

SPEAKING THE UNSPEAKABLE: PROVERBS OF OBSCENITY AND INVECTIVES IN AKAN

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ABSTRACT

The unspeakable or verbal taboos are words that are considered in bad taste by speakers of a language. They are associated with things that are not said, particularly in words and expressions in a given society because of their indecency, shocking character or immorality. Verbal taboos in Akan include *ntam* 'reminiscential oath', *duabɔ* 'imprecation', *nsedie* 'self-imprecation', *atɛnnidie* 'invectives', *ammɔdin* 'unspeakable'. The unspeakable may include the effluvia of the human body: faeces, menstrual fluid, etc. and the sex organs and acts related to sex. The data for this paper was drawn from Akan news on Adom FM (a local Akan radio station in Ghana) and an Akan proverb contest on Peace FM (a local Akan radio station) from June 2023 to December 2023. In addition, a questionnaire was conducted with 118 level 300 native Akan speakers at the Faculty of Ghanaian languages Education, University of Education, Winneba. The paper focuses on invectives and the unspeakable in Akan and argues that although the Akan culture does not allow the use of these expressions in normal speech, they are permitted in proverbs.

Keywords: Verbal Taboos, Language Ideology, Language Of Proverbs, Akan Culture.

1. INTRODUCTION

This paper discusses the exceptions to Akan verbal taboos within the framework of *language ideology*. According to Agyekum (2006), *language ideology* can be viewed from the point of *language-in-use*, *languages in contact*, *purism*, and *standardization*. In this paper, *language ideology* is viewed from the point of *language-in-use*. A cursory look at the literature on *language ideology* shows that Silverstein (1979) seems to be credited with a persuasive formulation of language ideology as *any sets of beliefs about language articulated by the users as a rationalization or justification of perceived language structure and use*. According to Irvine (2012) language ideologies are infused with political and moral interests and are shaped in a cultural setting.

A group of people who live together and share the same language or a particular variety of language forms a speech community. All speech communities develop a culture over time based on shared experiences. Such a culture includes norms, rules, rituals, customs, and other characteristics that are peculiar to that speech community. Types of behaviour or language use that are accepted within a particular culture may be frowned upon in another culture. That is, depending on the type of language or cultural ideology, what is prohibited in one speech community may turn out to be the norm in another society. Akan culture prohibits the use of taboo expressions in normal speech situations. However, the same culture allows the use of these taboo expressions in proverbs and in certain speech situations. Although the *Politeness* theory proposed by Brown and Levinson (1978, 1987) and the concept of *face* by Goffman (1955) may be the right theories for analysing taboos in general, it is the concept of *language ideology* that fits into this practice of allowing taboo expressions in proverbs and in certain

speech situations in the culture. Allowing verbal taboos in certain speech situations in the Akan culture is based on the Akan language ideology.

2. VERBAL TABOOS

According to Behzad, Malik and Azam (2016), linguistic or verbal taboos are the words or expressions that cause embarrassment, discomfiture, awkwardness and aggravate shame and offend the listener's beliefs. What is considered a taboo is defined by culture and not by anything inherent in the word or expression itself. It is the members of a speech community that restrict the use of certain words or expressions in certain speech situations based on shared experiences. In the words of Farb (1974), *any word is an innocent collection of sounds until a community surrounds it with connotations and then decrees that it cannot be used in certain speech situations*. Members of every speech community have their own way of banning and restricting the practice of certain acts and the use of certain words or expressions. The members of a speech community make every endeavour to avoid certain acts and utterances because they deem such acts and utterances unfit for normal linguistic usage. However, according to Agyekum (2010, p.9), words that are labelled as taboos or unspeakable in one context, may not be considered as taboos in another context in the same language and culture.

Agyekum (2010, p.142) gives the speech situations where Akan verbal taboos are used in the culture. He says that taboo expressions can only be used among peers, intimate and close relatives, lovers, and in scientific and technical contexts, at the hospital before one's doctor or physician. He continues that taboo expressions can be used when one is angry and as invectives. However, he fails to recognize that it is not only in the above situations that verbal taboos can be used in Akan. This paper provides evidence to prove that the Akan language and culture also allow taboo expressions in the context of proverbs. As far as proverbs are concerned, there is no obscene language or unspeakable in Akan. The ban placed on the unspeakable is lifted in the language of proverbs in Akan. Just as a poet has *poetic license* to depart from the strict fact or correct grammar for the sake of literary effect, the proverb user in Akan also has the *proverbial license* to use the unspeakable or taboo expressions in appropriate proverbial contexts.

