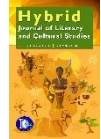




Gender and Sexuality Linguistic Taboos: A Case of *Mɔ* and *Nnyabi* in Ewe and Mampulli



Research Article

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Abstract

This paper investigates the cultural underpinnings that govern the use or disuse of sexually explicit Ewe and Mampulli verbs *mɔ* and *nnyabi* (have sex) among native Ewe and native Mampulli speakers. A longitudinal study approach and interviews were employed to collect data over a twelve-month period among Ewe speakers of Aflao in the Volta Region of Ghana and Mampulli speakers of Nalerigu in the North East Region. Findings reveal that the cultural underpinnings that govern these taboo words are, first, the Ewe and Mampulli cultures regard sex act as a sacred thing and that using such explicit words in talking about it is too raw and uncultured; second, both cultures are patriarchal or male dominant; third, they permit polygamy but frown on polyandry; finally, the two cultures frown on homosexuality. This study provides a window into the Ewe and Mampulli cultures, and by extension the African culture, as regards the topic of sexuality. Moreover, it would enable the reader to fathom why the dominant African culture's position on homosexuality is not a question of hatred but of culture clash.

Keywords: African culture, Ewe language, gender, identity, Mampulli language, sexuality, taboo words

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Public Interest Statement

Human sexuality has some form of taboos associated with it across all cultures, and a deep comprehension of a people's culture leads to the breaking of barriers of misunderstandings and misrepresentations. This study presents the cultural underpinnings that govern sexuality taboos from an African perspective. Besides, it clarifies the controversial misunderstanding of the general African attitude towards the global topic of homosexuality.

Introduction

Culture is linked to human languages in such a remarkable way that human identities are inseparable from the languages they employ for their day-to-day activities. The capacity of language to hold the culture of the people who speak it has been one of the most investigated in language studies. A culture of a people and their worldview can all be traced to how they employ language in various contexts and on various topics. A major source of cultural identity revolves around the way sexuality is viewed and expressed among a people. The topic of human sexuality is definitely discussed among all cultures and, of course, as long as cultures differ across the globe so is how this topic is discussed. Apart from a culture's attitude towards the topic of human sexuality, the cultural underpinnings that govern the discussion of sexuality among human cultures can also be investigated. A number of studies such as Berger (2005), Duguay (2011), Kulick and Wilson (2003) and Rashkow (2000) have shown that the general taboo attitude towards the expression of sexuality persists among people of various cultures. For example, Duguay (2011, p. 1) acknowledges that "in spite of the fact that we are all bombarded with sexual messages every day, the subject of relationship and sexuality education for students with intellectual and developmental disabilities continues to be a taboo one". We note from the submission of Duguay (2011) that even among the educated, the discussion of sexuality still poses a challenge. What this means is that regardless of the extent of exposure that individuals have as regards education, topics such as sexuality still have strong cultural leanings. An individual's culture's role in their employment of language on a given topic in a given situation can therefore not be overlooked.

Among the Ewe and Mampulli peoples of Ghana, overt expressions of sexuality are a taboo. Many youths have not had the opportunity to discuss topics with their parents relating to sex let alone refer to the sexual organs by name in these cultures. Other Ghanaian languages are likely to have similar outlook towards the topic for sexuality. But the focus of this paper is the Ewe and Mampulli languages of Ghana. For example, the real Ewe names for the penis and vagina are *ava* and *kolo* respectively. Those of Mampulli are *yorì* and *peɲni*. However, common euphemistic terms known to the speakers of these

languages, such as *kakayi*, *ati* (stick) and *ɲutsu* (lit. man) are used for penis while *nyɔnu* (lit. woman) is used for the vagina in Ewe. That follows, therefore, that a boy's *ɲutsu* or *ati* in Ewe refers to his penis while a girl's *nyɔnu* refers to her vagina. In a loose transliteration, therefore, that would be something like *a boy's man* or *stick* and *a girl's woman* which are both literally very remote from what they supposedly represent. In Mampulli, the euphemistic terms employed for the sex organs are *doo* (man/ manhood) and *toonni* (front). In Mampulli, therefore, a *boy's man* is his penis while a *girl's front* is her vagina. It is interesting to note that both languages employ a synecdoche in referring to the penis in that the term *man* which is a whole is employed to represent just a little part of the human body, penis, which paradoxically is still a part of a man's body. In this synecdoche, we see a substitution of the taboo word *penis* to an everyday word, man.

If referring to the sexual organs by name assumes such euphemistic approaches in the two languages under study, we can imagine the overt discussion of the act of sex itself. The latter is the focus of this paper. The Ewe raw verb to have sex known by all Ewe speakers albeit hardly used in public both orally and in written form is *mɔ* (copulate, fuck, have sex). The verb *mɔ* is definitely a taboo one among the Ewe, which is used only among peers of all ages but never overtly. For example, one of the researchers of this paper is a native speaker of the Ewe language and has studied it for more than three decades, including at undergraduate and graduate levels, but has never come across the verb *mɔ* in any Ewe literature. Of course, that is not the case for English as regards *fuck*, *have sex* or *copulate*. At least, any of the foregoing are found in English literature. Clearly the Ewe language differs markedly in the expression of sexuality from English and perhaps from other languages. This paper therefore seeks to investigate the taboo verb *mɔ* in Ewe with the focus of unearthing the underlying cultural underpinnings that govern its use or disuse.

