Vol. 2, No. 1; June (2026)
E-ISSN:3121-8539
ISSN:3121-7710

Sexual Taboos and Indigenous Social Regulation in Contemporary Ghana: A Comparative Study of Akan and Ewe Societies

Lawrence BOSIWAH
Department of Ghanaian Languages and Linguistics,
University of Cape Coast, Ghana.
ibosiwah@ucc.edu.gh
&
Kwame ADU
Department of Ghanaian Languages and Linguistics,
University of Cape Coast, Ghana.

Abstract
Sexual taboos have historically served as important mechanisms of social regulation in many African societies by guiding moral behaviour, preserving family structures, and maintaining communal order. However, the influence of modernization, urbanization, globalization, formal education, and religious transformation has generated debates regarding their contemporary relevance. This study examines sexual taboos as mechanisms of social regulation among the Akan and Ewe people of Ghana. Guided by Émile Durkheim's Theory of Sacralisation, which explains how sacred values and collective beliefs generate systems of prohibition that regulate social behaviour and preserve social cohesion, it explores the socio-cultural functions of sexual taboos, identifies major forms of sexual prohibitions and associated sanctions, and assesses their relevance within contemporary Ghanaian society. The findings reveal that sexual taboos remain significant mechanisms of informal social control among the Akan and Ewe despite ongoing socio-cultural transformation. It observes that while modernization and religious change have altered traditional forms of enforcement, the underlying moral principles embedded within sexual taboos remain influential in shaping social expectations and behaviours. The study concludes that sexual taboos remain resilient cultural institutions that contribute to moral regulation, cultural continuity, and social cohesion among the Akan and Ewe.
Keywords: Sexual Taboos; Social Regulation; Indigenous Knowledge Systems; Akan; Ewe; Ghana.

Vol. 2, No. 1; June (2026)
E-ISSN:3121-8539
ISSN:3121-7710

Introduction

Sexuality constitutes one of the most regulated aspects of human social life across cultures and historical periods. Every society develops norms, values, customs, and prohibitions that govern sexual behaviour in order to preserve social order, maintain family structures, and ensure cultural continuity. Among the various mechanisms employed to regulate sexual conduct, taboos remain one of the most enduring and influential institutions. Taboos refer to culturally sanctioned prohibitions that restrict certain behaviours, practices, or interactions considered morally, socially, or spiritually unacceptable within a given community (Douglas, 1966). They function as informal systems of social control that define the boundaries of acceptable behaviour and prescribe sanctions for violations.

In traditional African societies, taboos occupy a central position within indigenous systems of governance, morality, religion, and social organization. Unlike formal legal systems that depend on codified laws and state institutions, taboos derive their authority from communal values, ancestral traditions, and spiritual beliefs (Mbiti, 1990). They regulate various aspects of life, including food consumption, environmental conservation, kinship relations, political authority, and sexual conduct. Through these regulations, taboos contribute to social cohesion by encouraging conformity to collectively accepted norms and discouraging behaviours perceived as threats to communal stability (Gyekye, 1996). Sexual taboos are particularly significant because sexuality extends beyond individual choice and is closely linked to reproduction, inheritance, lineage continuity, family stability, and community welfare. In many African societies, sexual conduct is regarded as a communal concern rather than a purely private matter because inappropriate sexual behaviour may affect family relationships, social harmony, and spiritual well-being (Nukunya, 2016). Consequently, acts such as incest, adultery, premarital sexual relations, and sexual activities in sacred places are traditionally prohibited and sanctioned.

The Akan and Ewe societies of Ghana possess elaborate systems of sexual taboos that have historically functioned as mechanisms of moral regulation and social control. Among the Akan, practices such as Mogyafra (incest), Ayerefa (adultery), and sexual activities in forbidden spaces are considered grave offences capable of bringing spiritual pollution and communal misfortune (Sarpong, 1974). Similarly, among the Ewe, sexual misconduct is believed to attract sanctions from ancestors, deities, and spiritual forces that safeguard communal morality (Nukunya, 2016). These prohibitions are deeply rooted in indigenous worldviews that emphasize the interconnectedness of individuals, families, communities, nature, and the spiritual realm. The continued relevance of sexual taboos has attracted scholarly attention because contemporary African societies are undergoing profound transformations resulting from modernization, globalization, urbanization, technological advancement, formal education, and religious change. These transformations have altered traditional structures of authority and challenged indigenous systems of moral regulation (Omenyo, 2006; Akrong, 2022). The expansion of Christianity and Islam, increasing exposure to global media, changing family structures, and evolving perceptions of sexuality have influenced attitudes toward traditional sexual norms. Nevertheless, emerging studies suggest that indigenous cultural values continue to shape social behaviour even within modern contexts (Ampofo & Boateng, 2017; Tenkorang, 2021).