According to Agyekum (1999, 2002, and 2010), verbal taboos in Akan include the following:

- i. *Ntam* (reminiscential oath)
- ii. *Duabɔ* (imprecation)
- iii. *Nsedie* (self-imprecation)
- iv. *Atennidie* (invectives)
- v. *Ammɔdin* (unmentionable/unspeakable)

The unmentionable or unspeakable in this context are mostly words and expressions that refer to bodies and their effluvia such as faeces, urine, menstrual blood, etc. and the organs and acts of sex. This paper focuses on the verbal taboos *iv* and *v*, that is, *invectives* and the *unspeakable* in Akan. The Akan culture and language prohibit the use of these expressions in normal linguistic usage because they are considered as indecent, filthy, and offensive. Nevertheless, the expressions and words of invectives and the unspeakable are allowed in proverbs in Akan.

The available literature in Ghana shows that some studies have been conducted on verbal taboos in some Ghanaian languages. Apart from Agyekum (1999, 2002, 2009 and 2010), which discuss verbal taboos in Akan, Agbedor and Johnson (2009) and Obeng (2000) also discuss verbal taboos in Ewe and among the students at the University of Ghana respectively. According to Obeng (2000), students at the University of Ghana express the unspeakable or

verbal taboos through graffiti in male lavatories in the University. Agbedor and Johnson (2009) focus on verbal taboos in Ewe and the types of expressions used in place of the taboo expressions. They found out that Ewe speakers avoided taboo expressions by using appropriate euphemisms, which found expressions in *metaphors*, *circumlocutions*, and *apologetic expressions*.

3. THE PROVERB

According to Cuddon (2013), a proverb is a short pithy saying which embodies a general truth which is related in form and content to the maxim and the aphorism, common to most nations and peoples, and it is a form of expression of great antiquity. This implies that proverbs are normally handed down from generation to generation and they are not usually attributed to any particular author. Unlike the parable, which is usually a short narrative fiction, proverbs communicate a lot of information in a few words. Well-known and wise statements that are attributed to famous people can best be described as *sayings*. In Akan, these wise statements are called *asem-sebe*, meaning *a statement that resembles a proverb*. For instance, the following popular statements (*vi* and *vii*) are attributed to Dr. James Emman Kwegyir Aggrey, hence they cannot be described as proverbs:

- vi. *If you educate a man, you educate an individual but if you educate a woman, you educate a whole nation.*
- vii. *Black keys of the piano give good sounds and the white keys give good sounds, but the combination of the two gives the best melody.*

Agyekum (2017) also says that proverbs are interpretations of traditional wisdom based on the experiences and socio-political life of our elders, and that the use of proverbs is the acknowledged mark of one's communicative competence. What this means is that one's ability to use proverbs appropriately in both spoken and written discourse can be considered as the hallmark of native-like proficiency. Agyekum (2017) continues that Akan proverbs are aesthetic devices of vitality in speech, and the salt of the Language. The use of proverbs embellishes speech and makes the language look *beautiful* and sound *sweet* to the addressee. Proverbs can also be used as a device to handle face-threatening acts. An Akan speaker who is communicatively competent in the language knows that intra-lingual verbal taboos are not allowed in the normal linguistic usage in the language. According to Agyekum (2010), taboo expressions can only be used in some identifiable contexts in the Akan culture. This paper argues that the use of proverbs is one of those identifiable contexts in which taboo expressions are permitted in the Akan culture.

4. METHODOLOGY

The paper discussed the proverbs of *invectives* and *unmentionable/unspeakable* in Akan. The proverbs of *unmentionable/unspeakable* were further divided into *effluvia of the human body* and the *sex organs/acts related to sex*. The research approach used in this paper was qualitative. The data for this paper was drawn from *Akan news on Adom FM* and an *Akan proverb contest on Peace FM (Wo Bu Be A, Me Nso Mete Be)* from June 2023 to December 2023. In addition, a *questionnaire* was conducted with 118 level 300 native Akan speakers at the Faculty of Ghanaian languages Education, University of Education, Winneba, to whom the researcher was teaching *Language and Culture*. The students were tasked to write, as many as possible, Akan proverbs involving *invectives*, *effluvia of the body*, and *sex organs/acts related*

to sex. The researcher crosschecked the proverbs with the Kyidomhene (a sub-chief) of Ammuana-Praso, Nana Osei Yaw Akoto and two Akan lecturers at the Department of Akan-Nzema, Faculty of Ghanaian languages Education, University of Education, Winneba.

