

Breaking the Rules and Getting Away with It:  
An Exploration of Sanctioned Taboo-breaking in Ritual Performances  
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## Abstract

Both ritual and taboo have been given a great deal of attention in the field of anthropology, but hardly ever in relation to each other. The goal of this report is to explore the conditions present within rituals containing sanctioned taboo-breaking and preliminarily analyze the relationships between those conditions and taboo-breaking. Data was collected for twelve rituals and analyzed using a bivariate correlation, pie charts, and a discriminant function analysis. The results suggest that the presence of sanctioned taboo-breaking during rituals is influenced by other variables related to the ritual and taboo in question, including the relatedness of observers, the importance of the taboo in question, the specific type of ritual, and whether a participant or an observer breaks the taboo. This report includes several suggestions for further investigation of this largely unexplored topic. [Key words: taboo, social norms, ritual, ceremony]

## Statement of Purpose

Discovering the relationship between taboo-breaking during rituals and other factors relating to those rituals is the purpose of this research. Although taboo-breaking is often noted in anthropological descriptions of rituals when present, an exploration of the social contexts in which taboo-breaking occurs is lacking. This research seeks to begin to fill this void in order to help the reader understand how the allowance of taboo-breaking during certain times is related to the other conditions present during rituals. Taboos are present, as well as violated, in almost all cultures, yet there also exist “allowed times,” including ceremonies, rituals, and festivals, during which the normal social punishments or repercussions of taboo-breaking are removed, at least for some participants. It seems logical that the tolerance of these subversions of social norm are tied to other factors such as the type of ritual, the presence of observers, the relatedness of those observers, the level of investment in the ritual, the frequency of the ritual, and the level of

importance associated with the taboo or norm being broken. This research seeks to reach a preliminary understanding of under what conditions these violations of taboo do or do not occur and to provide insight for further research in this area.

### Literature Review

Before proceeding to the actual research, let us take a moment to review what others have had to say about this topic in order to understand it better. Much has been written about taboos, as well as about rituals, but little has been said about the combination and interaction of the two or about when taboo-breaking is likely or unlikely to occur.

Many of the issues surrounding the research of taboos and rituals stem from the necessity of defining both of these terms. While at first these terms seem simple and straightforward, difficulty emerges when attempting to determine where to draw the line about what to include or exclude in a study concerned with either. Levine (1986: 979) points out part of the reason for this difficulty in his discussion of taboo: “Taboo restrictions are so familiar that they do not *come from anywhere*. They are simply there, self-evident, neither of divine origin nor the products of a moral, legal, or historical system” (italics in original). Although the reasoning here is specific to taboo, it could also be applied to ritual. Several authors have attempted to help in the definition of these terms, with varying degrees of success.

Of these two terms, taboo has proven the more difficult to define. A well-known attempt comes from Freud, who defined taboo in relation to use in its native language:

‘Taboo’ is a Polynesian word. It is difficult for us to find a translation for it, since the concept connoted by it is one which we no longer possess... The meaning of ‘taboo’, as we see it, diverges in two contrary directions. To us it means, on the one hand, ‘sacred’, ‘consecrated’, and on the other ‘uncanny’, ‘dangerous’, ‘forbidden’, ‘unclean’. The converse of ‘taboo’ in Polynesian is ‘*noa*’, which means ‘common’, or ‘generally accessible’. Thus ‘taboo’ has about it a sense of something unapproachable, and it is principally expressed in prohibitions and restrictions. (1950: 24)

Anthropological literature also contains a great deal of discussion about taboo. Frazer (1922/2002) defines taboo as the ‘negative precepts’ of magic which are expressed through prohibitions against certain actions. He uses ‘taboo’ interchangeably with his own term, ‘negative magic’ and states that it is the opposite of sorcery. The purpose of taboo, according to Frazer, “...is to avoid an undesirable [event]” (p. 19); he also makes it clear that taboos do not have an obvious reason for their existence, but rather are part of “...one great disastrous fallacy, a mistaken conception of the association of ideas” (p. 20). Put simply, Frazer views taboos as rules which are thought by the people that observe them to protect those people from the supposed consequence(s) of the prohibited action(s). Frazer also notes that people of high social status (he focuses specifically on kings and priests) are likely to be subject to more taboos than lower status individuals; this is linked to the belief that these individuals’ actions are somehow connected to and can influence nature. More recently, Levine (1986) has suggested, while calling upon Freud’s work, that taboo began as a prohibition that was externally imposed in the distant past, but over time has become self-imposed. Golub (2004) suggests that the idea of taboo arises where the idea of self is in an uncertain position, and therefore exists to help define those unfamiliar and uncertain spaces in life. Levine (1986), referring to physical items (people, places, things, or conditions) which are taboo rather than taboo as a social rule, includes in his definition of taboo anything “which is the vehicle or source of a mysterious attribute” (p. 979). Spain (1988) also has some difficulty defining taboo, and gives two possible definitions, of which only the first is relevant for anthropology: the “conscious, culturally articulated rules” (p. 297) which govern the prohibition of certain actions. From these examples in the literature, it can be clearly seen that there is no hard and fast definition of taboo. Much of the confusion comes simply from the use of the word, which commonly switches between being used as a noun or as an adjective (Levine 1986). For the purposes of this research a loose definition roughly equating

taboo and social norm will be used so as to include behaviors which would be considered only minor transgressions as well as those which violate more serious social expectations.

