

Prohibition of Birth-Giving in Yoruba Palaces: Taboo or Speculation and Impact on Building Infrastructure in Yorubaland

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Abstract

Original Research Article

There are many taboos, prohibitions and restrictions in Yoruba palaces in which some of them are man-made. Some are promulgated to prevent action deemed disrespectful or spiritually harmful to the Kings, and one of such is for the wives of Yoruba Kings not to give birth in the palaces. Anybody who disobeys will face the consequences and calamities. Therefore, this study is necessary to investigate the validity of the taboo and ascertain whether the forbidden act of not giving birth in the Yoruba palace is a taboo or speculation, the reasons behind it, its implication, progress and impacts on building infrastructure in order to free the palace from unnecessary bondage.

The study employed descriptive survey and qualitative approach was adopted. Data was collected from both primary and secondary sources. It focused on the data and information obtained from palace chiefs, Yoruba historians and community elders. Survey technique used was interview. Eight towns were purposively selected and hundred people were randomly selected and interviewed in Yorubaland. Data collected was analysed using historical approach and descriptive statistics.

The study revealed that the major cause of the problem was jealousy among the Kings wives and past Kings wives who were living in the palaces. This made them to be barren and the only solution to solve the problem was for the wives who noticed any sign of pregnancy to move out of the palaces and deliver the babies outside the palaces for safety and protection of the mothers and the babies. It was also revealed that the taboo on its own do not have any side effect on the palaces, Kings, Kings wives and the born and unborn children, but the forces behind the taboo make it dreadful that one must obey it.

The study concluded that the act of not giving birth in Yoruba palaces that termed as taboo in Yorubaland is a speculation, and man-made, and it is a blessing in disguise because it brings growth and helps to develop the towns in term of building infrastructure

Keywords: Taboo, Birth-giving, King, Yoruba palaces, Yorubaland.

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1.0 Introduction

Birth is the coming of young ones out of the mothers' body or the process of delivering a baby or babies while a palace is a royal residence, sometimes,

a seat of government or official residence of a sovereign archbishop or any large splendid building for entertainment, but this study is concerned with the palace as the official, royal residence, and



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administrative seat of a King. It is the building where the King or the head of a town in Yorubaland is dwelling with his family or relations.

Palace building is a public building, and sacred epicenter of Yoruba culture, tradition and political authority. It also houses shrines with multiple courtyards where rituals and ceremonies are carried out. It is always situated at the centre of the town and a symbol of Yoruba identity and heritage.

Speculation is making guess or theory about something unknown, often based on incomplete information. It is the forming of a theory or conjecture without firm or sufficient evidence to be certain. It is a message expressing an opinion based on incomplete evidence whereas, a taboo is a strong social, cultural or religion prohibition resisting specific behavior often deemed sacred, offensive, dangerous and unacceptable by the society or community with violations often carrying severe social or supernatural consequences. It can also be defined as a ban on something considered too repulsive, forbidden act or behavior inappropriate for general discussion enforced by custom, law and belief to avoid shame, misfortune and harm to the community.

A taboo can also be a general agreement on something not to discuss or to do. The penalty to the violators can range from legal penalties to social ostracization or feeling of disgust. In Yorubaland, taboo may and may not be universal because it varies from one community to the other, but in the Yoruba palaces, it is a forbidden act throughout the Yorubaland.

Palace taboo is a specific rule, prohibition or restriction in royal court imposed on members of a royal family to prevent action deemed disrespectful or spiritually harmful and one of such is for the wife of a King not to give birth in the palace. The wife can be impregnated in the palace by the King, the pregnancy can be nursed there, but when the time to deliver is approaching, the wife must leave the palace, and deliver the baby elsewhere in adherence to the taboo in order to avoid calamities to the child, wife or the King. Therefore, this study is to investigate the validity of the taboo and ascertain whether the forbidden act of not giving birth in the

Yoruba palace is a taboo or speculation, the reasons behind it, its implication, progress, and impacts on building infrastructure in order to free the palace from unnecessary bondage.

2.0 Literature review

The Yoruba people are one of the largest and most cultural influential ethnic groups in West Africa, and primarily inhabiting in Southwestern Nigeria, Benin, and Togo. They have very rich cultural heritage and concentrated in Yorubaland, establishing power city-states like Ile-Ife and Oyo Empire. They are known for their unique, ancient and modern craftsmanship including bronze and beadwork, cosmological traditions and highly developed artistic and architectural heritage. They constitute one of Africa's most historically significant and cultural dynamic societies, centered on cities and local Kings. Their language is Yoruba with rich literature, poetry and proverbs. They speak with various dialects such as Egba, Oyo and Ijebu.

