

Chapter 6

Chapter 6

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6.0 Introduction

The English word 'taboo' was derived from the word 'tabu', an Austronesian term originated from Polynesia. It was Captain Cook who discovered it when he came to Tonga. When he translated it into English it became 'taboo'. In the languages of Polynesia, the word 'taboo' means 'to forbid', 'forbidden', and it can apply to any kind of prohibition.

As is put by Wardhaugh (2000) certain things are not said, not because they cannot be said, but because people do not talk about them or if they are talked about, they are discussed in a very roundabout way. In the Nguni societies of South Africa, who practice 'hlonipha', under which it is forbidden for a woman to use her father-in-law's name or even to utter words containing the syllable of his name. Likewise, in Khurkhul, it is tabooed to use husband's personal name to address him. Thus, they go here for *teknonymy* (see Chapter3).

6.1 Taboo is Universal

Taboo is universal. Each community sets their own taboo strategies. The only difference here is the domains. When one community creates taboo, they also make certain rules to punish the persons who break it. In some part of Afghan, if a woman elopes with a man, she is put into prison; orthodox Hindus practice honor killing when the daughter or the son marries someone from a low caste.

The Khurkhuls also have their own rules to punish those people who break their taboos. For instance, if a male and female who belong to the same *sagei* elope, they are subjected to either *inthokpa* or *tanthokpa*.

- (i) *Inthokpa* (boycott): He/she is permitted to stay in the village, but not allowed to have any kind of social relation with anyone; or
- (ii) *Tanthokpa* (exile): He/she (often the whole family) is forbidden to stay in the village.

Though it is an individual who breaks taboo, often, it is the whole family who meets the punishment. The reason is each individual represents the face of the whole family.

The belief is that there is a super natural or demonic power within the tabooed objects/ideas, thus, for example, the Khurkhuls believe that the *pungchao* (a drum) has super natural/demonic power and it is tabooed to go too near to it. If this is done even by mistake it would bring him or her only ill fate. Thus, the fear of meeting ill fate holds one back from breaking taboo.

Sociolinguists study taboo because such a study can show how different societies view the world and in different ways. Thus, what is taboo in one society may be openly discussed and talked about in some other culture (Qandar, 2011).

In the current chapter, we focus on the Khurkhul taboos and how they are encoded in Khurkhul. During our field work for this the informants were, however, rather reluctant to provide proper information, which necessitates us to take round about ways to elicit correct information from them.

6.2 Taboos in Khurkhul

The term *namungba* is the Khurkhul equivalent of English ‘taboo’. However, the compound *heide* (a compound of *hei* ‘PROHIBITIVE’ and *de* ‘NEGATIVE’) is added to the verb as in the following examples:

| | | |
|--|--------------|------------------|
| <i>angom-di</i> | <i>majen</i> | <i>ca-hai-de</i> |
| angom-TOP | pumpkin | eat-PROH-NEG |
| ‘It is tabooed for <i>Angom</i> to eat pumpkin.’ | | |

Different clans have different tabooed food in the Khurkhul society. For the *Angom* clan the pumpkin is a tabooed food, for the pumpkin is offered to the deity in *suksaba* (a ritual related to death) Thus, the pumpkin is considered by the *Angom* clan to be a food meant only for the ancestors.

It is tabooed to utter slang words in the Khurkhul society as is said in the following example with the use of *hei-hei-de*:

| | | |
|--------------------------------|-----------|-------------------|
| <i>akampet</i> | <i>wa</i> | <i>hei-hai-de</i> |
| Slang | word | say-PROH-NEG |
| ‘It is tabooed to say slangs.’ | | |

Thus, Jay (Jay, 2009, 155) writes: “Taboo words can be used to achieve a variety of personal and interpersonal outcomes that may be positive, negative, or inconsequential in terms of their impact on others, although some might argue all uses of taboo words are harmful to some degree.”

Thus, one of the informants said about his personal experience with slang and swear words: “By uttering slang words I can release my anger and thereby avoid a physical fight. In the case of swear words, it gives me a kind of self satisfaction that I have proved myself innocent.”