Ritual is not quite as difficult to define as taboo, but there is still much variation in the literature concerning this matter. Neville (1984) suggests that ritual is part of the enculturation that makes us human; he also argues that ritual can be seen in the “patterns and processes of everyday life” (p. 151). Addressing religious rites, Tylor (1924) states that “...they are expressive and symbolic performances, the dramatic utterance of religious thought, the gesture-language of theology...” and a “...means of intercourse with and influence on spiritual beings...” (p. 362). Brightman (1999) suggests that ritual is a way for society to talk about itself. Loveday (1981), quoting Radcliffe-Brown, describes rituals as a means for the “regulated expression” of “human feelings and sentiments” and as a means to maintain those sentiments in a culture (p. 136). Loveday also suggests that there are certain indicators of ritual, such as special language, actions, and clothing.

The role of ritual is a matter debated among anthropologists; the role of the subversion of taboo in ritual is a matter which has gone mostly unaddressed. Neville (1984: 151) states that “ritual frames and segments social processes and serves as an encodement of the society’s fabric of meanings.” Loveday (1981) describes the role of ritual as a means to transmit information to ourselves (meaning our own cultural group). He also discusses the multi-functional nature of ritual events and categorizes them based on purpose. Frazer (1922/2002) also observes that the purpose of many rituals observed around the world is to counteract the anticipated negative effects of broken taboos or to remove the taboo nature of some object. The general consensus concerning ritual seems to be that it is a way for a society to pass on important cultural information in the form of a tradition. Brightman (1988) suggests that the subversion of taboo, or the simulation of subversion, during rituals can be a form of social commentary which addresses

“the prickly issues of everyday life” (p. 278). Brightman also acknowledges that taboo breaking can provide a cathartic (sometimes vicarious) experience, which may in turn prevent later misbehavior.

From this overview of the literature on the topic, it is obvious that taboo and ritual have had much attention from anthropologists, but seldom in connection with each other. This gap in the literature concerning the interrelations of these subjects is one that this research may begin to fill.

### Description of Data

The data for this research was collected from several ethnographic accounts in the eHRAF database. Societies were chosen using eHRAF’s search option with the terms “taboo” and “ritual;” from this the three societies listed as returning the most paragraphs within each of the seven world regions displayed were chosen as a pool from which to draw. The first society (Zulu) was selected due to its large number of hits in the search. After that, an effort was made to select cases from different world regions. A similar search, beginning with the subjects of “Avoidance and Taboo” (OCM 784) and “Ritual” (OCM 788) was then conducted within the selected society. If a likely ritual was not located this way, further searches for information about “Nuptials” (OCM 585), “Burial practices and funerals” (OCM 764), “Puberty and initiation” (OCM 881), and “Organized ceremonial” (OCM 796) were used in an effort to find a suitable ritual account. In this stage, an effort was made to maintain a balanced sample of ritual types. Texts were selected based on the volume of information available within them about the ritual in question (reported as a number of paragraphs by eHRAF). Additional information was sometimes sought concerning social norms and sanctions (OCM 681) if it was not included in

the original accounts of the ritual. Information was gathered on rituals and taboo-breaking as available, and every effort has been made to accurately reflect each ritual.

Human behavior is influenced by many factors, and the variables chosen reflect factors which were thought likely to influence behavior and choice in a ritual setting. Gupta and Singh (1992) emphasize the importance of understanding the costs and benefits of action or inaction to the individual, as well as the importance of group identity in fostering rebellious behavior. Data was collected for the following twelve variables, two of which are identifying variables:

- *Society* – the culture in which the ritual performance was observed and recorded, as designated by eHRAF
- *Region* – the region of the world in which the society is located, as designated by eHRAF
- *Presence or Absence of Taboo-breaking* [TBreak] – a simple indication of whether or not any social norms were violated during the ritual under consideration
- *Who Breaks the Taboo* [TBreaker] – a nominal variable reflecting whether a direct participant or an observer violated the norm, including a value for “not applicable”
- *Degree of Importance Associated with the Taboo* [TImport] – an ordinal variable with values of 1 = low importance, 2 = medium importance, and 3 = high importance, as well as 0 = not applicable. Importance was measured based on the normal punishment for the behavior within the relevant society. “High importance” includes offenses that would usually result in the death, exile, or long-term imprisonment of the individual. “Medium importance” includes offenses that result in other social sanctions, such as short-term imprisonment, temporary social ostracism, fines, or physical punishment. “Low importance” includes offenses that result only in general stigma associated with the individual who breaks the taboo or verbal reprimand.

- *General Type of Ritual* [TypGen] – a nominal variable using a modified form of one of Dr. Lewis Binford's hunter-gatherer variables. 1 = secular rituals, 2 = maturational history rituals, 3 = announcement of social status, 4 = focused on group, and 5 = relationship between people and forces of nature/ supernatural. This is a collapsed version of the following variable.
- *Specific Type of Ritual* [TypSpec] – a nominal variable, also using a modified form of one of Binford's hunter-gatherer variables. Only the values actually included in the table will be listed here: 1 = regional seasonal gatherings with sings and dancing, 3 = female initiation ceremonies, 4 = male initiation ceremonies, 5 = marriage ceremonies, 6 = mortuary rituals, 17 = shaman's performances linking the people to forces around them, and 20 = renewal rituals.
- *Presence or Absence of Observers* [Observs] – indicates whether or not someone other than the direct participants was present to observe or assist with the ritual.
- *Degree of Relatedness of Attendants* [DegRelat] – an ordinal variable indicating who is present at the ritual; 1 = direct participants and organizers only, 2 = attended by the immediate/local family, 3 = attended by members of the residential community, 4 = attended by the local group as in (2) and non-local kin, 5 = participants include persons from a regional scale of attendance.
- *Frequency of ritual, in reference to main participating individual(s)* [RitFreq1] – an ordinal variable ranging from values of 1 = once to 7 = weekly.
- *Frequency of ritual, in reference to observers* [RitFreq2] – an ordinal variable with values ranging from 0 = never (no observers present) to 7 = weekly. Note that values 1 through 7 are the same in this and the previous variable.