5. PROVERBS OF INVECTIVES

Drößiger (2017) defines *invectives* as all those linguistic activities that may have an effect to conventionally humiliate, run down, or incriminate somebody. *Invectives* are taboo expressions which are usually used when the speaker is exasperated. However, in Akan language and culture, *invectives* are allowed or used in proverbs when the speaker is not in an angry mood. Agyekum (2010) gives another speech situation in Akan where *invectives* are allowed in the culture. He says that in certain portions of some Akan festivals, like *Nsee* of the people of Elmina and the *Apoɔ* of the people of Techiman, the ban on *invectives* can be lifted during those festivals. Agyekum (2010) continues that subjects are allowed, during those festivals, to hurl invectives such as *viii* and *ix* at the chief.

- viii. **woyɛ (ɔ)kwasea**, *you are a fool.*
- ix. **woyɛ aboa**, *you are a beast.*

These invectives are however not allowed in the culture after the festivals; however, they are always allowed in proverbs.

The Akan word for *a fool* is (ɔ)kwasea, and it is a masculine noun. It is always used to refer to men and boys. Any time it is used to refer to a woman or a girl, it must be qualified with the feminine marker (ɔ)baa, *woman* as in *x* below.

- x. **woyâ (ɔ)kwasea-baa**, *you are a woman/girl who is a fool.*

Among the Akan, the use of the invective (ɔ)kwasea by women to refer to men is considered as serious as being an adulteress, and it may lead to a divorce. The Akan culture bars women to use the invective (ɔ)kwasea to refer to their husbands. An Akan woman who refers to her husband as (ɔ)kwasea (*a fool*) is ready for a divorce. In spite of the seriousness attached to the use of the word in normal linguistic usage, the same culture allows it in proverbs by both sexes as shown in *xi* to *xiv*.

- xi. **Ɔkwasea na wɔtia ne hwɛa so mprenu.** (*It is only a fool who allows his testicles to be pressed twice.*)
- xii. **Ɔkwasea na yɛbu no bɛ kyɛrɛ no aseɛ.** (*It is only a fool who expects a proverb to be explained to them*)
- xiii. **Ɔkwasea na ɔsɛ yɛde ne yɛnko na yɛnne no.** (*It is only a fool who thinks that an indirect reference against him is meant for someone else.*)
- xiv. **Wokyɛrɛ ɔkwasea ɛsetwitwire a, sɛ ɔrɛkɔda mpo a na duaa tua n'ano.** (*If you teach a fool how to brush his teeth, he will leave the toothbrush in his mouth even when he is sleeping.*)

The testicles are sensitive organs that must be carefully protected. Apart from the pain a man suffers when testicles are pressed or clasped, the action can also cause sterility. Among the Akan, people who are sterile are stigmatized. When the Akan are making libation, they always ask the gods not to cause them to blind at night. (*Momma yɛn ani mfira anadwo*). They pray that the gods should help them to see at night to perform their duties with their wives in order to fulfil their God's given duty to procreate. Hence the proverb: *It is only a fool who allows his testicles to be pressed twice (xi)*. According to the Akan people, *it is only a fool who expects a proverb to be explained to them*. It is said that the use of proverbs is the acknowledged mark of one's communicative competence (Agyekum, 2017). This implies that

any member of any Akan speech community who is communicatively competent should be able to decode the meaning of proverbs. Sometimes Akan proverbs are used as a form of indirection to avoid conflicts, to save one's face, or to express verbal taboos. Therefore, one will be considered a fool if they expect a proverb to be explained to them. Again, one is considered a fool if they think that an indirect reference against them is meant for someone else (*xiii*). Furthermore, the Akan people consider anyone who follows rules blindly without applying common sense as a fool. Wise people should not be automatons, that is people who strictly adhere to rules without considering practical or logical aspects. The fact that it is good to clean or brush one's teeth, it does not mean that the chewing stick or the brush should be left in the mouth even when we are sleeping. This implies that foolish people are not always moderate in their actions. Fools would overdo good things, until those things become bad or harmful. Hence, the proverb *If you teach a fool how to brush his teeth, he will leave the toothbrush in his mouth even when he is sleeping* (*xiv*)

6. PROVERBS OF EFFLUVIA OF THE HUMAN BODY

The word *effluvia* is the plural form of *effluvium*, which is derived from the Latin word *effluere*, meaning *flowing out*. The effluvia of the human body include faeces, urine, menstrual blood, vomit, phlegm, sexual fluid, and gaseous waste. These effluvia of the human body are unmentionable in Akan and are not usually used in normal speech situations. However, in proverbs they are accepted in the culture as shown in *xv* to *xx*.

