AKAN VERBAL TABOOS:
TRADITIONAL AND CONTEMPORARY ISSUES

Kofi Agyekum

Abstract

This paper addresses the status of taboo expressions in Akan society looking at it from traditional usage and the changes in contemporary Akan society. It looks at verbal taboos (VT) from the theory of language ideology. The paper argues that a change in language and culture has some direct bearing on VT. We shall discuss the functions of taboo expressions in the Akan society. We shall also consider the taboo and the social class that normally use taboo expressions and why. We shall also discuss the influence of taboo expressions on other, non-taboo expressions, intralingually and interlingually. The paper discusses the sociolinguistics of VT and sees how societies put sanctions on free speech. We will thus argue that even though speech is free, there is a limit to the extent one can freely use language. The paper further considers the current state of verbal taboos especially with the advent of western education, globalisation, religion and urbanisation and the prospects for Akan verbal taboos. Finally, we shall look at the problems encountered with research into Akan verbal taboos.

Résumé

Nous abordons, dans cette article, le statut des expressions taboues dans la société akan par rapport à l’usage traditionnel et aux changements survenus dans la société akan contemporaine. Il s’agit d’analyser les tabous verbaux (VT) vis-à-vis de la théorie de l’idéologie de langue. A notre avis, des changements survenus au niveau de langue et de culture ont un rapport direct avec les tabous verbaux. Nous examinons non seulement les rôles des expressions taboues dans la société akan mais aussi les tabous et la classe sociale où ils sont habituellement employés ainsi que la justification pour leur usage.

Ensuite, nous abordons l’influence des expressions taboues sur d’autres expressions non taboues, tant au niveau intralingue que interlingue. Nous examinons, dans cet article, les dynamiques sociolinguistiques des tabous verbaux en vue d’identifier les moyens dont disposent les sociétés pour sanctionner l’expression libre. Ainsi, nous postulons que l’expression libre
nonobstant, il existe des bornes par rapport à l’usage libre des langues. Ensuite, nous analysons l’état actuel des tabous verbaux, surtout avec l’avènement des phénomènes comme l’éducation occidentale, la religion, l’urbanisation et la mondialisation, ainsi que les perspectives pour les tabous verbaux akans. Finalement, nous examinons les obstacles qui entravent la recherche sur les tabous verbaux akans.

1. Introduction: Language Ideology and Theory of Verbal Taboos

According to Silverstein (1979: 193), language ideologies are “sets of beliefs about language articulated by users as a rationalization or justification of perceived language structure and use.” The concept of language ideology has emerged recently as a productive organizing principle for the integrative study of language practices and larger social and political formations and structures of power and authority. Language ideology is useful as a framework for the ethnographic and comparative analysis of ideological systems and communicative practices in societies. It directs attention to cultural actors’ rationalisation of their own language activities. In language ideology, a person’s language is his life, and this reveals the interrelationship between language, history, identity and culture.

Language ideologies are cultural representations of the network between language and the sociocultural world that help us to understand and interpret the political, cultural, economic, law and religious events of the people, their identity, power, aesthetics, morality etc. Language ideology can also be viewed from the point of language-in-use, languages in contact, and the ideologies of “purism” and “standardization”, including verbal taboos. The social function of language is the focus. The understanding of Akan verbal taboos is based on the Akan language ideology.¹ Language ideology contributes to the study of linguistic form, and the choice of language for a particular event. The choice or avoidance of language in the Akan verbal taboo system is based on language ideology. Language ideologies are also found in the operations of institutions of power and law as we find in the avoidance of Akan verbal taboos in formal sectors.

¹ Taylor (1997) looks at the power, functions and reflexive character of language, and claims that language can only be explained as a cultural product of the reflexive application of its own creative powers to construct, regulate, and give conceptual form to objects of understanding. Language is an object of cultural understanding and any theoretical analyses of language should consider its reflexive character.
1.1 Methodology

The data for this paper were collected at various scenes of communicative interaction among the Akan. I also recorded some of the interactions and transcribed them. Apart from this I conducted interviews with some Akan speakers. I also relied on previous works on verbal taboos. One of the questions in my research interview was to find out which categories of people were interested in using imprecation and swear taboos. More than 90% of my interviewees answered that it was normally the poor and those in the lower ranks in the society. I visited the Antoa Nyamaa shrine, where it was forbidden to take pictures or record events on either a tape recorder or a video cassette. Immediately after each section, I went to the Antoa town and made my notes before leaving. I combined the face-to face interview and the questionnaire approaches, usually called the ‘self-administered questionnaire’, as a practical method in obtaining high response rates.

2. Verbal Taboos in Akan Pre-colonial Society

This section looks at verbal taboos in Akan traditional society. In the Akan traditional society, verbal taboos were linked to Akan religion, history and socio-political systems. We will see that some of the taboos have lasted and stood the test of time. Verbal taboos are universal, but administered in cultural and individual specific ways from society to society. The inclusion of vocabulary items for particular phenomena, acts, objects, etc. in the taboo culture depends on sociocultural values and attitudes. In societies with attitudes of disgust or repugnance towards sexual and excretory organs and acts, there is a greater likelihood that they will put premium on verbal taboos. The use of taboo expressions is generally influenced by the sociocultural context of the speech and the backgrounds of the participants in the social interaction.²

2.1 Categories of Akan Traditional Verbal Taboos

There are varieties of verbal taboos in Akan that were traditionally adhered to. They include ntam, ‘reminiscential oath’, duabɔ ‘imprecation’, nsemie, ‘self-imprecation’, atenidie ‘invectives’ and ammodin, ‘unmentionables’ (see Agyekum 1996).