- *Level of Investment in the Ritual* [RInvest] – an ordinal variable with values 1 = low investment, 2 = medium investment, and 3 = high investment. This variable was determined in reference to investment in other rituals within the same culture.

Data was gathered for twelve rituals in this study (detailed in Table 1 at the end of this section). The small number of cases limits the conclusions that can be drawn from the data; however twelve cases should be sufficient to provide some preliminary results. Of the twelve cases, three come from the Navajo culture (North America), two each from the Iban (Asia) and Zulu (Africa), three from the Igbo (Africa), and two from the Kogi (South America). Seven of the cases contain taboo-breaking, and five do not. Of the seven cases containing taboo-breaking, four involve a direct participant as the violator and three involve an observer. Again, of the seven cases containing taboo-breaking, four were low importance taboos, two were of medium importance, and the importance of the remaining one could not be determined. Eight of the rituals are maturational history rituals, three deal with the relationship between people and nature or the supernatural, and one is a secular ritual. More specifically, the rituals include one regional gathering with sings and dancing, one female initiation ritual, one male initiation ritual, three marriage rituals, three mortuary rituals, two shaman's performance linking the people with forces which could impact them, and one renewal ritual.

Observers are present in nine of the ten cases for which the information was available. In one case, the observers are the local/immediate family, in two cases they include the residential community, in three cases they include the local group and non-local kin, and in three cases the ritual is a regional scale event.

The ritual frequency for participants included three cases where the ritual was experienced only once, five cases where the ritual was rarely experienced, one case where the

ritual was occasionally experienced, and one case where the ritual was experienced monthly.

One case did not contain sufficient evidence to determine ritual frequency for participants.

The values for ritual frequency in relation to observers clustered around “occasionally,” with five cases in that category. There was also one case for each of the following values: never (no observers), rarely, annually, and seasonally. Three cases are missing this information.

The final variable is the level of investment in the ritual; five cases have low investment, four have medium investment, and three have high investment.

It is not appropriate to discuss these variables in terms of a mean, median, or standard deviation due to the nature of the variables themselves; we can however note some of the patterns. Maturational history rituals are by far the most common rituals in the data set, no cases of a high importance taboo being broken are included in the data, and it is much more common for rituals to have observers than to not have them.

Although the limitation of a small sample size is obvious, the rituals included in this study cover a broad range of variation in the variables which were measured and provide sufficient data to inspire preliminary conclusions and a plethora of paths for further research.

Table 1 Rituals used for analysis with their identifying information as well as the references from which information about rituals was taken.

<b>Ritual</b>	<b>Society</b>	<b>Region</b>	<b>Reference(s)</b>
Mlah Pinang	Iban	Asia	Gomes 1911
adat mati enggau rabat	Iban	Asia	Sandin 1980
Feast of the Tortoise	Igbo	Africa	Ottenberg 1989
Burial	Igbo	Africa	Thomas 1914, Afigbo 1981, Preuss and Moermann 1926, Meek 1970, Ottenberg 1968
ibu-nkwu (upiti)	Igbo	Africa	Afigbo 1981, Amadiume 1987
Burial	Kogi	SAmerica	Reichel-Dolmatoff 1974
Re-creation Ritual	Kogi	SAmerica	Reichel-Dolmatoff 1987, Reichel-Dolmatoff and Muirden 1949, Reichel-Dolmatoff and Muirden 1951, Reichel-Dolmatoff 1976
Kinaaldá	Navajo	NAmerica	Frisbie 1967
Shooting Life Chant	Navajo	NAmerica	Wyman 1936
The Squaw Dance	Navajo	NAmerica	Downs 1972, Hill 1943, Van Valkenburgh 1937, Ladd 1957, Kluckhohn 1946, Bauer 1983
ukuBhina	Zulu	Africa	Raum 1973
umgcaggo	Zulu	Africa	Kohler and Van Warmelo 1933, Raum 1973

## Methods

Although the small sample size and lack of continuous variables limit the appropriate methods of analysis, several relationships were discovered utilizing a combination of bivariate correlation, discriminant function analysis, and pie charts. All analyses were computed using SPSS Statistics 17.0. Since this is an exploratory study, a simple bivariate correlation was used as a first attempt to recognize strong or significant relationships and to help give a general idea of the relationships within the data. The goal of this study is to examine under what conditions a ritual is likely to exhibit taboo-breaking, so a discriminant functions analysis was performed for the purpose of creating a tool to aid in predicting further cases and testing the results of this

study. Lastly, pie charts were created to increase the understanding of patterns through a visual representation of relationships.

Results

Simple bivariate pie charts are presented here to aid in visualizing the shape of the data as it relates to the presence or absence of taboo-breaking [TBreak]. All numbers inside pie charts represent counts.

Figure 1 shows that taboo-breaking is present [TBreak = 1] only in rituals with no observers or a large group of attendees [DegRelat = 1, 4, or 5], and it is not present in rituals with medium or small groups of attendees [DegRelat = 2 or 3]. It should be noted that the rituals with the largest numbers of attendees [DegRelat = 4 or 5] sometimes do and sometimes do not include taboo-breaking.