They are one of the most urbanized groups in ancient Africa with diverse religions comprising Christianity, Islam and Traditional Yoruba religion (Traditionalists). They have a strong oral tradition, rich mythology, and deep rooted cultural festivals such as Sango and Ogun. They are dynamic, influential with a strong evolving identity that blends traditional customs with modern international influences. They are well known for their wisdom, resilience, strong community bonds, hospitality, and community focus with deep respect for elders, ancestral traditions and heritages.

Yoruba people cover six states in Nigeria namely: Lagos, Oyo, Ogun, Akure, Osun and Ekiti. They are mostly farmers and traders with well-organized markets. Major cities include Lagos, Ibadan, Osogbo, Oyo, Ondo, Akure, Ilesha, Ijebu-Ode, Ogbomoso, Abeokuta, Owo and many others. Oduduwa was regarded as progenitor and the first King of the Yoruba, who established the dynasty in Ile-Ife.

Among the Yorubas, the palace has long anchored the town's radial plan and ritual life, typically sited at the centre of a town from which principal roads radiate outward, reinforcing its

position as the spiritual and administrative heart of the community. It serves as an official and royal residence for the King, a sit of governance for legislative, executive and judiciary arms of government. It also serves as a place for entertainments, political authority, social organizations, lineage memory, and rituals for the peace of the community.

Yoruba palace always has expansive compound with many courtyards. It is a most significant compound both in magnitude and in artistic splendor and stand as a symbol of authority, wealth, affluence, heritage and identity, especially among the people of Yoruba. It is a vibrant centre of culture and spirituality, maintaining political order, cultural continuity, community cohesion, and a focal point of the whole community.

2.2 Purposes of Palace taboo

The purposes of palace taboos include:

1. To show deep reverence for the King and the throne.
2. To prevent spiritual disruption that can attract negative forces and misfortune..

3. To maintain discipline, harmony and cultural continuity within the town and community.
4. For protection and to maintain group identity, and traditions.
5. To safeguard the spiritual and cultural integrity of the town and community.

3.0 Methodology

The study employed descriptive survey and qualitative approach was adopted. The study consulted historical documents and existing literature to enable build a holistic comprehensive understanding of the study. Data was collected from both primary and secondary sources derived from multiple sources such as published and unpublished materials in books, journals, internets, and interview. It focused on the data and information obtained from palace chiefs, Yoruba historians and community elders in order to understand the historical context. This is crucial to analyze the aim of the study.

The principal survey technique used was interview and purposive sampling method was used in selecting the towns. Eight towns were selected and hundred people were randomly selected and interviewed in selected Yorubaland towns as shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Places visited and Number of people intervied

S/N	Town selected	Number of people interviewed
1.	Oyo	10.0
2.	Osogbo	10.0
3.	Ogbomoso	15.0
4.	Ilesha	10.0
5.	Ile-Ife	15.0
6.	Ondo	10.0
7.	Lagos	20.0
8.	Akure	10.0
	TOTAL	100.0

Source: Author's Fieldwork, 2025.

Data collected was analysed using historical approach and descriptive statistics such as frequency counts and percentages.

4.0 Findings and Discussion

4.1 Origin of the Taboo

The origin of this taboo cannot be ascertained because there are two versions to it but the two versions are related and pointed in the same direction.

4.1.1 First Version

This version of the taboo stated that there was a King in the past in Yorubaland, who had many wives but no child. Not that the wives were barren but they were unable to conceive or give birth to premature babies, despite all efforts of the King, who was able, perfect, agile, and strong. This King died without a single child. Another King came into the throne, and the same thing happened to him too. He was childless till he died, and situation went on until the seventh King. Before the seventh King came to the throne then, many designated Kings refused to come to the throne.

When nobody wanted to be King and died without child, the seventh King now told the elders and community that, before he would come to the throne and become King, he would marry and had children, and the Yoruba people allowed him after much arguments and deliberations. That was how the seventh King had children before he died. When he died and the next one came to the throne, he started with barrenness and he wanted to leave the throne. The Yoruba elders and the people now advised him to contact the oracle to know the way forward. The oracle was contacted and said that the past Kings wives were behind the problem because of jealousy. They were bitterly jealous of themselves on whom to give the King the male child (Prince) that would succeed him after his death. This jealousy led to barrenness among them because they had gone far spiritually on this issue.

