

# NONVERBAL CODES AND FILMIC PORTRAYAL OF AFRICAN CONCEPTION OF CULTURAL TABOOS IN *AKPAN EKWONG*

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## **Abstract**

This study was undertaken to ascertain how non-verbal codes are deployed to enforce cultural taboos in African societies. Propounding taboos was a strategy by African societies to assist them maintain, peace, security and social order in running their communities. Using qualitative method, based on Kewsi Wiredu's theory of "Ethical Consensus", this study examines the use of nonverbal codes in *Akpan Ekwong* to enunciate taboos in the traditional African context. There is an indication that nonverbal codes are the filmic codes to enunciate cultural practices that are detestable and detrimental to the citizens and the society. Morality can be instilled through the imposition of injunctions by coding certain human practices abominable in the society. The nonverbal representations of these symbols serve as the indicators for acknowledging the creative representations of these practices. The paper concludes that signs used in communication should be purposeful, unified and didactic to persuade the society to comply with the creative purpose for which in information was coded. Nonverbal communication systems, namely use of artifacts, gestures, sign languages, symbols among others can be developed into a formal model and utilized for information dissemination and reception for effective management of the human society.

**Keywords:** Culture, Film, Nonverbal-Codes, Society, Taboos.

## **Introduction**

Digging into the pre-literate and pre-Christian African traditional society, one discovers that the people, whether constituted as social groups in terms of clans or villages, have been conscious of the essence of living a moral oriented life. The African Society frowned seriously at anybody who lived immorally and such persons are usually treated as social misfits. This ethical concept practically permeates the African society. It is interesting to observe further that, "as in all societies of the world, social order and peace are recognized by African people as essential and sacred... Where the sense of corporate life is deep, it is inevitable that the solidarity of the community must be maintained otherwise there is disintegration and destruction" (56).

Before the advent of the Europeans, the use of codes to impart information was the unique model in Africa. In *Sociology of the Ibibio a Study of Social Organisation and Change*, Ekwon Ekwon acknowledges that the African societies, like some other pre-Christian cultures had no written record, but rather traditions. This means that, they depend on oral traditions for the transmission of tribal wisdom, morality, knowledge, history and culture from generation to generation (142-144). This oral transmission seemingly accounts for the reason there exist impediments to effective communication of traditions and history, with African communities having striking dissimilarities in terms of taboos and superstitions in their current applications. Intrinsic to the African society are the core values that define her

cosmology, making the society a more communal milieu as realized in human brotherhood, economics, orality, the marriage institution, human rights and religion, chieftaincy and politics among others. According to Nana,

The value... is expressed in the sharing of a common social life, commitment to the social common good of the community, appreciation of mutual obligations, caring for others, inter-dependence and solidarity. At the same time, the claims of individuality are recognized. African ethic, however, urges avoidance of extreme individualism, which is seen as potentially destructive of human values and of the whole meaning and essence of human society. Attempts are therefore made to balance communalism and individualism so they can co-exist (475).

There are human practices that are viewed as taboos African communities. Some of these practices have a universal undertone making them condemnable virtually in nation. Such practices include witchcraft, manslaughter, incest, money-ritual, love-portion, cruelty livestock, shifting of ancient boundary, unpinning an injunction, sleeping with someone's spouse, unmasking a masquerade, shooting of arrows into the market and many others. However, this culture is imperative in the cause-and-effect propensity representation they are given in the nonverbally coded in contemporary films. This is an indication that social good presupposes that cultural values would entail those healthy attitudes, accepted norms, praiseworthy standard of behaviour, unswerving fidelity to the object of belief, and actions that endear one to the society, making one to live in harmony with others. On the contrary, practices that stir shame, grief and death values are looked upon as taboos. This study evaluates the filmic portrayal of these nonverbal codes for taboos and their imperatives within Akwa Ibom setting in *Akpan Ekwong*.

### **Theoretical Framework**

This study is hinged on Kewsi Wiredu's theory of "Ethical Consensus" as a resolution of all moral conflicts. Wiredu is a renowned Ghanaian author and scholar in African Philosophy. As he conceptualises, ethical consensus emphasised that based on the differences in values, belief systems and attitudes, conflicts become inevitable consequences of those diversities in the society. The tenet of the theory is that polarity in the society springs from conflicting attitude human beings project toward materializing their wishes. As Joseph Rishante puts, in the circumstance of human practices, "it is aimed at building a violent-free society... (and) it allows for the promotion of ethical values" (226). Thus, cultural issues need to be resolved from consensus of opinion than imposition of values.