Figure 1 Effects of Relatedness of Observers on Taboo-breaking

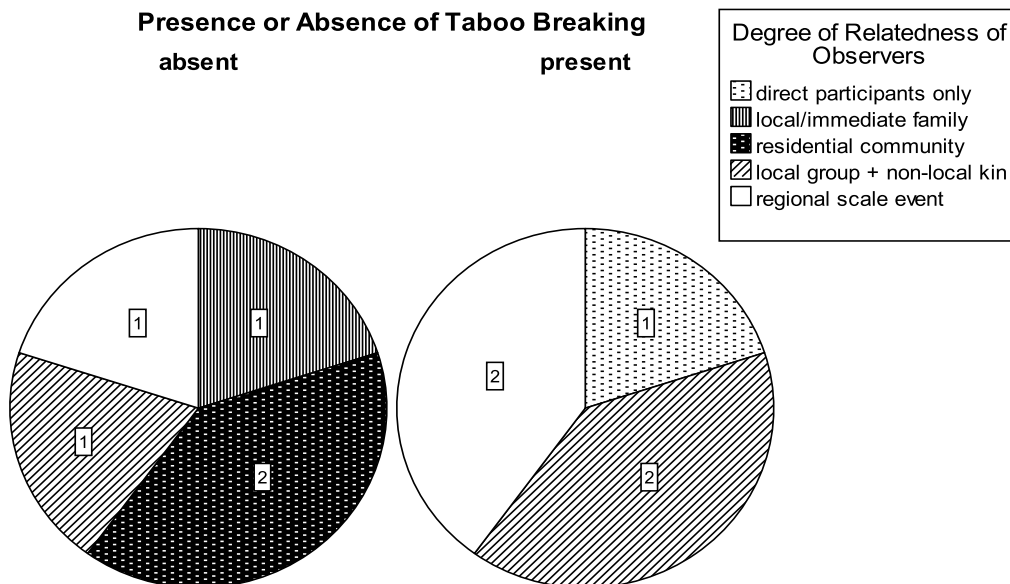
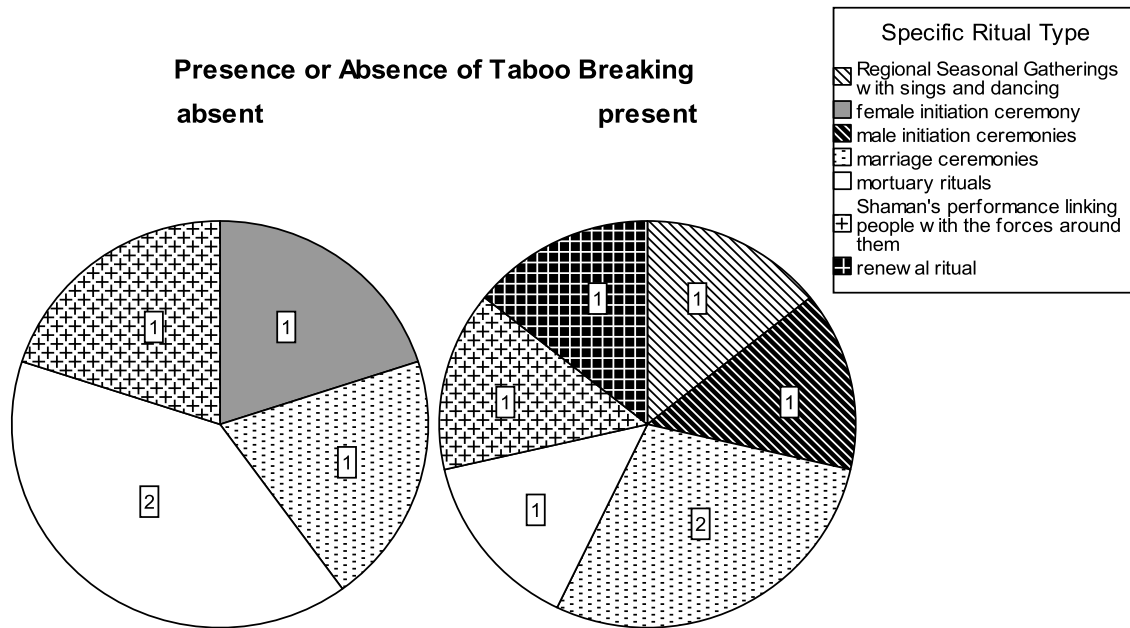


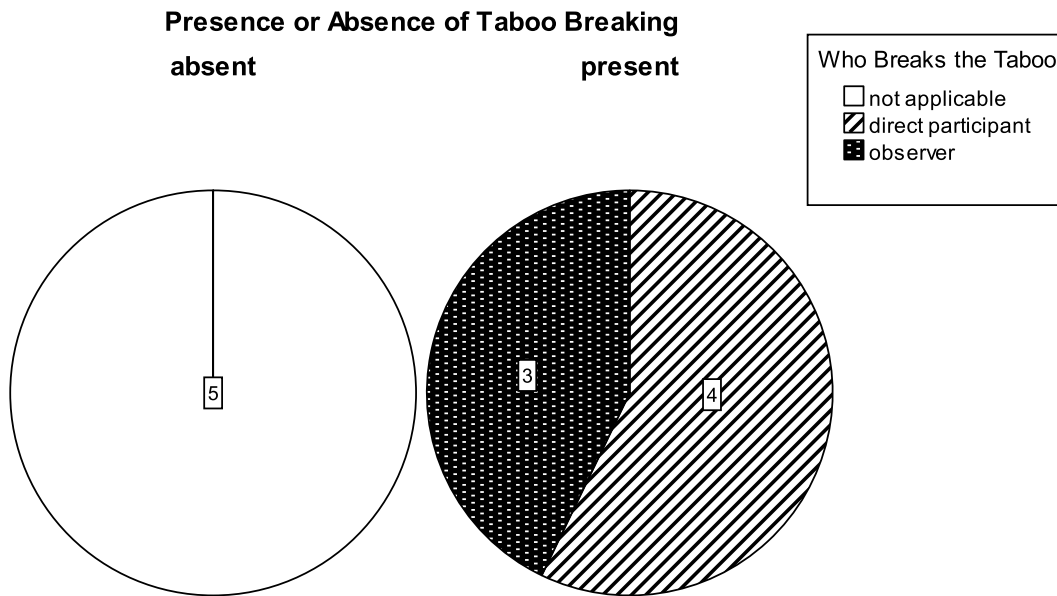
Figure 2 represents the relationships between taboo-breaking [TBreak] and the specific ritual types [TypSpec]. Note that shaman's performances [TypSpec = 17], mortuary rituals [TypSpec = 6], and marriage ceremonies [TypSpec = 5] are present both with and without taboo-breaking. Also note that female initiation ceremonies [TypSpec = 3] are only present in rituals without taboo-breaking.