² Jay (1977:237) aptly states that “The social-physical setting constrains word usage as much as the relation between the speaker and the listener ... Where we are, influences what should and should not be said.” Enculturation and socialisation, age, gender, social status, degree of religiosity and educational level influence the use of taboo expressions in speech. Even within a specific culture, words that may be taboo and shocking to one individual and/or a particular group of people may not necessarily be so to others of a different background.
Ntam is a form of oath that involves an evocation of the past unpleasant experiences of a people and the state. The Akans believe that the utterance of an ntam taboo word has the magical power to bring about the recurrence of the same or a similar event. It touches on the emotions of the people and reminds them of past predicaments and thus disturbs them psychologically. Busia, one of the renowned scholars of Akan, commented on this as follows:

The important thing is that the oaths allude to distasteful incidents or tribal disasters connected with the ancestors. It is a taboo to allude to these misfortunes, because the ancestors are either annoyed or aggrieved by the recollection of their disaster and this estranges them from the community. There is also the fear that the use of the oath may cause repetition of the misfortune to fall on the successors of the ancestors. (Busia1968: 75-78)

The Akans consider ntam oaths as referring to mournful events, dark secrets, weaknesses and shortfalls of the people that should not be recalled or resurrected from the past, hence a taboo item.

Duaŋɔ, ‘grievance imprecation by invocation’ is a type of religious verbal taboo that involves the employment of magical and powerful supernatural powers to cause harm to one’s addressee. In duaŋɔ, ‘imprecation’ there is a grievance between a speaker and his victim and the imprecator desires to harm the target. Akans invoke supernatural powers in defence and execution of certain forms of justice. Akan duaŋɔ, ‘imprecation’ normally arises out of enmity, breakdown of love, lack of peace, conflict, anger, social avoidance, selfishness, attempt to eliminate a fellow, curse, etc.

Nsédie, ‘assertive self-imprecatory oath’ is another religious oath where the speaker invokes the name of a supernatural being to unleash its wrath, curse and punishments on the speaker himself/herself if what is asserted is a perjury. A speaker uses the supernatural being as an instrument to fulfil an obligation, pledge, promise or assertion, failure of which he faces a punishment. In a society like Akan where religious faith is very strong, taboo expressions related to religion e.g. duaŋɔ, ‘grievance imprecation’, nsedie ‘oath’ etc. were very strong (see Agyekum 1996, 1999).

Atnnidie ‘invective’ is an abusive word or expression with a violent censure, reproach and face threat to the addressee. Invectives are more emotionally oriented and considered inappropriate and embarrassing, and intended to offend the addressee(s) or targeted group. Invectives are backed by cultural and societal perceptions that negatively refer to the origin and genealogy, deformity and invalidity, religion, occupation, and sexual organs of the addressee.

Invectives take the form of linguistic warfare between participants in a communicative situation where the weapon is the abusive language they use to psychologically affront and hurt the feelings of one another. Invectives throw psychological bombs at the hearts of the
opponents, tarnish their image and damage their emotions and thereby curb co-operation between people. Invectives remind people of painful events or facts about themselves or their relatives living and/or dead, that they would rather not recall. It is the antagonistic nature of the verbal expressions and their negative social implications for the abuse that render them verbal taboos (see also Allan and Burridge 1991:117). Invectives undermine peace, and there is the need for linguistic disarmament that takes the form of prohibition, inhibition and the restriction on the use of invective expressions that are not decorous.

Ammodin, ‘unmentionables’ are the type of verbal taboos that we normally avoid in our daily lives because the topics form part of our daily human communication. Ammodin expressions are to be avoided because they are considered distasteful and indecent for normal linguistic usage. They are offensive, face threatening and evocative; they affront the faces of addressee and even by-standers and cause them psychological pain. Ammodin expressions centre around the following: naming taboo, death, pregnancy, excrement, sexual organs, urination, menstruation, (body parts and effluvia, scatological substances), dreadful diseases like leprosy, impotency, barrenness, tuberculosis, epilepsy, insanity, flora and fauna including snake, leopard, lion, gnomes and fairies, whale, crocodile, elephant, monster, eagle, scorpion, odi tree and homakyem and liana rope.

2.2 Interlingual and Intralingual Taboos

In this section, we shall look at how taboo expressions can affect non-taboo expressions to the extent that the non-taboo expressions eventually become established in the minds of the people as taboo expressions, and as a result they would not like to mention them. This section considers (i) intralingual and (ii) interlingual expressions.

