

Ntam ‘reminiscential oath’ taboo in Akan

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ABSTRACT

Ntam ‘reminiscential oath’ among the Akan of Ghana is a commissive form that has statutory force. In it, the oath-taker evokes the memory of historical events that are dangerous and unpleasant to mention. The statutory force of the oath is accomplished by the evocation of these memories in the community which shares them. This article reviews the types of *ntam* oaths, the contexts for their use, and their structure. (*Ntam* oath, Akan verbal taboo, face threat, commissives)

INTRODUCTION

This article addresses *ntam* ‘reminiscential oath’ 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, as well as the largest percentages of both L1 and L2 speakers. According to the Ghana 2000 population census, 49.1% of the national population of 18.8 million are Akans (*Daily Graphic* 2001:1).

Ntam may be considered as a form of oath. It is an evocation of the past unpleasant experiences of a people and of the state. Within Searle’s (1969) typology of speech acts, *ntam* oaths are a type of COMMISSIVE, but with the special quality of having statutory force. That is, *ntam* oaths are used in institutional contexts at the highest level of the Akan state, as well as in less important institutional contexts, as discussed below. I will argue that the meaning of a speech act like *ntam* is best captured and analyzed within the sociocultural context rather than from a personalistic perspective. It is the social world that shapes the things we do or say with words by linking language with the personality and society (cf. Rosaldo 1982:228).¹

I will refer to *ntam* as a “reminiscential oath by evocation,” quite different from religious or legal oaths. I will continue to use the indigenous term *ntam* after I have defined the notion. I will discuss the theory behind the *ntam* taboo, the basic types of *ntam*, and situations for the use of *ntam* with or without sanctions. This essay concentrates on situations in which the unspeakable, or taboo, *ntam* becomes speakable without any sanctions. Brief mention will be made of the history and origins of *ntam*, a complete account of which would form another

article; here, I focus instead on the language, form, structure, style, and the pragmatics of *ntam*, supporting the discussion with specific data from my fieldwork.

METHODOLOGY

The materials presented here were collected using the methods of the ethnography of communication. I collected most of the data from arbitrations at the Manhyia Palace of the king of Asante between February and July 1994. Arbitrations are traditional courts where civil disputes of all kinds are deliberated – land and chieftaincy disputes, marriage cases, assault, invective (see the next section), theft, and similar matters. In all these cases, *ntam* oaths are used to assert the principles' views, and also by witnesses to bind themselves to speak the truth. The jury is made up of the chief or king of the locality and his elders.

I also interviewed renowned *akyeame* 'chief's spokesmen' and other elders at the palace and other places within the Akan community. In addition, I sent questionnaires to final-year students at the University College of Education, Winneba, for them to administer during the Easter holidays of 1994.²

AKAN VERBAL TABOOS: WOEFUL THINGS

The Akan term *abususem* 'woeful things or expressions' is used for verbal taboos. I cite below such forms of verbal taboo in Akan. In Agyekum 1996, I identify various categories of verbal taboos in Akan, including *ntam* 'reminiscential oath'. Other categories include *duabo* 'grievance imprecation,' which involves the invocation of a deity to unleash divine wrath or a curse on the target or wrongdoer (see Agyekum 1999). The opposite of this verbal taboo is *nsedie* 'assertive self-imprecation oath'. There is also *atennidie* 'invective', especially forms of invective that negatively refer to the origin and genealogy, deformity, ill health, or sexual organs of the addressee. All these taboo categories can be aptly referred to as *mbusuem* 'woeful things' because their outcome can be distasteful.

Of all the taboos mentioned, the closest to *ntam* is *nsedie* 'assertive self-imprecation oath'. Both are oaths used to assert a stand, and they commit the speaker to say nothing but the truth or to abide by his or her words. Both of them key to a solemn and serious mood. They are both used in local arbitration. The difference between them can be characterized as follows. (i) *Nsedie* is a religious oath, invocative in the sense that the speaker calls down the wrath of a supernatural being to punish the speaker himself or herself if what is asserted is perjury. (ii) *Ntam* is reminiscential and evokes past memories and unpleasant situations that are dangerous to the community; it thus carries listeners back into the history of the people (see Agyekum 1996, chap. 2)

OATHS IN THE BIBLE AND IN WESTERN SOCIETIES

This section gives a brief overview of oaths in the Bible and in Western societies. *Webster's Encyclopedic Dictionary* (1989:993) defines an oath as "a solemn ap-

peal to God, or to some revered person or thing, to witness one's determination to speak the truth or to keep a promise." We will see that oaths work like *ntam* in that they index a community of people who believe in such a higher power and in the force of the oaths.

Oaths in the Bible

According to the *New Geneva Study Bible* (1995:670), "Oaths are solemn declarations invoking God as a witness to statements and promises, inviting Him to punish anything false." The underlying factor here is that oaths bind the speaker to speak the truth, and failure to do that will offend God.

In the book of Nehemiah, chap. 5, the Hebrew governor Nehemiah deals with the oppressed and wants the rich to restore to them their lands, vineyards, houses, money, and other properties. When he calls them, they agree to restitution, but to make it binding he asks them to swear an oath. This is recorded as follows: "So they said, 'We will restore it, and will require nothing from them; we will do as you say.'" Nehemiah recounts, "Then I called the priests and required an oath from them that they would do according to this promise" (Neh. 5:12).

In the book of Ezra, we are told that the Israelites confessed that some had taken pagan wives and wanted to make covenant with God to put away all those wives. They went to Ezra to commit themselves to supporting him in this, and to ask him to see to it that it be done. "Then Ezra arose, and made the leaders of the priests, the Levites, all Israel swear an oath that they would do according to his word. So they swore an oath" (Ezra 10:5).

In the New Testament as well, we encounter oaths. In Mathew 26:72–74, Peter denies that he knows Jesus, supporting his assertion against doubters with an oath: "Then he began to invoke a curse on himself and to swear, 'I do not know the man.'"

Acts 23:11–12 tells how people plotted to kill Paul, binding themselves by an oath: "And when it was day, some of the Jews banded together and bound themselves under an oath, saying that they would neither eat nor drink till they had killed Paul."

There are cases in the Bible in which God swears an oath to his people. A divine oath is expressed in Psalm 110:4: "The Lord has sworn and will not relent." This was interpreted by Christians as demonstrating the unchangeable permanence of the new priesthood of Jesus. This was supported by reference to Hebrews 6:13–17, 7:20–21; for example, "Thus God determining to show more abundantly to the heirs of promise the immutability of His counsel, confirmed it by an oath" (Heb. 6:17).

It could be deduced from the examples above that oaths in biblical times had an inherent power to bind a speaker to abide by what he or she said. An oath's force does not respect the status of the speaker. Apart from the examples given above, there are many additional instances in the Bible of the use of oaths, for

example in Luke 1:73–74, Mathew 5:33–34, Genesis 24:1–9, 1 Samuel 14:26, Ecclesiastes 8:2, and Jeremiah 11:5 and 42:18.

Oaths in Western society

Oath-taking in Europe and the Near East originated from religious customs, but it became extended to secular settings, especially in law courts and other legal proceedings, with the particular usage varying from country to country. Oath-taking dates at least as far back as the Sumerian civilization (4th to 3rd millennia BCE) of the ancient Middle East, and to ancient Egypt. At that time people often swore by their life; Egyptian *ankh* ‘oath’ means ‘an utterance of life’. The words for ‘oath’ in many Indo-European languages, including English *oath*, are reflexes of Proto-Indo-European **h₁óitos* ‘a going’, specialized to the meaning ‘oath’ in Celtic and Germanic with reference to the practice of walking between parts of slaughtered animals to give force to the oath (Mallory & Adams 1997:408). Oaths were also taken by invoking sacred water-courses of the underworld, combining associations with water and lightning (Mallory & Adams 1997:409). The force of such allusions makes clear that the oath was intended as an absolute guarantee of the word and intent of the person swearing, and also the fetter that bound him to the truth. This implies that it is not the mere mentioning of the oath that is important, but the implicational bond that it entails and the obligation it casts on the speaker. In Latin, the term for oath is *ius iurandum* ‘sworn law’; in Roman society, oaths were firmly established legal instruments with statutory force (see Klinger 1987:302). Benveniste 1973 concludes that the expression refers to the rigid enforcement of the procedure of the oath, which was itself a *sacramentum*, an engagement made before the gods.