- xv. **Wodwonsɔ gu faako a na ɛpu ahuro.**
(*If direct your urine at the same spot it will be covered with foam.*)
- xvi. **Wogyegye ɛtã so a, na ɛbɔn.**
(*The stench of a fart will not be felt until you make noise about it.*)
- xvii. **Sɛ w'akonnwaboa se woatã a, wɔnnye no akyinnye**
(*If an insect in your chair says you have farted you cannot deny it.*)
- xviii. **Madi, madi ɛnne mane, mane ne ɛnam.**
(*If you are fond of eating anything, you will have a running stomach*)
- xix. **Sɛ wo ne me na ɛne a, anka wobɛhunu sɛ mene ahorɔ.**
(*If you have been defecating with me, you will know that my faeces are only phlegm*)
- xx. **Sɛ woyɛ wo to abrɔ a, wotã wo yam.**
(*If you are wicked towards your anus, you will fart in your stomach.*)

The proverb in *xv* means that any bad behaviour may be allowed provided it is expressed skillfully to minimize or hide the impact on society. The proverb in *xvi* advises people not to give undue recognition to others who fart about or misbehave in order not to encourage them to continue in their bad behaviour. The Proverb number *xvii* advises people not to make any attempt to deny a charge or an accusation when there is convincing evidence to support the charge or the accusation. It is the insect in the chair you are sitting on that says you have farted. The Proverb number *xviii* also advises people to be mindful of their actions as we reap what we sow. The Proverb literally means *I have eaten, I have eaten moves with I have defecated, I have defecated*. It means that if you are fond of eating anything, your stomach will run, meaning people always reap the returns of their actions. Again, the Akan word *madi* (which is a clause in English) is repeated in the sentence because reduplication is a common feature in Akan. The Proverb *xix* also advises people not to be envious of their neighbours. There is the tendency for the person who is experiencing constipation to be envious of the other person who has been visiting the

lavatory at normal times to empty the bowels. However, the latter may be having more serious problems than the former as their faeces may be only phlegm as result of a more serious illness. Finally, the Proverb **xx** also advises people not to be mischievous to others who seek their wellbeing. *If you are wicked towards your anus, it will not allow you to pass air through it. You will have to fart in your stomach.*

7. PROVERBS OF SEX ORGANS AND ACTS RELATED TO SEX

As explained earlier, the Akan culture does not allow speakers to use words denoting sex organs and acts related to sex in normal everyday speech. A speaker who is communicatively competent is able to use such words or expressions euphemistically to avoid being tagged as indecent, offensive, or barbaric. However, the Akan culture does not consider those words or expressions indecent or offensive when they are used in proverbs. The Akan proverbs in **xxi** to **xxv** and those in the appendix illustrate this.

- xxi. **Hwea tenten ntumi nyɛ den nkyɛn kɔtɛɛ.**
(*No matter how long the scrotum is, it cannot be harder than the penis.*)
- xxii. **Sɛ wo yere de ne sisi twa wo mpoa a, wo de atopa na ɛyi no ano.**
(*If your wife insults you with her hips, you respond with sexual intercourse*)
- xxiii. **Se ɔhaw da wo maame twɛ ano na wo de wo kɔtɛ yi firɪ hɔ a, na wonnii no.**
(*If there is a plague on mother's vagina and you use your penis to remove it, you have not had sex with her.*)
- xxiv. **ɛtwɛ korɔ kum kɔtɛɛ.**
(*A single vagina kills penis.*)
- xxv. **Wopere ɛtwɛ ho a, wodi turumu.**
(*If you rush your sexual intercourse, you will mistake anus for vagina.*)

The proverb **xxi** advises people to respect the experienced and the elderly in society because *no matter how long the scrotum is, it cannot be harder than the penis*. This also means that there should not be a complete role reversal between the *scrotum* and the *penis*, and by extension, between different members in the community. Again, the meaning of the proverb in **xxii** is similar to the English proverb *violence begets violence*. The Akan culture does not permit married women to initiate sex directly. Hence, if your wife twerks or dances in a sexually provocative manner before you, you should be wise to respond accordingly. Furthermore, the Proverb **xxiii** also advises people to take positive risks to avoid or save unpleasant or dangerous situations if they have pure motives. Just as the Akan culture permits the use of verbal taboos in certain contexts, certain acts that are considered abominable in the culture can be allowed for certain good reasons, such as saving a life. Hence, the proverb (**xxiii**) *sɛ ɔhaw da wo maame twɛ ano na wo de wo kɔtɛ yi firɪ hɔ a, na wonnii no*. (*If there is a plague on mother's vagina and you use your penis to remove it, you have not had sex with her.*) The meaning of the Proverb **xxiv** is similar to the English proverb *variety is the spice of life*. New and exciting experiences indeed make life interesting. The Akan culture permits polygamy, so men who can afford to marry more than one wife can do so to avoid being rendered impotent as a result of living with only one married partner. Hence, the proverb (**xxiv**) *ɛtwɛ korɔ kum kɔtɛɛ*. (*A single vagina kills penis.*) Lastly, the proverb **xxv** advises people to be patient always to have full benefits of what is theirs, because when we rush, we may get things wrong. Hence, the proverb *wopere ɛtwɛ ho a, wodi turumu*. (*If you rush your sexual intercourse, you will mistake anus for vagina.*)