Recent scholarship further indicates that traditional norms remain important sources of identity and social cohesion in many African communities despite growing modernization pressures (Amoah, 2023; Okyerefo & Fiaveh, 2024). This suggests that sexual taboos may

E-ISSN:3121-8539
ISSN:3121-7710
not have disappeared but may instead be adapting to contemporary realities. Understanding the ways in which these cultural institutions continue to influence behaviour is therefore essential for appreciating the dynamic relationship between tradition and modernity in contemporary Ghana.

The Gap in Research

Sexual taboos have historically served as important mechanisms of social regulation within Ghanaian societies. Through systems of prohibition and sanction, thee taboos have guided moral behaviour, protected lineage systems, preserved family integrity, and reinforced communal values. However, contemporary Ghanaian society is increasingly characterized by rapid social, cultural, economic, and religious transformations that have altered traditional mechanisms of social control. Urbanization, formal education, globalization, digital communication technologies, and changing religious orientations have contributed to shifting attitudes toward sexuality and morality (Tenkorang, 2021; Amoah, 2023). Younger generations are increasingly exposed to alternative value systems that emphasize individual autonomy and personal freedom, often challenging traditional communal norms. Consequently, questions have emerged concerning the continued relevance, effectiveness, and adaptability of sexual taboos in regulating behaviour within contemporary Ghanaian society.

Although existing studies have examined taboos within African cultural contexts, much of the literature focuses on historical descriptions, religious interpretations, linguistic dimensions, or specific cultural practices (Agyekum, 2002; Adinkrah, 2015). Comparatively little scholarly attention has been devoted to understanding how sexual taboos continue to function as mechanisms of social regulation among major ethnic groups in Ghana, particularly the Akan and Ewe. Furthermore, limited research has explored how these traditional institutions have adapted to contemporary socio-cultural realities while maintaining their moral and regulatory functions.

This gap in knowledge creates an incomplete understanding of the contemporary role of indigenous systems of social control in Ghana. Given the importance of sexuality in shaping family relationships, communal stability, and cultural continuity, there is a need for a comparative examination of the significance, philosophical foundations, and contemporary relevance of sexual taboos among the Akan and Ewe. This study therefore seeks to address this gap by analysing how sexual taboos continue to function as mechanisms of social regulation in contemporary Ghana.

Research Objectives and Significance

The study is guided by the following objectives:

1. To examine the socio-cultural functions of sexual taboos as mechanisms for maintaining social order and moral discipline among the Akan and Ewe.
2. To identify the major sexual taboos practised among the Akan and Ewe and examine the social and spiritual sanctions associated with their violation.
3. To explore the contemporary relevance and transformation of sexual taboos in the context of modernization, urbanization, globalization, and religious change in Ghana.

This study is significant for several reasons. First, it contributes to the growing body of literature on African indigenous knowledge systems by providing a comparative analysis of sexual taboos among two of Ghana's largest ethnic groups. The study deepens scholarly understanding of how traditional cultural institutions continue to influence social behaviour in contemporary societies.

Vol. 2, No. 1; June (2026)
E-ISSN:3121-8539
ISSN:3121-7710

Second, the study contributes to sociological and anthropological debates on social regulation, morality, and cultural continuity. By demonstrating how sexual taboos function as informal mechanisms of social control, the study highlights the enduring relevance of indigenous moral systems in regulating behaviour and promoting social cohesion. Also, the findings provide useful insights for policymakers, educators, religious leaders, traditional authorities, and development practitioners interested in promoting ethical behaviour, family stability, and community development. Understanding the moral values embedded within indigenous cultural systems may facilitate culturally sensitive approaches to social policy and moral education. Furthermore, the study contributes theoretically by extending the application of Durkheim's Theory of Sacralisation to contemporary African cultural contexts. It demonstrates how sacred values, communal beliefs, and social sanctions continue to interact in shaping behaviour despite ongoing social transformations. Finally, the study contributes to broader discussions concerning the relationship between tradition and modernity in Africa. It demonstrates that traditional institutions are not static relics of the past but dynamic social systems capable of adaptation and transformation while retaining their core social functions.

Concept of Taboos

The concept of taboo originates from the Polynesian term *tapu*, which refers to something forbidden, sacred, or set apart from ordinary human activities (Frazer, 1890). Anthropological scholarship views taboos as systems of social prohibition designed to regulate behaviour, maintain social order, and preserve communal values (Douglas, 1966). Taboos function by defining actions, relationships, or practices that are considered unacceptable within a particular cultural setting and by prescribing sanctions for their violation. According to Douglas (1966), taboos are mechanisms through which societies establish symbolic boundaries between purity and impurity, order and disorder. They represent collective efforts to maintain social stability by discouraging behaviours perceived as threatening communal well-being. Similarly, Freud (1913) argues that taboos serve both religious and social purposes by controlling impulses that may undermine social cohesion. In African societies, taboos extend beyond religious prohibitions and serve as indigenous systems of governance, morality, and social control (Mbiti, 1990). They regulate human relationships with the environment, political institutions, family structures, and spiritual entities. Consequently, taboos function as informal legal systems that complement formal institutions in maintaining social order.