By the same token, the other researcher who is a native speaker of Mampulli, confirms that even though Mampulli is not yet reduced to writing nor used in schools, the Mampulli word *nyyabi* (have sex, fuck, copulate) is a taboo one and is never used overtly. This paper therefore also seeks to unearth the cultural underpinnings that govern the use of the Mampulli taboo word *nyyabi* (have sex, fuck, copulate). The paper is segmented under the following headings: Research Questions, Literature Review, Method, Findings and Discussion, and Conclusion and Implications.

Research Question

This paper seeks to answer the following question:

1. What are the cultural underpinnings that govern the use of *mɔ* and *nyyabi* (have sex) among the Ewe and Mampulli of Ghana?

Literature Review

Taboos cut across many cultures in the world and it is appropriate to review a few of them to contextualise the present study. One such study worth mentioning here is that of Qanbar (2011) who investigated linguistic taboos in the Yemeni society. Qanbar (2011) submits that Yemeni families have made-up names for sex organs, especially when they discuss the topic of sex with children. This reveals that names of sexual organs are taboo words in quite a number of cultures, and it is not a novel discovery that in both Ewe and Mampulli sex topics are taboos. The focus of this paper, however, is not to unearth whether or not sex topics are also a taboo in Ewe and Mampulli. They are. While the present study acknowledges that such things as names of sexual organs are taboos in Both Ewe and Mampulli, it seeks to discover something further: the cultural underpinnings that govern the tabooeness of the sexually explicit Ewe and Mampulli words *mɔ* and *nnyabi* (have sex). Both of these words are transitive verbs. In Ewe, the infinitive, the present and the past forms are all *mɔ*; the continuous form carries the morpheme -m (equivalent to the English -ing) hence *mɔm* is the continuous form while the noun form is *mɔmɔ*. In Mampulli, on the other hand, the infinitive as well as the present form of the verb to have sex is *nnyabi* while the past is *nnyabla* and the continuous form is *nnyablla*. These verbs are at the centre of our discussions regarding the cultural constraints that control their use or disuse.

Other languages as Chinese and Jordanian Arabic also have similar views of sexuality and replacing sex organ names with euphemistic terms. (Hongxu, and Guisen, 1990; Al-Khatib. 1995). Striking linguistic taboos, however, that extend beyond sexuality identified by Agyekum (2002) among the Akan of Ghana are the following: terms related to menstruation, defecation, pregnancy, the unadorned names of chiefs, all these revealing that taboos of a people do not only bother on sexuality. As we have seen above, among the Akan of Ghana, terms relating to such natural things as menstruation and defecation are taboo terms and so euphemistic terms are used instead of the raw terms. The same is true among the Ewes and Mampullis of Ghana, and more so when it comes to the taboo word *mɔ* and *nnyabi* (to have sex). An interesting finding from Agyekum (2002) is that it is even taboo to use names of chiefs and elders without their honorific tittles among the Akan. While mentioning raw terms relating to sexuality and the like among the Akan is a taboo, using the names of elders and chiefs without their titles is also a taboo. From this we learn that not only is it a taboo to use some terms but also a taboo to drop others. In that regard, there exists a taboo of employing some terms as there are in the disuse of some other terms; hence using or dropping a term can be a taboo in some cultures.

From Fakuade et al (2013), we learn that among the Igbo of Nigeria, it is a taboo to refer to one's in-laws by their personal names. It follows that honorific tittles are

preferred instead of the personal names of in-laws. This Igbo case is similar to that of the Akans of Ghana. As we have seen in the foregoing paragraph, it is unacceptable to drop the honorific titles of chiefs and the elders among the Akan of Ghana. The same is true of the Igbo language of Nigeria, the only difference being the reference point of the honorific terms. Among the Akan, the reference is chiefs and elders; with the Igbo, it is one's in-laws. These dynamisms displayed by a people's culture as regards their use of language is remarkable forasmuch as knowing these twists and turns of the culture of a people would help us better understand them. By the same token, unearthing the cultural underpinnings that govern the use or disuse of sexually explicit verbs *mɔ* and *nnyabi* among the Ewe and Mampulli would open up the way to better understand their cultures, particularly with regard to the way they understand and express sexuality.

