THE PRAGMATICS OF DUABO 'GRIEVANCE IMPRECATION' TABOO AMONG THE AKAN

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0. Introduction

This paper addresses *duabo* 'grievance imprecation' as a verbal taboo among the Akan of Ghana. Akan belongs to the Kwa group of languages found in West Africa. It is the indigenous language with the largest number of speakers in Ghana. The paper addresses the notion of the magical power of the spoken word with regard to *duabo*. A linguistic analysis of *duabo* will be presented in terms of its etymology, morphology, typology, syntax and semantics. In the framework of the ethnography of communication, this paper looks at the pragmatic features of *duabo*, the participants and its performative aspects. It also discusses the situations under which the verbal taboo is mentioned and it considers the sanctions involved. All this is supported by empirical data collected among the Akan in 1994.¹

Verbal taboo is an important aspect of the Akan language and culture. There are varieties of verbal taboos in Akan. They include *ntam* 'reminiscential oath', *duabo* 'imprecation', *nsedie* 'self-imprecation', *atennidie* 'invectives' and *ammodin* 'unmentionables' (see Agyekum 1996). This paper, however, concentrates only on *duabo*. *Duabo* 'grievance imprecation by invocation' is a type of religious verbal taboo which involves the employment of magical and supernatural powers to cause harm to one's addressee. *Duabo* is normally related to supernatural powers which people consider as valuable and powerful. *Duabo* normally occurs where there is a grievance between a speaker and his victim. We shall be looking at the types, functions, structures and the prototypical language used in *duabo*. We will also look at the categories of communicative participants connected to this type of speech communication. There is a Ghana map at the end of the paper that shows some of the towns, villages and rivers mentioned in the text and their relationship with Kumasi and Accra, the capital of Ghana.

1. Theoretical framework

Duabo can best be analysed in the general framework of the ethnography of communication. Hymes (1972) proposes an ethnographic framework which takes into account the various factors that come into play in speaking. These factors are summarily put in an acronym, **SPEAKING**:

¹ This paper is a modified form of a chapter from my M.Phil. thesis from the University of Trondheim. The thesis was issued as *University of Trondheim Working Papers in Linguistics* 30 (1996).

S-setting and scene, *P*- participants, *E* - ends, *A*-act sequence, *K*- key
I- instrumentality, *N*- norms of interaction and interpretation, *G*- genre.²

In the analysis of *duabɔ*, we shall look at the *setting* in terms of place and time, *participants* in terms of the people who are connected with it, and *ends* in terms of the purpose for the *duabɔ*. *Acts sequence* refers to the events that culminate into the *duabɔ* speech activity and how they have been structured, *keying* is viewed in terms of the tone and mood of the participants in the act, *instrument* is the medium of language used and in the case of *duabɔ*, it is the spoken words. The *norms* refer to the socio-cultural norms, values and conventions attached to *duabɔ*, and in fact, these are the issues that make it a verbal taboo. The *genre* is a religious one and this captures the spiritual and supernatural aspects of this communicative event. Some of the component parts of *duabɔ* are speech acts. Anything that comes out during *duabɔ*, would be considered as an integral part of the whole communicative event.

2. Duabɔ 'grievance imprecation': The Duabɔ as a verbal taboo

The *duabɔ* taboo is purely a religious verbal taboo. It is the practice of the Akans in invoking supernatural powers in defence and in the execution of certain forms of justice. This has given rise to the origin of imprecation based on the desire of the imprecator to harm the target. Akan *duabɔ* 'imprecation' normally arises out of *enmity, breakdown of love, lack of peace, conflict, anger, social avoidance, selfishness, attempt to eliminate a fellow, curse*, etc. This is the reason why I have labelled *duabɔ* as 'grievance imprecation'.

Duabɔ is a verbal taboo because it derives its effect from supernatural powers whose might the ordinary man cannot match and whose actions and behaviour people can neither predict nor decipher. For this reason, one should avoid invoking supernatural names in certain contexts (see also Rattray 1969a; Wagner 1987: 233). It is believed that when a person trivialises the names of the deities, he is defiling and blaspheming against them. *Duabɔ* is discouraged because these supernatural powers (other than God) are quick to anger and their punishments are very severe. This, however, does not mean that *duabɔ* is totally tabooed, for like all the other verbal taboos in Akan, there are certain situations when it can become mentionable.

Generally, *duabɔ* is an expression that is invoked with the intention to punish the targeted person. The consequence of the *duabɔ* is that it puts the referent into an awkward situation that affects his life and property. In psychological terms, it affronts the face of the target when he is within the communicative situation. The event may also affront the face of by-stander. (cf. Goffman 1955, 1981; Brown and Levinson 1987).

² In this paper, Hymes' (1972) model is used together with Saville-Troike's (1989: 138-157) model for *Communicative events*. Saville-Troike's (1989) model consists of the following main features: genre, topic, purpose/function, and setting (all categorised under "scene or extra-personal context of the event"). The others are key, participants, message form, message content, act sequence, rules of interaction and norms of interpretation. In effect, there is a strong relationship between Hymes' and Saville-Troike's models.

Not only does *duabɔ* affront the victim, but in the final analysis all *duabɔ* expressions are considered taboo because they tamper with people's lives and allegedly kill them off. *Duabɔ* may harm an entire family and in some cases be reversed to kill the imprecator. A reduction of the population through imprecation is considered detrimental to the society. It is because of the social impact of *duabɔ* that the Akans have institutionalised it as a taboo expression restricted to be used as a weapon of a last resort in some defined contexts for bringing about social justice.

3. *Duabɔ* activity: Internal structure and participants

The internal structure of *duabɔ* as a single speech activity has three major constituent parts and they are: (a) **protactic proposition**, which represents the invocation (of the nemesis) and the cursing aspect (the speech act; performative verb), (b) the **apodictic proposition**, which indicates the purpose of the use of the imprecation, and (c) the **commissive proposition**, which states the punishment.

There is a prototypical frame in *duabɔ* in Akan which pragmatically involves at least three participants or more. These are the **imprecator** (speaker), **imprecatee** (target) and the **nemesis** (addressee). Each of the participants has a communicative role in the speech event. The participants and their roles are presented below. Apart from the participants, there is the message that links the **imprecator** and the **nemesis**. This will be referred to as the **mand**.³

(i) the speaker	→	the imprecator	→	1st. person
(ii) the target	→	the imprecatee	→	2nd. or 3rd. person(s)
(iii) the addressee	→	supernatural, the power broker, God, deity, the nemesis		
(iv) the message	→	the mand		

The first participant is the **imprecator** (speaker/the performer) who embarks on the act. The **imprecator** functions as the animator of the powerful words and it is his wish which the nemesis fulfils. The imprecator sends a mand to the Nemesis to act upon it. Mands with second person subjects express the speaker's intention to get the addressee or hearer to do something.