Sexual Taboos

Sexual taboos refer to culturally sanctioned restrictions governing sexual behaviour, relationships, and practices within a society. They define acceptable and unacceptable forms of sexual conduct and establish moral standards regarding intimacy, reproduction, marriage, and family life (Nukunya, 2016). Sexual taboos are among the most universal forms of social regulation because sexuality is closely linked to kinship systems, inheritance, lineage continuity, and communal stability. Across many African societies, sexual behaviour is not regarded as a purely private matter but as a social activity with implications for the wider community (Gyekye, 1996). Consequently, practices such as incest, adultery, premarital sexual relations, and sexual intercourse in sacred spaces are often prohibited. These restrictions seek to protect family integrity, maintain social harmony, and prevent conflicts associated with inheritance, lineage, and communal relationships.

Among the Akan, incest (Mogyafra), adultery (Ayerefa), and sexual activities in sacred locations constitute serious moral offences capable of attracting both social and spiritual

Vol. 2, No. 1; June (2026)
E-ISSN:3121-8539
ISSN:3121-7710

sanctions (Sarpong, 1974). Likewise, among the Ewe, sexual misconduct is believed to offend ancestors and spiritual forces responsible for maintaining communal welfare (Nukunya, 2016).

Social Regulation and Social Control

Social regulation refers to the processes through which societies establish norms, values, and institutions that guide individual behaviour and maintain social order (Durkheim, 1893). Social control encompasses both formal and informal mechanisms used to encourage conformity and discourage deviant behaviour. Formal social control operates through laws, regulations, courts, and governmental institutions. Informal social control, however, functions through customs, traditions, beliefs, moral expectations, and social sanctions (Ross, 1901). Sexual taboos belong to the category of informal social control because compliance is largely secured through social expectations, communal disapproval, shame, and spiritual beliefs rather than legal coercion. Recent scholarship argues that indigenous systems of social control remain relevant in many African societies despite modernization and globalization (Amoah, 2023; Okyerefo & Fiaveh, 2024). Traditional norms continue to shape moral behaviour and community relations even when formal institutions dominate public life.

Sexual Taboos and Cultural Continuity

One important function of sexual taboos is the preservation of cultural continuity. Cultural continuity refers to the transmission of values, beliefs, norms, and practices from one generation to another (Gyekye, 1996). Through sexual taboos, societies reinforce moral values relating to marriage, family responsibility, lineage preservation, and communal identity. Studies indicate that many traditional societies employ sexual prohibitions as mechanisms for protecting cultural heritage and sustaining collective identities (Adinkrah, 2015; Tenkorang, 2021). Consequently, sexual taboos contribute not only to behavioural regulation but also to the preservation of indigenous worldviews and cultural traditions.

Theoretical Framework: Durkheim's Theory of Sacralisation

This study is anchored in Émile Durkheim's Theory of Sacralisation as articulated in *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* (1912). Durkheim argues that societies distinguish between the sacred and the profane. Sacred objects, institutions, and values are protected through systems of beliefs and prohibitions that prevent their violation. According to Durkheim (1912), the sacred encompasses entities regarded as morally significant and worthy of collective reverence, while the profane refers to ordinary aspects of everyday life. Through the process of sacralisation, communities assign sacred significance to particular values, institutions, and behaviours. Once something becomes sacred, taboos emerge to protect it from desecration. Durkheim further contends that taboos are social facts reflecting the collective conscience of society. They represent shared moral beliefs that regulate behaviour and reinforce social cohesion. Violations of sacred norms attract sanctions because they threaten the moral foundations upon which society depends.

Relevance of the Theory to Sexual Taboos

The theory is highly relevant to the study because sexuality occupies a sacred position within Akan and Ewe societies. Institutions such as marriage, family, lineage, and reproduction are collectively valued and protected through systems of sexual prohibitions. Practices such as incest, adultery, and sexual activities in sacred spaces are prohibited because they threaten institutions considered sacred by the community. Consequently, sanctions associated with taboo violations can be understood as collective mechanisms designed to restore social

Vol. 2, No. 1; June (2026)
E-ISSN:3121-8539
ISSN:3121-7710
equilibrium and preserve communal values. Durkheim's framework explains why sexual taboos continue to persist despite modernization. Since sacred values are deeply embedded within collective consciousness, they often remain influential even when traditional institutions undergo transformation. The principal strength of Durkheim's theory lies in its ability to explain the relationship between morality, religion, culture, and social order. It demonstrates how shared beliefs contribute to social cohesion and behavioural regulation.
However, critics argue that the theory places excessive emphasis on consensus while underestimating social conflict, power relations, and individual agency (Ritzer, 2022). Despite this limitation, the theory remains appropriate because the study focuses primarily on the role of sexual taboos in promoting social integration and moral regulation.

