

TABOOS, SUPERSTITIONS, MYTHS AND STIGMAS AGAINST DUCK PRODUCTION IN SOUTH-WEST NIGERIA

Oguntunji,* A.O.

*Department of Animal Science and Fisheries Management,
Bowen University, Iwo, Osun State, Nigeria.*

**Corresponding author:- abelmendel@yahoo.co.in*

Diverse socio-cultural cum religious-related factors such as taboos, superstitions, stigmas and myths are principal factors affecting rearing, marketing and consumption of duck and its products in Nigeria. This study was conducted to identify and scientifically analyse some of the taboos, superstitions, stigmas and myths affecting duck production in southwest Nigeria. Primary information on the prevailing known taboos, superstitions, stigmas and myths surrounding ducks and its products were obtained from 300 duck farmers in southwest states of Oyo, Osun and Lagos. Scientific analyses of the information elicited from respondents revealed that preponderance of these 'restricting factors' were borne out of superstitions, stigmas and myths while few of them were 'promulgated' to protect and conserve ducks due to their perceived 'weak' nature. Mass awareness campaigns in print and electronic media by governmental and Non-governmental agencies are imperative to enlighten the public and to demystify the prevailing 'restricting factors' against duck production in Nigeria in general.

Key words: awareness campaigns, religious-related, restricting factors, Socio-cultural.

In African societies there abound various socio-cultural factors, religious beliefs, taboos and norms regulating the consumption and utilization of animals (Ogunjinmi et al., 2009). These taboos, myths and norms are religiously followed and noncompliance with these widely believed taboos attract public outcry and sanctions of erring members of the community in some cases. Even in some rural communities, sacrifices are made to

cleanse the community and to appease 'gods' of the land against repercussions of such act.

The term 'taboo' is derived from the Polynesian word 'tapu' and is defined as a 'prohibition or a ban' (Negi, 2010). A taboo is a cultural or religious custom that forbids one to do, touch, use or talk about a particular thing (Aina et al., 2009). Taboos represent unwritten social rules that regulate human behavior and attendant constraints that not only govern human social life, but also affect, and sometimes even directly manage, many constituents of the local resources (Colding et al., 2001).

Duck is not popular in Nigeria in spite of its innate potential for meat and egg production and congenial environment for its rearing in all agro-ecological zones. This is evident in its low population compared to other poultry species, low demand of its products, absence of specialized commercial duck farms and scarcity of all encompassing researches on its husbandry, characterization, production, health management and genetic improvement.

There are myriads of taboos, superstitions, myths, stigmas and personal dislikes wielding significant influence on the husbandry, marketing, consumption and improvement of ducks in Nigeria. Many of such taboos have rendered the bird mystical; thus, making many to avoid this waterfowl like plague. (Ola et al., 2003) asserted that duck is the most venerated domesticated bird in Nigeria and that its potentials have remained untapped due to the many supernatural myths and taboos attached to it among Yoruba speaking people of southwest Nigeria. Although other livestock species such as goat and sheep (Aina et al., 2009; Thorpe, 1972) and snails (Ogunjinmi et al.,

2009; Oyebanji, 1999; Lawal, 2003) also suffer one form of discrimination or the other in Nigeria but not as pronounced for duck.

Studies on effect of taboos, superstitions and myths on duck production are meager; of recent,

(Alfred and Agbede, 2012) reported that 79% of respondents identified taboo as a strong social factor against duck production in south-west Nigeria. Putting into consideration the negative impact of taboos, superstitions, myths and stigmas on duck production in Nigeria, it is imperative to document such taboos and investigate remote reasons for 'promulgation' of such taboos.

Against this background, the present study was conducted to identify and scientifically analyse some of the taboos, myths, superstitions, stigmas and hatreds against duck production in southwest Nigeria.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Study area

This study was conducted in Oyo, Osun and Lagos States in Nigeria. They are contiguous and are located in the southwestern part of Nigeria. The three states are inhabited by the *Yoruba* ethnic group, one of the three major ethnic groups in Nigeria.