In a similar manner, though taboos impose prohibition and restriction, they are also capable of intensifying emotion in communication within certain groups. For instance,

the topic of sex is considered taboo in the Khurkhul society. However, this topic is discussed within the same sex group (especially of the same age) in a very liberal manner. It strengthens the emotional bonding as they are sharing a topic/experience which is too private, supposedly to be shared only with their partners. Khurkhul has two special terms for this: *leipungphamba*, and *mounaowathi*.

- (i) *Leipungphamba* (sitting in the hillock): It is a domain where men share their personal experiences, and sex is the main topic here. Thus they tease the new comers for *leipungphamba* with expressions like this:

| | | | |
|------------------------|---------------|-------------|----------------------|
| <i>lɔ̃ibuŋ-pʰəm-bə</i> | <i>həw-re</i> | <i>nupi</i> | <i>tʰige hei-re!</i> |
| hillock-sit-NMLZ | start-PERF | women | search say-PERF |

‘He wants to search women as he has started sitting on the hillock!’

- (ii) *Mounaowathi* (waste talk of newlywed women): Like men, women are forbidden to speak about sex. Despite that, married women often indulge in this. Though both old married women and newly married women have equal participation, its meaning is oriented to the newly wed women. This shows how the Khurkhuls focus on those who are new into experiencing sexual life. The sentence below is a common reaction from the unmarried women against those women who talk of it:

| | | |
|------------|---------------------------------|------------------|
| <i>noi</i> | <i>məw-nəw-wa-tʰi</i> | <i>ta-niŋ-de</i> |
| you (PL) | affinal women-small-word-faeces | hear-wish –NEG |

‘I do not want to hear your (i.e. affinal women’s) small talks about faeces (vulgar)’.

These two examples show that unmarried women are more prohibited from the topic of sex than men. For instance, men are licenced to involve in such talk before marriage; however, women are prohibited until her marriage.

Though taboo creates such a relation, the basic concept of taboo is ‘to forbid’ in the Khurkhul society. Thus, if one ends up speaking out taboo words, she bites the index finger and say “*hang hang hang*” (three times). In a similar way, in Nguni, if one

violates the taboo of 'hlonipha', she immediately sits down on the ground. The followings are some of the taboo subjects in the Khurkhul society.

6.2.1 Taboo related to Death and Disease

Everyone is aware of the fact that humans have to die one day or the other; however, people do not stop from finding ways to escape from this reality. Using euphemism is one such way to escape from the reality of pain and death.

Humans use language to escape from this fear since we believe that language has a magical power. Thus according to Gao (2013), language is considered to contain special powers that can cure sickness, keep away evils, bring good to oneself and harm to enemy. For example, in Khurkhul, *siba* (death) is replaced by *leikhidre* (no more). Thus, *leikhidre* leads them to see death as absence. Thus, when a baby is born *maiba* (local male priest) or *maibi* (local female priest) determines whose spirit it is coming back through the child. They called it *hallakpa* (coming back). This is to say that the Khurkhuls believe in reincarnation. The newborn are reincarnations of their ancestors. This concept enables them to deal with or overcome fear, as death does not mean the end of life, it is rather only absence for a while; one needs to get ready for the next life.

Euphemism is used in life threatening diseases, too. For instance, *samu uring* (a dangerous boil formed inside the nose) is replaced by *chaorehe* ('that big thing'), and *matu chombi* (a kind of disease in which finger became hairy and rotten) is replaced with *amado* ('that one'). For example, it is tabooed to say *samu uring*, especially in front of the patient since it is a life threatening disease.

Euphemism as a means to escape from fearful and life threatening diseases is practiced in the present day, too. For instance, diseases like AIDS and cancer are most often referred to by means of euphemism. Both these diseases are viewed with fear; however, the only difference is that the AIDS patient is viewed with a negative attitude, whereas the cancer patient is treated with sympathy as is evident in the following:

A: *tombigi* *laina-do* *soidabi-laina-du-ne* *nuḡai-*
Tombi's disease- TOP particular-disease-TOP-CONF
 happy-

 te

 NEG

‘Not happy (to know) Tombi’s disease is that particular disease’.