Sexual Taboos and Moral Regulation
Several studies demonstrate that sexual taboos serve as important mechanisms of moral regulation in African societies. Agyekum (2002) found that among the Akan, taboos function as cultural instruments that encourage conformity to accepted moral standards and reinforce communal responsibility. Similarly, Nukunya (2016) observed that Ewe taboos regulate interpersonal relationships and contribute significantly to maintaining social harmony. The study concluded that adherence to sexual prohibitions remains closely linked to indigenous understandings of morality and communal welfare.

Sexual Taboos and Spiritual Sanctions
Research consistently shows that beliefs in spiritual sanctions constitute one of the strongest mechanisms through which sexual taboos are enforced. Mbiti (1990) argues that many African societies associate taboo violations with ancestral displeasure, illness, infertility, misfortune, or communal crises. Adinkrah (2015) found that traditional Ghanaian communities frequently employ spiritual explanations when interpreting sexual misconduct and social deviance. Fear of supernatural consequences often exerts a stronger deterrent effect than formal legal sanctions.

Modernization and Transformation of Sexual Taboos
Contemporary scholarship highlights the impact of modernization on indigenous systems of social regulation. Ampofo and Boateng (2017) observed that urbanization, education, and globalization have altered attitudes toward sexuality among younger generations in Ghana. Likewise, Tenkorang (2021) argues that changing social values and exposure to global cultural influences have transformed traditional understandings of sexual morality. Nevertheless, many traditional sexual norms continue to influence behaviour indirectly through family institutions, marriage customs, and community expectations. Amoah (2023) further reports that traditional moral values remain significant sources of identity and social cohesion despite increasing modernization. This suggests that sexual taboos have adapted to the situation rather than disappear.

Comparative Studies on Akan and Ewe Societies
Although studies by Sarpong (1974), Agyekum (2002), Nukunya (2016), and Adinkrah (2015) provide valuable insights into taboo systems within Ghanaian societies, comparative analyses of sexual taboos among the Akan and Ewe remain limited. Existing research has generally focused on individual communities, linguistic dimensions of taboos, or broader discussions of African morality. Few studies have systematically examined how sexual taboos function simultaneously among the Akan and Ewe as mechanisms of social regulation in contemporary Ghana. The reviewed literature demonstrates that sexual taboos contribute

E-ISSN:3121-8539
ISSN:3121-7710
significantly to moral regulation, cultural continuity, and social cohesion within African societies. However, three important gaps remain. First, existing studies predominantly focus on individual ethnic groups rather than comparative analyses of major Ghanaian societies. Also, insufficient attention has been devoted to understanding how sexual taboos continue to function under conditions of modernization, urbanization, globalization, and religious transformation. Again, limited research has applied Durkheim's Theory of Sacralisation to explain the persistence and adaptation of sexual taboos in contemporary Ghana. Lastly, this study addresses these gaps by comparatively examining the socio-cultural functions, sanctions, philosophical foundations, and contemporary relevance of sexual taboos among the Akan and Ewe.

Conceptual Model of the Study

The study conceptualizes sexual taboos as the independent variable influencing social regulation and moral behaviour within Akan and Ewe societies.

Sexual Taboos

- Incest prohibitions
- Adultery prohibitions
- Premarital sexual restrictions
- Sacred-space sexual prohibitions

Mediating Factors

- Spiritual beliefs
- Communal values
- Ancestral sanctions
- Social expectations

Social Regulation Outcomes

- Moral discipline
- Family stability
- Lineage preservation
- Social cohesion
- Cultural continuity

Research Paradigm

This study is situated within the interpretivist research paradigm. Interpretivism emphasizes understanding social phenomena through the meanings, beliefs, values, and experiences that individuals and societies attach to them (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Unlike positivist approaches that seek objective and measurable realities, interpretivism acknowledges that social realities are socially constructed and culturally embedded. The interpretivist paradigm was considered appropriate because sexual taboos are not merely behavioural restrictions but socio-cultural constructs rooted in indigenous belief systems, communal values, moral philosophies, and spiritual worldviews. Understanding their significance therefore requires an exploration of the meanings attached to them within Akan and Ewe societies. This paradigm enabled the study to examine sexual taboos as cultural institutions that regulate behaviour, preserve social order, and sustain communal identity.

Research Design

The study adopted a qualitative documentary research design. Documentary research involves the systematic collection, review, evaluation, and interpretation of existing documents to generate empirical knowledge and develop theoretical understanding of a social phenomenon (Bowen, 2009). A documentary approach was deemed suitable because the

E-ISSN:3121-8539
ISSN:3121-7710
study sought to investigate the historical development, socio-cultural functions, philosophical foundations, sanctions, and contemporary relevance of sexual taboos among the Akan and Ewe through existing scholarly evidence. Since taboos are deeply embedded within cultural traditions and historical experiences, documentary research provides an effective means of accessing diverse perspectives documented across anthropology, sociology, philosophy, religious studies, and African studies. The qualitative nature of the study further facilitated an in-depth exploration of cultural meanings and social realities associated with sexual taboos. Rather than quantifying behaviours, the study focused on interpreting patterns, themes, and cultural narratives emerging from the literature.