Among the Hittites, there were “oath gods” and others seen as gods of contract (i.e., the guardians of oath and truth). Judaism distinguishes two kinds of improper oaths: a vain oath, whereby one attempts to do something that is too difficult to achieve or attempts to negate the fulfillment of a religious precept; and a false oath, in which one uses the name of God to swear falsely, thus committing a sacrilege. In Christianity, Judaism, and Islam, oaths are still widely used today. An oath in Islam is called *qasam*; one typically swears on his life, soul, honor, or faith. This primarily constitutes a pledge to God, and so a false oath is considered a danger to one’s soul.

In Greek religion, the institutions of oath, religion, and morality and the organization of society were inextricably linked. According to Burkert (1985:250), “The function of an oath is to guarantee that a statement is absolutely binding, whether it be a statement about something in the past or a declaration of an intent for the future.” In a culture like Akan, which was until recently without writing, with no records to serve as proof and no legal documents, the binding nature of oath was of unique importance, and it still is. This implies that there is an extension of the illocutionary speech act into a kind of statutory force.

NTAM AS AN OATH

One striking feature of the Akan *ntam* oath is that it is not based on religion. It is "reminiscential" in that it evokes past unpleasant events in Akan society. One of the important questions to which the study of oaths like *ntam* contributes is that of precisely how statutory force becomes available. I suggest that the language of the oath is statutory, rather than a mere simple commissive, and that its force is available because it "socializes" the commitment made. It binds the oath-taker to the community, and vice versa. This is done by evoking shared memories and moral commitments and by indexing a community within which these are significant.

The civil functions of the *ntam* oath are comparable to those of the Greek oath. The Akan *ntam* oath governs the laws of the state. It dominates penal law and civil law and thus plays an important regulatory and monitoring role in the practical life of individuals and of the society as a whole (see Burkert 1985:252). *Ntam* is important in court deliberations, commercial dealings, land issues, other legal transactions, and the settlement of family, clan, and chieftaincy disputes.

In *ntam*, the swearer pledges, binds, and commits himself or herself to the apodictic propositions in the oath, and as a result, the assertions mentioned in his oath can be demanded of him. This is aptly stated by Klingler:

An oath is a promise made before some institutional authority. In taking an oath, a person not only assumes an obligation but also becomes liable to prosecution; the state and society have an interest in his act. Oaths serve as objective guarantees of what is promised. Swearing to tell the truth, one guarantees that what one says is true. Oaths are self-endorsing. It is a best verification of the truth. (1987:301)

This description captures the statutory nature of oaths that include the Akan *ntam*. In swearing in public to assert the truth, the oath-taker invites the society before which the oath is uttered to guarantee that what is said is the truth. Searle 1969 therefore added TRUTH to his criteria for illocutionary acts and considered sincerity an essential quality for speaking. The person taking the *ntam* oath commits himself or herself to sincerity. In the case of *ntam*, however, we can see an important additional dimension of the oath: its social dimension. The entire society demands sincerity from the speaker and also believes that the evocation of *ntam* presupposes the truth. This is the case because the events, and the society itself in the form of those people for whom the events mentioned are significant and dangerous, are evoked and indexed in the moment of taking the oath. Thus, while Akans seem to share standards of "sincerity" that would be recognizable to Searle, the social distribution of responsibility accomplished in *ntam* goes beyond his account of commissives. Searle's commissives have a strong focus on individual sincerity, but *ntam* commissives include a complicit audience that shares responsibility for the fulfillment of the

act to which the utterer of *ntam* commits. *Ntam* indexicalizes and reproduces social memories that affect the entire society.

Duranti 1993 discusses a Samoan theory of speaking in an important instance of the “antipersonalist” critique of speech act theory. Samoans do not attach importance to the private meaning of utterances. Duranti writes, “Samoans practice interpretation as a way of publicly controlling social relationships.” The same antipersonalist critique is put forward by Rosaldo:

The meanings carried by our words must thus depend not just on what we say, but who we are and what we hope our interlocutors know. The speech act theory fails because it thinks of “doing things with words” as the achievement of autonomous selves, whose deeds are not significantly constrained by the relationships and expectations that define the social world. The theory fails because it does not comprehend the sociality of individuals who use its “rules” and “resources” to act. (1982:204)

Based on the above assertions, I claim that words do not emanate from individuals but from many social contexts and settings. A speech act like *ntam* requires the participation of a certain type of audience. The meaning of an instance of *ntam* is seen as the product of an interaction and not necessarily as something sited in one person’s mind. If an individual swears a *ntam* in privacy, it has no social impact until it is made public (see also Hill & Irvine 1993:9).

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The *ntam* taboo can be analyzed most appropriately within the framework of speech act theory (Austin 1962, Searle 1969). Under this theory, some of the pertinent questions to be asked are: (i) How binding is an expression in language? (ii) What is the nature of the binding force, and what is the source? (iii) What is its impact on the speaker? (iv) What is its impact on the audience?

I will argue that among speakers of Akan, language itself is a binding force, and it has power and “ignition” analogous to those of a mechanical engine. The idea that language has “force” and “power” in language is made explicit in Austin’s and Searle’s theory of speech acts, but as pointed out many years ago by Malinowski, in many societies a commitment to this idea is both implicit and explicit in local ideas about how language works. The power of the spoken word is clearly recognized by Akan speakers when they establish a category of verbal taboos (see Agyekum 1996).

As expressed in the etymology of the word *oath*, people with this idea recognize that language can be used as a bond that may allow, prohibit, or restrain people with reference to certain designated acts. Various pacts, covenants, and treaties among nations, tribes, clans, and individuals are captured through language. Agreements on disarmament, rules, regulations, and commandments are

all encapsulated through the binding force and power of language. People are committed to the language and must obey its contents. In such cases, one can argue, language is mightier than the sword.

Ntam as a speech act

In this article, distinction is made between a *ntam* event and a *ntam* speech act. The *ntam* event is the situation that triggers the use of *ntam*, as we will see below. The *ntam* speech act is the evocation of the *ntam* taboo utterance and the use of performative verbs. The *ntam* speech act and its paralinguistic features are integral parts of the whole *ntam* communicative event. The speaker performs the speech act in a serious mood, and the participants become solemn.

Ntam falls directly into the category of commissives; however, certain types of *ntam* communicative events may employ speech acts of other categories, such as directives. A commissive is a speech act in which the speaker is committed in some degree to the truth of the proposition his utterance expresses, and it necessarily involves intention (Searle 1969). Commissives commit the speaker to some posterior or future action; that is, the speaker commits himself or herself to performing an action at a time later than that of the utterance (see Leech 1983:206). Commissive verbs include *promise, vow, swear, offer, volunteer, pledge, contract, bid, bet, accept, and assure* (see Duranti 1997:224, Coulthard 1992:24).

The display in the speech act of commitment to some future action must be separated from the fulfillment of the act. This is why, in cases of inappropriate or perjured *ntam*, social censure can be exercised, as discussed below.

Searle 1969 emphasizes the illocutionary force of speech acts and introduces the term FIT. According to him, “fit” expresses the relationship between our words and the world we live in. We can deduce that physical things and concrete behavior such as violence are transformed into abstractions in the form of language, and when the language is used, it presupposes the performance of the act referenced. This phenomenon can be captured as follows:



This means therefore that world is fitted to words, and words may also be fitted to the world. There is thus a strong relationship between the world, which is reality, and the word, which is language.

According to Mey (1993:132), “Through the use of words I make the word fit my language and change the world in accordance with my directions as given through the use of language.” A person’s commissives effect a change in the world by creating an obligation in the speaker. The speaker of a *ntam* therefore creates an obligation on his or her own part to abide by what is said in the proposition, and also targets the truth.