On another hand, in Mexican Spanish as submitted by Grimes (1977), personal names are given to sexual organs as euphemistic terms because referring to the sexual organs by name is unacceptable in that culture. Moreover, Grimes (1977) said that paronyms are also employed for taboo words for it is easier to use them other than the original terms. So far, we have seen that discussing sexuality definitely raises some eyebrow in most, if not all, cultures. From Grimes (1977) we see that personal names substitute for the names of sex organs. Of course, there is no hesitancy in referring to people by their personal names and substituting personal names for the names of the sex organs without a doubt makes it easy for people using Mexican Spanish to refer to the sex organs. This display of complication to simplify the unspeakable is one phenomenal linguistic paradox that continues to intrigue researchers in language study. For example, referring to the sexual organs by the personal names of people is simply an indirect way of calling the sexual organs. Direct or indirect, the sexual organs are referred to, revealing the sometimes-inexplicable aspect of language and culture. It is difficult to explain but this phenomenon is perfectly understandable to the native speakers of the language or languages in question.

Leslau (1959) and Mbaya (2002) have also revealed some interesting taboos among Ethiopians and the Omoro Lagun. Among Ethiopians and the Omoro Lagun, in-laws do not refer to their daughters and sons-in-law by their personal names. This is in direct contrast with what we have already discussed about the Igbo of Nigeria where sons and daughters-in-law do not refer to their parents-in-law by their names but by titles. Among Ethiopians, however, the opposite is the case. If I am married, my father or mother-in-law cannot refer to me by my name but by a title. This indeed is a confirmation in the diversity of the many cultures that exist among the human family. Not being privy to the dynamisms these cultures would definitely make one fall victim to these taboos. It follows, therefore, that these studies on language and culture are very significant as their findings

play huge roles in the discovery of the makeup of humanity when we zoom in on culture.

Taboo words or expressions are not exclusive to a few languages. They are a possession of all languages regardless of whether or not their status as world language. The English language, one of the most spoken and used internationally, also exhibits taboo words or expressions. Gao (2013) identifies some of these taboo words and the euphemistic terms that are employed in their stead. One euphemistic term Gao (2013) points to is "FCUK" which is self-explanatory. Another term is *mistress*, a partner for extramarital sex. While it is common knowledge that sex act with one to whom one is not married is called fornication or adultery, this negative or taboo situation has been euphemised with the word *mistress*, a very healthy word. The English word *mistress* carries many positive meanings, one of such being a female person of authority. Substituting a partner of extramarital sex with *mistress* in this context is a semantic process of contextual amelioration. Hudson (2000) earlier reveals that the English language, just like other languages, has her taboos. This follows that taboos are not any single language's possession. We also note that sexuality is a taboo in many languages.

The list of studies on taboos is very tall and there are discoveries upon discoveries in this field. Suffice it now to say that the issue of sexuality bothers on tabooeness in many cultures of the world. In all this review of literature we note one gap – all studies discussed the taboo of sexuality and other taboos without revealing the cultural underpinnings that govern these taboos. The latter is the focus of this paper. The present study is geared towards finding the cultural underpinnings that inform the explicit verb *mɔ* and *nnyabi* (have sex) in Ewe and Mampulli. Such a discovery would contextualise culturally that taboos are more than taboos as they are consciously or unconsciously regulated by the culture of the people whose taboos they are.

Method

The present paper is wholly qualitative in that the conclusions based thereon are not reduced to numerical bases. Since this is a culture identity-driven study, a longitudinal study approach was adopted to collect data over a twelve-month period. Native speakers of Ewe in Aflao of the Volta Region of Ghana were asked to comment on the cultural appropriateness of the following sentences: 1. Kofi mɔ Ama. 2. Ama mɔ Kofi. 3. Kofi mɔ Yao. 4. Ama mɔ Ami. (Kofi had sex with Ama. Ama had sex with Kofi. Kofi had sex with Yao. Ama had sex with Ami). We must take note that in Ewe, Kofi and Yao are males while Ama and Ami are females. Further, interviews were conducted with native-speaker respondents of both sexes, young and old as to the cultural underpinnings that govern the tabooeness of the verb *mɔ* among the Ewe. In all, 119 interviewees contributed to the Ewe part of the study, the youngest of 19 to the oldest of 72; 50 males, 69 females. On the part of

Mampulli, similar sentences in Mampulli were used to collect data in Nalerigu of the North East Region of Ghana: 1. Sandoo nyabla Tani. 2. Tani nyabla Sandoo. 3. Sandoo nyabla Mahami. 4. Tani nyabla Wunpoa. (Sandoo had sex with Tani. Tani had sex with Sandoo. Sandoo had sex with Mahami. Tani had sex with Wunpoa). Sandoo and Mahami are male names while Tani and Wunpoa are female names. In all, data was collected from 73 Mampulli native speakers; 39 males and 34 females; the youngest of 18 to the oldest of 76. Respondents of both Ewe and Mampulli speakers gave their responses in the native languages and these responses were translated into English by the researchers who themselves are native speakers of their respective languages.

Findings and Discussion

This section presents the findings of the study. The research question of this paper seeks to unearth the cultural underpinnings that govern the tabooess of the verb *mɔ* and *nyabi* (have sex) among the Ewe and Mampulli of Ghana. Findings are discussed in the succeeding paragraphs.

The Sacredness of the Act of Sex.