The solution provided by the oracle was that when any of the King wives noticed any sign of pregnancy, such wife should come to the oracle's

house for protection, and that was the beginning of Yoruba Kings wives moving out of the palaces to deliver their babies outside the palaces.

4.1.2 Second Version

It stated that there was a King in Yorubaland in the past that had many wives and none of the wives gave birth to lively babies. They all gave birth to premature babies. This problem happened to many Kings in Yorubaland until when it got to a certain King who said that the oracle should be contacted. When the orator arrived and contacted Ifa, Ifa said the King's wives were waging war against each other on who was going to give King the male child (Prince), who would be King after his father. The oracle said that it was an act of jealousy that caused the whole problem.

The oracle said that the only solution was that the moment any of the King wives noticed a sign of pregnancy, such wife should move to Yeye's house (mother of children's house) for safe delivery and protection. Yeye was one of the small gods in Yorubland represented by a female worshipper, and since then, the wives of the Yoruba Kings did not give birth in the Yoruba palaces again. Immediately any of them noticed any sign of pregnancy, such wife moved to Yeye's house until she delivered.

From the two versions, it shows clearly that there was problem in many of the Yoruba palaces in the past, in which majority of the Kings did not have children to survive them until they died, and the problem was not natural but artificial. The major cause of the problem was jealousy among the Kings wives living in the palaces on who would give the Kings the Prince that would survive him. This situation made them to be barren or giving birth to premature babies.

It also shows that the only solution to solve the problem then was for the wives who noticed any sign of pregnancy to move out of the palaces and delivered the babies outside the palaces for safety and protection of the mothers and the babies. It was practiced and worked and since then, the wives of the Kings started giving birth to bouncing baby boys and girls. The Yoruba elders and chiefs now came

together and said that henceforth, birth-giving in Yoruba palaces was prohibited and that nobody should give birth in the Yoruba palaces again. Initially, it was immediately the Kings wives noticed a sign of pregnancy that they moved out. Later, it was changed to when the time of giving birth was approaching, so that the child and the wife could be properly taken care of by the Kings.

4.3 Causes of the Taboo

The act of jealousy among the Kings wives and the belief that the past Kings wives who were inherited by the Kings were spiritual (witchcrafts), and that they joined hands with Kings wives to disturb the peace of the palaces. This act of jealousy gave room to the existent of this taboo in order to safeguard bad occurrences and calamities in the palaces. The wives joined hands together, and used external forces to achieve their aim and desired. All these are the causes why the taboo was initiated.

4.4 Reasons for the Taboo

There are five major reasons for the promulgation of this taboo in Yoruba palaces. These are:

1. **Safety:** To preserve the life of the new babies, the mothers (Kings wives), and to eradicate barrenness among the wives.
2. **Bad Occurrences:** To avoid bad occurrences and calamities such as the death of the Kings.
3. **Peace:** To allow peace to reign in the palaces among the Kings wives, the past Kings wives living in the palaces, families, and to prevent fighting, quarrelling and enmity among them. It serves as a peace keeping element in Yoruba palaces.

4. **Shame Devil:** To put devil to shame, in the sense that, the act of suspicion among the Kings wives is addressed with this taboo.
5. **Love:** To promote love, joy and harmony among the Kings' wives and the extended families in Yoruba palaces.

4.5 Implication of the Taboo

The taboo on its own do not have any side effect on the palaces, Kings, Kings wives and the born and unborn children, but the forces behind the taboo make it dreadful that one needs to obey otherwise, the consequences will come.

Some of the consequences of disobeying the taboo include:

- i. The death of the child and the mother.
- ii. The barrenness of the King, King wife or wives for life.
- iii. In some towns in Yorubaland, it may lead to the depose of the King.
- iv. The town that goes against the taboo in Yorubaland may be seriously troubled by evil spirits, in terms of peace and harmony.

4.6 Views of Yoruba people, Religion, Education and Civilization

4.6.1 View of Yoruba people

The Yoruba people believed that new babies are the gift from God and they can be delivered anywhere, anytime when it pleases God, who is the owner and giver of these children, and that we are just ordinary guidance or caretakers of these children but the evil spirit behind the taboo makes it to be dreadful.