Figure 2 Effects of Specific Ritual Type on Taboo-breaking



The left half of Figure 3 is irrelevant, since a taboo-breaker [TBreaker] is only present when a taboo is broken [TBreak]. The right half however, shows us that direct participants are only slightly more likely than observers to be the taboo-breaker.

Figure 3 Effects of Who Breaks the Taboo on Taboo-breaking



A bivariate correlation yielded several strong, significant relationships, the most interesting of which are highlighted in blue in Table 2 below (for the complete table, see Table 2.1 in the appendix). Relationships highlighted in red in Table 2 are the results of the coding values used, rather than important significant relationships, and are thus not discussed here.

There is a strong negative relationship between the presence of observers [Observs] and the specific type of ritual [TypSpec] ( $r = -.728$ ,  $p = .017$ ), which is significant. This relationship suggests that renewal rituals [TypSpec = 20] are less likely to have observers than other ritual types.

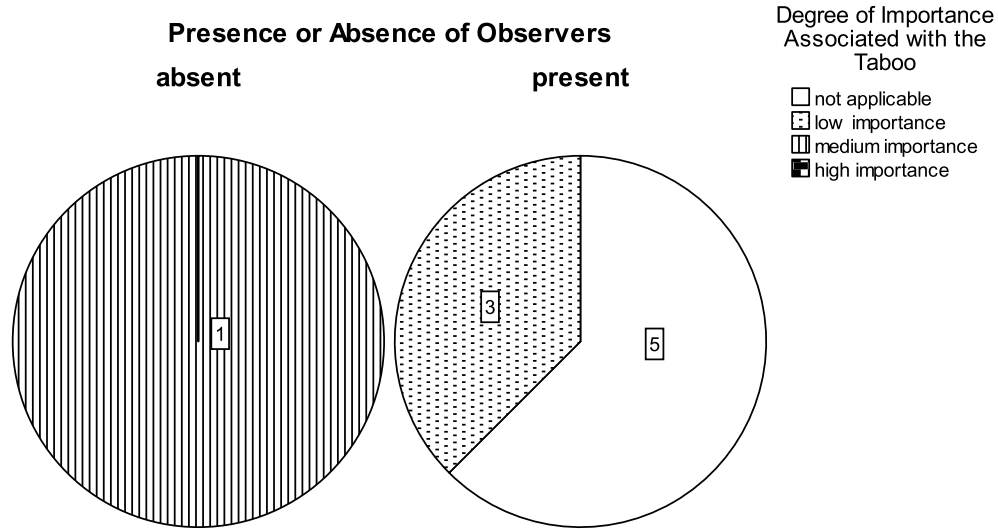
<b>Table 2 Bivariate Correlation</b>		Presence or Absence of Taboo Breaking	Who Breaks the Taboo	Degree of Importance Associated with the Taboo	Specific Ritual Type	Presence or Absence of Observers	Degree of Relatedness of Observers
Presence or Absence of Taboo Breaking	Pearson Correlation	1	.881**	.886**	.073	-.333	.156
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000	.000	.823	.347	.667
	N	12	12	11	12	10	10
Who Breaks the Taboo	Pearson Correlation	.881**	1	.676*	-.124	-.076	.287
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000		.022	.701	.834	.422
	N	12	12	11	12	10	10
Degree of Importance Associated with the Taboo	Pearson Correlation	.886**	.676*	1	.479	-.746*	-.287
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.022		.137	.021	.454
	N	11	11	11	11	9	9
Specific Ritual Type	Pearson Correlation	.073	-.124	.479	1	-.728*	-.602
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.823	.701	.137		.017	.065
	N	12	12	11	12	10	10
Presence or Absence of Observers	Pearson Correlation	-.333	-.076	-.746*	-.728*	1	.677*
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.347	.834	.021	.017		.032
	N	10	10	9	10	10	10
Level of Investment in Ritual	Pearson Correlation	.458	.609*	.029	-.661*	.361	.714*
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.134	.036	.932	.019	.305	.020
	N	12	12	11	12	10	10