The second participant is the **addressee**, the central and core participant of the whole act. It is the source of the power for the causative act to inflict harm or death. It is the supernatural power (an invisible participant) and it may be God or any of the deities. This participant is referred to in this paper as the **nemesis**. The Nemesis is defined in Greek mythology as "the avenger; personification of the gods' retribution for violation of sacred law" (Longman Encyclopaedia, 1st edition 1992: 743). The **nemesis** (addressee) is never

³ According to Leech (1983: 116) "mands constitute a more general category than what we normally understand by command. They reflect a common element of meaning shared by the three moods: Imperative, infinitive, and present subjunctive. Mands invoke or conjure up a state of affairs which is envisaged as unfulfilled".

physically present in the communicative scenario; however, it takes active part in the spiritual aspects.

The **imprecatee** is the targeted person who bears the brunt of the *duabo* (he can be in the second or third person). According to the norm and constitution of the Akans, the potential imprecatee must not be there at the time of the utterance of the imprecation. In some cases the imprecator may not be known or may be a third party. In some situations however the imprecatee may be present (see *nitandua* section 5.3.1). While the imprecator and the imprecatee are [+human], the nemesis is normally supernatural [-human].

The structure of *duabo* can be illustrated as follows: the **imprecator** employs the mand to pray the **nemesis** (deity) to inflict any of the possible punishment(s) which the nemesis deems fit on the **imprecatee**. The punishments include *nightmares, misfortunes, sickness, birth problems, madness, death or any other*. The punishments are unordered and they may be one or more depending on the gravity of the offence and the wish of the imprecator.

The imprecator can say “I give you to the deities to deal with you”. The imprecator implies that the punishment he wants to be afflicted on the imprecatee is beyond his power and control. The imprecative frame can be as in the example below:

1. *Se saa ase m yi a wode ato me so yi*
 If such matter this which you take Consec. Put me top this
 se enye nokore a Asuo Debi nku wo.
 If Neg.is true then Asuo Debi Imp.kill you
 ('If this accusation you have levelled against me is untrue, may River Debi kill you'.)

Structure of Example 1 :

If this statement/act X is false/defamatory, etc. then nemesis Y should kill you Z.

4. The linguistic structure of *Duabo*

This section discusses the linguistic structure of *duabo* in terms of its semantic origin, etymology, and syntax. In the linguistic structure, it is possible to omit some of the internal propositions and participants of *duabo* as listed in 3. above.

(i) Semantic origin of Duabo

The act of *duabo* literally involves an attempt to use a stick to hit somebody with the intention of killing him or her. In reality, it is rather the use of words which is believed by the Akans to have some “inherent power” to kill people. This is done by handing the person over to some supernatural powers to use their powers to perform the act. They can proceed to harm or afflict the victim with disease, death, etc. on behalf of the imprecator. This same meaning of *duabo* is preserved in the final proclamation used in the judgement

of cases in Akan arbitration.⁴

(ii) *Etymology and origin of the word Duabɔ*

The etymology of the word *duabɔ* is derived from two words: a noun *dua* 'stick' and a verb *bɔ* 'to hit'. *Duabɔ* is, therefore, a verbal noun from the verbal phrase *bɔ dua* 'hit with a stick'. Here is an illustration of the process of modification of a verb into a noun imprecation.

[[bɔ + dua]	VP]]	→	[dua + bɔ]	NP]]
[V + N]	VP]]	→	[NP + V]	→ NP]]
'to imprecate'		→		'imprecation'

It is likely that in the olden days, before the introduction of iron and metal weapons, the Akans used *dua/abaa* 'clubs' as their major weapons in wars and for execution, hence their usage in *duabɔ* 'imprecation' and also the judgement proclamation. *Duabɔ* is a spiritual execution where the physical execution is encoded in the spiritual world.

(iii) *Omission of nemesis in Duabɔ 'grievance imprecation'*

In some *duabɔ* taboo expressions, the imprecator avoids mentioning the nemesis but may voice the punishment which should befall the imprecatee. These are like the informal *duabɔ* we shall see later. Since the imprecator himself cannot mete out the punishment, it is assumed that there is an unspecified agent who is going to carry it out. Little (1987) points out that curses in which the agent is not specified are often in the form of petitions to others to intervene. Generally, the imprecations in Akan are couched in the form of a mand or a petition for supernatural intervention. Below are examples of "agentless" imprecations.

- (2) **Eba a ɛde ba deɛ wo-remfa bi nhyɛ w'akyiri.**
 Baby rel. be call baby foc. you neg. take some neg. put Poss. back.
 ('As for what we call a child you will never put one on your back.')

This implies that the imprecatee is cursed never to have a child.

⁴ Among the Akan, after a case has been settled through arbitration, the chief's spokesman makes a proclamation. The proclamation has some relation with a curse except that in the proclamation it has a purely metaphorical significance. Here is the proclamation.

Sɛ asem a esiɛ yi, sɛ wamma X amfa wo amma ha amma Nananom amfa asopa antie bi ɛnna anka womaa abaa so na wode bɔɔ ne tirim na wokum no a wodi no aboa.

"In the case that ensued between you and X, if X had not brought you here before Nananom, for them to have used their good and attentive ears to hear and go through the case, and if you had taken a stick/club and hit him on the head and if you had thus killed him, you would have treated him like a beast/animal."

- (3) *Dee ɔtee me kookoo yi deɛ afuo biara a ɔde beɖua*
 Who he- Past pluck me Poss. cocoa this foc. farm any which he-uses plant
mu no egya nhye no.
 in that fire Imp.burn it
 ('As for the one who plucked my cocoa, any farm in which he plants the cocoa should get burnt'.)
- (4) *Onipa bɔnefo a ɔtan me biara deɛ ɔnwu.*
 Person sinful who he- Pres. hates me any as for he- Imp. -die.
 ('May any sinful man who hates me die.')

(iv) *Omission of the apodictic propositional content*

In some instances, the apodictic propositional content indicating the reasons for the imprecation may be omitted as in the examples below.

- (5a) *Saa nipa no ɔbo bra biara a ɛrenye yie.*
 That person the he play life any which it Neg.Prg.do well
 ('May that person never prosper in any venture he embarks on in his life.')
- (5b) *Onii ko renhunu ne ho ano da wo wiase*
 Person that Prog. Neg. see Pos. body front never be at world
yi mu
 this in
 ('That person will never be prosperous in his life').

In the above data, all the expressions in bold letters are the *duabo* taboo expressions. They are punishments which the imprecator wants to befall on the imprecatee. Sometimes the imprecator may leave the apodictic propositional part but the cursing part must obligatorily appear to show that he has the intention to imprecate. These forms can only be used in situations where the apodictic propositional content of the imprecation has been stated earlier on in the discourse.