Intralingual Taboo is the phenomenon where the sounds of taboo words correspond with other homophonous words that are non-taboo within the same language. Intralingual verbal taboo expressions that become contaminated in Akan normally relate to sex and to scatological substances. In Akan, the bare word (taboo) for the female sexual organ, vagina, is ɛtwɛ. It has affected other words like twedɛ ‘a knock at the head’ and aba-twɛ ‘elbow’, so it becomes very difficult to mention these words. With regard to twedɛ ‘a knock at the head’ people prefer to use the synonym koto that has no resemblance to the taboo expression. The Fante expression e-twam, ‘it has passed’, pronounced as [etwem], corresponds homophonously with the words etwe-mu [etwem] (lit.) ‘inside the vagina’, hence it becomes very difficult to say a sentence that has the expression e-twam, ‘it has passed’ pronounced as [etwem]. I find it embarrassing to sing a Fante Christian Asɔr Ndwom, ‘Christian Hymn’ Number 93 (CAN 93) which reads ɔsɔr nye asaase [etwem] kɔ ‘heaven and earth have passed away’. 
When I was young, in order to chastise friends for mentioning taboo expressions, we posed some questions whose answers would phonologically appear to be taboo expressions although they are not. Below is an example of such a phenomenon.

Q: Sewoko kuro bi a yefer he se Te areso na wohia panin bi na sibisa wo seahante wokohene areso a, woheka se?
A: Meka se mekoTe areso.

Q: ‘If you attend church at a place called Te and an elder meets you and asks: “young man where do you go to church” what will you say?’
A: I will say “meko Te areso”, ‘I go to church at Te’.

The underlined expression mekoTe areso ‘I go to church at Te’, is non-taboo; however, it will sound like me koa areso ‘my penis is erected’, which is a taboo. The addressee is accused of mentioning the unmentionable and therefore teased at (see Agyekum 2009:70 on speech play).

In some cases, when peer group members meet they ask their colleagues to recite tongue twisters, some of which would sound like taboo expressions. Let us consider the one below.

Papa a rekɔ yi hyɛ nwi kyɛ ‘the man who is going is wearing a woollen hat’.

In rapid speech the sentence turns out to sound as Papa a eke yi hwe nwi twɛ, ‘the man who is going looks at hairy vagina’. This is a taboo sentence. The words hye ‘wear’ and kye ‘hat’ are assimilated into hwe ‘look’ and twɛ ‘vagina’ respectively. It becomes a taboo expression, first by the mere mention of the taboo expression twɛ ‘vagina’ and secondly as an insult for a man to be interested in looking at “hairy vagina”.

**Interlingual Taboo** occurs where a taboo expression in L1 that has a phonetic resemblance with non-taboo expression in L2 affects the speakers of L1 in mentioning the non-taboo expressions in L2. In Ga, a Ghanaian language spoken in Accra, a personal name Atwɛ (female) resembles the Akan taboo expression etwɛ ‘vagina’. There is also the Ada “tribal” surname Nakte that is similar to the Akan taboo word kɔte, ‘penis’. It is thus very difficult for Akan speakers to mention the names of these people for fear of mentioning the unmentionable.

The English sound [ə] shewa is homophonous with the Akan word hyewa, ‘scrotum’ which is a taboo expression. In my linguistic tutorials with the first year undergraduates of the University of Ghana in 1989, it became very difficult for me to tell my Akan students that the sound is called ‘schwa’.

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3 The English word pity is also an embarrassment to Krobo speakers of Ghana, since the same phonetic form pitii also means clitoris in the local language. Haas (1964) records that Thai students of English felt reluctant to mention the English word key since the word kʰii (same sound) in Thai language means ‘excrement’. The English word yet closely resembles the Thai word je’d ‘to have intercourse’. Thai students of English thus feel reluctant in saying the English word yet. Haas (1964) refers to the
2.3 Verbal Taboo Avoidance Techniques

There are linguistic tools that enable speakers to “say without saying”, i.e. to comment on tabooed concepts by speaking the truth or reality whilst avoiding the forbidden words. I refer to these tools as taboo avoidance techniques (TAT). The various techniques include (a) euphemisms, (b) hyperbole, (c) metonymy, (d) understatements, (e) coinage, (f) secret codes, (g) speech play, (h) talking backwards (i) the use of the apologetic disclaimers (sēbe) and (j) circumlocution. Of all these, the paper focuses on the most efficient and popular one, euphemism.

Akans try as much as possible to avoid verbal taboos by using euphemism as the major taboo avoidance technique. Euphemisms are the polished ways of expressing verbal taboos e.g. death, sexual organs, menstruation, pregnancy, etc. Wardhaugh (1992: 237) considers euphemisms as “the result of dressing up certain areas in life to make them more presentable. Euphemistic words and expressions allow us to talk about unpleasant things and ‘neutralize’ their unpleasantness.” In the view of Allan and Burridge (1991: 3), euphemisms are “expressions that seek to avoid being offensive.” Euphemisms, therefore, serve as a shield against the offensive nature of the taboo expressions.

Euphemisms are verbal art forms which the speaker uses to embellish his speech in an attempt to show his communicative competence and linguistic politeness within the sociocultural norms of Akan communication. Euphemisms are used as necessary substitutes for verbal taboos to tone down the unpleasantness and afford the speaker an escape from the strict rules and sanctions on verbal taboos. I propose that within the context of verbal taboo language, euphemistic language should be referred to as “surrogate verbal taboos”.