Study Context

The study focuses on the Akan and Ewe ethnic groups of Ghana. The Akan constitute the largest ethnic group in Ghana and are predominantly located in the Ashanti, Eastern, Bono, Ahafo, Western, Western North, and Central Regions. Akan societies are characterized by strong kinship systems, matrilineal inheritance structures, and elaborate indigenous religious traditions that influence moral conduct and social organization (Sarpong, 1974). The Ewe are primarily located in the Volta Region, parts of the Oti Region, and neighbouring areas of Togo and Benin. Ewe social organization similarly incorporates indigenous belief systems, ancestral traditions, and communal values that regulate behaviour and maintain social cohesion (Nukunya, 2016). These groups were selected because they possess rich traditions relating to sexual taboos and represent two of Ghana's most influential cultural communities. A comparative analysis of these societies provides valuable insights into the operation of indigenous systems of social regulation within contemporary Ghana.

Sources of Data

The study relied exclusively on secondary data. Secondary sources were selected because they provide extensive documentation of traditional beliefs, cultural practices, and social institutions that have evolved over long historical periods.

The sources included:

- Peer-reviewed journal articles
- Academic books
- Ethnographic studies
- Doctoral dissertations
- Master's theses
- Conference proceedings
- Book chapters
- Policy reports
- Historical documents
- Publications on African traditional religion and indigenous knowledge systems

Priority was given to peer-reviewed publications and authoritative scholarly works due to their academic credibility and methodological rigor.

The inclusion criteria required that documents:

1. Focus on sexual taboos, morality, social regulation, indigenous belief systems, or related concepts;
2. Address Akan, Ewe, Ghanaian, or African socio-cultural contexts;
3. Be published in reputable academic outlets;
4. Provide substantial discussion relevant to the objectives of the study.

Documents lacking scholarly credibility or direct relevance to the research objectives were excluded.

Vol. 2, No. 1; June (2026)
E-ISSN:3121-8539
ISSN:3121-7710

Data Collection Procedure

Data collection was conducted through a systematic literature search process. Relevant literature was identified using multiple academic databases to ensure breadth and depth of coverage. The databases consulted included:

- Google Scholar
- JSTOR
- Scopus
- Taylor & Francis Online
- SpringerLink
- Sage Journals
- Wiley Online Library
- ProQuest Dissertations and Theses
- Institutional repositories

Searches were conducted using combinations of the following keywords:

- Sexual taboos
- Akan sexuality
- Ewe culture
- Indigenous morality
- Social control
- Social regulation
- African traditional religion
- Indigenous knowledge systems
- Cultural values
- Sexual norms in Ghana
- Traditional sanctions
- Sacred prohibitions

Boolean operators such as AND, OR, and NOT were employed to refine search results and improve precision.

The literature search followed three stages:

Potentially relevant documents were identified through database searches and reference tracking from key publications.

Documents were screened based on titles, abstracts, and keywords to determine relevance to the research objectives.

Full texts of selected documents were reviewed to determine their suitability for inclusion in the study. This systematic procedure enhanced transparency and minimized selection bias.

Sexual Taboos as Mechanisms of Social Regulation among the Akan and Ewe

The thematic analysis revealed that sexual taboos continue to function as important mechanisms of social regulation among the Akan and Ewe despite increasing modernization and social transformation. Across the reviewed literature, sexual taboos were consistently portrayed as indigenous systems of behavioural control that establish moral boundaries and define acceptable sexual conduct within society. Among the Akan, sexual taboos regulate relationships involving marriage, kinship, reproduction, and lineage continuity. Incest (Mogyafra), adultery (Ayerefa), and sexual intercourse in sacred places are considered serious violations because they threaten family stability and communal harmony (Sarpong, 1974; Agyekum, 2002). Similarly, among the Ewe, sexual behaviour is governed by cultural norms that emphasize communal responsibility and respect for ancestral traditions (Nukunya, 2016).

Vol. 2, No. 1; June (2026)
E-ISSN:3121-8539
ISSN:3121-7710

The findings indicate that sexual taboos serve four principal regulatory functions. First, they preserve lineage purity by preventing prohibited sexual relationships that may complicate inheritance and kinship structures. Second, they reinforce moral discipline by defining socially acceptable sexual behaviour. Third, they maintain family integrity by discouraging behaviours that undermine marital stability. Fourth, they contribute to social cohesion by ensuring conformity to communal expectations. These findings support Gyekye's (1996) argument that African morality is fundamentally communitarian and prioritizes collective welfare over individual interests. The findings further demonstrate that sexual taboos function as informal institutions that complement formal legal systems in regulating behaviour.