Wiredu believes that situating common values with an African socio-cultural paradigm in the face of the cultural flux of today's society, occasioned by the intrusion of foreign cultural interferences with the traditional culture of Africans, holds the ace of preserving the African cultural values and identity. As Thad Metz puts, "a greater percentage of Africans think that one is morally obligated to help others, roughly to the extent that one can and others need, with rights not figuring into the analysis of how one ought to transfer wealth, time or labour" (326). This thought closely aligns with Wiredu's thought of ethical consensus as the driving force of African value system. It is by simple inference that one can say, this same ethical consensus is what designates some actions as immoral and forbids them as taboos. However, concretising the symbols in a creative arts like visual art, songs,

drama, and film is a way of showcasing the extent to which these abhorrence are repudiated as taboos in Africa.

### **Background/Synopsis of *Akpan Ekwong***

*Akpan Ekwong* is one of the Nigerian subgenres of Nollywood film produced by Ngozi Ojuluchukwu and directed by Moses Eskor. The film portrayed witchcraft, as a African practice in Africa that evokes revulsion whenever it is mentioned. The portrayal of this theme is the reflection of the African tradition. On unwanted human practice considered as taboos. Ikot Akabom has witnessed many unexplainable deaths of mostly youths but no substantial enquiry is made to unravel the causes of these deaths. Uko, Akpan Ekwong, younger brother is captured in spirit by the coven and eaten, which results in his death physically. The death raise the citizens' eyebrow to have been the work of witches/wizard. Akpan Ekwong swears to expose the killer of his brother and he goes ahead by crossing to another domain to fortify himself for the task. His mission yields a positive response and he did not only expose the killer of his brother but begins to expose and exorcise witchcraft in the land. This becomes threat to the coven. They seek alliance with the river goddess and seal the tie by offering a virgin. In Akpan Ekwong's home, Ekanem, his wife, is sex starved. She seduces Akpama, her husband's bosom friend, to have sex with her. Akpan Ekwong discovers and kill Akpama, which lead to his arrest and prosecution for possession of fire arm and for murder.

### **Taboo in View**

The word taboo conveys two ideas: law and attitude towards the law. This makes various scholars to view it in various ways. For instance, in *West African Traditional Religion* Omosade Awolalu acknowledges that taboos and laws are not easily differentiated from one another; that it is safe to say that laws deal with a person's conduct towards his fellow men, while taboos are concerned with one's conduct towards what is sacred and the ancestors in the African context (212). To Francis Etim, in his *Metaphysics of African Medicine: A Discuss on Philosophy of Medicine*, expresses that witchcraft is a practice that repudiates globally. As the practice can result in ostracism, banishment out outright death to the person practicing it, it is a taboo (171-172). This means, a taboo is an antisocial activity.

Taboos are the checks and balances guiding religious and social practices and behaviours they are carried out. According to Edet Udo taboo is, "the system or practice or act whereby things are set apart as sacred and forbidden to general use or placed under prohibition or interdiction" (272). To Christian Clerk, "taboo is a powerful restriction or prohibition that regulates contracts between specific categories of individuals and things in particular circumstances. (Clerk 5). Meanwhile, Patrick Ebewo makes analysis of taboos in Ika community of Akwa Ibom thus:

A grandchild is never rebuked for making use of any fruit tree in the grandparent's home. If rebuked, the tree withers.... Eating of sweet yam (*enem*) is forbidden. Harvesting of new yams is not allowed until the *oboong edia afa* performs a customary ritual. Harvesting of palm fruits is forbidden on *Afiong Aran* day. In Ika, the Giant-rat (*ejied*) does not run about in the daytime. If this happens, death is around the corner.... Sex in the farmland (*inaa-ikot*) requires cleansing. To destroy one's property is abomination (*nduo abom*). To fight with an in-law (*ukod*) or grandchild (*ajejen*) is an abomination. To sleep with a mourning widow (*nwan akpe*) is an

abomination. Whistling in the night is forbidden because it attracts evil spirits.... Women in their menstrual period do not go to the stream to fetch water. (23).

Taboos are therefore, a collection of restricted or forbidden things put in place to check the conduct and moral principles of the people for a better life in the society.