If a euphemistic term is long over-used it becomes a taboo expression, and another finer expression would have to be used to replace it. Adams (1985) refers to this phenomenon as euphemisms for euphemisms. An example is the use of the Akan expression efie nipa, ‘home member’, as a euphemism to replace the taboo expression ɔdɔnkɔ, ‘slave’. Presently, the expression efie nipa too has become contaminated and hence a taboo expression.

In the evolution of a taboo system among the Akans, a euphemistic expression can have an upward movement and can subsequently be developed into an ntam ‘reminiscential oath’. For example, the expression Korɔmante which historically started as a euphemism for the phenomenon of sound clash between languages as “accidental phonetic resemblances” between perfectly harmless words of one language and impolite or obscene words of another language (see Haas 1964 491: 493). According to Farb (1973: 82) in the Nootka Indian language of Vancouver Island, British Columbia, the English word such so closely resembles the Nootka word for “cunt” that teachers find it very difficult to convince their students to utter the English word such in class.
death of an Asante king has developed into an ntam and may not be mentioned at all these days.

People may not utter the taboo expressions for fear and matters of social decorum, but naturally they still talk about them in their heads and in other sanctionless situations. For this reason, euphemisms have a very high mortality rate, for they keep on losing their potency in communication (cf. Redfern 1994: 1181).

3. Functions and Responses to Taboo Expressions in Akan Society

Taboo expressions are proscribed and there are sanctions imposed on violators. This does not really mean that they are absolutely negative; there are certain situations when taboo expressions have positive social and psychological functions in the society. People use taboo expressions in certain situations for the following reasons (see also Apte 1994: 4514):

(1) The use of taboo expressions gives the individual a feeling of momentary freedom from social conventions and constraints. The prohibition of verbal taboos puts some limits on the freedom of certain expressions and binds the speaker in his speech; if he violates them he can speak freely and enjoy a period of linguistic freedom.

(2) Individuals may also use taboo expressions as a protest against what they consider antiquated values regarding speech. Some contemporary speakers think that strict adherence to taboo culture is primitive, and protest by using taboo expressions. Some contemporary Akan highlife musicians hide behind paronyms to sing profane songs by pronouncing non-verbal taboos words as if they were taboo words, and thereby violate the rules on the use of verbal taboos and also run away from the sanctions on verbal taboos.

(3) Taboo expressions may be used as verbal aggression; commonly in ethnic slurs since such words reflect the strong aggressive and hostile feelings a speaker may have towards certain ethnic groups. Such invective taboo expressions are meant to insult and offend the targeted group, like what is found among politicians (see Agyekum 2004a on political invective).

(4) Swear items are intimately bound up with the language of abuse, and they often carry a load of expression. Taylor (1976: 43-63) refers to this taboo loading as ‘vehemence’. ‘Vehemence’ may indicate the speaker’s general mood and emotional state at the time of the utterance, or indicate one’s attitude to the addressee or to the referent of the utterance.

The use of swear words would mark a speaker as socially undesirable. They may however, be used during the Nsɛe day in the Elmina Bakatue festival. On this day, people who present themselves as decorous and decent and therefore fail to use abusive words are considered odd. In this cultural context, the violation of verbal taboos is an expression of the low social class of the speaker. Those who fail to use verbal taboos are considered as distancing themselves from the group; this is reversal of rituals. This means that in certain identifiable contexts, taboo expressions are used as a mechanism for solidarity (see the examples on Ghanaian university students in section 4).
(5) Individuals may use taboo expressions to express pent-up emotions, such as anger or frustration (cf. Montagu 1967). People whose occupations are very stressful use taboo words to steam off the tension and frustration (see section 4).

(6) Taboo expressions are used as social checks and balances especially on the people at the helm of administration. In certain sections of some Akan festivals, especially the Apɔɔ of Techiman and the Nsɛɛ of Elmina (mentioned above), the ban on the use of taboos is lifted and subjects can then hurl insults at the king and draw his attention to misdemeanours of his administration (see Agyekum 1996 chap. 5)

4. Major Changes and Decline of Verbal Taboo Expressions in Modern Akan Society

In all societies, sociological changes bring about linguistic changes. The prohibition on the use of taboo expressions is a crucial attribute of the taboo nature of the words, but with time the repeated use of taboo expressions diminishes their importance, sacredness, and taboo nature and they become a common-place. Jay (1977: 237) writes “what words are considered dirty also fluctuates with the passage of time; therefore the members of a set of dirty words are not static.4

The major changes and decline of Akan verbal taboos are brought about because the Akan culture and society have come under successive waves of ‘de-culturation’ and social restructuring, transformation and modernisation. The erosion, decline and the social restructuring of many taboo expressions have been caused by colonialism, westernisation, western formal education, foreign religion (especially Christianity and Islam) and globalisation. Modernisation and the advancement of modern technology have reduced the danger and unpredictability associated with certain areas of human life e.g. hunting, fishing, religion, etc.5 These factors partly account for the decline of itam, duabɔ and nseddie taboo expressions in Akan. In addition to these, are post-independence socio-political changes with a “culture of silence” under military regimes and the abuse of “free speech” under more “liberal governments”.