DEFINITION AND AKAN CONCEPT OF *NTAM* TABOO

The nominal *ntam* is derived from the verb *tam* ‘lift’ plus the nominalizing prefix *n-*. The derived noun *ntam* literally means ‘lifting up, wrestling, struggling, grappling with’. The verb *tam* in its predicative function implies the lifting of heavy objects. The word *ntam* thus implies grappling with an object that is heavy, burdensome, and difficult to lift, and thus a task that requires considerable effort, caution, and energy.

The word *ntam* refers to historical experiences and events in the life of the Akan people of Ghana that literally are “very difficult for the mouth to lift,” much less to talk about – quite a mouthful, as the English speaker would say. *Ntam* can refer to any experience or event that has happened to an individual, a family, or a whole state in the past. It may have occurred during a war; it may be an epidemic, a plague, a famine, a tragic accident, or an unexpected death. In ancient times, the Akans avoided referring to such events lest the spirits of their dead ancestors should rise and take revenge, because their agonies and painful experiences had been recalled. K. A. Busia, a renowned sociologist, writes:

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. (1968:75–78).

The *ntam* oath, therefore, symbolically serves as a set formula alluding covertly to the tragic incident (cf. Mensah-Brown 1976, Braffi 1984:39–43, E. Obeng 1988:59–62).

It is fascinating to note that, even though *ntam* is a taboo and hence “unmentionable,” it is mentioned and understood in certain identifiable contexts. *Ntam* thus constitutes an especially powerful and interesting form of social memory and reproduction of history that draws people into a common understanding of their history. When *ntam* is evoked, all present will be drawn to index an important piece of shared knowledge. We can thus consider *ntam* as one of the Akan oral art forms by which important sociocultural and historical information is stored (see Connerton 1989).

Furthermore, by “mentioning the unmentionable” and thus rendering the audience complicit in recognition of it, *ntam* not only reproduces social memories but also establishes the audience as a party to the oath. This creation of a complicit audience is one of the mechanisms by which *ntam* rises beyond the quotidian level of ordinary commissives to achieve its statutory power.

The Akans consider *ntam* oaths as recalling mournful events, dark secrets, weaknesses, and shortcomings of the people that should not be resurrected from the past. The expression “Let sleeping dogs lie” is an apt description of the ra-

tionale behind the *ntam* taboo. In old times, people would fast for several days after such past experiences were mentioned in public. The swearing of a *ntam* oath reminded the elders or others present of their past shame, misfortune, nightmares, or sorrowful historical events. The recollection often brought tears to the cheeks of the elders. It is the agony behind *ntam* 'reminiscential oath' that makes it a verbal taboo.

The expression *meka ntam* 'I swear by the *ntam*' is itself a euphemism. It is an aspect of politeness to avoid the use of the actual forbidden referent (see Rattray 1969a: 215). If one says *meka ntankeseε*, it is enough to understand its reference. Since the referents, the "unfortunate historical experiences," are either understood explicitly or assumed to be understood implicitly, speakers rarely ever mention them overtly. Over time, the taboo expressions have not only become pivotal in the taboo system but have also lost their explicit referents for most people. Referents of *ntam* are known only to those within the inner circle of the family or the state. This is the indirect aspect of the *ntam* taboo. Note, then, that the "complicit audience," those who are drawn into the project of socialization that establishes the statutory force of *ntam*, are themselves indexed by the utterance of the oath. Thus, not only is social memory reproduced in the making of the oath, but the group of people who share that memory are also projected and reasserted when it is uttered.

Ntam 'reminiscential oaths' can be considered as a system of language use among the Akan by means of which the shared tribulations of a family, clan, or state are evoked as a form of social power and control over the remaining members of the group on both formal and informal occasions. The utterances are considered inappropriate in contexts of joyful commemoration and reminiscence. Rather, they remind people of the sad event, but they do not mention the event explicitly, since this is taboo to mention explicitly in public or in private, to any audience.

The most important aspects of *ntam* that makes it a verbal taboo are the MAGICAL POWER OF THE SPOKEN WORD, FACE THREAT, IMPORTANCE, and DANGER of the denotatum with which the taboo word is associated. It is believed that the utterance of a *ntam* word has the magical power to bring about the reoccurrence of the same event, or a similar event. It ultimately touches on the emotions of the people, reminds them of past predicaments, and thus disturbs them psychologically. In all the cases that relate to the notion of *ntam* that I observed at the Manhyia Palace in Asante, indigenous perceptions were constantly repeated to show the importance the Akan people attach to the concept. The statement below, made by a chief during arbitration at the Manhyia Palace in April 1994, evidences this:

- (1) *Ntam ye adeε a emu ye duru pa ara, eno ara na akonnwa yi ne εman mu yi nyinaa gyina so. Yen nyinaa a yewɔ ha yi Ntankeseε ho ban na yerebɔ.*
'*Ntam* is something which is "very serious", it is all that the [chief's] stool and the whole state leans on. All who sit here, protect the Great Reminiscential Oath (*Ntankeseε*).'

Although *ntam* as a concept is logically and semantically an abstract noun, there are various lexical, syntactic, and semantic structures and expressions that portray *ntam* as real, or concrete, and thus fit the word to the world. *Ntam* is considered as an enduring, metaphorically deified element that has perpetual life like God or any other deity, and that must be worshipped. It is beyond reproach and unquestionable and should be attended to. These concepts denote that the society requires people to continue to revere *ntam*. The Akans depict *ntam* as a positive, powerful, valuable concept, the strongest verbal taboo that should not be trivialized (cf. Yankah 1995:50). There are therefore admonitions and sanctions against the downgrading of *ntam*. For example, a person who does so may be asked to pay a small fine in money or drink.

BASIC TYPES OF *NTAM*

Ntam can be classified according to the scope and the gravity of their penalties into *ntankumaa* ‘minor *ntam*’ and *ntankeseɛ* ‘major *ntam*’. They may also be categorized according to the appropriateness or manner of their use and performance; thus, we have *ntanhunu* ‘inappropriate *ntam*’, *ntampa* ‘appropriate *ntam*’, and *ntammɔsɔɔ* ‘stalemate *ntam*’.

The distinction between the minor and major *ntam* taboos is based on the nature of the various jurisprudential settings in the Akan society. They begin with the house, with the family head as the chief justice and the elders of the family as the members of the jury. At the village level, the chief is the chief justice and the members of the jury are the various family heads. The various chiefs of the traditional area constitute the members of the jury at the paramountcy level, with the paramount chief as the presiding officer and chief justice. At the level of traditional states like Asante, Akyem, Bono, and others, the respective king is the lord of the judiciary, and the members are the paramount chiefs.

Every *ntam* has limited scope and jurisdiction of operation, no matter how powerful it may be to its users. If a *ntankumaa* is a taboo of a village, a town or a state, then it is also restricted to such areas. Only people who serve under the chiefs of a particular area are bound by such a *ntam*, and it is only the political head that can try such *ntam* cases. Furthermore, such a *ntam* is invalid outside the area of its jurisdiction. Among the Akan, one cannot evoke his or her geographical area’s *ntam* to prove his or her case in another place that has its own *ntam* taboo system. The Akan says, *yɛmfɛ ntam ntu kwan* ‘we do not travel with a reminiscential oath’.

Ntankumaa ‘minor reminiscential oaths’

Ntankumaa are the oaths pertaining to individuals, households, families, and localities such as small towns and villages. In the household, the custodian of the *ntam* is the head of the family, usually the oldest surviving member.

Ntankumaa originated from tragedies, real or legendary, which tradition claims befell particular small towns, villages, families, or individuals. Every family and

every individual can have his or her own *ntam*. Examples of some individual *ntam* may stem from barrenness, impotence, serious diseases like epilepsy or leprosy, or physical and mental disabilities. Here are some examples:

- (2) *Meka me yafunu a manwo.*
'I swear by my barrenness', lit. 'I swear by my infertile womb.'
- (3) *Meka me ba awiawuo.*
'I swear by my child's death at midday.'
- (4) *Meka me yareε.*
'I swear by my disease.'