From Durkheim's perspective, sexual taboos perform an integrative social function by protecting institutions regarded as sacred. Marriage, family, kinship, and reproduction are collectively valued institutions whose preservation contributes to social stability. The continued observance of sexual taboos therefore reflects the persistence of collective moral consciousness within Akan and Ewe societies. The findings corroborate studies by Adinkrah (2015) and Awedoba (2009), which conclude that indigenous systems of social control remain significant in regulating behaviour despite the growing influence of modern institutions. The persistence of these taboos demonstrates that traditional mechanisms of regulation continue to coexist with contemporary legal and religious frameworks.

Major Sexual Taboos and Associated Social and Spiritual Sanctions

The analysis identified several sexual taboos that remain prominent within Akan and Ewe societies. Although specific expressions vary across communities, four categories emerged consistently throughout the literature.

Incest

Incest was identified as the most serious sexual taboo among both the Akan and Ewe. Sexual relationships between close biological relatives are viewed as violations of lineage integrity and communal morality. Among the Akan, incest is referred to as Mogyafra, literally implying the corruption of shared blood relations (Sarpong, 1974). The literature indicates that incest is believed to attract severe consequences including infertility, illness, death, ancestral displeasure, and communal misfortune. Beyond spiritual consequences, offenders may face social exclusion, public condemnation, ritual purification requirements, and loss of social status.

Adultery

Adultery emerged as another significant sexual taboo. Marriage within Akan and Ewe societies extends beyond individual relationships to encompass obligations between families and kinship groups. Consequently, extramarital sexual relations are perceived as violations of trust, family honour, and communal responsibility. The findings reveal that traditional sanctions often involve compensation, reconciliation rituals, and social condemnation. Among the Akan, customary mechanisms such as Ayefrɛ serve to restore damaged social relationships and communal equilibrium.

Premarital Sexual Relations

Premarital sexual relations, particularly where they result in unintended pregnancies, continue to attract social disapproval in many traditional communities. Such behaviour is frequently associated with family dishonour and moral irresponsibility.

Although contemporary attitudes toward premarital sexuality have become more flexible in urban areas, traditional expectations concerning sexual restraint remain influential in many communities.

Sexual Activities in Sacred Spaces

Vol. 2, No. 1; June (2026)
E-ISSN:3121-8539
ISSN:3121-7710

Both Akan and Ewe societies prohibit sexual intercourse in sacred forests, shrines, rivers, farmlands, and ritual sites. Such acts are believed to pollute sacred spaces and offend spiritual entities responsible for protecting communal welfare. The reviewed literature indicates that these prohibitions are closely linked to indigenous cosmologies that emphasize harmony between humans, nature, and the spiritual world. The findings collectively suggest that sanctions associated with sexual taboos serve dual functions. On one hand, they punish violations of accepted norms. On the other hand, they facilitate reconciliation and restore social equilibrium. This supports Awedoba's (2009) observation that traditional justice systems prioritize communal restoration rather than retributive punishment. From the perspective of Durkheim's Theory of Sacralisation, the severity of sanctions reflects the sacred nature of the institutions being protected. The stronger the perceived sacredness of family, lineage, and morality, the greater the sanctions imposed upon those who violate associated taboos.

Contemporary Relevance and Transformation of Sexual Taboos in Ghana

The findings indicate that although sexual taboos remain influential, their interpretation and enforcement have undergone significant transformation in contemporary Ghanaian society.

Urbanization, formal education, globalization, migration, technological advancement, and religious pluralism have altered traditional systems of authority and social regulation. Younger generations are increasingly exposed to alternative moral frameworks that emphasize individual rights and personal autonomy. Consequently, some traditional sexual taboos have weakened, particularly within urban settings. However, the analysis demonstrates that sexual taboos have not disappeared. Rather, they have adapted to changing social realities. Christianity and Islam have incorporated several traditional moral principles into contemporary religious teachings. Concepts such as sexual purity, marital fidelity, and moral responsibility continue to be emphasized within modern religious institutions. The literature further suggests that traditional values remain evident in public reactions to issues such as incest, adultery, sexual abuse, and family-related scandals. Community responses often invoke notions of shame, dishonour, and moral responsibility that are deeply rooted in indigenous cultural values.

This finding aligns with Amoah's (2023) argument that indigenous cultural values remain important sources of identity and social cohesion despite modernization. Similarly, Okyerefo and Fiaveh (2024) observe that traditional institutions continue to influence contemporary social behaviour even when their forms of expression change. Durkheim's theory provides a useful explanation for this persistence. Sacred values embedded within collective consciousness tend to survive social change because they remain connected to communal identity and cultural continuity. While enforcement mechanisms may evolve, the underlying values continue to shape social expectations and behavioural norms.

The findings therefore suggest that sexual taboos are best understood not as obsolete cultural relics but as dynamic social institutions capable of adapting to changing historical conditions while retaining their regulatory functions.

Discussion of Major Findings

Four major findings emerge from the study.