8. CONCLUSION

The foregoing discussion has shown that although the Akan culture does not allow the use of invectives and the unspeakable in normal speech, they are permitted in proverbs. The proverb user has the *proverbial license* to use invectives and the unspeakable in proverbs. The use of these expressions may however be preceded with the apologetic expression *sebe* or *sebe, sebe mpen aduasa* (*sebe, sebe thirty times*). What this implies is that, after all, the unspeakable can be spoken in certain contexts, and one of the contexts in which the unspeakable can be spoken in the Akan culture is in the use of proverbs.

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Appendix

1. **Ɔkwasea ani te a, na agorɔ agu.**
(*A game ends when the fool becomes wise.*)
2. **Ayamtubini wɔmmɔno boa.**
(*The faeces that come when someone has a running stomach cannot be collected.*)
3. **Ɛnyɛ deɛ kuruwaba ntee bi da ne tui.**
(*It is not the sound 'tui' that the chamber pot has not heard before.*)
4. **Sɛ woretu wo fo a, mposa wo hwea.**
(*When you are being advised, you don't rob your scrotum.*)
5. **Sɛ ɛtwɛ bɔ dam a wodzi.** (Fante)
(*If a vagina is mad, it gets fucked.*)
6. **Sɛ wohunu abranteɛ a ɔne wo yere atwe mpene pɛn kɔte wɔ yaane so a, wo yam hye wo.**
(*If you see how big the penis of your wife's ex-boyfriend is at a public latrine, you get scared.*)
7. **Sɛ ɔbaa bɔne bɔ ɛka a, ɔde ne twɛ na ɛtua.**
(*If a bad woman gets into debt, she uses her vagina to pay it.*)
8. **Ɔwo nta nsuro kɔtepon.**
(*A bearer of twins is not scared of a mighty penis.*)
9. **Ɛtwɛ nsuro kɔteɛ abufuo.**
(*The vagina does not get frightened by the anger of the penis.*)
10. **Sɛ wode w'ani to wo maame twɛ so a, wobɛkɔ na wo papa butu so.**
(*If you target your mother's vagina, when you get there, your father will be on it.*)
11. **Worebɛdi aberewa asuro ne se?**
(*Are going to have sex with an old lady and fear her teeth?*)
12. **Sɛ wonam toto wo pa a, wohyia wo difoɔ.**
(*If you walk twerking and dancing in a sexually provocative manner, you will meet your sex partner.*)
13. **Ɛtwɛba nsuro ahuhuro.**
(*The clitoris does not fear heat*)
14. **Ɛto kɛsɛɛ nsuro kɔte tenten.**
(*Big buttocks do not fear a long penis.*)
15. **Sɛ wo twɛ so a, ɛnsɔ nsene prako ano.**
(*If your vagina is big, it cannot be bigger than the mouth of a pig*)
16. **Ɛtoɔ kɛsɛɛ na ɛnyane kɔte wuiɛ.**

(It is big buttocks that resurrect a dead penis.)

17. **Adanseɛ nti na ɔkraman di ne yere wɔ abɔnten.**

(It is because of evidence that a dog fucks his wife in public.)

18. **Sɛ wonim atopa bu a, wonnim bu nsen w'ase.**

(If you know how to have sex, you cannot do it better than your father-in-law.)

19. **Sɛ wosuro ɛtwɛ a, ɛnna wo de wo nsa keka funuma.**

(When you are afraid of the vagina, you caress the navel.)

20. **Woredi ɔkɔmfɔɔ yere no, na n'abosom nso redi wo turumu.**

(As you are fucking a fetish priest's wife, the gods will also be fucking your anus.)

21. **ɛtwɛ nyɛ gɔta na yɛabɔ atra.**

(The vagina is not a gutter to be jumped over.)