The study covered 300 duck farmers, comprising of 25 duck farmers from four Local Government Areas of each state. The local government areas covered in this study was:

1. Oyo State: Oyo West, Oyo East, Atiba and Afijio LGAs,
2. Osun State: Iwo, Ayedire, Ejigbo and Ede LGAs,
3. Lagos State: Epe, Eredo, Eti-osa and Ikorodu LGAs

Data collection

Since duck farming is not popular in these study areas, snowball sampling method was used to elicit information from respondents. Snowballing sampling method is a method whereby respondents were identified by asking respondents to give referrals to other persons believed to fit the study requirement (Nyoni and Masika, 2012).

Unstructured interviews were conducted with duck farmers on the prevailing taboos,

superstitions, stigmas and myths surrounding duck production in the study area.

Data collected were collated, arranged and analysed scientifically (no empirical analysis involved).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Duck and its eggs

Scientific analysis of taboos one to six indicates that they were made primarily to protect duck and its eggs against theft.

It could be inferred that repercussions attached to the violation of these taboos are severe; most especially those relating to thunderstorm, lightning, small pox, leprosy, blindness and curses. Such repercussions are deadly feared in the olden days and at present by many. Grave consequences attached to the violation of these taboos scared many from violating them.

Before the advent of orthodox religions (Christianity and Islam) to *Yoruba* land, African traditional religion involving worship of deities (gods and goddesses) was widespread. In *Yoruba* traditional religion, some gods and goddesses were believed to be in control of some professions and environmental factors such as climate, diseases, e.t.c. For instance, *Sango* the god of thunder is believed to be in charge of thunder, lightning and fire. This god is greatly feared for if incited against a person, community or town, loss of lives and properties are attendant effects of his wrath; therefore, his wraths are always avoided.

Likewise *Sanponna*, another *Yoruba* god believed to be in charge of small pox is worshipped for protection against small pox infection because it was believed then that small pox infection can be prevented or controlled by appeasing *Sanpoona*. Similarly, Hindus also worship *Sitala Mata* the goddess of small pox in their temples throughout India (Henderson and Preston, 2009).

Small pox is an infectious disease caused by virus. The disease is greatly feared for it is believed to be highly contagious and had claimed many lives in the past. Globally this disease was responsible for an estimated 300 – 500 million deaths during the twentieth century (Riedel, 2005). In 1979, World

Table 1 Taboos, superstitions, myths and stigmas against duck production

	Taboos/superstitions/myths/ Stigmas	Possible consequence(s)
A. Duck and its eggs		
1	Duck egg must not be stolen	i. Thunderstorm will kill the person. ii. Evil (unspecified) will befall the person iii. He/She will be exposed in few days by committing another crime iv. The hand of the person will be shaking
2	Duck must not be stolen	i. Whatever evil word the owner of the duck pronounced against whosoever steals, eats or sees the stolen duck will come to pass ii. The person will continue to steal
3.	Incubating eggs must not be looked into	i. The person will become blind ii. The eggs will be abandoned
4.	Incubating duck must not peck someone	The person will become leprous
5.	Duck eggs must not be touched	i. Hands must be dipped in wood ash before touching the egg. ii. small pox will infect the person. iii. The hand of the person will wither off
6.	Incubating eggs must not be touched	i. Such eggs will not hatch ii. The person will become leprous
B. Slaughtering, processing and consumption of duck products		
7.	Head and feet of ducks must not be eaten	i. Anyone who eats the head will suffer epilepsy. ii. The leg causes sickness (not specified) iii. Anyone who eats the head will not sleep
8.	Ducks should not be slaughtered often for consumption	The household will become empty
9.	Duck egg must not be eaten often	Any evil word pronounced by such a person will come to pass
10.	The head must be covered with <i>Jatropha</i> leaves before slaughtering	If not, the ugly sight of duck will haunt the person
11.	No one must complain about thickness of duck feather when defeathering duck	The feather will multiply
12.	Pregnant woman must not eat duck meat	The expected baby will be dumb
13.	<i>Jatropha curcas</i> (purging nut plant) twig and duck meat should not be eaten on the same day but after seven days	i. If such a person curses or say evil words it will come to pass ii. The person will die iii. Ringworm will infect the person and will take long time to heal iv. Mouth ulcer will affect the person