(v) *Omission of the curse component*

It is possible in certain contexts for the imprecator to omit the curse or punishment and entrust everything to the discretion of the nemesis to punish the imprecatee. I cite below such a variety recorded at Assisiriwa on the 3rd. of April 1994. The woman imprecator poured some drink on the ground and also threw and broke an egg on the ground and imprecated as follows;

- (6) *Dee ɔfaa m'adeɛyi menhunu onipa*
 'He who he-Past take my thing this I-Neg.-see person
korɔ a ɔfaae, Asuo Offin wo na wonim enti
 one who he-Past take River Offin you foc. you-know so

[*kyerɛ wo tumi*].⁵

[show your powers]'.
(‘I am not able to see or recognise the one who took my thing, River Offin you are the one who has an idea so exercise your powers’).

In the above example, the punishment is left open by the use of the expression *kyerɛ wo tumi* 'exercise your powers'. The punishment can be any of the types we have mentioned earlier on and is exercised according to the discretion of the nemesis based on the gravity of the offence.

(vi) *Anticipatory imprecation*

It is also possible to have an anticipatory imprecation, where the speech act is not complete at the time of the utterance. One can say that it is a delayed speech act. It is normally put in a conditional clause giving the imprecatee ample time and opportunity to manoeuvre. In Akan, such an imprecation may be marked by the conditional marker *sɛ* 'if' as in;

- (7a) *Sɛ obiara kɔbue adaka no so wia sika a ɛwɔ*
If anyone Egr. go open box the on steal money which it be
*mu no a Kyinaman nku no.*⁶
in then Kyinaman Imp. kill him

(‘If anyone opens and steals the money in this box, may the deity Kyinaman kill him’.)

In the anticipatory imprecation (also called provisional curse by Little 1987) the malefactor or imprecatee is made impersonal and generic by the use of the pronoun *obiara* 'anybody'. Here, the conditional clause marked by the marker *sɛ* 'if' has also got an ingressive *kɔbue* 'a going to the place before the act of opening takes place.' (The ingressive markers in Akan *bɛ* 'come' and *kɔ* 'go' refer respectively to a coming or a going to a place before the real action of the verb takes place.) Structurally, the *sɛ* in the ingressive introduces a suppositional condition intended to pre-empt an act. A speaker can also utter the anticipatory imprecation as follows.

- (7b) *Onipa biara a ɔbɛbue adaka yi so awia sika a ɛwɔ mu no Kyinaman nku no.*
(‘May the deity Kyinaman kill any person who opens the box and steals the money in it’.)

In the examples of anticipatory imprecation above, the speech act is not complete because one of the necessary conditions (the malefactor or the imprecatee) is not met. The imprecation is left open and general and it may or may not happen. By the power of the

⁵ River Offin is one of the major rivers in the Ashanti Region of Ghana

⁶ Kyinaman: This is another powerful deity in a village called Nobesu near Kyekyewere. People trust its magical powers so much that they employ it very often in imprecation and oaths.

spoken word the imprecation is potential, and it becomes functionable at the appropriate time when a victim commits the anticipated offence. The condition will then be met for the imprecation to be accomplished and the malefactor is then cursed (cf. Little 1987: 184).

The question that arises is, what happens if no malefactor falls into the trap? The name of the deity might have been mentioned in vain and that is tantamount to defilement and blasphemy. The speaker will be using the imprecation as a protective device to his personal advantage at the expense of the whole society. These are among the main reasons why such imprecations have become institutionalised verbal taboos in the Akan community.

4.1. *Lexico-semantic form of Duabɔ*

In this section, we shall consider the nature of a prototypical *duabɔ* in terms of the type of verbs and complementizers that are used in *duabɔ* utterances. The prototypical verbs used are *kye* 'to arrest', *nya* 'to afflict' and *kum* 'to kill' and they are ordered. Depending on the gravity of the offence and the intended punishment, the imprecator would choose any of these verbs. The scale of the affliction by the nemesis moves along a continuum of stages as in the frame below:

<i>kye</i>	→	<i>nya</i>	→	<i>kum</i> .
'arrest'		'get/afflict'		'kill'

We analyse this structure according to the nature of the punishments meted out by the nemesis.

(a) *kye* 'to arrest'

This is the first level of the punishment where it is believed that the nemesis sends his spiritual policemen to arrest the imprecatee. According to my informants, this is where the victim may start having nightmares and unhappy dreams and may become psychologically unsound. If the person realises that the affliction is caused by a supernatural being and runs to the deity and performs the necessary rituals, he may be free. The fines and punishments involved at this stage are minimal.

- (8) *Deɛ wafa me sika no Kwaku Firi nkye no*
 Person who perf. take my money the Kwaku Firi arrest him
mma me.
 for me.
 ('May the deity Kwaku Firi arrest the one who has stolen my money'.)

(b) *nya* 'to afflict'

The second stage is *nya* 'to get/afflict', where the deity is supposed to get hold of the

victim. It normally starts with an illness which worsens day by day. The person may visit various medicine men but all to no avail until it is revealed that he is under the affliction of a spell. If he is ignorant of being a target of a *duabɔ* 'imprecation' and rushes to the shrine of the deity, then the highest degree of the punishment is set in motion. Here is a *nya* example.

- (9) *Onipa a ɔkɔ-wia-a me ntoma no Ayanta nnya no.*
 Person who he go steal past my cloth the Ayanta get him.
 ('May Ayanta afflict some harm on the one who stole my cloth'.)

(c) *kum* 'to kill'

This is the most prototypical verb, it is the highest degree of the punishments. The verb *kum* 'to kill' means 'to cause one to be out of existence'. Let us consider the examples below.

- (10a) *Sɛ wo! Wosi me kunu ho bio a*
 If you! You step my husband body again then
Akonnedi nku wo.
 Akonnedi Imp.Kill you.
 ('If you venture to have a further affair with my husband may the deity Akonnedi kill you'.)
- (10b) *Wode wo nan si asaase no so a Tegare nku*
 You take your leg step land the on then Tegare Imp.
wo⁷
 you.
 ('May Tegare slay you if you should step on the land (in dispute)').

The verb *kum* 'to kill' is placed in an indirect causation (execution) where the imprecator requests another agent (the nemesis) to spiritually kill the imprecatee. By the magical power of the spoken words, the imprecator thus hands the offender over to a supernatural power (see Tambiah 1968). It is in such utterances that we really see the magical power of the spoken word. The speaker thinks along the following lines: "*If I physically beat, confront, or kill you, I may be committing a criminal offence, so I will rather hand you over to the spiritual world so that I will not be committed in any way.*" According to Montagu (1967: 57) "the mere existence of supernatural powers is not in itself sufficient to generate the process of cursing. Only when the individual is forbidden to take judgement into his own hands is he likely to hit upon the idea of compelling the supernaturals to assist him in the execution of his judgement".

