taboo here can be related to two types of sanctions that highlight primitive and modern society. In primitive society, if a taboo is violated, people believe that it will bring

sanctions from the magical-religious supernatural realm. On the other hand, in modern society, taboo remains a prohibition, but taboo is profane and its violation is associated with the breakdown of the idealized order. Therefore, the sanctions received are social punishments such as fines, imprisonment, or isolation.

Believing in mystical and supernatural things in taboo prohibitions feels strange, unnatural, and irrational from the perspective of individuals and modern society who have the view that something to be believed must be concrete, rational, and proven naturally and empirically. However, throughout the history of life, the reality of human life, personal life, and dependence on society and individuals with supernatural powers is found from ancient times to modern times[15].

However, taboos are considered to actually occur by ordinary people through word of mouth, which are passed on from one generation to the next and are usually about humans, supernatural forces, places, or objects. The method of teaching culture through stories that have a moral message has been carried out for thousands of years. The same stories are passed on from generation to generation and experience distortions in their delivery so that the truth can no longer be known but has a very deep moral message[4].

Furthermore, a taboo in Aceh society (the region in Indonesia) is known as Hame. Some areas also call it the term Seumaloe. Hame or Seumaloe is a taboo or prohibition that is believed by the people of Aceh. Hame or Seumaloe are widely used in education for children, there are cases where the depiction of the bad consequences of violations in the form of guilt can be described as an imitation of the actual taboo. Taboos are used for the purpose of making children polite and of good ethics. For example, asking for something back that has been given to someone else will cause ulcers on the elbow. The actual purpose is modesty. Eating from a pot (in Aceh's words known as kaneut) at a wedding will cause the bride's face to darken. Throwing rice in the mouth causes tooth decay. Poverty threatens those who shake the dust from their clothes at night. Actually, the rule is only to show the degree of one's decency.

This is very wrong with the assumption that some people think that taboo is a primitive culture. Taboo is not just a culture that is followed for no reason. When a taboo is no longer needed, it will disappear day by day. This means that taboo depends on space and time. For example, in Indonesia in the past culture, children don't allow to go out after dark. But now, there are children who come out at night because of electricity.

Taboo also works as synonymous with ethnicity. Every society has different taboos that are believed in society. Taboos followed by one community are not necessarily followed by other groups. The type of taboo here is usually a taboo that is believed to be hereditary and misuses knowledge. But taboos are supported by cultural traditions and religious norms, and taboos are a socially sanctioned practice for a long time[6]. According to Freud, only cannibalism and incest are universal taboos. While others depend on what is followed by the community[14].

If we analyze further, it can be concluded that almost all taboos contain messages or moral values that must be maintained and preserved by the community, so that they can control their actions and attitudes so that they are in accordance with the culture and morals of the local community[9].

Modernity cannot be discussed without mentioning the terms virtual and media. In their modern form, taboos disguise themselves to prohibit and restrict. There are many taboos that have

developed naturally in society today. Such as a prohibition on using derogatory language on social media. The purpose of a taboo in the modern era is to regulate social norms. Such as ethnic taboos (e.g., nationalism and ethnocentrism) and prejudice (sexism, racism, homophobia, racism, as well as religious fanaticism). The prohibition of slavery, pedophilia, ephophobia, the prohibition of consumption of alcohol, and tobacco, as well as sexual molestation/harassment and sexual objectification, are all taboos that have become increasingly common in recent decades.

## 6 Conclusion

Taboo is a prohibition that regulates social relations between humans in an ecosystem of life. People still do taboos in this modern era for several reasons. First, the religious taboo is a sacred and holy thing. Religious communities like Indonesia have many taboos based on religion. Second, the values and morals contained in taboos are very visible in human interactions. Because taboo is a social law that is not written but is still practiced. Third, the taboo is part of the culture that should be preserved. Every society has its own taboo which makes it a characteristic.

1. The values and morals contained in taboos are very visible in human interactions. Because taboos are supported by cultural traditions and religious norms, and taboos are a socially approved practice for a long time.
2. Taboos can improve the fabric of society. Because taboo is an unwritten prohibition and can give social sanctions that have an impact on the perpetrators and the community itself.
3. To form the characteristics of an ethnic or community.

## References

- [1] C. Fershtman, U. Gneezy, and M. Hoffman, "Taboos and identity: Considering the unthinkable," *Am. Econ. J. Microeconomics*, vol. 3, no. 2, 2011, doi: 10.1257/mic.3.2.139.
- [2] A. Habibovic, *Taboo Language*. Kristianstad University: English Department, 2010.
- [3] R. Rodman, *An Introduction to Language*. New York: The Dryden Press, 1988.
- [4] C.-M. Fairman, *Fuck – Word Taboo And Protecting Our First Amendment Liberties*. Sphinx Publishing An Imprint Of Sourcebooks Inc, 2009.
- [5] T. Jay, "The Utility and Ubiquity of Taboo Words," *Perspect. Psychol. Sci.*, vol. 4, no. 2, 2009, doi: 10.1111/j.1745-6924.2009.01115.x.
- [6] S. Freud, "Totem And Taboo: Some Points Of Agreement Between The Mental Lives Of Savages And Neurotics," *Stand. Ed. Complet. Psychol. Work. Sigmund Freud*, vol. 7, 1913.
- [7] A. Hasbullah, "MAKNA TABU-TABU PADA KAUM PEREMPUAN SUNDA (Studi Desa Kodasari Kecamatan Ligung Kabupaten Majalengka)," RADEN INTAN LAMPUNG, 2017.



- [8] T. Intan, "Fenomena Tabu Makanan Pada Perempuan Indonesia Dalam Perspektif Antropologi Feminis," *PALASTREN J. Stud. Gend.*, vol. 11, no. 2, p. 233, 2018, doi: 10.21043/palastren.v11i2.3757.
- [9] A. Humaeni, *Taboo Perempuan Banten*. Banten: Laboratorium Bantenologi, 2019.
- [10] P. Saptandari, *Gender dan Masalah Kesehatan Wanita*. Surabaya: Airlangga University Press, 1996.
- [11] D. Angraini, "Pantangan Makan Ibu Hamil dan Pasca Melahirkan di Desa Bongkot Kecamatan Peterongan Kabupaten Jombang," *Bio Kult.*, vol. II, no. 2, 2013.
- [12] M. Chaizir, "TABU DALAM KEHIDUPAN MASYARAKAT INGIN JAYA ACEH BESAR," *Abrahamic Relig. J. Stud. Agama-Agama*, vol. 1, no. 2, 2021, doi: 10.22373/arj.v1i2.10150.
- [13] K. Allan, Keith, And Burrige, *Forbidden Words. Taboo And The Censoring Of Language*. Cambridge University Press, 2006.
- [14] H. Webster, *Taboo: A Sociological Study*. New York: Octagon Books, 1973.
- [15] H. S. Ahimsa-Putra, *Masalah Kesehatan dalam kajian Ilmu Sosial Budaya*. Yogyakarta: KEPEL-Press, 2005.