Table 2: Outcome of Palaces visited, Number of people interviewed and their responses

S/N	Town selected	Number of people interviewed	Number of people not believed in the taboo	Number of people believed in the taboo
1.	Oyo	10.0	8.0 (80.0%)	2.0 (20.0%)
2.	Osogbo	10.0	6.0 (60.0%)	4.0 (40.0%)
3.	Ogbomoso	15.0	12.0 (80.0%)	3.0 (20.0%)
4.	Ilesha	10.0	9.0 (90.0%)	1.0 (10.0%)

5.	Ile-Ife	15.0	10.0 (66.7%)	5.0 (33.3%)
6.	Ondo	10.0	7.0 (70.0%)	3.0 (30.0%)
7.	Lagos	20.0	18.0 (90.0%)	2.0 (10.0%)
8.	Akure	10.0	7.0 (70.0%)	3.0 (30.0%)
	TOTAL	100.0 (100.0%)	77.0 (77.0%)	23.0 (23.0%)

Source: Author’s Computation, 2025.

From Table 2 above, out of hundred (100.0) people interviewed, many (77%) of people interviewed do not believe in this taboo and even wanted the taboo to be eradicated while few (23.0%) of people were in support. This shows that the Yoruba people of today do not believe in this taboo.

4.6.2 Religion View

There are three major and leading categories of religion in Yorubaland namely, Christianity, Islam and Traditional religion. All the three categories of people were interviewed as shown in Table 3.

Table 3: Outcome of people interviewed based on Religion

S/N	Town visited	Number of people interviewed	Number of Muslims interviewed	Number of Christians interviewed	Number of Traditionalists interviewed
1.	Oyo	10.0	4.0 (40.0%)	3.0 (30.0%)	3.0 (30.0%)
2.	Osogbo	10.0	3.0 (30.0%)	5.0 (50.0%)	2.0 (20.0%)
3.	Ogbomoso	15.0	5.0 (33.3%)	7.0 (46.7%)	3.0 (20.0%)
4.	Ilesha	10.0	3.0 (30.0%)	6.0 (60.0%)	1.0 (10.0%)
5.	Ile-Ife	15.0	6.0 (40.7%)	6.0 (40.7%)	3.0 (20.3%)
6.	Ondo	10.0	4.0 (40.0%)	5.0 (50.0%)	1.0 (10.0%)
7.	Lagos	20.0	8.0 (40.0%)	10.0 (50.0%)	2.0 (10.0%)
8.	Akure	10.0	4.0 (40.0%)	4.0 (40.0%)	2.0 (20.0%)
	TOTAL	100.0 (100.0%)	37.0 (37.0%)	46.0 (46.0%)	17.0 (17.0%)

Source: Author’s Computation, 2025.

Majority (100.0%) of the people interviewed were Muslim (37.0%) and Christians (46.0%) while few (17.0%) were traditionalists.

Table 4: Outcome of Religion view

S/N	Religion	Number interviewed	Number believed	Number not believed
1.	Muslims interviewed	37.0	7.0 (18.9%)	30.0 (81.1%)
2.	Christians interviewed	46.0	5.0 (10.9%)	41.0 (89.1%)
3.	Traditionalists interviewed	17.0	12.0 (70.6%)	5.0 (29.4%)

TOTAL	100.0 (100.0%)	24.0 (24.0%)	76.0 (76.0%)
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Source: Author's Computation, 2025.

From Table 4, majority (76.0%) of the religionists do not believe in the taboo while few (24.0%) believed in it. Surprisingly, some (29.4%) of traditionalist do not believe in it and were also against the taboo but many (70.6%) of them supported it for the sake of Yoruba race, therefore there is need to eradicate it.

4.6.3 Education and Civilization

Education brings civilization and when one is educated such person does not believe in the abstract things, taboo inclusive. The Yoruba people as at today are the leading tribe in Nigeria both in education and civilization. Likewise their Kings, they are well exposed, civilized and educated. Some of them came from overseas to become Kings and majority of them are either Muslims or Christians as shown in Table 5.

Table 5: Calibers of some of Yoruba Kings in Yorubaland

S/N	Town	Title	Name of the King (His royal highness/majesty)	Qualification/Profession
1.	Oyo	Alaafin of Oyo	Dr Abimbola Akeem	Mechanical Engineer
2.	Osogbo	Ataoja of Osogbo	Owoade	Chartered Accountant
3.	Ogbomoso	Soun of	Jimoh Oyetunji Olanipekun	Business Consultant
4.	Ilesha	Ogbomoso	Ghandi Afolabi Olaoye	Economist/Author
		Owa Obokun of	Gabriel Adekunle	
5.	Ile-Ife	Ijeshaland	Aromolaran III	Chartered Accountant
6.	Ondo	Oni of Ife	Adeyeye Enitan Ogunwusi	Medical Doctor
7.	Lagos	Osemawe of	Victor Adesunbo Kiladejo	Lawyer/Police officer
8.	Akure	Ondo	Rilwan Babatude Aremu	Architect
9.	Ibadan	Oba of Lagos	Ogunlade Aladelusi	Chemical Engineer
10.	Ila	Deji of Akure	Rasidi Adewolu Ladoja	Educationist
11.	Orangun	Olubadan of	Abudlwahab Oyedokun	Administrator/Liberian
12.	Ede	Ibadan	Munirudeen Adesola Lawal	n
	Awe	Orangun of Ila	Cornileus Abiola Oladokun	Educationist
		Timi of Ede		
		Alawe of Awe		

Source: Author's Computation, 2025.