⁷ Tegare is a renowned and powerful deity taken from the Northern Region of Ghana into the Ashanti Region. Many towns and villages had/have this deity in various forms.

- (11a) *Dee* *wafa* *me sika no* **Antoa Nyamaa**⁸ *nku* *no*.
 Person who perf. take my money the Antoa Nyamaa Imp.kill him.
 ('May Antoa Nyamaa kill the person who has taken my money'.)

The *duabo* taboo expression in the above data is **Antoa Nyamaa should kill him**. The imprecator is the indirect causer and the nemesis, Antoa Nyamaa, the direct causer or the instrument to effect the killing; the imprecatee is the causee. The imprecatee is not named, he is represented by the pronoun *no* 'him'. In pragmatic terms, the above utterance implies that, I, the speaker (in the possessive construction), am hereby invoking the deity Antoa Nyamaa to kill the unnamed target. The example cited above could stylistically be stated as:

- (11b) *Dee* *wafa* *me sika* *no* *dee* **Antoa Nyamaa** *na*
 He who perf take my money the as for Antoa Nyamaa Foc.
nku **no**.
 Imp.kill him.
 ('May the person who has taken my money be killed by Antoa Nyamaa'.)

In the above, the speaker strengthens the imprecation by the use of an exclusive focus marker *na* and also the topicalising marker *dee* 'as for' which topicalise on the imprecatee and nobody else. The *na* focuses attention on one particular nemesis, **Antoa Nyamaa**, which is going to mete out the punishment. The focus markers are used to lay emphasis on the degree of the seriousness of the intention of the speaker and aimed at making the imprecation very effective.

(d) Other variants of the curse/punishment component

Apart from these prototypical lexico-semantic expressions of the curse and punishment, we also meet others such as *Onyame ntua wo ka*, 'May God punish you', *ɔmmɔ dam*, 'may he make you mad', *ɔmma aseɛm no nsi n'anom na ɔno ara nka n'anom aseɛm* (lit.) 'may the issue appear in his mouth so that he should say it from his own mouth', i. e. 'may he confess', *mfa nsuo nto ne yam* 'may you put a stream in his stomach', *ɔngu n'anim ase* 'may the person be disgraced', *mmusuo nka no* 'woe be unto him', and still many others according to the will and wishes of the speaker and the gravity of the offence. One of the most harmful of all the imprecation taboos is where the imprecator invokes the Almighty God as follows: *Onyankopɔn mpae agradaa nsi onipa korɔ no tirim*, 'May God strike the head of the person with lightning'. This is because the energy in lightning kills instantaneously and the target has no time to plead for forgiveness.

⁸ Antoa Nyamaa: This is a shrine harboured in a small stream called Asuo Nyamaa in a village called Antoa some seven miles away from Kumasi. It is a very renowned deity and people in the Ashanti Region very often use it for *duabo* 'grievance imprecation' and *nsedie* 'assertive self-imprecatory oaths'.

4.2. The syntax and pragmatics of *Duabɔ*

This section discusses the syntax and pragmatics of *duabɔ*. It looks at its conditional clauses, transitivity, mood, aspect, tense, polarity, and person.

The syntax of the imprecation is such that it carries a conditional clause initiated by the conditional marker *sɛ* 'if'. This indicates that the imprecator is not absolutely sure of the truth condition of the case and that is why he is leaving it in the hands of nemeses to handle the case for her/him. For this reason, if it turns out that the suspected imprecatee is not the guilty party, then he is free. Conversely, if he is guilty the supernatural beings will punish him accordingly.

- (12a) *Sɛ barimayi de ne ho aka ɔbaa no*
 If man the take his body Perf touch woman the
a Kyinaman nku no.
 then Kyinaman Imp. kill him
 ('If this man has had a sexual affair with the woman, may Kyinaman kill him'.)

In the use of *sɛ* in the above conditional imprecation, the imprecator has a specific imprecatee in mind. The conditional type of imprecation may also be expressed by the use of a generic term as *onipa* 'a person', without a specific imprecatee in mind. Here is an example:

- (12b) *Onipa a w-a-bɛsesa me kookoo no nyinaa no Sesiman Ntoa*
 Person who he perf.collect my cocoa all the Sesiman Ntoa
ku no ma me.⁹
 kill him for me'
 (May Sesiman Ntoa kill the person who has come to collect all my cocoa'.)

We can identify two types of *duabɔ* in terms of their transitivity with regard to the mentioning of the imprecatee. There is the true transitive *Wabɔ dua* (lit.) 'he has hit stick', 'he has imprecated'. Here the direct object of the verb *bɔ* 'hit' is *dua* 'tree' and the imprecatee is not mentioned. The referent is opaque and may thus have no opportunity to pacify the nemesis. In this type of transitivity, offenders (including close relatives) may not be aware that they are targets of the imprecation. One can say something as follows, *m'adee yi a ayera yi dee merəkɔbɔ dua*, 'As for my item which is missing I am going to cast a spell'. In this type of curse, there is a threat and the deity is not mentioned, but the presence of the expression *bɔ dua* puts fear into the hearers. This forewarns the victim to take heed and either bring the thing back or find a way of appeasing the imprecator.

The second type is ditransitive *duabɔ* and it is a type of double object construction in Akan (see Osam 1997; Saa and Eze 1997). In the ditransitive, the person imprecated is mentioned and the name comes in between the structure *bɔ dua* as in:

⁹ Sesiman Ntoa: This is a shrine in Nkoranza, one of the major towns in the Brong Ahafo Region of Ghana.

<i>M</i>	<i>ɛbo</i>	<i>X</i>	<i>dua</i> .
I-	Fut. -hit	X	stick. ('I will imprecate X.')
Agent	Fut. hit	Goal	Theme

In the ditransitive, the referent is transparent. It is, therefore, considered that the consequence of the imprecation is more serious when the target's name is not mentioned. If the victim becomes aware of the imprecation and finds proper ways of pacifying the nemesis, the anticipated consequences of the *duabo* can be deactivated. There are cases where people die because they might have been targets of curses without their knowledge. Victims of a spell or a curse, who realise it very early are able to consult some deities for advice and solutions.

One of the most important pragmatic characteristics of *duabo* as a speech act is that the speaker must be in the first person singular *me* 'I', and the tense must not be in the past but either in the present or future. In terms of aspect it should be in the imperfective but not in the perfective except when it is a *duabo* being reported by another person. Here the reporter is not performing the *duabo* at the same time that he is speaking. For this reason, it is not to be considered as explicit performative. (see also Searle 1969, 1976).

In terms of mood in imprecation, the apodictic proposition is normally in the indicative. However, the imprecated *mand* is in the imperative in the form of a polite command (a speech act of request) on the nemesis. The imprecator requests the nemesis to use its powers to punish the imprecatee. In terms of polarity it is always positive, not in the negative, because it is something the speaker wishes to happen but not that he wants to deny its occurrence.