(Literal)

‘It is unfortunate that Tomba is suffering from cancer.’

Cancer is replaced by the euphemistic expression *soidabi laina*. The exact translation of it is ‘that obvious disease’.

6.2.2 Sex taboo

In many communities, the concept of sex is taboo, and is thus euphemized. In some Algerian communities, alternative expressions like the following are used:

I slept with her.
I spend a night with her.
I enjoyed my time with her.

Thus, the preferred expression in English against ‘I had sex with her’ is ‘*I made love with her*’.

In a similar way, the Khurkhuls consider sex as taboo. Thus, it is tabooed to talk of sex, mention of sex, and seeing the act of sex. So, any kind of physical contact between husband and wife is permitted only at night. During day, in front of others, they act rather like strangers to each other. Like the Tahitian woman, who considers it taboo to eat together with the husband, the Khurkhul women are not supposed to share or touch the *pukham* (plate), *tengkot* (curry ball), and *chaisen/khuchai* (kind of water glass) of her husband’s while he is eating. The distance which the couple maintains in front of others/in public is seen in the proverb below:

| | | | | | |
|------------------|------------|-------------|------------------|-------------|-------------|
| <i>asiḡbā-nə</i> | <i>mon</i> | <i>pʰui</i> | <i>apəḡbā-nə</i> | <i>nupi</i> | <i>pʰui</i> |
| clever-by | | pillow beat | foolish-by | woman | beat |

‘The clever man beats the pillow while the foolish man beats his wife’.
(Literal)

You beat the pillow inside your bed room to give the impression that you are beating your wife, but in actuality you’re making love with her!

It is also tabooed to watch see an act of sex. If one happens to see it, which is called *anam aha chuba*, a prayer called *kothok chamthokpa* (to purify) is done with the help of a local priest in order to purify the person.

The Khurkhuls convey the meaning of ‘the act of sex’ by using words like *haktinnaba* (meeting of the body), *leiminnaba* (staying together), *ahing lekpa* (staying overnight), *masa sokapa* (touching the body), and so on as can be seen from the following example:

moi haktinnā-re

they meet body-PERF

‘Their bodies have had met’. (Literal)

‘They had sex.’

In the following example, the euphemistic expression ‘holding the night’ is used to mean ‘having sex’:

moi ahiḡ lek-le

they night stay-PERF

‘They had held night’. (Literal)

‘They had sex last night.’

In the example below, the euphemistic expression is ‘touching the body’:

māsa *sok-le*
3pp body touch-PERF
‘Her body is touched’. (Literal)
‘He had sex with her.’

A woman is no longer considered *leisabi* (an unmarried virgin woman) once she is touched by a man. If a man holds the wrist of a woman’s it is considered an intendent elopement.

6.2.3 Forest copulation taboo

Forest copulation is considered taboo in many communities because the forest is considered a sacred place. The Bengs, who are an African group living in the Ivory Coast, prohibit couples from having sex in the forest or the field. According to them, they pollute and bring bad luck to others. Likewise, the Khurkhuls also forbid forest copulation. Most forests or grounds around them, e.g. *Kounu ching* (Kounu hill), *Kounu sumang* (Kounou’s courtyard), *Koubru ching* (Koubru hill), *Ichum Lairembi umang* (Ichum Lairembi’s forest), are considered sacred places. They called such places *laipham* (God’s place). One of the informants mentioned a happening which she heard from her grandmother; her grandmother heard it from her grandmother. The story was narrated to her when she had attained her puberty just to make her aware of how dangerous it is to have sex in *laipham* (God’s place). The story goes like this: Once, a couple had sex in *Koubru ching* (the Koubru hill), and they got locked. The penis of the man was stuck inside the vagina of the woman, eventually causing them death. According to her grandmother, it was an accurate punishment to the people breaking the forest copulation taboo. This story is still told to young ones who have just attained puberty.