\*\* . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

\* . Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

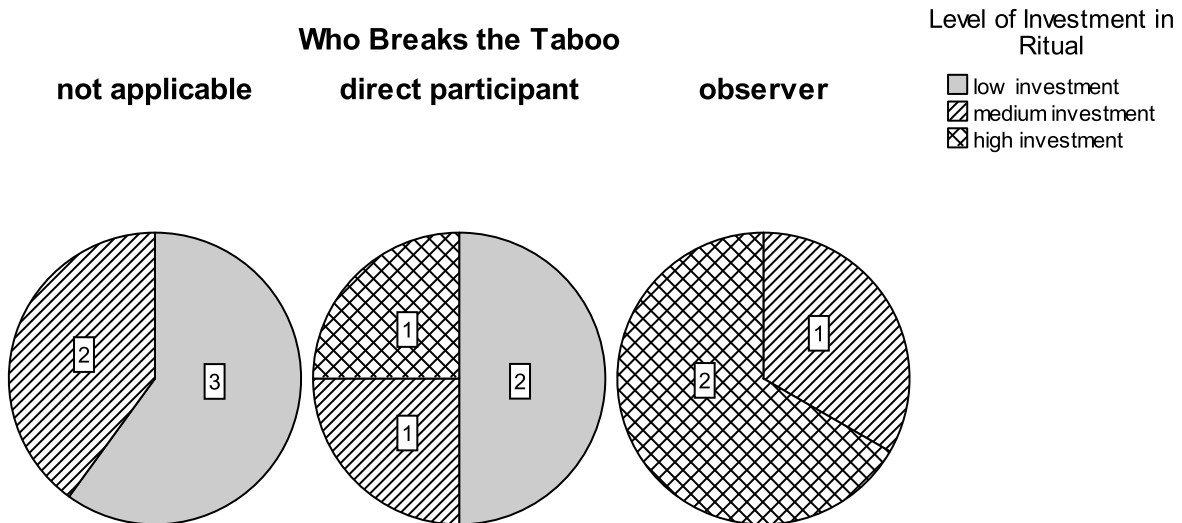
There is a strong negative relationship between the presence of observers [Observs] and the level of importance associated with the taboo being broken [TImport] (r = -.746, p = .021), which is also a significant relationship. This relationship suggests that less important taboos are broken when observers are present. It is illustrated in Figure 4 below.

Figure 4 Effects of Observers on the Importance of the Taboo Broken



There are two other significant relationships in the data. The first is between the level of investment in the ritual [RInvest] and who breaks the taboo [TBreaker] ( $r = .609, p = .036$ ). This relationship suggests that higher investment rituals are more likely to contain taboo-breaking, and that the greater the investment, the more likely it becomes that an observer will be the one to break the taboo. This can be seen in Figure 5 below.

Figure 5 Effect of Ritual Investment on Who Breaks the Taboo





The remaining significant relationship is between the level of investment in the ritual [RInvest] and the relatedness of the attendees [DegRelat] ( $r = .714$ ,  $p = .020$ ). This relationship suggests that rituals with a larger attendance of less related persons will have a higher level of investment.

The discriminant functions analysis utilized nine of the twelve cases, yielding the coefficients shown below in Table 3. From this analysis it was learned that the variables which most affect the presence of taboo-breaking [TBreak] are who breaks the taboo [TBreaker], how important the taboo is [TImport], the specific type of ritual [TypSpec], and the relatedness of attendees [DegRelat].

**Table 3 Classification Function Coefficients**

	Presence or Absence of Taboo Breaking	
	absent	present
Who Breaks the Taboo	-95.872	163.915
Degree of Importance Associated with the Taboo	-587.745	861.830
Specific Ritual Type	40.851	-53.234
Degree of Relatedness of Observers	47.106	-43.404
(Constant)	-179.369	-386.688

Fisher's linear discriminant functions

The following regression equation was written using the coefficients from Table 3:

If

$$\begin{aligned}
 & -179.369 + (47.106 * \text{DegRelat}) + (40.851 * \text{TypSpec}) + (-587.745 * \text{TImport}) + \\
 & (-95.872 * \text{TBreaker}) > -386.688 + (-43.404 * \text{DegRelat}) + (-53.234 * \text{TypSpec}) + \\
 & (861.830 * \text{TImport}) + (163.915 * \text{TBreaker})
 \end{aligned}$$

then taboo-breaking [TBreak] absent, else taboo-breaking present.

**Table 4 Classification Results<sup>b,c</sup>**

			Predicted Group Membership		Total
			absent	present	
Original	Count	Absent	5	0	5
		Present	0	4	4
	%	Absent	100.0	.0	100.0
		Present	.0	100.0	100.0
Cross-validated <sup>a</sup>	Count	Absent	5	0	5
		Present	0	4	4
	%	Absent	100.0	.0	100.0
		Present	.0	100.0	100.0

a. Cross validation is done only for those cases in the analysis. In cross validation, each case is classified by the functions derived from all cases other than that case.

b. 100.0% of original grouped cases correctly classified.

c. 100.0% of cross-validated grouped cases correctly classified.

The classification results from the discriminant functions analysis are shown in Table 4 (above); cross-validation correctly classified 100% of the grouped cases.

Three multivariate pie charts (Figures 6, 7, and 8), each using the presence/absence of taboo-breaking [TBreak], the importance of the taboo [TImport], and one of the other variables indicated in the discriminant functions analysis (degree of relatedness [DegRelat], specific ritual type [TypSpec], and who breaks the taboo [TBreaker]) were also created.



Figure 7 Relationship of Specific Ritual Type to Taboo Importance and Taboo-breaking