Duabo, may be said to contain a speech act verb *bo...dua* 'cast spell' which is usually referred to as commissive in the general literature. The structural term commissive proposition refers to the part of the *duabo* taboo expression where the speaker mentions the punishment which should be meted out to the imprecatee.¹⁰ The explicit commissive verbs would rather be (*kye, nya, kum*), those mentioned in the commissive and not the implicit verb (*bo...dua*) or their clauses (see also Austin 1962; Ray 1973: 19; Leech 1983: 206; Wardhaugh 1992: 284).

According to Leech (1983: 206) commissives have a posterior time reference, i. e. they refer to a time frame later than that in the main verb or at the point of the utterance. Even though *bo...dua* 'cast spell' as a phrasal verb is usually implicit, the claim made by Leech (1983) applies to the *duabo* ritual as a whole. This is because at any point one is imprecating another, the effect of the imprecation is expected to come at a time after the utterance and never before.

¹⁰ In actual usage the phrasal verb *bo...dua* appears in a clause *mebo...dua* 'I cast a spell'. This clause is almost invariably omitted in the context of *duabo* usage and is, therefore, implicit. We, therefore propose that in Akan, the clause containing the phrasal verb should be taken to refer to the whole *duabo* ritual, rather than the phrasal verb in isolation.

5. Typological classification of *Duabɔ*

This section looks at the types of *duabɔ* along two parameters. The first is based on the nemesis invoked and the second is based on the appropriateness of the *duabɔ*. We thus have

- (a) *Minor Duabɔ* vs. *Major Duabɔ*
- (b) *Appropriate* vs. *Spiteful Duabɔ*

Among the Akan, the gravity of a *duabɔ* may partially depend on the offence committed, but the most essential parameter for the assessment of the gravity of a *duabɔ* expression is the nemesis mentioned. The supernatural powers used as nemeses are ranked in terms of the degree of their powers. Depending on the offence, an appropriate nemesis is selected to execute the mand. Based on this background, one can talk of *minor* vs. *major duabɔ*. We shall also look at instances where the minor or major *duabɔ* is said to be used out of spite (*nitandua*).

5.1. *Minor Duabɔ*

Minor *duabɔ* refers to a situation where a minor deity is used as the nemesis. A minor deity in this paper refers to a deity with no established sacerdotal system.¹¹ The deity in this context can be a family deity, or that of a small stream without a priest. These deities are usually localised and not known in many parts of the Akan state. One can imprecate as follows;

- (13) *Dee ɔ twaa me borɔdeɛ no Asuo Bɔne*
 Person he cut Past my plantain the River Bɔne
mfa ne nsuo nto ne yam.
 Imp.take its water put his belly
 ('May the stream Bɔne run through the stomach of the one who stole my plantain'.¹²)

It is believed that punishments involved in the minor *duabɔ* are very minimal and can be *slight sicknesses, nightmares*, etc. *Duadane* 'pacificatory rites' can easily be performed to ward off the wrath of the deity. The pacification rites cost less, and can be performed outside the shrine with ordinary water and by word of mouth. It may be performed by a family head or any elder.

¹¹ In the Akan concept of supreme beings, major deities include powerful supernatural beings and God who is their 'summus inter paris'. Since, God is the head of all the major and minor deities, it seems more convenient to have a triadic system of deities in Akan as shown below.

Minor	→	Major	→	Supreme
Lesser gods		Powerful gods		God

¹² A stream running through the stomach of an offender implies that the person will have a continuous and serious diarrhoea which cannot be treated by any orthodox medicine.

5.2. Major *Duabɔ*

These are imprecations which involve the mentioning of names of renowned and powerful deities in the Akan society. These deities are believed to be powerful because they are unforgiving and may even kill imprecatees. They usually have established sacerdotal systems to act as human intermediaries between them and the living.

Some of the Akan deities connected with these major *duabɔ*, include Antoa Nyamaa, Asuo Ayanta¹³, Kwaku Firi, Sesiman Ntoa, Akonnedi of Larteh¹⁴, Tegare, Gagau,¹⁵ Kyinamanso, etc. When their names are mentioned in imprecation, people are of the view that the consequences will be very grievous and severe and may extend from the target to his entire family, all depending on the intentions of the imprecator and the degree of the offence. Apart from this, pacificatory rituals in these major imprecational spells are very costly. They may involve the payment of various sums of money, offering of eggs, fowls, sheep, drinks, etc. which may put a whole family into bankruptcy. Victims of major imprecations must travel to the shrines before the rituals can be performed. It is because of the fear of sanctions by the community and the consequences of the misuse of *duabɔ* which can result in the imprecator himself being punished by angry nemeses, together with other reasons and factors listed in section 1 that people would always try to avoid the use of such taboo expressions.

The Akan people are much more scared by imprecations that involve the invocation of deities than those which are informal curses like *mmusuo nka wo* 'woe be unto you'. Again apart from the *duabɔ* where the imprecatee is struck with lightning by God (see 4.1), the Akans attach greater importance to the *abosom* 'gods' than to the Almighty God during imprecation. It is not the case that they do not believe in the existence of the power of God. Like the Christians, the Akan believe that God is slow to anger and, therefore, if they entrust an imprecation into his hands he may not inflict the punishment at all or may not do it in time to satisfy the intentions of the imprecator.¹⁶ This is the more reason why most imprecators employ the *abosom* 'the gods' other than the Supreme being as the nemeses. In this sense, although God is the Almighty supernatural power, imprecations involving the use of his name may be categorised under the minor imprecation. This is based upon the speed with which he acts, the magnitude of the punishment meted out, and the absence of an established sacerdotal system in his name.

¹³ Asuo Ayanta: This is also a River deity near Asante Bekwai which people employ in *duabɔ* and *nsedie*.

¹⁴ Larteh: a town in the Akuapem District of the Eastern Region of Ghana, is the place for the Akonnedi shrine.

¹⁵ Gagau is a deity in a town called Asaman in the Agona District of Ashanti in Ghana (see Ghana Map)

¹⁶ See Joel 2:13 "Return to the Lord your God, for he is gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in love and he relents from sending calamity."

5.3. *Appropriate and spiteful Duabɔ*

This section addresses the appropriateness of an imprecation. The appropriateness is defined in terms of whether the imprecation is proportionate to the offence and whether the imprecator imprecates appropriately or out of spite.

5.3.1. *Nitandua 'Spiteful grievance imprecation'*

Nitandua is made up of two words; *nitan* 'hatred' and *dua* 'imprecation', and literally means hatred imprecation and glosses as 'spiteful imprecation'. This is the most grievous of all types of imprecation among the Akan. One major denominator of all the cases of spiteful imprecation is that it is disproportionate to the offence committed. Other sociological and emotional factors like *enmity, hatred, jealousy, breakdown of love, lack of peace, conflict, anger, social avoidance, selfishness, attempt to eliminate a fellow*, can also set in. The offence could also be based on suspicion or mere hearsay. *Nitandua* can be major or minor depending on the nemesis invoked (see above). The contexts of the use of *nitandua* are the following;

- (a) participants involved,
- (b) the scope of the imprecation,
- (c) setting, in terms of place and time of the imprecation.