Findings have revealed that one cultural underpinning of the tabooess of the verb *mɔ* and *nyabi* among the Ewe and Mampulli of Ghana is that the act of sex itself is considered a sacred or holy thing that deserves reverence. For example, one Ewe woman in her sixties says:

It is only today that you children do not respect sex and talk about it openly everywhere. Even dogs hide if they want to have sex. Using *mɔ* for sex is the same as having sex in public. That is why we use the word *dɔ* (sleep) instead of *mɔ*.

The foregoing submission reveals that one cultural underpinning that governs the tabooess of the verb *mɔ* in Ewe is that the Ewe consider the act of sex as a sacred thing. As we saw earlier from Qanbar (2011) and Agyekum (2002), talking about sex openly is a taboo in the Yemeni and Akan cultures. The Ewe culture has a similar attitude towards discussing sex openly. Besides, the cultural constraints that govern the topic of sexuality are revealed in this study. We note from the submission above that the researcher was referred to as 'children' albeit he is in his late thirties. From that we gather that the act of sex itself is reserved for adults among the Ewe. Besides, the act of sex is not done publicly. In fact, the sacredness of the act of sex is not exclusive to the Ewe people of Ghana. That is universal. Our focus here is on the employment of the verb *mɔ*. We note from the

submission above that employing *mɔ* is held at the same level as having sex publicly. From this we deduce that the Ewe consider the verb *mɔ* to be very raw and very descriptive of the sex act itself insofar as it is comparable to public sex. Such a comparison clearly reveals the reverence placed on the use of *mɔ* in Ewe language and culture. The word *mɔ*, therefore, is unspeakable or unprintable among the Ewe because the act of sex is regarded as a holy matter that must not be taken lightly.

At the outset, one of the researchers, a native speaker and scholar of the Ewe language, submitted that he had never come across the verb *mɔ* in any Ewe literature. In fact, the present paper is the first time ever the researcher has used and written the verb *mɔ* in an official document such as this. Among peers in our early teenage years, we would write such taboo graffiti as Etse *mɔ* Sena (Etse had sex with Sena) on walls under the cover of darkness and that was that, never in school or anywhere else. The submission of the respondent above explains it all; Ewe people consider the employment of the verb *mɔ* to be too raw and uncultured as they regard the act of sex as sacred. This is corroborated by the submissions of one Ewe retired teacher who says:

I can't remember ever using the word *mɔ* to my children. That word is too heavy for me. But, of course, we use it among ourselves and I know the young ones also do. It's an open secret.

From the foregoing, we learn that the word *mɔ* is used covertly among peers of any age. However, the same retired teacher acknowledges that he had not used *mɔ* to his children and that the word is too 'heavy'. This would mean that sex education is one area that would need attention among the Ewe of Ghana. The cultural stand of the sacredness of the act of sex among the Ewe definitely shows in their almost total reluctance to use the word *mɔ*. From the perspective of a youth, an obviously shy-looking 19-year-old secondary school girl acknowledged that she can only use *mɔ* among her peers especially with those she is very close to. She submits further that:

I remember my father was very angry with me when my younger brother reported to him that I used *mɔ*. That was five years ago. My father did not talk to me about that but I knew he was angry by the way he looked at me. I was also sad that my father would think I was spoilt. Since then, I'm very careful as to where to use that word.

The foregoing words clearly show and explain from a young person's perspective the

tabooness of the word *mɔ* among the Ewe. It also reveals that largely, parents do not speak about or mention *mɔ* even when they seek to educate their children on sex. A young Ewe man in his early 20s attested to this reality. He says:

Sex education? Nothing like that happens in our family. My father and mother used to warn us about girls and that is how far they could go. Everything I know about sex and the word *mɔ* is from friends.

The words above sum up what is largely present in the culture and the use of sex language among the Ewe of Ghana. It is possible that there is sex education in homes where parents have some formal education. However, findings have revealed from a number of respondents in their early and late 20s that parents never taught them anything about sex let alone mention the word *mɔ*. Some of these parents referred to here have white collar jobs such as banking, teaching, medicine and accounting. In fact, the researcher grew in the home of a teacher who had taught for more than 40 years, but the word *mɔ* never appeared in his entire conversations with his parents. In all, we can confidently conclude that one of the cultural underpinnings that govern the use or disuse of the verb *mɔ* in Ewe is that the act of sexual intercourse is viewed among the Ewe as a sacred thing that must not be referred to directly. It is interesting to note that the findings of the Mampulli language are similar to those of Ewe as regards the viewing of the act of sex as a holy thing that must be revered and not mentioned. A Mampulli farmer in his 70s submits the following:

My daughter, how would you react even if you see dogs doing sex act in the open? Do you focus your gaze on it? Using that hot word *nnyabi* can even burn our lips. That is something that is done in the dark, so must we mention it openly?