### **Nonverbal Codes in African Society**

In the African society, orality is the harbinger of communication and it is in a word that a culture or value is transmitted. "The word is the capsule of the life force which the human spirit conceptualizes and nurtures.... It is the encapsulation of joy, the sadness, the knowledge, the experience and the feeling that exist in man at a particular time" (Onuenkwusi 2). As Etop Akwang intones, "codes produce messages or meanings which are far more stable within several communicative context and concert" (83). A nonverbal code, then, is a concrete representation of the oral factor with a more stable symbol. According to Anietie Udofia *et al*, a "symbol is a concept made to stand for an idea" (54). Thus, nonverbal codes are pictorial representation of ideas, especially, in films. This may be the reason Wilson generalizes it as, "an admixture of social conventions and practices which have become sharpened and blended into rewritable communication modes and systems and which have almost become standard practices, modes of speech and social organizations" (98).

Nonverbal code is the deployment of concrete visual elements to establish a cultural cynosure. According to Michael Haralambos *et al*, "it is used to explain human behaviour and human society by examining the way in which people... develop a self-concept or self-image, and act in terms of meaning" (856). This may be the reason Sul Yan sees nonverbal codes as signifiers stimulating an idea to be situated from a general conception of a referent, which are usually the discernible pictorials encapsulating spoken or written idea in artifacts, pictures, effigies, or fashion. It is a symbol as long as it can be employed to represent something else (31). In Elizabeth Ben-Iheanacho's view, "a dress is the immediate visible difference that proclaims... identity and symbol (96); nonetheless, "some Nigerians use this to portray special moment in their lives" (Akas 460).

To this effect, designs on fashions play the role of a signifier. But outside dress, such signifiers are sacred forest, shrine, stream, yellow palm frond (*ayei*), masks, rhythms of gongs or drums or bells, costumes, tattoos, totems, sacrifices, empty calabash, koalin (*ndom*) in colours, feathers, tusks, bones, drum, mask or other parts of certain animals. For instance, hoisting a yellow palm-frond on a location, land or whatever, passes an information of strict injunction, prohibiting people from encroachment. In some communities, the presentation of the yellow palm fronds can be a restraining order to stop a conflict or war and embrace an armistice. It is also used to place embargo on a place or object. In the same vein, Elizabeth Isichei details that in traditional pre-colonial old Oyo empire, the presentation of an empty calabash to the *Alaafin* or a dish with the egg of a parrot was a nonverbal indication that the *Alaafin* must commit suicide (67). Therefore, nonverbal codes are concrete representations of "artistic achievements... in an abundant oral literature consisting of myth, legends, stories, short pieces in prose... found in certain parts of Africa to develop a given theme" (Traore 7).

### **Nonverbal Codes in *Akpan Ekwong***

Cultural taboos are portrayed prominently using codes that are decipherable as a sign. This shows the African conception of figurative expression concealed in traditional media such as riddles, proverbs, adages, dance design patterns and in body accessories. This seems to reflect that figures are used in Africa only when the subject matter is deep enough to code or unravel a mystery or an illogical but factual circumstance. In *Akpan Ekwong*, various codes are deployed to express this African traditional values in the Akwa Ibom setting.

#### **Deadness/Destruction**



**Fig. 1: Human Skull (*Akpan Ekwong*)**

In *Akpan Ekwong*, the life taking force is viewed a dead trap. The deadness is portray with human skill. Thus, the use of human skill to convey the abhorrence of death among African society is a nonverbal coding of the taboo as unwanted circumstance.

#### **Fire**



**Fig 2: Aliveness (*Akpan Ekwong*)**

Fire is not actually a taboo to repudiate in the African context. However, the fire is metaphoric. It represents the aliveness, glowing and the immutable verve of witchcraft in the society. This is a nonverbal representation of the abhorrence of the aliveness of witchcraft and the advantage the coven is gaining within Africa.

#### **Child/Human Sacrifice**



**Fig 3: Sacrificial Object (*Akpan Ekwong*)**

Human sacrifice is portrayed in the symbol above. It is a filmic mode of encapsulating its augury in the African setting. Akpan Ekwong sacrifices a human being to gain his and water demands a live virgin to form a league with the coven to unseat Akpan Ekwong. The image above is a nonverbal code for the act in the film.

### **Palm Frond**



**Fig 4: Injunction (Akpan Ekwong)**

Palm frond is used to encode African conception of human boundaries and injunction. The presence of a palm-frond is a nonverbal enunciation of boundaries.

### **Stone**



**Fig. 5: Totemic (Akpan Ekwong)**

The witches and wizard are so powerful that they can manifest their heinous act in numerous unpredictable mode. Stone is made a contact of evil, in which Uko hits his leg and the leg rots instantly. Stone elicits the impenetrable force of the coven.