Ntankεsee 'major reminiscential oaths'

Ntankεsee are the oaths pertaining to various ethnic groups such as the Akuapem, Asante, Akyem, or Bono. Some refer to them as *Ntam Kεkεε* 'red reminiscential oath' (i.e., 'serious oath'). The color red in Akan society signifies danger, doom, or damnation, and it indicates symbolically that such reminiscential oaths are very dangerous or tricky to use and must be handled with great caution.

Every traditional state in Akan and every *akonɔnwa tuntum* 'black stool' has its own *ntam*. (The wooden stool is the symbol of office for Akan chiefs and kings; every chief has one.) According to the Akan, the state oaths came into being with the expansion of families into clans and further into states. In this process of expansion, the misfortunes and mishaps that previously were limited to the family now became the concern of the whole state, and the wrath invoked by their mention would now affect the king or chief and the whole state.

In this larger domain, the king became the owner and custodian of the *ntam*. In all the state *ntam* I compiled, the origin typically had to do with an unfortunate experience or a tragedy that affected a king, a queen, another royal, or some other important figure in the political administration of the state. The event might be a disaster such as the death of the king in battle or the decimation of an army, a plague, or an epidemic that affected a whole state. The unmentionability (or taboo) of an oath was intended to avert the reoccurrence of the tragic event.

The state *ntam* are established unspeakable linguistic items, each with its own origin. These items, unlike all other expressions in the language and culture, have limited scope of distribution and usage. They may not be used in ordinary conversation. There are prohibitions, inhibitions, sanctions, punishments, penalties, and rituals attached to them.

Categories of appropriateness

Ntam may also be categorized according to the appropriateness of their use and performance into *ntanhunu* 'inappropriate', *ntampa*, 'appropriate', and *ntammɔsɔɔ* 'stalemate'.³

Ntanhunu 'inappropriate reminiscential oath' refers to any taboo *ntam* that is spoken in an inappropriate context. *Ntanhunu* literally means 'empty oath'. Since *ntam* is a taboo expression and can be mentioned only when there is actual need

for it, anybody who swears an oath in the wrong context or in falsehood is said to have used a verbal taboo inappropriately. This is perjury and must be punished accordingly. Here is an example of *ntanhunu*:

- (5) *Meka Ntankeseε se abε yi ne mmire yi a εso woε yi wo me.*
 'I swear by the great reminiscential oath that this palm nut and mushroom are mine'.

Ntanhunu can also refer to a situation in which one has sworn an oath but cannot explain the reasons behind the swearing. When it is perceived that she or he is joking with the *ntam*, it is consequently declared an *ntanhunu* 'empty reminiscential oath' or 'taking an oath in vain'. This article, however, focuses on *ntampa*, discussed in detail in a later section.

Ntanhunu attracts many punishments. In the olden days, a person who swore a *ntanhunu* could be killed. In the present day, such a person may incur various punishments and sanctions such as the payment of a fine, providing drinks, or slaughtering a sheep. These depend on the seriousness of the offense, the power of the stool that owns the *ntam*, and the political status of the *ntam* that has been spoken.

PRAGMATICS AND STYLISTICS OF *NTAM*

This section looks at the pragmatics and stylistics of *ntam*. It also discusses their internal structure.

Internal structure and stylistics of ntam activity

I will now examine the internal structure of a *ntam* utterance by looking at how the words are arranged in linear order. This refers to the acts sequence of the *ntam* activity. A prototypical *ntam* in Akan has the following structure:

Protactic Proposition	Complementizer	Apodictic Proposition	Commissive Proposition
↓	↓	↓	↓
Performative	[Interpretive marker <i>se</i>]	Purposive (proposition)	Committal

This is exemplified by the following utterance:

- (6) *Meka ntankeseε se asaase no woε me.*
 'I swear by the great reminiscential oath that the land is mine.'

The Akan *ntam* expression thus has the following components: (i) a PROTACTIC proposition, (ii) an INTERPRETIVE MARKER *se* 'that', (iii) an APODICTIC proposition, and (iv) a COMMISSIVE proposition. In most *ntam* expressions, the commissive proposition is implicit, as seen in (6).

The protactic proposition is the introductory proposition that encodes the verbal taboo – the performative and the evocation, as in *Meka ntankeseε* 'I swear by the great oath'. It serves as a guarantee of the truth condition of the apodictic proposition.⁴ In the Akan system, if the protactic contains a taboo expression, the apodictic proposition must necessarily be true, for it is believed that the speaker is using the *ntam* to assert the truth. The oath component makes the commissive

more serious and elevated. The commissive aspect embodied in the oath makes the oath institutional, more deified, revered, and dangerous, and hence a verbal taboo. The oath and the commissive define the institutional site as sacred. It is a situation in which the speaker, by his or her language, directs the world to make his or her statement and assertion more believable.

The interpretive marker *se* 'that (complementizer)' marks or introduces the apodictic proposition (see Sperber & Wilson 1995:224–31 on interpretive uses).

The apodictic proposition is defined here as the actual statement for the purpose of which the speaker has been prompted to speak the forbidden word – that is, the reasons for the use of the *ntam*. It is the kernel and stimulus of the whole *ntam* expression and comes after *se*.

The commissive proposition binds the speaker to whatever is said. In a major *ntam*, the commissive may also mention the punishment to be meted out to a speaker who fails to comply with the contents and obligations of the oath. The example in (7) contains all the constituent parts discussed above:

- (7) (i) *Meka Mamponhene Yawoada se* (ii) [*mesom wo*] (iii) *mebu so a, meto ntam*.
'I swear by the *ntam* that [I will serve you] failure to do that I violate the oath.'

In (7), the performative part is *Meka Mamponhene Yawoada*. It is followed by *se*, the interpretive marker. The apodictic proposition is fused with the commissive in the expression *mesom wo* 'I will serve you', a pledge that represents the speaker's intention to serve the addressee (a king), without which there would be no need to utter the taboo word *ntam*. In effect, it is the core of the whole *ntam* expression. The final part is the commissive proposition, *mebu so a, meto ntam* 'failure to do that I violate the oath'; this spells out the punishment that concretizes the commissive. The terms "protactic" and "apodictic" propositions have also been used in connection with similar Akan verbal taboos (see Agyekum 1996, chaps. 3, 4; Agyekum 1999.)

Stylistics and pragmatics of ntankeseε 'major reminiscential oaths'

This section pays particular attention to politeness strategies and performative acts, analyzing major *ntankeseε* because they are more powerful and their structures demand some aspects of speech act principles and politeness. The most basic formulaic form used in speaking about *ntankeseε* is exemplified in (8):

- (8) *Mesre Otumfoε Ntankeseε meka Ntankeseε se akonnwayi yen ara yen dea*.
'I beg leave of Otumfoε's *ntankeseε* and swear by his *ntankeseε* that this stool is ours.'

In (8), the speaker says, in effect, "I seek permission to use Otumfoε's great reminiscential oath to swear by the great oath." In such an instance, 'Otumfoε's *Ntankeseε*' becomes an instrument that the speaker now uses as a prelude (or seeking permission) to utter the taboo word *ntam*.

In terms of personal pronouns as anaphoric references, the prototypical *ntam* utterance in both the major and minor *ntam* has 1st person singular *me* 'I' as the

subject of *ntam* statement. The *ntam* being referred to must have some formal grammatical relationship that REFERENTIALLY INDEXICALIZES either the speaker or the addressee in the speech communication. Reference to third parties is barred in Akan oath-taking, because the one on whose behalf it is sworn could deny responsibility for the use of the taboo or for its consequences. Such an act loses the aspect of commitment on the part of the swearer (see Silverstein 1976:27 for referential and nonreferential indexes). It would be inappropriate to make an *ntam* utterance like that in (9):

(9) *Yesɛ Otumfoɔ Ntankesɛɛ yeka Ntankesɛɛ sɛ asaase a ɛda ha kɔpɛm bɛpɔ no so no nyinaa wɔ me nananom.*

'We beg leave of Otumfo's *Ntankesɛɛ*, and swear by the great reminiscential oath that the land that stretches from here unto the mountains are for my ancestors.'⁵

The prototypical formula in *ntam* has an explicit and obligatory commissive performative verb *ka* 'swear' which functions as an initiating verb to the evocation of the taboo word *ntam*. The verb *ka* 'swear' is a commissive speech act verb. It has locutionary force that makes the agent involve himself or herself in uttering a *ntam* taboo expression. Its illocutionary force defines the intention of the speaker to perform a communicative activity that commits him or her in speaking the *ntam*, and its perlocutionary force indicates the effects that the utterance of the *ntam* may have on the listeners (see also Searle 1969; Bach & Harnish 1979; Crystal 1991:323; Levinson 1983:236; Coulthard 1992:18–19; Blakemore 1992; Mey 1993:113). The perlocutionary force of the *ntam* also brings about the reminiscence of the past deeds of the *ntam* and the solemnity therein. Among the Akan, the perlocutionary act includes the rituals (sacrifice of sheep, drinks, etc.) connected with the *ntam* that give the *ntam* its significance.