This submission, full of rhetorical questions, unearths how the older generation feels about the use of the taboo verb *nnyabi* in Mampulli, thereby revealing the cultural underpinning of the sacredness of the act of sex among the Mampulli of Ghana. We note that the old man's submission is full of rhetorical questions revealing his believe that the researcher is conversant with the cultural underpinning in question. Another thing noteworthy from the submission above is that the use of the adjective *hot* to describe the taboo word *nnyabi*. He follows that description with another rhetorical question as to whether sex act should be mentioned openly given that sex act is done secretly. We saw earlier from one Ewe respondent that the Ewe verb *mɔ* is too *heavy* to mention. No doubt

the same *heaviness* or difficulty is expressed in the Mampulli farmer's use of the adjective *hot* for the taboo word *nyabi*. Among the Ewe as we note above, mentioning the raw verb *mɔ* is tantamount to having sex publicly. The same culture underpinning is revealed in the Mampulli farmer's submission. We must note that the submission of the Mampulli farmer is essentially the view from many other respondents and the foregoing is only referred to as evidence. A number of Mampulli women also reveal their view on the raw use of the verb *nyabi*. This is essentially captured by the submission of one seamstress in her late fifties. She says:

I am even shy to comment on this. If it were not you school people, I would not answer you. You can see how I am suffering to talk. I am married, my sister. But my lord and I do not even use the word *nyabi* among ourselves. You can imagine how thorny that word is to use. It is too raw to say. It is like eating raw meat.

We see from the perspective of women the underlying cultural constraint of holding sex as sacred thing. The foregoing Mampulli female respondent admits that she is even shy being part of this academic exercise. Even though she is married, she and her husband do not use the raw verb *nyabi* in their conversations, something she describes as being the same as eating raw meat. We note also that all respondents so far use comparative language when referring to the rawness of the verbs *mɔ* and *nyabi* in Ewe and Mampulli. In these metaphors are clearly grounded the sacredness of sex act as one of the cultural underpinnings governing these words in Ewe and Mampulli.

From the perspective of youths, a sixteen-year-old Mampulli schools girl says: "Some spoilt mates at school like to use *nyabi*. One time a teacher caught one of them and punished him severely. I do not want anyone to think I am spoilt, so I do not use that word. Only spoilt people use that word." This school girl's submission is corroborated by a twenty-year-old Mampulli carpenter. He says: "In our shop, if our master or a stranger or someone we do not know is around, we do not use that word among ourselves. We would not even talk about sex in the presence of others. They would think we are bad boys". It is clear that peers could use these taboo words among themselves but never in the presence of a stranger or one they revere. Using *nyabi* before strangers or an authority is altogether unacceptable and uncultured and in the words of the Mampulli carpenter in question, one would be thought off as *bad boys*. So far, we have seen from the foregoing discussions that a major cultural underpinning that governs the use or disuse of the verbs *mɔ* and *nyabi* (have sex) in Ewe and Mampulli respectively is that the Ewe and Mampulli cultures hold sex as a sacred or holy thing that must be only discussed

clandestinely. The subject of sex itself is a taboo and so much more are the verbs used to describe the sex act, which are *mɔ* in Ewe and *nyabi* in Mampulli.

Patriarchal Cultures

Besides the cultural underpinning of holding the act of sex as a sacred thing, findings have also revealed that another cultural underpinning that governs the use of *mɔ* among the Ewe and *nyabi* among the Mampulli is that these cultures are patriarchal ones; they are male dominant cultures. We must note that by *male dominant*, we not mean dominant in the light of oppression but dominant in that the worldview of these cultures is through the lenses of males. We recall that one of the simple Ewe sentences employed to collect data is 'Ama mɔ Kofi' which would translate as 'Ama had sex with Kofi.' Ama is a girl's name while Kofi is a boy's name. On the part of Mampulli, the sentence was "Tani nyabla Sando" (Tani had sex with Sando). Sando is a male name while Tani is a female name. Comments from respondents of both sexes, young or old of the two languages reveal very interesting understandings why we arrive at the conclusion that both Ewe and Mampulli cultures are male dominant ones. One Ewe woman in her early 30s submits the following:

Eii! I have never heard this anywhere. How can a woman *mɔ* a man? How can a mortar pound a pestle? All I know is that it is men who *mɔ* women, not the other way around.

We note from the foregoing that an Ewe woman acknowledges and even sees it natural that it is only a man that can *mɔ* or have sex with a woman, not vice versa. We can see the strangeness of the idea of a woman having sex with a man in the respondent's use of the interjection of surprise Eii! This idea is shared by all the women interviewed in this study. The above quote only substantiates this underlying cultural fact. In crosschecking this with the Mampulli culture, a Mampulli woman who is a retired teacher simply points out that "that does not happen anywhere" and asked the researcher a rhetorical question: "You are also a Mampulli woman. Is it possible for a woman to *nyabi* a man?" From this retired Mampulli teacher, we acknowledge that it is easier for people to see the world via the spectacles of their cultures. This fact is seen in her assertion that it does not happen anywhere for a woman to have sex with a man. Her rhetorical questions suggest that she believes that the researcher being a Mampulli speaker shares the same cultural value. This assertions from women alone shows that the patriarchal cultural systems practiced by the Ewe and Mampulli are well grounded and accepted as a norm that must be observed. This reveals the culture-driven viewpoints of the females of both ethnic groups in question. Let us now turn our attention to the males and unearth how they understand the question of

a female having sex with a male. The minds of the male respondents for the Ewe language are summed up in the words of one bank worker in his late 40s who says:

We are the ones who do the act of *mɔmɔ* (having sex). I am not a sexist. I believe in the equality of both sexes. I also know that in English either sex can be said to have sex with the other. This is not the case for Ewe because languages differ with regard to culture. In the Ewe culture the act of *mɔmɔ* can only be done by a man.