Apart from sex, passing out urine, releasing faecal in the forest are also considered taboo by the Khurkhuls. If one has to pass out urine and faeces, such utterances are to be made before the act is performed:

ai *imagi* *tampak -tə* *p^haibə-ne*
 I mother's lap-LOC poo-CONF

'I am passing out in mother's lap.'

ai *imagi* *tampak-tə* *hanbə-ne*
 I mother's lap-LOC pee-

CONF 'I am peeing on mother's lap.'

The use of the word 'mother' grants them relaxation from the prohibition. For a mother it is very normal to get urine and faecal of their children in her lap. Thus, Mother Nature is viewed as his/her own mother in the context.

6.2.4 Body anatomy taboo

The body anatomy of woman is usually more tabooed than that of man. In the nineteenth century, in many cultures, especially in American cultures, "those words that have to do anything with anatomy and sex, and words even vaguely suggesting anatomical or sexual matters, have remarkable connotations. The ladies could not say 'breast' or 'leg', not even of chicken, so they were substituted by 'white meat' and 'dark meat'." (Deng (1989).

The change in the body of a woman is considered taboo in the Khurkhul society. Thus, the formation of the breasts is referred to with the help of euphemism, i.e. *tharoi mamai inba*, the English translation of which is "pushing out of the mouth of the snail."

Here, 'push out' is used as a metaphor to mean the physical change in the female body, i.e. the formation of breast. And the 'walk of the snail by its face' metaphorically indicates how the female breasts are pushed out, i.e. become bigger in size slowly, like the steps of

the snail.

Women's menstruation is taboo in many communities. During menstruation, women are considered to be impure. It is believed in some parts of Nepal that if women during the time of menstruation are allowed inside the house, their cattle will die, it will bring ill fate to the entire family. Therefore, during menstruation they have to stay under a shed which is located far from the home.

The Khurkhul term for menstruation is *mangba*. It is tabooed to use this term, so euphemistic words like *hakchang sengdaba* (impure body), *chakhum changdaba* (not entering kitchen), *thagee lakpa* (month's coming) etc. are used to mean menstruation.

During menstruation women are not permitted to enter the temple and some areas of the house. They are also not allowed to pray to the *yumlai* (deities of household affairs).

It is also tabooed to say anything about menstruation to any man or the father. One of the informants narrated a story about the most embarrassing experience she ever had with menstruation. While returning from the paddy field one day she suddenly had menstruation. So, she was lying down on the mat in front of her husband's bed. Her father-in-law saw her and asked if she was not well. She couldn't say the truth, so she said 'Yes'. Her worried father-in-law insisted that she immediately go to a *maiba* (local male priest). And she had no option left.

It is also considered taboo for a man to see blood from menstruation. It is considered a sign of bad luck to him.

It is tabooed to share the bed with her husband during menstruation. She has to sleep at the mat that is placed at *phamang* (in front of the bed). It is tabooed to lose virginity before marriage in the Khurkhul society. For the Khurkhuls virginity symbolises purity. It is considered a test on the quality of upbringing and teachings on the part of her parents. Women are expected to retain their virginity until the first night of the marriage. If one breaks this taboo and involve in premarital sex, it is considered impure and sinful. Thus goes a saying:

| | | | |
|--------------------------|---------------|--------------|---------------|
| <i>məw-sabi-nə</i> | <i>lai-də</i> | <i>kətpə</i> | <i>jəw-de</i> |
| married woman-pretent-by | God-to | offer | reach-NEG |

‘The offerings made by women who pretend to be married women never reach God’. (Literal)

‘God does not accept the offerings made by women who had premarital sex.’

Such women are not considered either *leishabi* (unmarried women) nor *mou* (married women). Khurkhul has a separate term for this category of women: *mousabi* (women pretending to be married women). Khurkhul women retain their virginity until marriage. One reason is obviously the fear of rejection by God.