Use of the apologetic tag sɛ in major ntam

The major *ntam* has an obligatory performative verb *sɛ* 'beg' (or 'request'). I wish to draw attention to the social significance of the use of this verb in major *ntam*. The Akan word *sɛ* can be glossed as 'apologize, beg for, or request'. For our analysis, we are combining request and apology, since the speaker apologizes and also requests permission for using the taboo expression. In this case, the speaker combines expressive (apology) and directive (request). The speech act of apology is an aspect of appropriateness and politeness in speech, and the *sɛ* verb carries that. The speech act of apology as an expressive captures the feelings and attitudes of the speaker, who thus expresses regret, admits the offense, assumes responsibility, minimizes the offense or responsibility, and offers compensation.

In the case of the *ntam* performance in (9), the use of *sɛ* implies that the speaker expresses regret and admits the offense and responsibility of reminding society of the unmentionable, something that brings into mind a past unpleasant situation and may even bring about its repetition. Since the situation demands the evocation of the *ntam* taboo to assert a fact or claim, the use of the *sɛ* 'apology' is meant to tactfully minimize the offensive power of the taboo. It is also meant

as a verbal compensation for the evocation of the taboo (see Kasper 1994:3209). According to Holmes (1995:155), "An apology is a speech act addressed to an interactant's face needs and intended to remedy an offence for which the addressor takes responsibility, and thus to restore equilibrium between the apologisee and the person offended."

The verb *sɛ*, which connotes both apology and request in Akan *ntam*, may also have the following as core pragmatic implications: The speaker employs politeness, apology, and persuasion. According to Obeng (1999: 710), "Apologising is a face threatening for the speaker, whereas it is face saving for the hearer. Apologies are face supportive acts and have positive effect on the recipient or addressee." In the speech act of apology, the speaker of *ntam* tries as much as possible to protect and save his or her face so as to be considered as a communicatively competent speaker within the Akan social context. This is intended to indicate the politeness and good upbringing of the speaker. The speaker maintains face by alerting the audience that the upcoming expression is a taboo, an inherently face-threatening act for which the speaker must be pardoned. The pardon is directed to the taboo word. The apology implies that the speaker should not be misconstrued as rude and uncaring, as verbally assaulting the audience by reminding them of past woes. The speaker therefore prefaces the utterance with the apologetic tag *sɛ* to express warm and positive concern, and that shows politeness. In addition, the use of *mesɛ* 'I beg or apologize' serves to mitigate the force of the impending face-threatening act. The appropriate deployment of such a dualism leads to persuasion and politeness.

In discussing apology in the context of face and politeness, Obeng (1999:715) states, "Face and politeness among the Akan is a phenomenon belonging to the level of the society and of the individual." Individual members who break and violate *ntam* taboos bring shame, disgrace, blame, punishment, and hardship on themselves, their families, and sometimes the entire Akan community. The reason for this is the belief that if the *ntam* is not well addressed, the unpleasant event can reoccur owing to the power of the spoken word. An apology event in an *ntam* speech act is therefore something that concerns not only the *ntam* speaker but also the entire Akan community within which the *ntam* is evoked. The need for the apology also stems from the fact that invoking the *ntam* puts everybody slightly in danger; it is a face-threatening act because it is dreadful to make the entire society revisit the contents of a *ntam*.

The value and application of politeness and what counts as politeness depend on the discourse domain and the participants involved. The given context of politeness is also socioculturally and historically determined. In the case of Akan *ntam*, the politeness, deference, and formality accorded to the "personified" *ntam* is based on the historical event to which the *ntam* label alludes, and on the custodian (the king) and his power.

The speaker uses the polite forms as nonreferential indexes⁶ to show reverence for the authorities by maximizing their status and debasing himself or her-

self. The purpose or goal of the speaker is to beg to use an *ntam* that is beyond his or her personal jurisdiction. Again, the speaker considers the addressee (the custodian of the *ntam*) to belong to a higher social class. Finally, the addressee is a person who wields greater power in the community than does the speaker. By using the apologetic disclaimer *sre*, the speaker makes it difficult for the chief to say no to the oath-swearing.

The verb *sre* can also be considered in terms of requesting. Requests are PRE-VENT ACTS that are meant to prepare the way for the performance of upcoming events in favor of either the speaker or the addressee. In using *sre* 'request/beg', the speaker is claiming clearance to swear a reminiscential oath taboo, but the clearance is sought through the *ntam* itself, which has now been personified. However, the implication is that the permission is sought through the king who is the custodian of the *ntam*.

In ethnolinguistic terms, *mesre* 'I request, apologize' may be considered as an apologetic device. It is also a means of showing politeness, humility, submissiveness, and knowledge of the Akan language. The use of the apologetic device *mesre* is influenced by the social context of the oath – the fact that it is spoken in the presence of a revered entity, in effect the king. The speaker is appealing to the stool of the land via the king (the stool is the implicit target of the whole context). This is in line with the circuitous mode of communication at court, where the speaker addresses the king through the Okyeame (spokesperson) (see Yankah 1995). There is, therefore, a need to exaggerate politeness by use of the performative *mesre*.

The format is conventional, except that *ntam* performance does not call for indirection. In *ntam* speech events, directness connotes sincerity and straightforwardness, and this is what we see with the apodictic and commissive propositions. Oaths are required to be precise in order to avoid ambiguity that may give room for dubious interpretation at a later time when the speaker is called upon. The equation of indirectness with greater politeness has been criticized as being simplistic; it may depend on factors of genre and specific cultures. The use of indirection to obviate crises, to communicate difficulty, and to make utterances consistent with face and politeness (see Obeng 1994:42) does not apply wholly to *ntam* speech acts and events. In *ntam*, the protactic that mentions the *ntam* can be considered as a form of indirection because what is mentioned is a cover term, more or less a euphemism, for the actual event referenced.

Style of ntam

In terms of style in *ntam* (especially the major ones), the Akans adhere as much as possible to brevity. When an *ntam* is used, the language should be as precise, straightforward, and devoid of ambiguity as possible.

Circumlocution and unnecessary repetition of the same *ntam* are considered jocular and inappropriate to *ntam*, which is a serious taboo expression. Such uses

are likely to be punished to discourage the trivialization of the *ntam* taboo. At the trial of a case at Manhyia on 30 May 1994, the Ankobeahene (a wing chief, or subchief) who trivialized the major Asante *ntam* by using it five times in a single *ntam* activity was severely punished. This use of *ntam* shocked and embarrassed the chiefs at that gathering. The culprit was strongly reprimanded, and his stool was set aside until further notice, an act signifying suspension. This episode underscores the importance and sacred uses of the *ntam* among the Akans. The elders, therefore, say that the use of a single *ntam* taboo in a single discourse has the potential of widening its scope to cover all events therein.

In discussing language and politics and indirectness in political discourse, Obeng 1997 mentions evasion, circumlocution, innuendo, metaphor, proverbs, and idioms as the common strategies that politicians use. He states that, owing to the rather tricky and risky nature of politics itself, and especially because of the power of the spoken word, political actors sometimes communicate in an obscure, semantically dense, vague, oblique, rather cautious manner.