Husbandary-related taboos, myths, superstitions and stigmas

14. Ducks must not be killed maliciously The person will die
15. Automobile must not kill duck
- i. Money/cowrie must be put in the mouth of dead duck, if not evil will befall the driver/cyclist
 - ii. curses pronounced against such cyclist/driver will come to pass
16. Duck must not be beaten by broom All ducks will die
17. Duck feces must not be stepped upon at all
- i. Sickness (unspecified) will affect the person
 - ii. Leprosy will affect the person
18. Duck feces must not be stepped upon in the morning It is a sign of bad omen for the person for the day
19. The underneath feather of duck must not be stepped upon Leprosy will affect the person
20. Young people should not rear duck Such a young individual will not prosper/It will take longer time for such youth to prosper
- D. Hatred and superstitions**
21. Women keeping ducks are witches
22. Ducks are mediums for evil spirits/evil birds
23. Black ducks usually turn to snake

Health Organization had certified complete eradication of this deadly disease in nineteenth and twentieth century after intensive vaccination; thus, refuting the belief that it is controlled by a god.

Leprosy, a chronic infection caused by bacteria and is also regarded as a deadly disease among *Yorubas*. The reason being that individuals affected are ostracized, stigmatized and isolated to live solitary life in the bush or in leper colony.

Slaughtering, processing and consumption of duck products

Scientific analysis of myths and stigmas against duck in this section revealed that most of them were made out of bias, superstitions and hatred because of the widely-believed ugly appearance of the multi-coloured carunculated head and webbed feet.

Duck head and feet consumption and the associated restricting factors

Till date, there is no scientific evidence/findings associating consumption of duck leg with any kind of sickness or consumption of duck head with insomnia. The taboo that anyone who eats the head will not sleep possibly originated from the widely held superstition among *Yorubas* that ducks do not sleep; therefore, anyone who eats the head will not sleep. In order to instill fear in the mind of people against the consumption of duck head, epilepsy was also “attached” as possible consequence to the violators. Epilepsy is a group of long term neurological disorders characterized by epileptic seizures (Chang and Lowenstein, 2003). This disease is also a dreadful disease among *Yorubas* and anyone suffering it is normally stigmatized and regarded as an outcast in the society because of the fear that it is contagious; though not yet scientifically proved.

In spite of the frightening repercussions attached to the consumption of duck head and feet, two respondents refuted these repercussions. A respondent in Oyo state claimed to have been eating both the heads and feet in the last three years and had not suffered any form of sickness because of it. Another respondent also claimed to have seen someone eating both the head and feet of duck without suffering any repercussion.

Taboos and superstitions associated with regular consumption of duck meat and eggs

Taboos 9 and 10 stemmed possibly from the perceived assumption that ducks are mystical or ‘strange’ birds. It is worthy of note that taboos 8 and 9 are retrogressive and are possibly salient factors responsible for low demand of duck and its products and the continuing declining trend in number of ducks by discouraging many from keeping ducks, since they could not slaughter and consume duck meat and egg at will in contrast to chicken and other indigenous poultry species.

Taboos on covering of duck eyes with *Jatropha* leave before slaughtering

This taboo lacks any scientific backing. The need to cover the head with *Jatropha* (Yoruba- *Lapalapa/Lapa*) leaves probably originated from the assumption that the bird is mystical; therefore, cannot be slaughtered ‘simply’ or ‘ordinarily’ like other poultry species. Special conditions are commonly attached to killing and slaughtering of some animals considered ‘supernatural’, ‘strange’ and mystical among *Yorubas* of south west Nigeria. For instance traditional hunters must make propitiation or sacrifices if owl and pregnant gazelle are killed.

Feather multiplication while defeathering

There is no scientific evidence to substantiate this taboo. This taboo was probably instituted to discourage complaints in the course of defeathering ducks because Muscovy duck has many thick underlying feathers which are difficult to remove/pull out manually.

Pregnant women and duck meat consumption

This taboo stemmed out of superstitions related to ducks. Till date there is no medical report associating duck meat consumption by pregnant women with dumbness of the expected baby. This taboo originated from the superstition that since Muscovy ducks are voiceless (dumb), babies born by pregnant women who consumed duck meat will be dumb.