The above words reveal that the respondent is well educated and understands to a degree the dynamics of language and culture. He acknowledges that English has its own culture that governs it much as Ewe does. Pressed further as to how he educates his children on sex and whether he had ever used the word *mɔ* to his children, the respondent admits that he does educate his children on sex. However, he says:

When it comes to sex education, I prefer to speak English. I can easily mention to have sex and explain with English what it means and why they should avoid it until they grow older. The Ewe language is just too heavy for me to use in sex education. Much heavier is the word *mɔ* itself. I know even you doing this research find it very difficult using the word *mɔ*. I can see that.

He admits that he educates his children on sex but employs English in doing so but thinks Ewe is too “heavy” to employ for such a purpose. The respondent even points to the difficulty that the researcher would face by conducting a study on such a delicate topic as well as the unspoken and unwritten word *mɔ*.

All in all, we acknowledge that one major cultural underpinning that governs the use or disuse of *mɔ* among the Ewe is that Ewe culture is male dominant. It is not natural for a woman to *mɔ* a man. The act of sex is seen through the worldview of a man. There is something else we should note. Findings have also shown that while it is unnatural to say a woman *mɔ* a man, it is natural to say a woman *mɔ* *ava* (penis). Thus, it is acceptable to say this: *Ama mɔna (cont.) ava.*, which would loosely translate as *Ama has sex with penis*. It is not acceptable for a woman to *mɔ* man, but that a woman can *mɔ* *ava* (penis). What is the underlying employment of this synecdoche? One woman in her sixties supplies the answer:

When we say a woman *mɔna aua* (fucks penis), which in itself is a taboo word, we mean the woman is a prostitute and the only thing important to her about a man is his penis.

The foregoing explanation is corroborated by several other respondents. In Ewe culture and language use, a woman that is a prostitute is said to be having sex with *aua* (penis). In that regard, the 'Ama *mɔ(na) aua*' is a taboo. Out of curiosity the researcher wanted to know the reverse of *Ama mɔ(na) aua*. Earlier, we have learned that the actual Ewe word for vagina is 'kolo'. In that regard, the researcher asked a number of respondents as to the tabooess or the underlying cultural underpinning were the sentence changed to *Kofi mɔ(na) kolo* (Kofi has sex with vagina/ Kofi fucks vagina). The responses confirm the male dominance as the underlying cultural underpinning that governs the word *mɔ* in Ewe. One Ewe man in his early fifties says:

That is very natural. You know *kolo* (vagina) is made for men. And while it may sound strange, there is something like an achievement on the part of any man who *mɔ* (have sex with/ fucks) *kolo* (vagina).

The above words are self-explanatory even as it is the view of many male respondents that it is natural for a man to *mɔ kolo*. The naturalness here suggests the underlying cultural underpinning that governs *mɔ* in Ewe. To the Ewe culture, even though sexuality is a taboo and even more is the use of the word *mɔ*, its use in various contexts reveal different cultural underpinnings. And in the case of a man 'to have sex with vagina', the dominance of males over females is revealed in Ewe culture. More interestingly, this view of a male-dominant culture is corroborated by their female counterparts. One seamstress in her late forties says:

When they say a man *mɔ kolo* (fucks vagina), that should not be a miracle. Men are to *mɔ kolo*. Without that you are not a man.

There is no denying, therefore, to say now that one of the major underlying cultural underpinnings of the use of the taboo word *mɔ* in Ewe is that Ewe culture is male dominant. *Mampulli*, on the other hand, is just a reflection of Ewe. The two languages mirror each other as regards the cultural underpinning of male dominance over female regarding the use or disuse of *nnyabi* in the case of *Mampulli*. For *Mampulli*, it is impossible and unacceptable for a Tani (a female name) to *nnyabla* (have sex with) a

Sando (male name). In Mampulli culture, only a Sando can *nnyabla* a Tani. Regarding the unacceptability of a female having sex with a male, one female teacher in her late 50s says:

If you have been to school, we learn that culture is a people's way of life. I know from school as a teacher that cultures differ. For example, I know that Ashantis inherit from their mother's side but we inherit from the father's side. In our culture, a woman cannot have sex with a man. That is it.