Yankah 1995 talks about the Okyeame as a speech intermediary, and sees therefore that messages to the chief and from the chief to the subjects should officially be channeled through the Okyeame. In such instances, the Okyeame is the "animator" and has to edit the messages by embellishing them with vivid words and figures of speech.

The two systems of speech cited by Obeng 1997 and Yankah 1995 run contrary to *ntam*, which must be presented without circumlocution and forms of indirection. The *ntam* is, however, comparable to Yankah's proverb staff (a wooden staff ornamented with an emblem representing a popular Akan proverb) because it is a sort of condensed formulaic statement that alludes to the authority of ancestral dicta. The *ntam* is a metonymic representation of what really happened, an event too unpleasant to be recounted. *Ntam* is also related to the discourse of shame and blame discussed by Obeng (1997:79; 1999:729).

TYPES OF MAJOR *NTAM* ACCORDING TO APPROPRIATE SITUATION: *NTAMPA*

This section looks at *ntam* in terms of setting, participants, ends, acts sequence, and genre (see Hymes 1972): situations in terms of place and time, participants, and the areas within which *ntam* may be used. The functions of the *ntam* are also discussed. I give samples of major *ntam* according to the various "formal oath-taking" situations where they are permitted without any penalties – that is, where they are *ntampa* 'appropriate *ntam*'. These include the following:

- (i) Oath during preparations for war.
- (ii) Oath of allegiance.
- (iii) Judicial oath
 - (a) after the settlement of a case as a seal to the court's verdict;
 - (b) before a witness testifies in a case of arbitration at the chief's palace.
- (iv) *Ntam* used as a minatory device.

ɔsa ntam ‘war *reminiscential oath*’

During times of war, in view of the seriousness of the situation, it is allowed to use the forbidden word in making a promise. This comes under commissives. An example of war oath normally taken before the chief by the Asafohene, the commander-in-chief of the traditional army, is as follows:

- (10) *Meka Dwabenhene Kwadu Twum meka Ntankesee se ɔsa yi a wose menkorɔ yi se meko na se mede m'akyiri kyere dom, se mesoma akoraboɔ na se wankɔ na se mamfa ho na se meko dwane a, meto Ntankesee meto Dwabenhene Kwadu Twum.*

‘I swear by Dwabenhene Kwadu Twum, I swear by the great *reminiscential oath* (*ntankesee*) that if I do not enter this war to which you have sent me, or if I go and turn my back to the enemy, if I shoot and miss the target (deliberately) and I do not continue to fight and if I run away, then I have violated the great *reminiscential oath* and also violated the **Dwabenhene Kwadu Twum**.⁷

After the swearing of such an oath of war, it was a taboo to sleep again in the town where it was taken. The chief and his army were bound by their words, and they moved directly into the war encampment (*bɔ sese*). Immunity from all the usual consequences of swearing an oath was permitted during the actual campaign. According to my informants, anyone might use these oaths “freely and even frivolously” without incurring any legal penalty whatsoever. There are expressions like *Yekɔ sa a, na yeabra ntam nsem ani* ‘When we go to war, we prohibit investigation of any case arising out of the swearing of an oath’ (i.e., ‘We have relaxed all matters related to oaths’); or *yeahini Asantehene ntam adaka* ‘We have opened the oath coffers of the king of Asante.’ The maxims of *ntam* discussed earlier imply that people can now use the oath freely. This is a situation in which the unspeakable becomes speakable.

Oath of allegiance

Oaths of allegiance can be of various types according to the situation, including those taken by lesser chiefs on the death of a superior chief, by a new chief during his installation before a king, by a king before his subjects, and by a priest before a new chief.

On the death of a king, the other *ahemfo* ‘subchiefs’, *ahenemmahene* ‘chief of the princes’, and the *ɔkɔmfo panin* ‘chief priest’ of the state swear the *ɔhene-wuo mu ntam* while holding the state sword to pay their last homage to their lord. I present here such an oath by a Kuronihene of an Akan state on the death of a paramount chief⁸:

- (11) *Meka Wukuada meka Sokodei.*
Meka Kwanyako meka Asankɔ Yawooda
Se ɔ man yi mu Safohene ne me.
ɔko ben na bae, a mantumi anko anye me wura?
Nana meka ntam se, se eye ɔko bi na bae
Na me ne Gyaase, Ankɔbea ne Apesemaka
Domaakwa ne Kyidom anko anye wo a,⁹
Na anka meto Akwamu Yawooda.

'I swear by Wednesday, I swear by Sokodei.
 I swear by Kwanyako, I swear by Thursday
 That I am the army commander of this state.
 Had there been any war which I could not fight to save my lord?
 Nana I swear by the *ntam* that if it had been a war,
 And I together with Gyaase, Anko bea and Apesemaka
 Domaakwa and Kyidom could not fight to save you,
 Then I would violate the reminiscential oath of Akwamu Thursday.'

As the *ahemfo* 'subchiefs', *ahenemmahene* 'chief of the princes', and the *ɔko mfo panin* 'chief priest' speak the taboo words in poetic form, they direct the state sword toward the corpse lying in state. The taboo words in (11), spoken by the subchief, include *Meka Wukuada meka Sokodei, Meka Kwanyako meka Asɔnkɔ Yawoada, Meto Akwamu Yawoada*. These taboo words can be used in this context without any sanctions. If they are used in any other context, they would be punishable – for example, if one said to his wife:

- (12) *Meka Akwamu Yawoada se megyae wo.*
 'I swear by the Akwamu Yawoada that I will divorce you.'

The *ntam Wukuada ne Sokodei* belongs to the Akuapem state of the Akans. It originated from a war the Akuapems fought with the Ewes in a town called Sokodei, where the Akuapems were defeated on a Wednesday. It has therefore become a sorrowful experience in the lives of the entire Akuapem state, and for that reason nobody is allowed to mention it lest he reminds the elders of that event.

The *ntam* sworn by the Kurontihene in (11), unlike the others we have seen, seems very long and poetic. It is a combination of various *ntam* brought together in a single utterance. The swearer has been motivated to mention all these various *ntam* taboos to prove how loyal he is to the dead king. He asserts that he has no control over death, and so could not save his master. It has an emotive effect on the audience. The evocation of *ntam* in an oath of allegiance like this is allowed because it foregrounds the seriousness of the event. However, in certain other contexts, repetition of a *ntam* is punishable.

Nsuae ntam, the oath of allegiance to a king, can vary from situation to situation and from participant to participant. It can be given by a traditional priest before a new chief, or a newly installed chief before a king, or a king before his subjects. During this period, the speaker is given the license to speak the *ntam* taboo and to commit himself or herself to the sincerity condition for speech acts (see Austin 1962:40).

On the installation of a new chief or king, the traditional priest of the state, who controls the spiritual power of the people, swears an oath of allegiance to the king, who is the custodian of the state *ɔbosom* 'deity'. He may swear as follows:

- (13) (a) *Meka Kokofuhene Fiada ne Dwoada ka Ntankeseɛ* (b) *se enye akɔmpa na mekɔm, se enye deɛ ɔbosom beka akyere me na meka, nso metwa wo nkontompo anaa medi wo kusum, se mede nsa mekɔm anaase mekɔm ɔtan akɔm, se metu adubɔne de to ɔbosom yi ho a, (c) meto Fiada ne Dwoada meto Ntankeseɛ.*

'I swear by the great reminiscential oath of **Kokofu Fiada ne Dwoada** 'Friday and Monday', and swear by the **Ntankeseɛ** that if I do not truly worship the deities in accordance with custom, if I do not faithfully transmit messages of the deities to the people, and if I should be secretive and conceal some facts, if I should be possessed by the deities and worship in a drunken mood, if I should harbor any hatred, or place any evil charms and spells on the shrine, I violate **Ntankeseɛ** and the **Kokofu Fiada ne Dwoada** 'major reminiscential oath of Friday and Monday'.