6.2.5 Taboo related to bodily excretions

In many societies, most words that relate to bodily excretions are considered taboo, except tears. For instance, in American English, words like ‘rest room’, ‘powder room’, ‘loo’ etc are used instead of toilet. Though there is no doubt that one has no intention of resting or powdering there. In a similar way, Khurkhul use the word *maning chakshang* (back kitchen) for *thikomshang* (toilet). The kitchen is housed at the extreme back of the house; the toilet is located at further behind the kitchen. Hence, the term *maningchaksang* (back kitchen). The other Khurkhul words like *thiphaiba* (releasing fecal), *yunghanba* (urinate) are replaced by *khonghamba* (washing feet), *mapan thokpa* (going out).

6.2.5 Swear words as taboo

Language is used not only to escape from the fear of disease and death, it is also used to curse and to swear. All types of swear and curse are tabooed in Khurkhul. However, in order to release frustration, hatred, anger, and love and the like sometime one uses swearing or cursing words.

The English meaning of swear is carried by *washakpa* in Khurkhul. There are some contexts in which the Khurkhuls might use swear words:

- (i) Swearing between two lovers: Lovers swear in the name of God that they will marry each another. If the woman ends up marrying a different man, she is going to have complication at the time of delivery. She might even meet death. Thus, if she has complication at the time of delivery, her former boy friend has to come to her and say:

nəsi-dəgi

kokpə oi-ro

today-from

pure be-IMP

‘From today, let everything be purified.’ (Literal)

‘I forgive you for everything you did in the past.’

Such a situation is most embarrassing. Thus, the Khurkhul society treats this type of swear as taboo. The elder women often advise the women of the younger generation never to use swear words with their boyfriends while having an affair.

- (ii) Proving innocent: **A** wants to prove to **B** that he did not steal the money. So, he swears in the name of *Ichum Lairembi* (deity). One of the common phrases which is used in this context is the following:

ai-nə *lal-lədi* *icum lairembi-məməŋ-lan-ŋəm-də*
 I-by wrong-if Ichum-Lairembi-front-cross-can-NEG

si- ge

death-OPT

‘If I am wrong let me die when (I) cannot cross the gate of Ichum Lairembi’.

(Literal)

‘If I am wrong let me be punished by Ichum Lairembi.’

The above swear sentence is very highly tabooed so that people always fear to use it. It is used only in a do or die situation, i.e. when there is no other option left to prove himself/herself innocent.

- (iii) *Laikatpa*: The term *laikatpa* means ‘seeking justice from God’.

This is used in an extreme case, i.e. in a context where even the intervention of a third person or party proves unable to solve the conflict. So, it is considered to be highly tabooed in the Khurkhul society.

One of the informants narrated how a woman called Usingma met with a drastic consequence after swearing this strong taboo. Usingma was the step mother of Using, who she always ill-treated while her own son was ever pampered. Once she lost her money, and she decided on *laikatpa* (seek justice from God). She suspected Ushing to have stolen the money. Despite warnings from her relatives not to go for *laikatpa* she went ahead with it with *thum* (salt) to be offered to God. She prayed:

huranbə-do *tʰum* *tumbə-kum* *tum-sənu*

thief-the salt dissolve-like dissolve-PERM

‘Punish the thief to death like the salt dissolves.’ (Literal)

‘Punish the thief to death’.

But soon it was revealed that the one who had stolen the money was his own son, not her step son. Then, one day Usingma lost her son. He was nowhere to be found. The Khurkhul still believes that her son got dissolved somewhere like the salt that she had offered to God did. This story is often narrated to the younger people by the elders in order to warn them about the dire consequences of swearing without thought.

- (iv) *Michei piba*: The term *michei piba* carries the meaning of the English term ‘curse’.

It is tabooed to use curse words in the Khurkhul society. However, it is less tabooed than swear words. Because, in the case of curse words, one can always *kokpiba* (purify), but it is blocked in the case of swear words. Thus, the older generation suggests using curse words instead swear words.