Among the Akan, as in most African cultures, the taboo expressions are motivated by superstitions based on the danger and unpredictability of certain ways of life of the people,  

4 Many expressions over a period of years undergo a “euphemistic taboo cycle”. The cycle begins when euphemisms are derived to relieve the tension associated with taboo words. The new euphemisms through their association with the taboo referent eventually become “contaminated” as well and must be replaced with other euphemisms and the cycle continues.

5 The danger and uncertainty are normally solved by magical powers and beliefs, and man has no control of his life since everything depends on nature and spirits. In order to save his life and live long, man has to abide by and comply with what the tradition and culture dictate to him, including the observance of taboos.
their occupations, religion and their entire sociocultural lives. If modernisation sets in people try to find scientific explanations for the occurrence of certain mishaps and accidents, and find solutions and means of control. In such situations, their beliefs in the magical powers are drastically reduced. As a result of this, the taboo expressions based on these beliefs are also thrown overboard (see Knipe and Bromley 1984: 188-191 for the explanation of the decline of taboo expressions among the Scottish fishermen).

The main reason for the decline of the religious verbal taboos, duabo, however, is the introduction of Christianity and Islam that have condemned the African Traditional Religion. It is not surprising these days to hear Akan evangelists and preachers blaspheming with the names of the abosom, ‘the minor deities’ and even hurling insults at them. In cases where dreadful diseases have attacked people and some members of the speech community think that the diseases may have something to do with duabo or the deities, others would condemn them. They would prefer that the patient is either sent to the hospital or to a spiritual church healer.6

The introduction of western judicial systems has reduced the use of ntam oaths in Akan. Many people would now want to settle their cases at the orthodox courts rather than embarking on ntam for the settlement of the cases at the local arbitration. In spite of this, the present study revealed that if there is an element of ntam evocation in a case that has been sent to the western court, the ntam aspect must be handled at the traditional court. According to the Asantes in particular the modern courts do not have the authority to try ntam cases (see Agyekum 2004b).

In Akan society, the nature of some occupations demands the use of songs and profanity to let off the steam of frustrations and tension. We realise these among soldiers, fishermen, log-cutters, and presently among students of higher institutions. There are three halls of residence in Ghana where students are especially fond of violating the verbal taboos. These are the Commonwealth Hall of the University of Ghana, Atlantic Hall, University of Cape Coast, and the Unity Hall of the Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology Kumasi. Students of these halls engage themselves in the composition and singing of profane songs and the use of blasphemous expressions against the supernatural powers, especially God. They have “profane choirs” and it is obligatory for every member of the choir to compose a new profane song during his time at the university (see Obeng 1993). During the hall week celebrations of Commonwealth Hall, the chief priest pours libation and the whole poetic text must be in profane language. The expressions in the text normally refer to sex, scatological elements and other blasphemous expressions against God. Ironically, they are afraid of using names of the abosom ‘minor deities’ for fear of instant punishments (see Agyekum 1996 chapters 3 and 4).

6 There are a number of churches in Ghana which are termed “spiritual churches”. These churches combine certain aspects of traditional African way of worship. They are considered to embark on spiritual healing and they are believed to heal certain dreadful diseases. Apart from these they are believed to be witch hunters.
The students use these taboo expressions solely for entertainment after a hard day’s academic work. These three halls organise competitions on the use of profane songs and taboo expressions. The winner is the group who can use more grievous sexual and scatological taboo expressions that would have attracted severe sanctions outside this realm of entertainment.

When languages come into contact, language conflict results. In a bilingual society, this affects the communicative competence of the various speakers. In such a situation, competence, especially in the native language which has systematically developed in a natural way, can be altered sometimes very drastically, by new social factors from the other languages and cultures. In such a contact situation, the language and culture of a donor country influence the recipient society. This is exactly the phenomenon currently going on in Ghana which has affected all the Ghanaian languages. English has become deeply embedded in the languages and culture and has drastically altered people’s competence in their mother tongue. At the same time, children do not normally get a systematic natural acquisition of communicative competence in their local languages. In the urban centres and cities, communicative competence in the mother tongue is highly reduced. In some families, the parents prefer to use English rather than their native languages in communicating with their children.

The language and culture conflict has affected verbal taboos. Most people do not know when and when not to use certain expressions. They are not competent with the use of the appropriate euphemisms in communication. This is the more reason why most aspects of verbal taboos in Akan are dying off. At the Manhyia court, people who have cases are supposed to defend themselves by using Akan, the local language. Both defendants and complainants who code-mix and code-switch with the English language are normally rebuked and their statements are not considered to have been well heard by the jury. They are mostly found wanting when they are reporting cases involving verbal taboos where there is the need for the use of taboo avoidance techniques like euphemisms, circumlocution, proverbs and speech play.