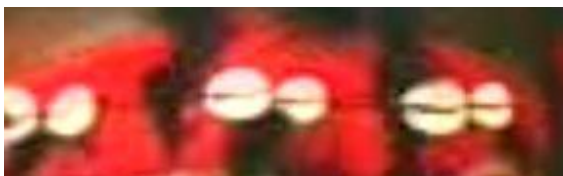
### **Ibit (Drum)**



**Fig 6. Evangelism (Akpan Ekwong)**

Drum is an instrument for sound production basically deployed in Africa for information imparting. In *Akpan Ekwong* it is used to encode evangelism.

### **Mbamba (Cowries)**



**Fig. 7: Sacred (Akpan Ekwong)**

Cowries is one of the nonverbal codes used in establishing the sacred or an object studded with divine aura when it is used in the Africa shrine.

### **Ndom (kaolin)**



**Fig 8: Foresight (*Akpan Ekwong*)**

White kaolin is prominently used to convey purity but in special cases of seeing a traditional herbalist's eye, usually one, painted with white kaolin, it communicates that he sees beyond the ordinary.

### **Enforcing Taboos through Non-Verbal Codes**

#### **The Weird Witches/Wizard**



**Fig 9: Witchcraft is abominable (*Akpan Ekwong*)**

The portraiture of the activities of witches and wizard in *Akpan Ekwong* as detestable and weird is a way of communicating the extent to which the society detests the act. Taboos are detestable human practices. The coven has appeared as an absolute taboo. This taboo is rather enunciated properly using nonverbal cues that represent how the Africans view them.

**Human Sacrifice:** Sacrificing one's child or other for wealth or power is a detestable act that if proven without doubt may result in the victim being banished in the society. However, this may result to the victim being condemner in the court of law.

#### **Cosmic Unity/Altar in Mask**



**Fig. 10: Defiling the Mask is Abominable (*Akpan Ekwong*)**

According to Margaret Akpan and Anietie Udofia, "a mask is an interface of cosmic connect between the living and the dead in Africa through blood sacrifice... an altar of transmogrification intensified by rites, worship and solemn rituals for a regeneration of cosmic force through circumstances of blood" (21). Desecrating a mask is a taboo.

### ***Ufuum-Mmong* (Sacred Water)**



**Fig. 11: Water for Cleansing (*Akpan Ekwong*)**

This is sacred water spiritually sanctified for purification in the African society. Defiling this water is a taboo. In African society, it is a taboo for a lady to cohabit and indulge in sexual relationship with a man who has not paid her bride price. In *Akpan Ekwong*, palm frond is dipped in *Ufuum-mmong* as a cleansing agent to sanctify Akpan, eliciting that the relationship Akpan is having with Ekanem is taboo.

**Deadness in Human Skull:** The skull is part of the human body. Its concrete substance is acknowledge to be interred as a man dies. Seeing the human skull with someone is abominable. Representing deadness with a frightening element is an indication that it is considered as a taboo in the society.

***Adanga/Injunction* (Ancient Boundary):** This expression is fully encoded in the non-verbal code as indicated above. However, it has a deeper connotative scope which makes tempering with it becomes a taboo. Abusing a grandchild/parent, shifting an ancient boundary, a clergy found indulging in fetish rites, incest, etc. – all these belong to the taboo of unseating the ancient boundary.

### ***Inaa /Nka-udo* (Extra Marital Sex)**



**Fig. 12: Illicit Sex is a Taboo (*Akpan Ekwong*)**

*Inaa* is a general word for illicit sex but in *Akpan Ekwong*, it is a signified for extra marital coitus. This act is enforced by the nonverbal code as a taboo.

### **Manslaughter**



**Fig. 13: Taken someone's Life is abominable (*Akpan Ekwong*)**



In African traditional setting, every life is valuable and a living person is a replica of the mortal and immortal essence. Life is viewed as a divine existence in a carnal body. Taking of one's life (suicide) is a taboo and taking of another's is abominable. In *Akpan Ekwong*, the portraiture of a gun is a nonverbal code showcase the taboo of manslaughter in Africa.

### **Conclusion**

Non-verbal communication cannot be without purpose. In all its ramifications, intents and purpose, it should serve to advance the cause of sharing meaning, giving information and advancing human interaction. The study of African traditional society from the Akwa Ibom perspective in *Akpan Ekwong* has situated the filmic use of nonverbal code to situate what the African society conceives as taboos. Taboos, on the other hand has a unique role of socialization, indication of boundaries and stimulation of wakefulness for the detestable in the society. That is the process of getting all involved to internalize the approved social norms and societal ethical codes of conduct, which in turn, enhances the building of a strong human community. Through a creativity film becomes a tool for creating awareness of the taboos and the different social roles prescribed in their observance.

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