An imprecation would be considered as a *nitandua* in a situation where a person's item(s) get(s) missing or stolen and he asks X about it and in spite of X's denial, the imprecator insists on using an imprecation. It is assumed that the speaker is pronouncing the imprecation out of sheer hatred. *Nitandua* also occurs in situations where there is no justification whatsoever for the imprecation. It also involves cases where an imprecator goes contrary to certain laid down Akan customs and institutions and imprecates for his own egoistic tendencies. For example, an adult should not imprecate children who have committed an offence out of ignorance and without any intention. If the imprecator simply neglects their age and imprecates, it is *nitandua*.

Nitandua can also be defined in terms of the scope of the punishment on the imprecatee. If the imprecator states that the punishment should not be limited to the victim alone, but should be extended to cover his whole family and all other relatives (vicarious punishments), then of course he has gone too far. Here is an example of such a *nitandua*.

- (14) *Onipa a wabɛwɪa efie ha mpempenadeɛ*
 Person who Perf.-come-to-steal house-here jewelleryes
yi deɛ [Kwaku Firi kill no]; efie biara nso a
 this foc. [Kwaku Firi kill him] house every foc. which
ɔde mpempenadeɛ yi bɛwura mu no nso [bɔ fie hɔ].
 he-use jewelleryes this enter in that foc.[ruin house there].
 ('The person who has stolen jewelleryes from this house may [Kwaku Firi kill him].
 Again any house to which these jewelleryes may enter, may you [ruin the entire
 house and depopulate it].')

The actual taboo words in the square brackets above are what we term as *nitandua*. The reason is that the offence of an individual should not affect innocent people. These innocent parties may not be able to find out the causes of their woes when the curse starts taking effect.

In terms of setting, it is against Akan tradition to imprecate publicly in the street, such an imprecation is considered to affect the whole village, town or state. The imprecator is punished by the elders and the necessary customary rites are performed. *Nitandua* is a very serious act and, therefore, attracts heavy penalties and sanctions. I provide here an example of *nitandua* recorded at the Asantehemmaa's court during my research in Kumasi in 1994.

Case 1: Brobbey vs. Nana Akua (all of Ntonso near Kumasi)

Venue: Asantehemmaa's Court: "Kumasi Manhyia"

Date : 14th June 1994

Participants: Members of the judiciary of the Court, the Queenmother, the parties involved and audience.

Background of the case:

There was a fight between two families, where Kwame Brobbey insulted Nana Akua, a young girl. He used some invectives referring to her sexual organs. He went to the extent of saying that her armpit and her sexual organs stink. Upon this, the lady Nana Akua imprecated as follows:

- (15) *Kwame Brobbey ee se wo ne wo yere da a Antoa Nyamaa ne Akorɔkɔto*
 Kwame Brobbey if you and your wife sleep Antoa Nyamaa and Akorɔkɔto
nku wo.
 Imp.kill you
 ('May the deities Antoa Nyamaa and Akorɔkɔto kill you if you have sex with your wife'.¹⁷)

In fact, this particular case was tried twice. In the first instance, Brobbey was found guilty of using invective taboo words. In the second part, Nana Akua was found guilty of using a *duabɔ* taboo expression, thus restricting Brobbey from having sex with his wife. Brobbey remarked as follows "Since she imprecated me I have not ventured to have sex with my wife". This proves his belief in the magical power of the spoken word.

The elders of the court ruled that since the *duabɔ* was used in the street, it is *nitandua* 'spiteful imprecation'. By Akan tradition, this type of *nitandua* implies that she has imprecated not only the person but the people of the entire village and sanctions must be imposed on her. After that, she was ordered to go and pacify the nemeses so as to ward off the wrath of the gods.

¹⁷ Akorɔkɔto is a major river deity in the Agona District of Ashanti Region of Ghana.

Case 2: Kwaku Bio vs. Kwasi Buronya

Venue: Asantehemmaa's Court: "Kumasi Manhyia"

Date: 10th May 1994

Participants: Members of the judiciary of the Court, the Queenmother, the parties involved and audience.

Background of the Case:

Kwasi Buronya imprecated Kwadwo Bio by invoking Antoa Nyamaa and the River Bia. The matter of imprecation was as follows: Kwadwo Bio inherited the legacy of Kwasi Buronya's late father. Bio took all the property of the deceased including, his cocoa farm, houses, golden ornaments and his clothing. Buronya imprecated as follows:

- (16) Se wode me papa ntoma ka wo ho a **Antoa Nyamaa**
If you take my father cloth touch your body then Antoa Nyamaa
ne Asuo Bia nku wo.
and Asua Bia kill you.
(‘If you should wear any of these items belonging to my late father Antoa Nyamaa and Asuo Bia should kill you’.)

Deliberation of the case:

“This is a *nitandua* 'spiteful grievance imprecation', so if we do not perform the customary rites and offer a live sheep, the river will inflict some harm on the imprecatee. The imprecator should be pronounced guilty.”

This particular case is a *nitandua* in the sense that Kwasi Buronya knows that the inheritor is permitted by custom and tradition to use the cloth. If he imprecates him because of this, then of course, the imprecation is based on hatred. Kwasi Buronya was found guilty and asked to pay some amount of money, and to provide two live sheep and one bottle of alcohol for the pacificatory rites to neutralise the imprecation. In this case, Kwasi Buronya was not much disturbed about the other properties like the cocoa farm and the house which were immovable. He was however driven by jealousy to see Kwaku Bio wearing his father's rich clothes.

Case 3: Alhaji vs. Yaa Agyeman

Venue: Asantehemmaa's Court: "Kumasi -Manhyia"

Date: 24th May 1994

Participants: Members of the judiciary of the Court, the Queenmother, the parties involved and audience.

According to the narration Yaa Agyeman previously fetched water from the Alhaji's house. At some point, Alhaji asked the woman to reduce the frequency of her visits to the place. Later on, there was a squabble between the Alhaji and the woman's children when they were playing football and this finally ended at the police station. After the police

deliberation, the woman went to the Alhaji's house with eggs and a bottle of *schnapps* and imprecated as follows:

- (17) Se enye me me ba na boroo wo ba na
 If it Neg.is ne my child Foc.beat your child and
 wode ato no so a Antoa Nyamaa nku wo.
 you Perf. him top then Antoa Nyamaa Imp. kill you'.
 ('If it is really not the case that it was my child who beat your child as alleged,
 and you have falsely accused him, then Antoa Nyamaa should kill you'.)