Individuals who use taboo expressions excessively in their speech may become insensitive to both the socially determined taboo nature of these words and their offensiveness to listeners. To such people the value of taboo expressions and the cultural attitude towards them wane. It comes to a point where people notice such speakers for their peculiar communicative patterns and are, therefore, not bothered by their use of taboo expressions. They may be labelled as communicatively incompetent. Nevertheless, those who consider them as using the taboo expressions to create fun would even like to have encounters with them as a form of entertainment. There was a woman called Afua Donkor at Edwinase in Ashanti Region who was fond of using taboo expressions related to sex. Some men were interested in conversing with her to hear issues about sex, and sometimes, one could see her with four or five men conversing on matters related to sex.
5. Taboos and Resistance to Social Change

In spite of the evidence that the impact of the Akan Verbal Taboo System is waning as a result of socio-political factors in language and culture such as urbanisation, modern communication systems, new religious movements, literacy campaigns, etc., we wish to emphasize that most Akan citizens still adhere to some aspects of the Akan culture. It is, therefore, very difficult for Akans to do away entirely with their culture on the grounds that some of the belief systems, like the verbal taboo system, lack empirical proofs which relate to the events that occur in their lives. We argue that beliefs need not be rational objects or even based on a system of empirical explications. Verbal taboos among the Akan, will, therefore, continue to exist in the foreseeable future, except that this will vary as more people become literate in the western tradition. Furthermore, it will vary as more Akan citizens adhere to other religions like Christianity, Islam, and Buddhism. But our prediction is that Akan verbal taboos will survive the test of all these influences and cultural waves. Some verbal taboos are resilient and resistant to social change, especially *invectives* and *ntam*.

Invective expressions are one of the most time-resistant elements in language, since they are “verbal rituals” that are very difficult to transform because of their long stay in the language and culture (cf. Grimes 1977). An invective would not be able to satisfy the emotional needs of the speaker if its impact is ineffective. For example, the Akan word *ɔdɔnkɔ* ‘slave’ has existed in the language for centuries, but its psychological effect exists up to now and it has not been possible to come out with a new word in Akan that would connote the same derogatory and discriminatory effect. The taboo expression *ɔdɔnkɔ* is continuously effective because it relates to the painful acts that were encountered during the period of slavery and how slave traders and owners maltreated the slaves. Slaves were classified as “subhuman” and therefore any allusion to slavery calls forth to the insidious crime to mankind.

The meaning and intent of invectives transcends the individual to the collective level, and their effectiveness depends on a long period of social affiliation and perceptions. The linguistic forms and connotations of invectives are transferred and relearned by each new generation of speakers. If this historical association is lost, the taboo form loses its impact.

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7 The Mirror (January 6th 1996: 3) reports that the king-makers and the people of Akrodie in the Brong Ahafo Region of Ghana (an Akan speaking area) are calling for the dethronement of their Omanhene Daasebre Boakye Asiama. According to the citizens of the town, the chief is frowning upon the custom of the people. Among other charges levelled against him include the following: (1) he is alleged to have refused to pour libation to the gods of the land and the ancestors since his installation, because according to him, his position as an archbishop does not permit him to do so, (2) he has allowed a woman in her menstrual period to live in the palace as against the custom of the people, (3) he has weeded the sacred grove known as *Nsamampo* where royals of Akrodie are buried. This area, according to Akan custom, should not be cultivated. The above report confirms how strongly the Akan’s attach themselves to their culture and force their taboo systems.
Another most resistant verbal taboo type in Akan is *ntam*. The state *ntam* like *OtumfoɔNtankɛseɛ* has existed from time immemorial but its power and potency have not declined in any way. Even though the frequency and the functional use of *ntam* have reduced with the introduction of western judicial apparatus, anytime it is mentioned, its solemnity and supremacy is felt (see Agyekum 2004b on *ntam*). The maintenance and resilience of *ntam* is based on the fact that it is reminiscential and deals with unpleasant historical events of the people that are kept secret.

*Duabo* and *nsedie* are also very resistant. The changes in *duabo* and *nsedie* taboo relate only to the type of nemesis named. The mention of the name of a supernatural power in *duabo* ‘grievance imprecation’ and *nsedie* ‘oath’ is based on the power of the deity to perform the wishes of the speaker and its popularity (see Agyekum 1999). For example, the name of the deities *Nana Kwaku Firi* of Nwoase in the Brong Ahafo Region of Ghana, *Antoa Nyamaa* of Asante and *Akonnedi* of Larteh in the Eastern Region are used in imprecations in many parts of the Akan community up to now.

6. Verbal Taboo and Social Class in Akan

This section discusses the various participants in the Akan society who use verbal taboos. The social index is in terms of sex, age, religion, education, and urbanisation. Among the Akan, *duabo* and *nsedie* can be employed by any person. The only exceptions are certain sacred persons in the Akan community who are prohibited from incurring the dangerous risks of *duabo*, ‘grievance imprecation’ and *nsedie*, ‘assertive self-imprecatory oath’. Among the Akan, traditional priests, chiefs, and kings who occupy certain stools should neither implicate, be implicated nor swear an *nsedie*, ‘oath’. The reason is that they are the custodians of the deities, and should therefore, revere the deities and avoid using their names in vain, which would defile and demystify them.