With the calibers of the Kings on the throne in Yorubaland, total adherence to this taboo will be minimal, and allow their wives to be giving birth outside the palaces will be very dangerous for the Kings, families and communities.

4.7 Progress of the Taboo and implications on Building infrastructure

In the past, the degree of obedience and compliance was very high. All the Kings in Yorubaland obeyed it to the letter. The Kings' wives also were not left out in compliances with the taboo, because the Yoruba people will say "Obedient is better than sacrifice". Later, the taboo turned to custom in Yorubaland that everybody living in the palaces must obey. Nobody was allowed to give birth in the Yoruba palace, no matter whom you are including slaves, servants, visitors, and relatives of the Kings.

Today, the degree of obedient is not as high as in the past although, many Yoruba palaces still observe it, and the reason for this is not far fetch. Apart from palaces that are used as residence, many (99.5%) of the Yoruba Kings have personal houses that are even better than the palaces before or after becoming Kings. Some used their riches to reconstruct and renovate the palaces. Some termed their palaces as old and new thereby, having residential apartments for their wives and relatives far away from the palaces in the same compound, since majority of the palaces have very large compounds.

Majority of the Kings due to their wealth constructed many mansions within and outside the towns and this contributes immensely to the growth and development of the towns. Majority of these buildings are master pieces and anywhere the buildings are sited, bring rapid development to that areas in term of social amenities such as pipe borne water, electricity, and good roads. This gives the Yoruba Kings an ample opportunity to take proper care of the pregnancies and the mothers. Some even allow their wives to give birth outside their domains such as Abuja, Port Harcourt or in Overseas depend on the calibers and richness of the Kings.

Aside from their riches and education, due to their religion background and exposure, majority of them do not believe in taboos, not giving-birth in palaces inclusive and this drastically affects the degree of obedience to this taboo. Some of their wives who are also educated have been given birth in palaces and nothing happens to the children and the mothers; though in secrecy.

4.8 Precaution to be taken when giving-birth in Yoruba palaces

There is a saying in Yorubaland that 'The mouth of the people is sacrifice or Peoples mouth is the sacrifice' (meaning, Enu araye ni ebo), therefore, when going against any taboo (which is just mere speculation), one should not tell or discuss the issue with anybody because the evil forces or spirits behind such taboo are human beings and can cause problems and calamities to anyone who goes against it. Therefore, when going contrary to the so called taboo, make it secret and ensure that nobody knows about it otherwise, the evil people behind it will be at work and act fast to perpetrate evils.

4.9 Impacts on Building Infrastructure of the town

This taboo brings rapid development to the towns because the Kings in their wealth, glory and riches build many houses and mansions in the towns to cater for their wives and the pregnancies. This increases the number of buildings in the town with necessary amenities provided for the conveniences of the users and the surroundings. These amenities include good transportation networks, health facilities, constant water supply and sewage systems, regular electricity supply and fire protection facilities. All these provisions improve the economic development of the town and improve quality of life.

5.0 Conclusion

The study concluded that the act of not giving-birth in Yoruba palaces that termed as taboo in Yorubaland is a mere speculation. The initial aim of the taboo was to sanitize and cleanse the Yoruba palaces but the aim is already defeated nowadays.

Many of the so-called taboos in Yorubaland are man-made to address the bad occurrences, habits and to give honor to the Kings in Yorubaland.

This taboo was promulgated to address the issue of jealousy and bareness among the Kings wives, and this problem has been solved because today, the Yoruba Kings do not marry many wives as before. Therefore, this study also concluded that the wives of Yoruba Kings in Yorubaland should give birth anywhere they want, palaces inclusive and nothing is going to happen to them and their children. There is no law, taboo or rule binding them not to give birth in Yoruba palaces.

Finally, the study concluded that the taboo which is a speculation and man-made is a blessing in disguise because it brings growth and helps to develop the towns in term of building infrastructure.

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