Alhaji brought the case to the Asantehemmaa's court and the woman was found guilty of the performance of the act and the utterance of the imprecation. After the reprimands, sanctions and the fines imposed on the woman, she was asked to perform pacificatory rituals to neutralise the effect of the imprecation.

An imprecation may be settled at the traditional arbitration by the secular and religious administrators and the party found guilty (imprecator or imprecatee) is fined. Since *duabo* taboo by its power of the spoken word can harm the imprecatee, it must be deactivated or neutralised after the arbitration. The neutralisation of its effect is done through some invocations, incantations and the performance of certain rituals. The major aspect of the ritual involves the appropriate use of language. The term used is *yerekɔdane dua no* (lit.) 'we are going to upturn the imprecation'. This means that we are going to pacify the nemesis and deactivate the magical and harmful power of the imprecation to make the imprecatee free.

People normally use the expression *Nana kɔkɔtwea, wodi bem*, 'Nana you deserve an apology, I am at fault', as the pacification formula. According to Nana Banahene, one of the senior spokesmen of the Asantehene, "the expression *kɔkɔtwea* is an apologetic device and a cleansing verbal tool a victim uses to clean his lips and mouth that have been defiled by the use of the *duabo* verbal taboo so that his mouth will henceforth never use such a taboo expression."

5.3.2. *Appropriate Duabo*

Generally speaking, since the society does not encourage imprecation, there is not a ready made term for appropriate imprecation. Our attention on *duabo* 'imprecation' is therefore focused on *nitandua* 'spiteful imprecation'. Notwithstanding, imprecation performs certain social functions which may allow the use of it and this is what we discuss in section 6 below.

6. Social functions of *Duabo* verbal taboo

Although *duabo* as a verbal taboo carries some sanctions, there are situations where the society allows it to be used for *self defence*, *protection of property* and other purposes and the consequences could be acceptable. These cases include *theft*, *slander*, *libel*, *marital cases*, etc. Even in these instances, sanctions may be imposed to deter people from the

wrong usage of these imprecations. We also saw earlier on that *duabɔ* is one of the strategies used to deal with one's enemies who may be pursuing him in diverse ways (see example 4). Among the Akan an imprecation can be embedded in a libation prayer where the genre gives the speakers the opportunity to use imprecation on known and unknown people and even tribes and states who they think hate them. Let us consider a marriage engagement libation text below.

- Otweaduumpon nsa!*
Abosom nnuasa mommegye nsa!
Asaase Yaa nsa!
Ayokofoɔ nsamanfoɔ nsa!
Asonafoɔ nsamanfoɔ nsa!
Agonafoɔ nsamanfoɔ mo nsa nie!
Biretufoɔ nsamanfoɔ nsa!
Yeafre baako yi deɛ na yeafre mo nyinaa.
Mommeɣyina yen akyi akyigyina pa.
Enne da yi na ene da bi se.
Enne da yi na mo ara mo nana Yaa Pokuaa
Ye de no rema Kwasi Owusu awareɛ.
Mo adaworoma mommegyina wɔn akyi akyigyina pa.
Momma wɔn awareɛ no nkɔ so.
Momma wɔn nwo abaduasa.
Momma wɔn abrabo nsi wɔn yie.
Wɔpɛ sika a momma wɔnnya bi.
Wɔsɔ ahahan mu koraa a momma ennane sika.
 (18) [*Onipa bɔne biara a ɔtan yen deɛ*
Momma ɔnwu awia ketekete.]
 (19) [*ɔman biara a ekaa wɔn nko na anka Asanteman agyigya deɛ*
Momma ɔnhwe ase porɔɔ.
ɔbɔ bra biara a mommma no nnye yie.
Momma emu nnipa nyinaa ase nhye.
Na yenkoɔfa wɔn agyapadeɛ nyinaa dommum]
Mommeɣyira yen a yeahyia ha yi nyinaa.
Mommeɣye nsa yi nnom no preko.
Mommma mmusuo biara nka yen.
Yen a yeahyia ha yi nyinaa nkwa so.
 Audience: *Mo ne kasa.*

('Otweaduumpon the Almighty God here are drinks!
 Deities of thirty fold rush for drinks!¹⁸
 Asaase Yaa the Mother Earth here are drinks!

¹⁸The expression 'drinks' is a poetic shorthand for 'here is/are your drink(s).

Ancestors of the Oyokoᵐ clan drinks!¹⁹
 Ancestors of the Asona clan drinks!
 Ancestors of the Agona clan here are your drinks!
 Ancestors of the Biretuo clan drinks!
 Ancestors of the Ekoᵐ na clan drinks!
 Once we have invoked one we have invoked all of you.
 Come and give us firm support.
 Today is a great day among all other days.
 It is today that your granddaughter Yaa Pokuaa
 Is been engaged to Kwasi Owusu.
 By your grace come and give them a firm support.
 Let their engagement prosper.
 Let them give birth to thirty fold.
 Let them have a prosperous marriage.
 If they search for money let them find it.
 If even they take hold of leaves, let them turn into money.

- (18) *[Any sinful man who hates us
 Let him die an afternoon death when the sun is overhead]*
- (19) *[Any nation which wishes the downfall of the Asante nation.
 Let her perish from the face of the earth.
 If she embarks on any economic venture let it fail.
 Let all the people in that nation perish
 So that we will go and take all their properties as booty].*
- Come and bless all of us here.
 Let us not fall into any predicaments.
 Give us long life and prosperity.
 Come and drink this once and for all.

Audience: Thanks for a good speech.)

In the above text, the expressions in the square brackets are imprecations within a libation text. The first one (ex. 18) is against any enemy and the second one (ex. 19) refers to any antagonistic nation.

In the olden days, *duabo* was one of the state mechanisms for the implementation of state laws.²⁰ On the political scene in Akan, there can be an imprecation from the *ɔman-kyeame* 'the state's spokesman' as follows:

¹⁹ Oyokoᵐ: This is one of the eight matrilineal clans of the Akans. The others are Agona, Ekoᵐna, Asona, Aduana, Biretuo, Asakyiri and Asennee. Every Akan is supposed to come from one of these clans. Members of the same clan consider themselves as brothers and sisters and trace themselves to one great grandmother. During libation, the ancestors of these eight clans are invoked. The speaker can list all of them or mention some and say that once some have been invoked it is assumed that all of them have been invoked.

²⁰ It is recorded in the Old Testament that imprecation was one of the methods Moses used in enforcing the law of God (cf. DT. 27-28). Little Lester (1987) also records that the discipline of the faith of Islam is also maintained in part by curses (Qur'an 2: 161).