Concerning the sociolinguistic aspect of the value of *duabo* and *nsedie*, it is recorded and pointed out in many societies that the concepts of imprecation/curse and oath, although verbal taboos, are in some way instruments of the weak. The findings of my research indicated that more than 90% of the people involved in imprecating and swearing were the poor and those in the lower ranks in the society. One of my informants, Opanin Kwaku Addai of Assisiriwa in Ashanti told me, “as for a rich man if you steal his ten pounds it does not affect him so he will not implicate.” The rich, the higher ranked, and the most important personalities in the society will normally prefer to send their cases to court. This issue is confirmed by Lester (1987) when he states that “those who have physical, military or judicial power tend to use such power. They use it to maintain their vision of order. It is rather the aged, the sick, the pregnant, the orphaned, the outcast who lack such power, and hence they resort to the power of the spoken word. They believe in the instrumentality of words and their causal “power” to make and unmake.”

Women also occupy certain specific positions with regard to *duabo* and *nsedie*. In addition to the priests and the chiefs, pregnant women and those in their menstrual period should neither implicate nor be the subject of imprecation nor swear an *nsedie*, ‘oath’. The reason is that a
menstruating woman is considered to be unclean and must, therefore, have nothing to do with deities, who are regarded as sacred, for she may defile and disempower them (see Agyekum 2002 on menstruation). With regard to a pregnant woman, there is the fear that any harm resulting from imprecation will affect the unborn child. Montagu (1967: 37-38) also records a similar issue among the Maoris of New Zealand. He writes “Even to the present day the Maoris of New Zealand strongly believe in the power of the curse. Pregnant women must not swear nor may curse too much for this endangers the baby’s welfare.”

My research findings also revealed that in the Akan society, in terms of gender, it is women who are particularly interested in speaking the taboo expressions of duabɔ and nzedie. I attended the Asantehemmaa’s court for three months. This court generally deals with feminine cases and domestic cases that the king’s court, saddled with state and paramount cases, does not have time to handle. In fact, about 50% of the cases tried there were on duabɔ and nzedie verbal taboos and the participants were normally women, especially middle aged ones. There were fewer cases that involved imprecation between men and women or between men only. Such cases were usually between wives and their husbands. The participation of females in duabɔ and nzedie is in contrast with ntam, ‘reminiscential oath’ that my research revealed that is normally used by men. Ntam is mostly related to chieftaincy, stool and land disputes, and in Akan such cases are normally male-oriented.

The research findings also revealed that non-Christians, non-Moslems and illiterates were much more engaged in duabɔ and nzedie than Christians, Moslems and literates. In much the same way it was found out that participants in duabɔ and nzedie are mostly found in the rural areas rather than in the towns and cities. Notwithstanding the categories of people who use imprecation and oaths, there are idiosyncratic linguistic behaviours towards these issues. There are people and families who would want to use invectives, nzedie and duabɔ irrespective of the social class, sex, religion, rank or status, habitat in the society.

In contemporary Ghanaian politics there is a trend of change whereby political activists in the major political parties, especially from the NDC, have resorted to the use of duabɔ, ‘imprecation’. The former president of Ghana once mentioned the Antoa Nyamaa deity as a powerful source that could be invoked to prove the truth. In another instance one Dr. Asemfoforo, an NDC regular caller to radio programmes, asked the President J.K Kufour to invoke the Ntoa Nyamaa to imprecate himself if he has not misused state funds. The latest is the duabɔ, ‘imprecation’ by Mr. Ohene Agyekum, the NDC regional Chairman for Ashanti Region, during the 2008 elections, and another by a teacher Sarkodie Bafoe from Kintampo in the Brong Ahafo Region of Ghana.

With invective, the research findings revealed that it is normally women more than men who engage themselves in it. As far as the rural and the urban areas are concerned there was no major difference. The cases that I observed at the Asantehemmaa’s court were both from Kumasi Metropolitan and also from the rural areas of the Ashanti.

The current trend, however, is that some people from rich homes are becoming exceedingly rude and disrespectful and hence use more invectives than those from the poorer. The poor fear that the use of invective can lead them into trouble and into arbitration that may involve
the payments of fines in cash and in kind, so they want to refrain from it. The people from rich families would, however, be prepared to bear the financial consequences of the use of invective. It is not uncommon to hear such remarks as:

\[ Keka \text{ bi kyereno } \text{ eba a, med\textit{i}} \text{ ho asem} \quad \text{(lit.)} \]
\[ \text{‘Just tell him what you want, if it turns into trouble, I am ready to deliberate on that’}. \]

It implies, just hurl the invectives at him, I will fully support you if any trouble should crop up.

My current research on political invective in contemporary Ghanaian politics has also revealed that some members of the ruling National Democratic Congress (NDC) and the major opposition party New Patriotic Party (NPP) are fond of hurling invectives at each other, and many newspaper publications have reports of these. Some of the insults have been exaggerated by the partisan newspapers (see Agyekum 2004a).

In addition to the above issues, chiefs and people who occupy thrones are by custom and tradition not expected to use invective, for in certain scenarios the addressee may be tempted to reply with a more serious invective. This issue is supported by the Akan maxim which states that \[ abufuo \text{ nnim ne wura ba}, \quad \text{(lit) ‘anger does not know its master’s child’}. \] This is to imply that if one is steamed up he may let off invective towards his own master. It was however, realised that illiterates, non-Moslems and non-Christians are much more interested in the use of invectives than their literate, Moslem and Christian counterparts. The use of taboo avoidance techniques like euphemistic expressions is in the custody of the aged, those in the rural areas and the illiterates. The research also revealed that men and women use euphemisms equally.