First, sexual taboos continue to function as effective mechanisms of social regulation among the Akan and Ewe. They establish moral boundaries, regulate interpersonal relationships, and contribute to social order. This finding supports communitarian perspectives that view morality as essential for collective welfare. Second, incest, adultery, premarital sexual

Vol. 2, No. 1; June (2026)
E-ISSN:3121-8539
ISSN:3121-7710
misconduct, and sexual activities in sacred spaces remain the most significant sexual taboos within both societies. These prohibitions are fundamentally concerned with protecting family integrity, lineage continuity, and communal stability. Third, spiritual sanctions remain powerful mechanisms of social control. Fear of ancestral punishment, ritual impurity, infertility, illness, and communal misfortune continues to encourage compliance with accepted norms. This finding confirms the enduring significance of indigenous belief systems in shaping behaviour. Fourth, sexual taboos have demonstrated remarkable resilience despite modernization. Rather than disappearing, they have undergone adaptation and reinterpretation within contemporary religious, social, and cultural contexts. These findings challenge modernization theories that predict the inevitable decline of traditional institutions.

Collectively, the findings validate Durkheim's proposition that societies preserve social order through systems of sacred values and moral prohibitions. Sexual taboos continue to protect institutions regarded as sacred by the Akan and Ewe, including marriage, family, kinship, ancestry, and communal morality. Their persistence illustrates the enduring capacity of indigenous cultural institutions to regulate behaviour and promote social cohesion in contemporary Ghanaian society. The study reinforces the relevance of Émile Durkheim's Theory of Sacralisation in explaining the persistence of sexual taboos within contemporary Ghanaian societies. The findings demonstrate that sexual taboos continue to function as mechanisms for protecting institutions considered sacred, including marriage, family, lineage, ancestry, and communal morality. Despite increasing modernization, these sacred values remain embedded within the collective consciousness of Akan and Ewe societies. The study therefore extends the application of Durkheim's theory beyond its traditional Western sociological context and demonstrates its continued relevance for understanding indigenous African moral systems. The findings also contribute to broader sociological debates concerning social control and moral regulation. They suggest that informal institutions remain significant sources of behavioural regulation even in societies where formal legal and religious institutions have expanded considerably. This challenges assumptions that modernization inevitably results in the decline of traditional systems of governance and morality.

The study highlights the continuing importance of indigenous cultural institutions in preserving social cohesion and communal identity. Sexual taboos contribute to the maintenance of family integrity, lineage continuity, and communal responsibility by regulating behaviour according to culturally accepted moral standards. The findings further suggest that traditional values remain embedded within contemporary social interactions, public discourse, and community expectations. This underscores the resilience of indigenous knowledge systems and their capacity to adapt to changing social environments without losing their core regulatory functions. The study demonstrates the importance of integrating indigenous knowledge systems into educational programmes that promote moral development, citizenship education, and cultural literacy. The positive aspects of traditional sexual taboos, particularly those that emphasize responsibility, respect, family stability, and communal accountability, can contribute to contemporary discussions on ethical behaviour and social responsibility. Educational institutions may therefore benefit from incorporating culturally relevant moral values into curricula while maintaining respect for diversity, human rights, and contemporary social realities. The findings suggest that policymakers should recognize the potential contribution of indigenous institutions to community development and social governance. Traditional authorities, religious leaders, educators, and community organizations can collaborate to promote culturally grounded approaches to addressing social

Vol. 2, No. 1; June (2026)
E-ISSN:3121-8539
ISSN:3121-7710
problems such as family instability, sexual misconduct, and declining communal responsibility. The study further indicates that culturally informed policy interventions are more likely to achieve social legitimacy and community acceptance than approaches that ignore indigenous values and social structures.

Contribution to Knowledge

This study contributes to existing scholarship in several important ways. First, it provides one of the few comparative analyses of sexual taboos among the Akan and Ewe in contemporary Ghana. While previous studies have examined taboo systems within individual cultural settings, limited scholarly attention has been devoted to a systematic comparison of these two major ethnic groups. The study therefore broadens understanding of indigenous mechanisms of social regulation within Ghanaian society. Second, the study contributes empirical knowledge by demonstrating that sexual taboos remain relevant mechanisms of social control despite increasing modernization, urbanization, globalization, and religious transformation. Contrary to perspectives that view traditional institutions as declining or obsolete, the findings reveal that sexual taboos continue to shape social behaviour through evolving forms of interpretation and enforcement. Third, the study advances theoretical knowledge by extending Durkheim's Theory of Sacralisation to the analysis of African indigenous moral systems. The research illustrates how sacred values, communal beliefs, and informal sanctions interact to regulate behaviour and preserve social cohesion within contemporary cultural contexts. Fourth, the study enriches interdisciplinary scholarship in Sociology, Anthropology, African Studies, Religious Studies, Cultural Studies, and Indigenous Knowledge Systems by highlighting the relationship between sexuality, morality, spirituality, and social order. Finally, the study contributes to ongoing debates concerning the relationship between tradition and modernity in Africa. It demonstrates that traditional institutions are dynamic rather than static and possess the capacity to adapt to contemporary realities while retaining their fundamental social functions.