Superstitions relating to pregnant women and the expected baby abound in African culture. Taboos and superstitions relating to

foods and drinks consumed by pregnant women are many among *Yorubas*. Some foods and drinks are forbidden for pregnant women, such prohibitions were premised on the fact that such food and drink items will affect mother or baby or both. Many of such taboos were 'promulgated' among Yoruba to protect pregnant women and the expected babies while some are mere superstitions. For instance, it is a taboo for pregnant women to share an egg with anyone but rather she must eat an egg. This was made on the assumption that sharing an egg will make the expected baby 'incomplete' or disabled. Of recent (Jimoh et al. (2012) reported that among *Ejagham* people of Cross River State in South-South Nigeria, some households within the community forbid their pregnant women from eating elephants because they believe that any pregnant woman who does would deliver a baby that resembles elephant. Another reason is because of its long reproductive cycle which they believe will affect fecundity of young females.

***Jatropha* twig and duck meat consumption**

Jatropha, also known as pig nut, psychic nut and fig nut is a drought resistant shrub or tree belonging to the genus *Euphorbiaceae*, which is cultivated in Central and South America, South East Asia, India and Africa (Gubitz et al., 1999). Its twig is commonly chewed as chewing stick in Nigeria and its leaves, roots and stems have been in use in traditional medicine since time immemorial for curing different kinds of ailments.

The death associated with chewing of its twig and consumption of duck meat on the same day is baseless but could probably be attributed to accidental intake of its seeds and inadequate knowledge of the toxicity of different parts of the plant.

Most parts (kernel, leaves, stem, flower, buds, roots, barks and wood) of this plant are toxic (Devappaa et al., 2010). For instance, the seeds contain oil known as hell oil, pinhoen oil, oleum infernale or oleum ricini majoris which contains small amounts of irritant curcanoleic acid (Watt and Breyer-Brandwyk, 1962).

In general, ingestion of 3-5 seeds causes marked nausea, gastro-intestinal irritation,

abdominal pain, vomiting and sometimes diarrhea [15]. *Jatropha* intoxication in children showed symptoms such as vomiting, diarrhea, miosis, dehydration (Levin et al., 2000; Koltin et al., 2006), depression and circulatory collapse (Rai and Lakhanpal, 2008; Singh et al., 2010).

Husbandry-related taboos, myths and superstitions

Taboos number 14 to 16 were primarily made to protect ducks against all forms of attacks. The prevalent management system of rearing ducks in Nigeria is the traditional extensive system which allows ducks to scavenge for food but made them vulnerable to malicious attacks.

Furthermore, putting into consideration some peculiar natures of ducks: their water-loving nature, 'irritating' carunculated head, watery feces, webbed feet, the assumed mystical nature, sluggish nature e.t.c. which do provoke hatred and violence against them and do make them victim of malicious attacks; hence, promulgation of those 'laws' One of the respondents claimed to have seen a driver that suffered the repercussion because he failed to make appropriate propitiation after accidental killing of a duck and the said driver was also killed by an automobile a week later.

Taboo number 15 was specifically made to prevent killing of ducks by automobiles. This is not peculiar to ducks alone but there are many of such 'protective' taboos that were 'promulgated' to prevent cruel attacks against and to conserve perceived 'weak' or 'vulnerable' livestock among the *Yorubas* in south west Nigeria.

For instance, in southwest Nigeria, it is common to see sheep sleeping on roads where traffic flow is light and many of them do fall victim of automobile accident. In order to protect this 'weak' animal, taboos forbidding automobiles from killing sheep among the Yoruba speaking people of southwest Nigeria was 'enacted', but if killed the driver/cyclist involved must stop and put coin/cowry in the mouth of the dead sheep. However, the same 'protective' taboo is not applicable to the perceived 'strong' livestock like guinea fowls, chickens, goats and pigeons which are rarely killed by automobiles.

These taboos have been of tremendous impact in protecting ducks and sheep against accidental killing by automobiles in south west Nigeria. These informal protective cum conservative taboos are consistent with the reports of Singh et al. (2010), Ntiamao-Baidu (1995), Abayie-Boaten (1998) and Attuquayefio and Fobil (2005) before the advent of modern or 'introduced' biodiversity conservation method, traditional African societies operated complex religio-cultural belief systems that used traditional norms, myths, taboos, totems and closed seasons to preserve certain critical natural resources. The effectiveness of traditional institutions in conservation and protection of biodiversity has been reported in some parts of Nigeria (Banjo et al., 2006; Obasohan, 2008; Akindele, 2010).