### 7. Problems with Research into Akan Verbal Taboos

Due to the taboo nature of the topic, it becomes very difficult for interviewers themselves to ask questions about such topics as sex, excrement, menstruation, etc. Most of the topics have been held so sacrilegious and magical that interviewees are in most cases not ready to talk about them. In most cases, where interviewers were so bold as to ask questions about these topics, the interviewees and the entire society’s attitude towards interviewers were negative.\(^8\)

With regard to taboo expressions on \textit{ntam}, ‘reminiscential oath’, since it involves past historical experiences and predicaments of a state, people were not ready to talk about them

\[^8\] In some instances, people looked at researchers of verbal taboo with scorn and feel that they only trouble them with “foolish questions”. Some questioned “don’t you have anything else to do?” Some people also remarked “why should you go to school up to this level only to study such foolish things as these?”
especially with reference to their origin. At a point where I wanted to find out the origin of the *Otumfo NtankanseMmiensa* ‘The Great Oath’ of the Asantes, a renowned *akyeame*, ‘the chief’s spokesman’, told me point blank “Menim nanso eno dee merenka nkyerewo. ‘I know it but as for that I will not tell you’. He just gave me a superficial view of it. Interestingly, I read a book written by a foreigner about the history of Asante and found out that the real circumstances leading to the *ntam* had been clearly and categorically stated.

In terms of *duabo* and *nsedie*, it meant going into the shrines; the major problems were that in the first place, people were not always ready to give you a full account of what happens. The ideal thing is first to become a member of the shrine. This would involve worshipping with them before getting insight into the secrets of the religion. At some of the shrines that I visited, especially at the Antoa Nyamaa shrine, it was forbidden to take pictures and also to record events on either a tape recorder or a video cassette. One may ask, couldn’t you have hidden the tape recorder? This was not possible because from the initial stages they would instil fear in you that if you do that you will be punished by the wrath of the deity. Also for ethical reasons, it was unfair to go against the wishes of one’s informants. One could only take down notes or try to use his memory and recollection. This method makes the researcher miss some of the points. In view of this, I had to go there many times in order to capture a ritual.

The other major problem was the extent of coverage. The research involved travelling to all the four corners of the Akan speech community, and this involved a lot of money. With an ethnographic approach in an illiterate society, much depended on face to face interviews. It was not feasible or reliable to send questionnaires to the respondents, hoping that they would finish and post them. One had to chase the questionnaire, and the problem was that at the appointed time of collection it turned out that the person had not even started, and a new appointment would have to be booked. It was not all that fruitful to rely solely on the questionnaire. The best practical method for obtaining high response rates was a combination of the face-to-face interview and the questionnaire approach usually called the ‘self-administered questionnaire’. However, the problem with this is that it is very costly and also takes a longer period to get the necessary data (see Kidder 1981: 151). Again, since most of the topics involved a narration of past predicaments, the Akan culture demands that the interviewer should not go empty handed but must send some drinks and other gifts. These types of drinks are also very costly.

**8. Conclusion**

This paper has examined Akan traditional verbal taboos and the changes and decline of taboo expressions in contemporary Akan society. It looked at the extent to which the changes in the society affect the taboo expressions. We saw that a change in language and culture has a direct bearing on verbal taboos. We pointed out that taboo expressions are socioculturally determined and the domain of taboo expressions varies across cultures, even though verbal taboos are universal. Verbal taboo expressions depend on sociocultural values and attitudes
of the particular society, and on the context of speech and the backgrounds of the participants in the social interaction.

The paper revealed that there are certain situations when taboo expressions have both social and psychological positive functions that help the individuals and the society. The paper considered the changes and stability of taboo expressions and indicated that while some of the taboo expressions can easily be influenced and decline with time, others like ntam and invectives are very resilient. The major linguistic tool for taboo avoidance is euphemisms; however, it is also possible for a euphemistic term to be over-used and hence become a taboo expression itself; then another finer expression would have to take its place.

The observance of verbal taboo among the Akan of Ghana today has declined. Today most contemporary Akan speakers do not care much about violating or respecting the traditional Akan verbal taboos. The most popular transgressors are the highlife musicians who indulge in profane songs. Among the Akan, taboo expressions are motivated by superstition, danger and the unpredictability of certain ways of life of the people, their occupations, religion and entire sociocultural lives. Modernism, foreign religion and the disbelief in superstitions have lowered the status of Akan verbal taboos, especially those that are related to religion.

The paper considered whether social variables like class, gender, age religion, urbanisation, and education influence the contemporary laxity in observance of Akan verbal taboos, or it is globalisation which is the major culprit. The findings from this paper suggest that each of these factors has a role to play, even though some of them carry more weight than others. Finally, the paper drew out the problems that were encountered in the research into Akan verbal taboos. It considered the subject area as very sensitive, to both the researcher and the interviewee.

References


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