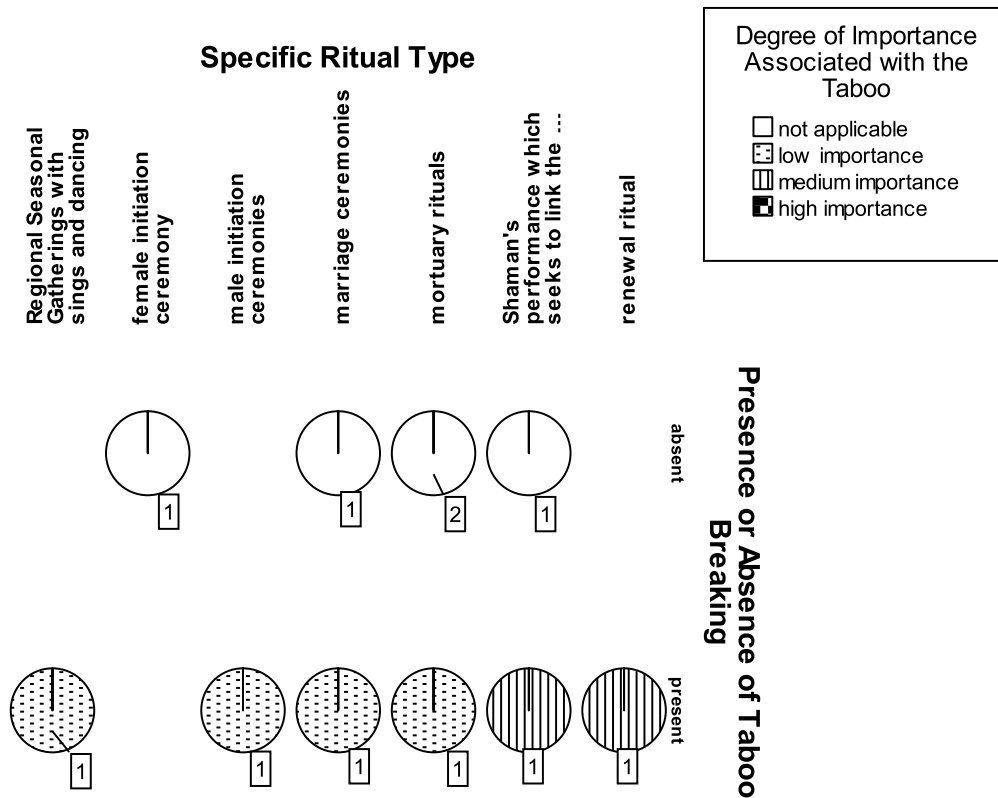
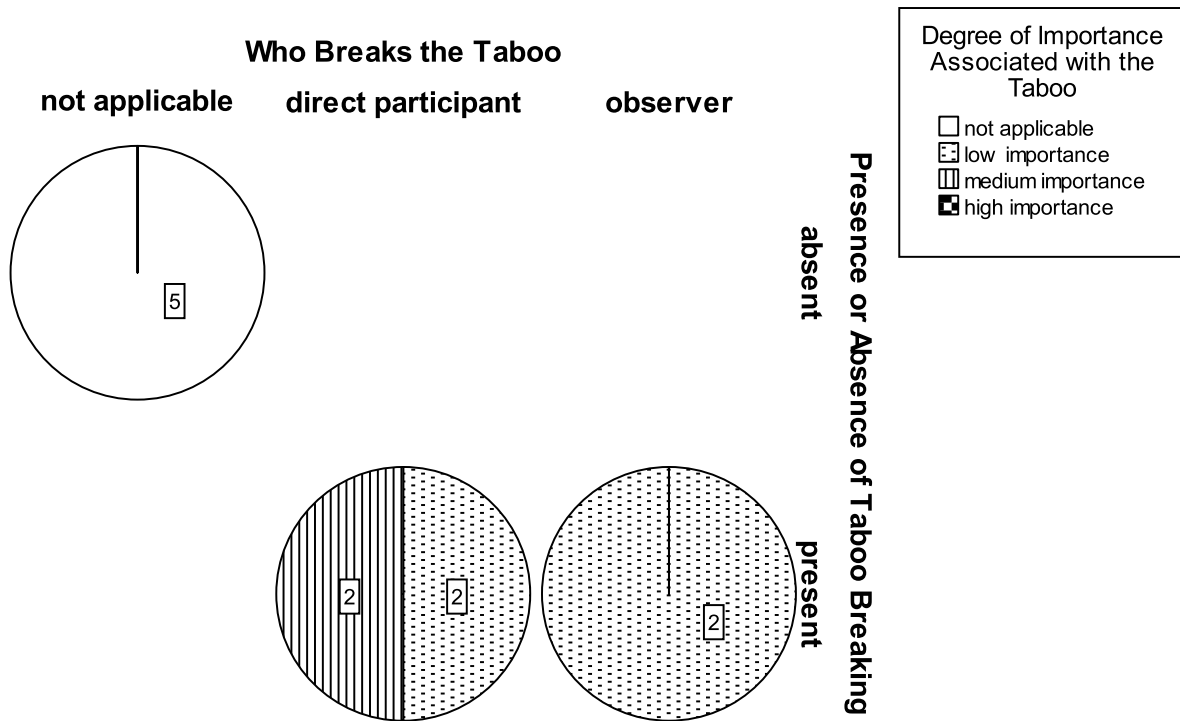


Figure 7 shows that taboo-breaking is present [TBreak = 1] for almost all types of rituals [TypSpec]; the exception is the female initiation ceremony [TypSpec = 3]. It should be noted that both cases of a taboo with a medium level of importance [TImport = 2] being broken are present in either a shaman's performance or a renewal ritual [TypSpec = 17 or 20], both of which fall under the same general type of ritual [TypGen = 5, relationship between people and forces of nature/supernatural].

Figure 8 (below) shows that the breaking of medium importance taboos [TImport = 2] only occurs in cases where a direct participant breaks the taboo [TBreaker = 1].

Figure 8 Relationship between Taboo Importance, Who Breaks the Taboo, and Taboo-breaking



Discussion

Although only preliminary conclusions can be drawn from this data due to the small sample size and exploratory nature of the research, the patterns presented above deserve careful consideration and will provide several avenues for further research.