Superstitions on stepping on the feather and feces of ducks in the morning.

To the best of the author's knowledge, there is no evidence in existing literature relating duck feces and underneath feather to leprosy. The fact that this water bird is hated probably informed the association of its feces and underneath feather with leprosy.

The taboo on stepping on its fecal waste in the morning as a sign of bad omen was borne out of superstition. Morning is an important period of the day among the *Yorubas* and whatever happens to a person in the morning is widely believed to be an indicator of what the day is likely to be for the person. Since Muscovy ducks are not popular, hated and not easily liquidated to cash like other indigenous poultry, this was superstitiously interpreted as a bad omen for anyone who steps on its fecal waste in the morning.

Superstitions on young people and duck rearing

Scientific analysis of this taboo revealed that it originated from the superstition attached to the sluggish nature of the ducks. Since Muscovy ducks are a slow-moving bird, this was superstitiously interpreted that if a young person rears duck, the progress/success of such youth will be delayed or retarded because ducks are sluggish and slow-moving.

This taboo is one of the underlying factors responsible for low involvement of youths in

duck production in the study area and Nigeria in general. This assertion was reinforced by the previous studies conducted in Nigeria that duck rearing is dominated by elderly people (Alfred and Agbede, 2012; Ugbomeh, 2002; Oguntunji, 2013).

Hatred/personal dislikes against ducks

Women keeping ducks are witches

This superstition probably stemmed from the *Yoruba* mythology on witches. It is well established and documented among the *Yorubas* that all witches are women (Abimbola, 1977); since ducks are considered strange and possessing metaphysical power, any woman keeping such a 'strange' bird is considered 'strange', having supernatural power or tagged a witch. The fear of being stigmatized as a witch prevented many women interested in duck production from keeping ducks and this inadvertently responsible for low number of women involved in duck production in Nigeria. This assertion corroborated studies conducted on duck farming in southern Nigeria that men are more involved in duck farming than women (Ola et al., 2008; Nyoni and Masika, 2012; Ugbomeh, 2002).

Ducks are mediums for spirits, black ducks are mediums for spirits and ducks are mystical/supernatural birds

The belief that ducks are mediums of 'spirits' could be traced to the bias/prejudice and hatred against this waterfowl, since many believed the bird is mystical and 'possesses' supernatural power.

The belief that black ducks are possessed with evil spirits or can turn to snakes emanated probably from the societal general bias against anything black in the study area. Black colour is usually associated with evil/bad omen in southwest Nigeria and solid black animals such as cats, pigeons, chickens, dogs and sheep are 'tagged', linked with spirits and commonly avoided like a plague. For instance, hatred against black colour has also been reported against black sheep and goat in western Nigeria where some believed that black sheep and goat belong to the witches and wizards of the land and that only witches and wizards should rear such animals (Aina et al., 2009).

This superstition might be the principal factor responsible for low proportion of black ducks in a recent study conducted in Nigeria (Oguntunji, 2013).

The claim that all ducks are mystical or 'supernatural' birds are borne out of many unsubstantiated superstitions on ducks among the Yorubas. Some premised the mystical nature of duck on the fact that ducks should not be slaughtered and consumed at all but should be sacrificed to the gods. Besides, the propitiation attached to its accidental killing by automobiles, slaughtering and the claim that they can turn to snakes in the night are other factors. Others submitted that they have 'supernatural' ability to detect charms buried or brought to a compound. Some also claimed that witches and harmful organisms such as scorpions and snakes cannot enter a compound where ducks are reared.

CONCLUSION

It is evident that in spite of the innate potentials of Muscovy ducks as an alternative source of cheap animal protein; its exploitation suffered utter neglect/set back majorly due to the adverse synergistic effects of taboos, myths, superstitions and stigmas. Though some of those taboos were made to protect and conserve ducks in the past; however current state of knowledge is a pointer to the fact that they have outlived their relevances. Besides, in order to promote duck production and consumption of its products, governmental and Non-government organizations' sponsored awareness campaigns in print and electronic media are highly imperative to enlighten and sensitize the general public on the potentials of duck for meat and egg production and also to disabuse the minds of the public in respect of myths, taboos, stigmas and personal dislikes militating against its exploitation in the study area.

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