The Kokofu Fiada ne Dwoada, the major reminiscential oaths of the Kokofu state of Asante, are said to have originated from the following events. In the first place, the tribute of firewood demanded by the Denkyiras when the Asantes served under them used to be collected on Fridays and Mondays.¹⁰ This was a real burden on the people. In addition, many threatening and unfortunate events in the lives of the Kokofu people happened on these days. In the war against the Bantas, one of the royals of Kokofu was killed on a Monday. Pinaman Panin, a queen, also died on a Monday. Gyaami, one of the most powerful kings of the state, died on a Friday; Agyeman Ampuromfi, a king, fell sick on a Friday and died on a Monday (cf. Rattray 1969b). As a result of all these events, it was assumed that these particular Fridays and Mondays were unlucky days for the people, and for these reasons, events associated with them should not be mentioned to remind the state of its calamities. This is the basis of establishing these expressions as a *ntam* and a verbal taboo.

Let us look at the following oath, sworn by a chief before a king:

- (14) (a) *Meka Bantamahene Ntwoma, meka Ntankeseɛ* (b) *se enye amammuo pa a me nananom ne wo de buu ɔman yi na mene wo de bebuo na se wotu me fo na mamfa na se wofre me nsuo mu ne awia mu, na mebu m'aso mu nnua a*, (c) *meto Ntankeseɛ meto Bantamahene Ntwoma*. 'I swear by **Bantamahene Ntwoma**, I swear by **Ntankeseɛ** the great reminiscential oath, that were it not for the good administration of my elders which I follow, if you advise me, and I do not pay heed, if you call me in the rain and in the sunshine, and I refuse to come, I have violated the great reminiscential oath, and I have violated the **Bantamahene Ntwoma**. I have incurred the sanctions for mentioning the forbidden word in vain.'

In (14), the letters (a), (b), and (c) represent the inherent structure of the entire taboo utterance. A new chief from Bantama, a suburb of Kumasi, is being installed, and he is swearing the oath of allegiance to his superior king, the Asantehene. He uses two kinds of *ntam*, the minor and the major oaths. This same structure can also be found in various *ntam* situations such as swearing before the mortal remains of a king, a traditional priest's oath of allegiance, or a war oath. In an oath of allegiance, the *ntam* reminiscential oath taboo expression can be used to mark the social identity, origin, and power of people in Akan society.

Judicial Ntam used in arbitration

Ntam is one of the major mechanisms used in Akan local arbitration to assert the truth and to avoid further conflicts. When a case is settled at the level of the traditional court, witnesses who testify are obligatorily made to swear the local oath. The intention is that the swearer be committed to speak the truth; otherwise, he or she violates the *ntam*. It is the normal *ntam* we have seen previously that is

used; the only change, a slight one, is the apodictic propositional content. It is interesting to note that, in the Asante state, the *Asantehemmaa* 'queen' has her own *ntam*. This *ntam* is the one by which litigants or witnesses at her court swear:

- (15) (a) *Meka* **ɔhemmaa Kokoniwa** (b) *se nokore a ewɔ asem no mu na meka, manka a* (c) *meto*
ɔhemmaa Kokoniwa.

'I swear by the **ɔhemmaa Kokoniwa** 'queen's sore-on-the-toe' that I will only speak the truth in this case. If I fail to do so, I have incurred the penalty of speaking **ɔhemmaa Kokoniwa** in vain.'

The *ntam ɔhemmaa Kokoniwa* is said to have originated from a sore that afflicted the toe of Asantehemmaa Nana Konadu Yiadom, queen of Asante, and became so chronic that it eventually killed her.¹¹

In the Akan tradition, after a case has been settled amicably either at the household level or at the chief's or queen's court, the *ntam* is used as a seal to mark the end of that case officially. Each of the two parties is made to swear a *ntam* oath to confirm that the case has been settled and that anyone who brings back the case violates the *ntam*. The expressive term used as the seal is *taame*, literally 'we are mentioning the hatred expression'. If the case is settled at the domestic level, an *ntankumaa* is sworn. If it is a case tried at the public level by the king or queen, a major reminiscential oath is sworn. Below is an example:

- (16) *Meka* **Wenchihene Yawoada** *se me ne no nni asem biara bio.*
'I swear by the Wenchihene's Thursday *ntam* that I no longer bear him any grudge.'

According to Busia (1968:76), the Wenchihene Yawoada might have originated from the following account. During the reign of Anye Amoapon, the Asantehene fought against the Dormaa in about 1746. The people of Wenchihene then lived at Ahwene. The advance guard of the Asantehene's army took the wrong path and attacked Wenchihene by mistake. Many of the unprepared people were killed before the error was discovered. The treasures of the Wenchihene stool were hurriedly hidden in the bed of the River Tain. The tragic incident occurred on a Thursday. People should not be reminded of this incident, and it is hence a reminiscential oath taboo.

Ntam used as a minatory device

Apart from the major situations discussed above, *ntam* can be used also in various situations as a minatory, or threatening, device. The verb 'to threaten' is one of the commissives verbs (see Duranti 1997:224). Busia (1968:77–78) lists, among others, the following; I will only discuss here an example of a minatory *ntam*. The minatory type of *ntam* comprises two categories: (i) *ntam* used by the custodian of the *ntam*, a chief or king; and (ii) *ntam* used by a person other than the owner.

Ntam may be used as a minatory device by the chief who is the custodian of the *ntam* for the good of the entire society. A chief may swear an oath for various

purposes: to enjoin his men to observe a certain custom; to order all those present to assist in quenching a fire; to order the cleaning of the path to the village stream; to order all his men to search for or apprehend a murderer; to ask his men to rescue the dead or dying from a fallen house or tree; or to enforce accepted rules of conduct, such as restraining young women from loose sexual habits and immorality or young men from riotous living. All these kinds of *ntam* commit the speaker to see to it that what is being directed is done. The speaker uses the *ntam* as a directive speech act to ask, order, command, enjoin, enforce, restrain, or prevent the addressee's action. Such *ntam* activities are thus a combination of commissive and directive speech acts. They bind and commit the addressee to the directive enshrined in the speaker's *ntam*.

An Akan citizen other than the chief may also use *ntam* as a minatory device in various situations. A war captain swears an oath when ordering his men not to retreat from an enemy. A man may swear an oath to retrieve his lost property from another; to restrain others from stealing crops from his farm; or to prevent another from doing him bodily harm. On the dissolution of a marriage, a divorced husband may swear an oath restraining his divorced wife from associating with a paramour suspected to have been instrumental in disrupting the marriage.

Oath-swearing by the chief is not sanctionable, and even though that by a war captain is performed by a person other than an owner of *ntam*, it is still non-sanctionable – as mentioned earlier, during wartime, *ntam* may be used freely without sanctions. A captain, like the chief, can use it for the good of the people. All the other uses by non-custodial persons mentioned above may attract sanctions if done inappropriately. The speaker is not the owner of *ntam* and cannot use it trivially for private ends without permission.

The speaker of a *ntam* may use it as a threat against his target (i.e., a commissive). In the old days, a chief could speak a *ntam* to some citizens to the effect that if they did not abide by his policies, he would make sure that their whole generation was killed:

(17) *Meka Kwasiada meka Mpete se se moantua asaase no ho to nyinaa pepɛɛpe a mehye wo ne w'asefɔ nyinaa ase a erenka baako koraa.*

'I swear by the reminiscential oath of **Kwasiada** and **Mpete** that if you people do not abide by the regulations and pay the toll on the land, I will kill you and all your descendants.'

The origin of the Kwasiada and Mpete *ntam* emanated from an epidemic of smallpox that hit the whole town of Bekwai on one particular Sunday and took thousands of lives. Hence, it has become a taboo for people to speak about this tragic event. Families who have been told about how the epidemic devastated their entire family will not like to think of this disease and that Sunday.

The above *ntam* is used as a minatory device. The speaker instills fear in the addressee in respect of an impending danger or consequences. It can also be a warning (a directive) to dissuade one from an act. *Ntam* in Akan can thus be used both as a promissory oath, or commissive (in the case of allegiance, war, and arbitration), and as a threat, or directive, as in (17) above.