- (20) *Dee* *ɔbeɣe* *dɔm atia* *ɔhene biara no* Asuo Bosom
 Person he Fut. do crowd against chief any the river deity
Tanɔ nku **no.**
 Tanɔ Imp. kill him.
 ('May the river deity Tanɔ slay anybody that rebels against the king.'²¹)

Among the Akan, as in many other African societies like Tanzania, law and morality may be maintained by the use of imprecations. In Akan, the prevalence of such curses acts as a mechanism to instil fear into the people to behave themselves well.

McKenzie (1993: 145) argues that the formula "Cursed be..." functions as a way of maintaining stability within the community. Pronouncing a curse on one who has acted in ways that violate accepted social responsibility is a way of expelling that person from the community. In this case, curse is also related to the maintenance of the covenant that the Lord made with Israel (Jer. 11: 13, Det. 27: 15-25).²¹ There is also the use of the "preventive curse" as a standard device for the protection of sacred places as well as deeds or agreements between persons (see also Little 1987: 183; McKenzie 1993: 144-145 for social functions of curse).

7. The human participants in *Duabɔ*

Among the Akan, *duabɔ* 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 associated with *duabɔ*. Among the Akan, traditional priests, chiefs, and kings should neither imprecate, nor be imprecated. Such people are the custodians of the deities and should therefore revere them and are restrained from using their names in vain so as to defile them.

Women also occupy certain specific positions with regard to *duabɔ*. In addition to the priests and the chiefs, pregnant and menstruating women should neither imprecate nor be the target of imprecation. The reason is that first and foremost 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. With regard to a pregnant woman, there is the fear that any harm resulting from imprecation or swearing 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 curse too much for this may endanger the baby's welfare."

Certain speech acts like in a wedding, the matrimony, commissioning of a ship, sentencing somebody to life imprisonment, etc. in European cultures require specific authoritative people who have the right to mention and perform them. In *duabɔ*, however, there are no specific authoritative people who have the sole authoritative power to imprecate. Little (1987) records that in order for the curse to be effective, and in order for the utterance to be considered as a speech act, certain conditions must be met. These

²¹ Asuo Tanɔ is the river deity for the Asante state of Ghana. In the olden days, whenever the Ashantis were going to war, they had to consult this deity.

include the presence of proper actors (participants), time, place, verbal formulas, and gestures.

In the sociolinguistic aspect of the value of *duabɔ*, it is recorded and pointed out in many societies that the concepts of imprecation and oath are in some way instruments of the weak. According to Little (1987), 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 poor, 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 (see also Thomas 1971: 502-512). My interview really confirmed this when I asked to find out which category of people were interested in imprecating and swearing.

More than 90% of my interviewees answered that it was normally the poor and those in the lower ranks in the society. One of my informants Op. 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 imprecate." The rich, the higher rank, and the dignitaries in the society will normally prefer to send their cases to court. My research revealed that in the Akan society, in terms of gender, it is women who are particularly interested in using the taboo words of *duabɔ*. I attended the Asantehemmaa's court for three months. This court generally deals with feminine and domestic cases which 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 those of *duabɔ* 'grievance imprecation' 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.

The research findings also revealed that non-Christians and illiterates were much more engaged in *duabɔ* than Christians and literates. The Christians do not believe in the power of the deities, and again they feel that invoking the deities implies the worship of idols. The literates who have been influenced by western culture also distance themselves from African traditional religion and therefore do not engage themselves in imprecation.

In much the same way it was found out that participants in *duabɔ* are mostly found in the rural areas rather than in the towns and cities. Those in the cities would normally seek redress at the legal courts instead of resorting to imprecation. It is possible to combine some of these social indexes, that is to say that an imprecator may belong to two or more of them. He can be an illiterate, urban and non-Christian. The question then is which of these social indexes carries more weight. The Christian factor is more prime in the sense that one could get a literate non-Christian person in the city who would still be interested in imprecation.

Notwithstanding the category of people mentioned as being interested in *duabɔ*, there are idiosyncratic forms of linguistic behaviour towards these issues. Some people are normally interested in *duabɔ* irrespective of their social classes, sex, religion, education, rank or status in the society. In fact, I know of a university graduate who still engages in imprecation.

8. Conclusion

This paper has discussed *duabɔ* as a religious verbal taboo in Akan. Since in *duabɔ* the spiritual component is obvious, the taboo nature of the expressions becomes very dangerous, because people fear the wrath of these spirits and nobody would risk his life by mentioning an unmentionable. In *duabɔ*, there is the **magical power** of the spoken word. Quite apart from this, the taboo also stems from the **importance** and **reverence** we attach to the deities. There is also the issue of face threats in *duabɔ* cases. For example, at any time a *duabɔ* verbal taboo is uttered in public, the faces of the audience are affronted.

In *duabɔ* the imprecator invokes the supernatural powers to impose harm or punishment on the imprecatee especially in situations of conflict. *Duabɔ* involves three participants, the speaker (imprecator), the addressee (the deity- nemesis), and the target for the imprecation and the punishment (imprecatee). There is a message, which is the mand. In terms of the structure of the language, we saw that the prototypical type of verbs used are *arrest*, *afflict* and *kill*.

Duabɔ has three main parts. These are the protactic proposition, which is the invocation, the apodictic proposition, stating the reason(s) for the imprecation, and the commissive proposition, stating the punishment. It is possible to omit either the protactic, apodictic content, the commissive proposition or the imprecatee in certain contexts.

In terms of types of *duabɔ* we saw that we can have an anticipatory imprecation whereby the taboo expression forewarns would-be-victims to avoid saying or performing certain acts. We also distinguished between major and minor types of *duabɔ* based on the type and power of the deity which is invoked and how soon it metes out the punishment unto the imprecatee. We argued that all the renowned deities in Akan are invoked for major *duabɔ* while the smaller and less powerful ones are used for minor *duabɔ*. Major *duabɔ* is employed when the offence is grievous. We pointed out that although God is a supreme deity, because he is all-forgiving, and since no sacerdotal system has been established in his name by the Akan, *duabɔ* which involve his name may be considered as minor *duabɔ* taboos. For this reason, God is not regularly invoked for *duabɔ* purposes. Apart from these types, we also discussed *nitandua* 'spiteful imprecation', cases where the imprecation is disproportionate to the offence and the imprecator imprecates the target out of sheer hatred and envy. We noted that among the Akan, this type is about the most grievous *duabɔ* taboo, and it attracts heavier sanctions.

Among the Akan, there is the possibility of warding off (by pacification) the wrath of *duabɔ* imprecation. This is done first by settling the matter in the presence of the secular and religious authorities by the imposition of fines. After this, rituals are performed to pacify the supernatural powers and an appeal is made for forgiveness. In view of the fact that in *duabɔ* a person's life is at stake, people are advised to refrain from these utterances, and children - as part of their socialisation process - are educated and cautioned about the use of these expressions. The paper finally looked at the sanctions of *duabɔ* and commented on the human participants.

Map of Ghana

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