From the foregoing as of all the earlier submissions discussed, we deduce from the respondents that culture cannot be questioned. That is clearly expressed in the quotation above that culture is accepted as it is and not questioned. This female teacher in question acknowledges that cultures differ in her reference to the Ashanti culture side by side that of Mampulli in terms of the lineage of inheritance; Ashantis inherit matrilineally while the Mampulli people inherit patrilineally. In that same vein, she suggests that among the Mampulli, it is impossible for a woman to be said to have sex with a man. The views of the Mampulli males are no different from those of the females. Commenting of the sentence in question, one pastor in his forties submits:

I know that the world is changing and modernity has affected almost everything. Much of our culture has been diluted and we have lost much of our indigenous ways of doing things. But even as I know that cultures grow, it is good we know our origins. The Mampulli view of the word you are referring to can only be used for a man, not a woman. I am a pastor and have no problem with that from a religious point of view but I am able to see things still from the cultural point of view.

The comment from the pastor in question also reveals that Mampulli speakers are aware of the dynamisms of different cultures. This pastor has shown his knowledge of other cultures but insists that it is unacceptable to say that a woman has sex with a man in Mampulli culture. In all, we can now confidently conclude from the foregoing discussions as regards Ewe and Mampulli languages and cultures that a main cultural constraint or underpinning that governs the use or disuse of *mɔ* and *nnyabi* is that these languages and cultures are patriarchal or male dominant.

Polygamy-Permissible Cultures

From the foregoing discussions, we realized that Ewe and Mampulli cultures frown on promiscuity on the part of women. On the part of men, however, having many sexual partners is not so much of an issue. It cannot be, however, either concluded that these cultures encourage men to have many sexual partners. Promiscuity is frowned on for both men and women. It is only that on the part of women, it is a more serious matter for these cultures. Just from that taboo word *mɔ* and *nnyabi*, we have discovered interesting facts about the cultures of the Ewe and Mampulli languages as regards sexuality. A third cultural underlying fact as regards the use of *mɔ* and *nnyabi* is that Ewe and Mampulli cultures do not frown on polygamy. On the part of Ewe, the conclusion from several respondents is summed up in the words of two respondents, a sixty-one-year old male carpenter and a fifty-four-year old trader. The carpenter said:

It is true that most of us now have only one wife, we are simply following what the church is forcing us to do. Our culture permits us to have as many wives as we can take care of. My father had six.

These words find support in those of the trader:

It is only women who cannot have more than a husband. That is an abomination. But a man's power is shown in the number of his wives. I am a second wife and I have no problem with that.

From the foregoing, we can conclude that another underlying culture that governs the taboo topic of sexuality in Ewe is that the culture allows for polygamy, but does not support polyandry.

The findings on the part of the Mampulli language is not any different from those of Ewe regarding the permissible view of polygamy. The Mampulli culture favours polygamy and rejects polyandry as does the Ewe culture. It is interesting to note that all the Mampulli respondents interviewed submit that the Mampulli culture does not frown on polygamy. One thing we need to take cognizance of is that most of the respondents, either male or female, acknowledge that they are well aware of the views of other cultures such as the Western culture towards polygamy. Some of the respondents who are Christian relate that their Christian faith frowns on polygamy. All this knowledge notwithstanding, they still acknowledge that the Mampulli culture supports polygamy but rejects polyandry. We must also note that understanding and practicing one's culture is different from what actually one's culture stipulates as regards a subject. For example,

most of the Mampulli men interviewed have only one wife each. However, their submissions are essentially summarized by what one forty-year-old teacher says:

I decide to have just one wife maybe because of the church. I also think that economically, one wife would be easy to take care of than many wives. Moreover, there would also be peace in my home because my wife does not have a rival to quarrel with. Many men today marry just one woman among us although we know that our tradition allows for more than a wife. In reality, this tradition is dying. In the days of my grandfather who had four wives, polygamy was common. But now, it is dying slowly.

We can tell from the foregoing respondent that in practice today, the practice of polygamy is waning. The same is true among the Ewe. It follows, therefore, that while these cultures are fundamentally polygamous, factors such as religion, society, economics and modernity are eroding the practice stealthily. That notwithstanding, the Ewe and Mampulli speakers still acknowledge that at the core, their culture favours polygamy. This departure of practice from culture is supported by one Mampulli man in his late sixties. He says:

If I am to advice young men of today as to the number of wives they should have, I would definitely advice for one. I had three. Those days things were a little easier. But now even getting a good job to do to take care of one's family is not easy. One wife is the best for now.

When asked further as to whether he would advise a young man to marry more than one wife if he has the means to support himself and the family, the respondent answered in the affirmative. From the foregoing, it is clear that one of the reasons why many may marry one wife is for the reasons other than for culture and for this case, it is definitely for financial reasons. We can now confidently conclude that one of the underlying cultural underpinnings that governs the use of *mɔ* and *nnyabi* in Ewe and Mampulli is that both cultures permit polygamy but reject polyandry.