CONCLUSION

We have seen *ntam* as a peculiar type of verbal taboo. Its taboo nature stems from how the people themselves conceptualize it and attach importance to it. The origin of *ntam* normally relates to certain historical calamities or misfortunes that befell an individual, a family, a community or the state, and of which the people, both dead and alive, will not like to be reminded. I have demonstrated that *ntam* can best be analyzed under the speech act theory of commissives. Every *ntam*, by default, includes the commissive verb *ka* 'swear'. The apodictic proposition may also be commissive or a directive, according to the intention of the speaker and what she or he wants the addressee to do.

Ntam, like other oaths, elevates the force of the basic commissive structure from the individual to a statutory or institutional level by widening the social field in which the commissive is guaranteed. By allusion to a forbidden event, *ntam* functions in the reproduction of social memory. But, even more important, *ntam* by this allusion evokes or indexes the presence of a community of those who know of the event and recognize its importance, and whose face might be threatened by one's mentioning it. Thus, the utterance of *ntam* creates a community, a complicit audience, involved in guaranteeing the carrying out of the commitment or in censuring failure to do so.

We identified two basic types of *ntam* based on their scope of operation: *ntan-kumaa* 'minor reminiscential oath' and *ntankeseɛ* 'major reminiscential oath'. While the former relates to an individual, a family, or a small village or town, the latter is state-owned and the custodian is the king or chief who has power and jurisdiction over the whole state. We distinguished between *ntanhunu* 'inappropriate' and *ntampa* 'appropriate' based on the proper use of *ntam*.

In terms of the structure, *ntam* has three main parts: (i) the protactic proposition, involving the commissive performative verb *ka* 'swear' that triggers the evocation of the *ntam* taboo, (ii) the apodictic proposition that states the reasons behind the protactic proposition (and may entail a commissive or a directive), and (iii) the *commissive* that binds and commits the speaker and further indicates the consequences of breach of the *ntam* and the subsequent punishment. The protactic, commissive performative verb *ka* 'swear', interpretive *se*, and the apodictic are obligatory in all *ntam* expressions. The commissive punishment, which strengthens the binding force of the *ntam* is, however, left out in some *ntam* expressions, but implicitly it is there as a tool to check the inappropriate use and perjury of the *ntam*.

Unlike the other verbal taboos in Akan and other societies, *ntam* is politically and judicially based. If somebody violates a state *ntam*, this is prosecuted like any other criminal case against the state.¹² It is a case between the individual and the state, but not between the speaker and the addressee as evidenced in other types of Akan verbal taboos. A violator of *ntam* can face various penalties, which may range from payment of fines or drinks, through an offering of sheep, to death.

We saw that *ntam* is a multifunctional concept and might be used in many different situations: land and stool disputes, marital issues, oath of allegiance, oath for war, oath before the corpse of a king, claim of ownership, justification and sincerity in certain issues, a seal to the settlement of case at the arbitration, and so on. Although in some of these cases the swearer would be punished for using the *ntam* inappropriately, in others no sanctions are incurred for use in certain identifiable appropriate social contexts.

Ntam plays an important role at the traditional politic and governance. Unfortunately, it has no place at the modern state and Ghana national politic. *Ntam* is restricted to traditional contexts. It is used in local jurisprudence, where it is employed across the board, from local settings such as family arbitration to wider traditional public settings such as arbitration at the Asantehene's court. There are differences between the *ntam* usages in these two divergent settings. The custodian of each of the *ntam* is the head of the group. The sanctions and penalties imposed on a violator also differ in accordance with the power of the custodian.

Ntam is one significant political, historical, sociocultural, and judicial institutions that has withstood the test of time, irrespective of modernization, westernization, and foreign religion. The functions and the importance of *ntam* discussed in this article emphasize it as an indispensable sociolinguistic, pragmatic, and ethnographic concept that will continue to thrive in the soil of the Akan community forever.

NOTES

¹ Nwoye 1992 aptly states that "unlike Western societies in which atomistic individualism is the expected norm of behaviour, among the Igbo of Nigeria, concerns for group interests override those of an individual."

² The present article is drawn from my 1996 M.Phil. thesis on Akan verbal taboos, presented to the Norwegian University of Science and Technology.

³ The *ntam* stalemate is an oath against oath in normal judicial proceedings. The plaintiff swears his or her indictment, and the defendant asserts his or her innocence with a counter-oath. The jury would then have to decide on this divergent swearing and arbitrate the case to find out the truth.

⁴ The protactic component of *ntam* is devoid of figurative language, idiomatic expressions, or evasive language. It goes contrary to the indirection strategies discussed by Obeng 1994, 1997. There is no stylistic way of phrasing the evocative parts in order to avoid punishment: One either utters it and faces the necessary sanctions, or one avoids it. All my informants confirmed that *ntam* is a univocal "expression." Opanin Yaw Nsia of Assisiriwa cleverly put it: "*Ntam deɛ wode fa baabiara a, enye yie, ɔno nko ara te ne fie*, lit. 'As for *ntam*, if you turn it any other way it is not possible, it stays alone in its house.'

⁵ In ex. (9), the 1st person pl. pronoun is *yɛn* 'we'. It is too general in reference for any action or breach of the taboo to be made the responsibility of any single member of the group. If a group of people is going to use a *ntam* taboo in a given context, only one of them will utter the *ntam*, using the 1st person sg. The speaker is assumed to be acting on behalf of all the rest, and the sanctions and punishment evolving out of the *ntam* will be binding on the group as a whole. This is in line with the group notion of face discussed by Obeng (1999:715). If the other members cannot be traced for some reason, there will be a swearer *in propria persona* to hold for the breach of the *ntam* if the need should arise.

⁶ Nonreferential indexes indicate the sociological relations of the participants in a speech event – inequalities of status, rank, age, sex, and deference. Referential indexes, by contrast, indicate grammatical categories like tense, aspect, number, and person that are embodied in the structure of the sentence (cf. Silverstein 1976:29–30).

⁷ This is the major reminiscential oath of the Dwaben state of Asante; it is a state *ntankesec*. It originated when the Dwabens waged war against the Akyems, meeting stiff opposition that made them call for assistance from the Dwabenhene's (king's) traditional brother, the Asantehene. The Asantehene dispatched one of his wing leaders, the Adontenhene, with an army to assist Dwaben. The Dwabenhene, the Asantehene's Adontenhene, and thousands of Dwabens were killed in the war. As the few surviving Dwabens were returning home, many of them died of starvation. After a number of days, they fortunately came upon a banana plantation that had only *kwadu bunu* 'unripe bananas', for which they had to scramble. The word *twum* (or *twom*) in the *ntam* refers to the act of scrambling. The *Kwadu Twum ntam* of Dwaben is, therefore, a reminder of the famine during the Dwaben-Akyem war (see Obeng 1988:60).

⁸ The Kurontihene is next in command after the chief in the administration of a town. When the chief travels, or when he dies and a new chief is not yet installed, the Kurontihene takes over the administration, together with other subchiefs.

⁹ Gyaase, Ankobea, Apesemaka, Domakwaa, Nifa, and Kyidom are various wings of the political administration of the Akan state and have different functions in time of war.

¹⁰ Denkyira was one of the strongest Akan states. The Denkyiras conquered the Asantes and ruled them for a long period until the battle of Feyiase (1698–1699), where the Asantes defeated them (see Braffi 1984). During their rule, every year the Asantes paid tribute which included the best wives of the paramount kings, firewood, red clay, drinks, and even plantain fiber to be used as toilet tissue.

¹¹ Asantehemmaa Nana Konadu Yiadom was the queen mother during the reign of the Asantehene Nana Osei Kwadwo (1752–1781). According to my informant, Bosie-Amponsah of LUV FM Kumasi, prior to Nana Konadu Yiadom's suffering this chronic sore on the toe, no Akan women, including the queen mother, were allowed to wear sandals; but just after her death, queen mothers were allowed this (see also Braffi 1984:61–64). Now, all women are allowed to wear sandals.

¹² The *Hutchinson Concise Encyclopedia* (1995:245) defines criminal law as the "body of law that defines the public wrongs (crimes) that are punishable by the state and establishes methods of prosecution and punishment. It is distinct from civil law, which deals with legal relationships between individuals (including organizations) such as contract law." In our study, therefore, we consider a *ntam* offense as a crime against the Akan state.

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