The relationship suggesting that when observers are present [Observs] the importance of the taboo broken [TImport] decreases (illustrated in Figure 1) seems both logical and illogical at the same time. On one level, it seems reasonable that an individual would be less likely to do something considered inappropriate in front of a large group of people, but this pattern also defies the influences of group mentality one could expect to see in some of the larger rituals.

This relationship is tenuous, since only one of the two cases with a medium taboo importance [TImport] also has information for whether or not observers were present [Observs], but further investigation could confirm it.

Figure 1 also illustrates a gap in the presence of taboo-breaking [TBreak] as it relates to the relatedness of attendees to participants [DegRelat]. Taboo-breaking is only present where either no observers are present or the gathering includes at least the local community and non-local kin. While it may seem illogical at first, this pattern in the data exemplifies the influences of group mentality one could expect to see in some of the larger rituals. It is likely that group size and the relatedness of attendees weigh heavily in an individual's consideration of the costs and benefits of action or inaction (Gupta and Singh 1992), as it relates to taboo-breaking. The data suggests that taboos are most likely to be broken either in a very small group setting or in a much larger group setting, perhaps in which the taboo breaker may not personally know all of the attendees, and therefore the potential costs of action are lowered. In settings where the attendees include only the immediate/local family or the residential community, taboo-breaking seems unlikely to occur.

As the level of investment in the ritual [RInvest] increases, it becomes more likely that an observer will be the one to break the taboo [TBreaker]. This relationship is logical, since the observer is less likely than a direct participant to have invested in the ritual and therefore has less at stake. It is also interesting that all of the high investment rituals [RInvest] have taboo-breaking present [TBreak]. It may be suggested that on such important occasions, it is necessary for the social norms to be broken as an indication that this activity is separate from everyday life. This would match Freud's definition of taboo as something which is sacred and (under normal conditions) unapproachable (1950).

The relationship between the presence of observers [Observs] and the specific type of ritual [TypSpec] indicates that renewal rituals are less likely to have observers than other ritual types; this is undoubtedly due to the fact that the only case without observers present is also the only renewal ritual recorded (the ukuBhina or rain rite from the Zulu in Africa). However, as the only case known to have no observers, this ritual and ones like it should receive further consideration to determine whether or not there is something unique about this ritual type.

Figure 2 shows two interesting patterns: taboo-breaking is present in almost all of the specific types of rituals [TypSpec] recorded and more important taboos [TImport] are only broken during shaman's performances linking people to the world around them or in renewal rituals. The first pattern suggests that each specific type of ritual is as likely as any other to contain taboo-breaking. It is possible that female initiation ceremonies differ in some fundamental way and therefore are unlikely to contain taboo-breaking, but it seems more likely that the patterning is due to a limited sample size (the specific ritual type category where taboo-breaking is absent is represented by only one case). The second pattern is more difficult to explain. The two cases which represent medium importance taboos are both rituals dealing with the relationship between people and the forces of nature or the supernatural [TypGen = 5], and share the facts that in each case the taboo was broken by a direct participant and the ritual had a low level of investment. One of the cases is recorded as lacking observers; the other case lacks information about whether or not observers were present. It seems likely that the breaking of a more important taboo is linked to the low level of investment and the absence of observers. Interestingly, all of the other rituals recorded with a low level of investment lacked taboo-breaking. Another possible explanation lies in the presence of a central shaman-type figure in one of the rituals; Frazer (1922/2002) suggested that priests and kings are subject to special

taboos. Perhaps the presence of such a person influences whether or not taboo-breaking occurs. Unfortunately, without more information, these relationships are still only speculative.

Figure 3 reflects a simple but important pattern. Only direct participants [TBreaker] break more important taboos [TImport]. There are two possible explanations for this: 1) the breaking of more important taboos only occurs in situations where observers are absent, and therefore cannot break the taboo, or 2) observers are not comfortable enough to disrupt a ritual by breaking a more important taboo. Based on the discussion concerning Figure 2, the first explanation seems much more likely.

All of this combined implies that taboo-breaking during rituals does not happen at random. There are patterns within the data, despite a small sample, and these findings show that there is more to be learned about sanctioned taboo-breaking and the conditions under which it occurs. The suggestions for further research which follow are only a beginning, and since research into taboo-breaking has been largely neglected, there remain many research questions and designs that would further our understanding of this topic:

- 1) increased sample size
- 2) utilization of the presence/absence of taboo-breaking [TBreak] as the only taboo-related variable to see if stronger patterning can be determined and to predict taboo-breaking regardless of other factors
- 3) investigation of variation in results based on region, culture, or exposure to other cultures
- 4) investigation of the role of taboo-breaking within cultures
- 5) investigation of the role of appointed taboo-breakers (such as the Maidu clowns)
- 6) investigation of the types of taboos most commonly broken during rituals



## Conclusion

This research report began with a description of a gap in the anthropological literature. The gap remains, as this research can only barely begin to fill it. Additionally, the suggestions for further research above only begin to scratch the surface of this complex topic. This study has sought to answer the when of taboo-breaking during rituals: when does it occur? The why still remains quite unclear. Perhaps, as Golub (2004) and Levine (1986) suggested, it is a means to mark as separate a transitional period in life. Perhaps as Loveday (1981) and Brightman (1988) suggested, it provides a cathartic experience and a means of “regulated expression” which helps to avoid misbehavior during other times. The answers to such questions are beyond the scope of this study, and so they are left for future exploration.

This much is clear: although much more research will be required to clarify the exact relationships, the occurrence of allowed taboo-breaking during rituals seems to be influenced by certain variables and these variables should be useful in predicting future cases. The variables identified as most useful in predicting future cases include who breaks the taboo, the degree of importance associated with the taboo in question, the specific ritual type, and the degree of relatedness of the attendees.

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