Conclusion

This study examined sexual taboos as mechanisms of social regulation among the Akan and Ewe in contemporary Ghana. Guided by Durkheim's Theory of Sacralisation and based on qualitative documentary analysis, the study explored the socio-cultural functions, philosophical foundations, sanctions, and contemporary relevance of sexual taboos within the two societies. The findings reveal that sexual taboos continue to play significant roles in regulating behaviour, maintaining social order, preserving family integrity, protecting lineage systems, and reinforcing communal values. Incest, adultery, premarital sexual misconduct, and sexual activities in sacred spaces emerged as the most significant sexual prohibitions within both societies. Compliance with these norms is reinforced through a combination of social sanctions, communal expectations, spiritual beliefs, and fears of ancestral retribution.

The study further demonstrates that modernization, urbanization, globalization, formal education, and religious transformation have altered the interpretation and enforcement of many traditional taboos. However, these forces have not eliminated the underlying moral values embedded within indigenous systems of regulation. Rather, sexual taboos have adapted to contemporary realities while continuing to influence social behaviour and communal expectations. The persistence of sexual taboos confirms that indigenous cultural institutions remain important components of social governance and moral regulation in Ghanaian society. The study therefore concludes that sexual taboos should not be viewed merely as remnants of the past but as dynamic cultural institutions that continue to contribute

Vol. 2, No. 1; June (2026)
E-ISSN:3121-8539
ISSN:3121-7710
to social cohesion, cultural continuity, and moral discipline in contemporary African societies.

Vol. 2, No. 1; June (2026)
E-ISSN:3121-8539
ISSN:3121-7710

References

Adinkrah, M. (2015). *Witchcraft, witches, and violence in Ghana*. Berghahn Books.

Agyekum, K. (2002). The communicative role of silence in Akan. *Pragmatics, 12*(1), 31–51.

Akrong, A. (2022). Christianity and indigenous moral systems in Ghana: Negotiating tradition and modernity. *Studies in World Christianity, 28*(3), 311–328.

Amoah, S. K. (2023). Indigenous cultural values and social change in Ghana. *African Studies Review, 66*(2), 245–263.

Ampofo, A. A. (2001). When men speak women listen: Gender socialisation and young adolescents' attitudes to sexual and reproductive issues. *African Journal of Reproductive Health, 5*(3), 196–212.

Ampofo, A. A., & Boateng, J. (2017). Gender, sexuality and cultural transformation in Ghana. *African Sociological Review, 21*(1), 44–61.

Awedoba, A. K. (2009). *An introduction to cultural anthropology: Essential concepts and theories*. Sub-Saharan Publishers.

Bowen, G. A. (2009). Document analysis as a qualitative research method. *Qualitative Research Journal, 9*(2), 27–40.

Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2022). *Thematic analysis: A practical guide*. Sage Publications.

Creswell, J. W., & Poth, C. N. (2018). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five approaches* (4th ed.). Sage Publications.

Douglas, M. (1966). *Purity and danger: An analysis of concepts of pollution and taboo*. Routledge.

Durkheim, É. (1893). *The division of labour in society*. Free Press.

Durkheim, É. (1912/1995). *The elementary forms of religious life* (K. E. Fields, Trans.). Free Press.

Frazer, J. G. (1890). *The golden bough: A study in comparative religion*. Macmillan.

Freud, S. (1913). *Totem and taboo*. Routledge.

Gyekye, K. (1996). *African cultural values: An introduction*. Sankofa Publishing Company.

Lincoln, Y. S., & Guba, E. G. (1985). *Naturalistic inquiry*. Sage Publications.

Mbiti, J. S. (1990). *African religions and philosophy* (2nd ed.). Heinemann.

Nukunya, G. K. (2016). *Tradition and change in Ghana: An introduction to sociology* (3rd ed.). Ghana Universities Press.

Okyerefo, M. P. K., & Fiaveh, D. Y. (2024). Tradition, religion and social transformation in Ghanaian societies. *Journal of African Cultural Studies, 36*(1), 55–71.

Omenyo, C. N. (2006). Pentecost outside Pentecostalism: A study of the development of charismatic renewal in the mainline churches in Ghana. *Zoetermeer: Boekencentrum Publishing*.

Radcliffe-Brown, A. R. (1939). Taboo. *Cambridge University Press*.

Ritzer, G. (2022). *Contemporary sociological theory and its classical roots* (7th ed.). McGraw-Hill Education.

Ross, E. A. (1901). *Social control: A survey of the foundations of order*. Macmillan.

Sarpong, P. (1974). *Ghana in retrospect: Some aspects of Ghanaian culture*. Ghana Publishing Corporation.

Tenkorang, E. Y. (2021). Sexual norms and changing social values in sub-Saharan Africa. *Culture, Health & Sexuality, 23*(9), 1180–1195.

Wiredu, K. (1996). *Cultural universals and particulars: An African perspective*. Indiana University Press.