The Taboo of Homosexuality

A fourth cultural underpinning that governs the employment of *mɔ* in Ewe is that homosexuality is looked upon as a taboo. The term *homosexuality* as used in this paper is generic and encompasses *lesbianism*. We note from the sentences for data collection the following: Kofi *mɔ* Yao and Ama *mɔ* Ami. Kofi and Yao are both males while Ama and Ami are females. These sentences were deliberately chosen to unearth the Ewe culture's view

of homosexuality as regards the taboo word *mɔ*. One noteworthy thing about this finding is that respondents' choice of words was very strong and their body language suggests that homosexuality is a taboo looked upon as an abomination. Let us discuss a few of the responses. One Ewe farmer in his late fifties submits:

Kofi *mɔ* Yao! Is it madness? It's only these days that we hear all over from those of you who have been to school that such an act as that is normal. Unbelievable! For us Ewes, that should not even be mentioned about us.

Without a doubt the foregoing words are strong and reveal unequivocally that a man having sexual relations with another man is a taboo in Ewe culture. We note that while the verb *mɔ* is a taboo, it is even more serious if it is used for homosexual relations. A retired lecturer in his early 70s reiterated the view of the farmer. He says:

For me, culture is culture and once it holds the value of a people, it must be respected and observed. The taboo of homosexuality, that a man cannot have sexual relations with another man, makes a lot of sense to me and a lot of credit goes to our forefathers for such an easy and reasonable creed.

These words are self-explanatory – Ewe culture frowns on homosexuality. Another thing noteworthy regarding the taboo of the verb *mɔ* is with regard to the sentence *Ama mɔ Ami*. We have already noted that both *Ama* and *Ami* are females. While it is clear that homosexuality is generally a taboo in Ewe culture, it is deemed physically impossible for a female to *mɔ* another female. Let us see why. All submissions gathered regarding this are summed up by one fish seller in her late thirties. She says:

What would they use to *mɔ* each other? Since when has that started?
Hahaha. Where is this world heading to?

From this market woman, we note that the taboo word *mɔ* among the Ewe intrinsically involves penetration and as we have seen already, according to Ewe culture, it is only a male that can *mɔ* a female, not vice versa let alone a female to female. Noteworthy about her submission is that it consists of rhetorical questions whose answers are obviously pulled without difficulty from the Ewe culture which she believes is shared by both the researcher and the her that homosexuality is foreign to Ewe culture. In all, via the lenses of Ewe culture with specific focus on the verb *mɔ*, we have realized that Ewe culture frowns on homosexuality.

Remarkably, findings among the Mampulli turn out to be similar to those of the Ewe language. We recall that two of the sentences used to collect data on Mampulli read: *Sando nnyabla Mahami*. *Tani nnyabla Wunpoa*. Both *Sando* and *Mahami* are males while both *Tani* and *Wunpoa* are females. Respondents all acknowledge that the Mampulli culture totally rejects homosexuality. At the same time, many respondents demonstrate their understanding of the changing trends in the world as regards the topic of homosexuality. Regarding *Sando nnyabla Mahami* and *Tani nnyabla Wunpoa*, one secondary school teacher in his early 40s says:

As a teacher, I know the multifarious views people have towards the topic of homosexuality. I personally do not look at it from the view of right or wrong. I also know that culture is not a question of right or wrong but norms that are acceptable by a people. As far as I know from my parents and the entire communities where I grew, it is just unheard of that a man can have sex with a man or a woman with a woman. I think that is regarded as sacrilegious and that such acts can bring curses on us. For our culture, homosexuality is not acceptable.

We note that the respondent above is well aware of the dynamisms that cultures display and therefore his choice of words itself display diplomacy in telling the Mampulli culture's view of homosexuality. The secondary school's teacher's words were corroborated by the submissions of a mason in his late 30s who says:

For me I know long ago that it is not acceptable in my culture that men can have sex with men and women with women. Even if people do that, they do it in secrecy. The fact that Mampulli men or women do not come out to declare that they are homosexual alone shows they know the culture rejects homosexuality.

All these submissions need no further elaboration. The Ewe and Mampulli cultures consider homosexuality as a sexual taboo. In that regard, we have seen in this study that a fourth cultural underpinning that governs the use or disuse of the sexual taboo words *mɔ* in Ewe and *nnyabi* in Mampulli is that the two languages frown on homosexuality.

Conclusion

This study sought to unearth the cultural underpinnings that govern the use of disuse of the sexual taboo words *mɔ* of the Ewe language and *nnyabi* of the Mampulli language. Four main cultural underpinnings are discovered, namely, that the act of sex itself is held as a sacred thing and the use of these words is considered too raw and uncultured; second, Ewe and Mampulli cultures are male dominant; third, the two cultures allow for polygamy but do not support polyandry; finally, Ewe and Mampulli cultures frown on homosexuality. The cultures of both languages mirror each other perfectly as regards the tabooess of the words *mɔ* and *nnyabi* (have sex). The implication of this study is that it serves as a lens into the Ewe and Mampulli languages and cultures as regards gender and sexuality taboos. A thorough comprehension of this cultural creed would broaden the view of the reader about these cultures and by extension the African culture as regards the issues of sexuality. Moreover, this study would enable the reader to fathom that the dominant African culture's position on homosexuality is not a question of hatred but of culture clash. And by making an effort to see things through the cultural lenses of the African, the world community would better understand why many African countries frown on homosexuality.

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