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## **Tabooing insults: Why the ambivalence?**

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**This paper examines insults, both verbal and non-verbal, on the premise that societies the world over have adopted an ambivalent attitude towards the creation and use of insult. The ambivalence argument is grounded in the sheer preponderance of both institutionalised and informal usages of verbal and non-verbal insults, through the arts mainly, as well as the tabooing regimes of insults in the same societies. The paper argues that the worldwide attitude of ambivalence towards the creation and usage of insult is not double standards but rather a delicate balancing act for the attainment of psycho-social goals such as catharsis and entertainment on one hand and the moderation of the social conflicts caused by verbal and non-verbal insults. The paper argues further that since neither the sanctioned uses of insult nor its tabooing do fully guarantee the attainment of the psycho-social necessities mentioned, the ambivalent attitude provides the needed framework for managing the creation and usage of insult as a necessary evil. Social navigation between sanctioned usages and tabooing of insults seems to be guided by the principles of ‘context’ and ‘intent’ of creation and usage of insult.**

**Key words:** Tabooing insult, institutionalised usage, worldwide ambivalence, psycho-social goals, context, intent.

### **INTRODUCTION**

This paper examines the worldwide ambivalence towards the creation and use of verbal and non-verbal insults. The notion of ambivalence suggests a state of vacillation between “having either or both of contrary or similar values...,” (Hornby, 1990). The ambivalence is evident in the many worldwide institutionalized and informal uses of verbal and non-verbal insults and the tabooing of same at the same time (Agyekum, 2010; Eckert and Newmark, 1980; Grimes, 1977; Leach, 1989; Samarin, 1969).

Scholarly writings on verbal taboos show that insults rank high in both so-called traditional and industrial

societies (Adeyanju, 2001; Leach, 1989). Conceptualised universally as “behaviour and speech regulators”, taboo functions as “a social prohibition or restriction sanctioned by supra societal (innate) means or a socially sanctioned injunction alleged to have the force of such a prohibition” (Adeyanju, 2001, p. 223). Most scholars attribute the value societies attach to the subject of taboo firstly, to the perception that it “stands at the intersection of human affairs and the forces of the larger universe...”, and secondly, to the inability of humans to control the outcomes of taboo infringements (Mudimbe, 1988; Eliade, 1987).

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Barfield (1997), for example, emphasizes that “breaking a taboo ordinarily brings either a specific supernatural sanction or a sort of general misfortune”.

Socio-linguists such as Grimes (1977) and Agyekum (2010) have explained that the basic principle in verbal taboos is their ability to evoke proscribed concepts. These include dysphemism (ordinary use of taboo words), verbal abuse, and their evasion through substitute forms such as euphemisms, or ‘taboo avoidance techniques’ (Agyekum, 2010). Explaining the principle behind taboo further, Leach (1989) and Radcliffe-Brown (1940) state that whatever is a taboo subject is not only of special interest but also of great anxiety.

Among the many justifications for tabooing insult is the reference to its inherent ability to offend, hurt, demean and to psychologically destabilize the targeted personality, the audience, and the society at large (Agyekum, 2010; Allan and Burridge, 1991; Grimes, 1977). Agyekum explains that “the abusive expression throws psychological bombs at the heart of the opponents and damages their emotions... It is the antagonistic nature of the verbal expressions and their effect that we try to avoid” (Agyekum, 2010, p. 110). For example, in Ghana, there are several common invectives that make metaphorical associations between targeted person’s and lower animals, that describe parts of their bodies in the most unsavoury terms, and those that make references to guarded histories including targeted persons’ slave ancestry, disease scourge and physical disabilities. Such are the levels of emotional and psycho-social injuries that insults can inflict on target persons, audiences and whole societies and which underscore the wisdom behind the tabooing of insult.

Notwithstanding these strong moral, religious and psycho-social bases for tabooing insults, there are also several known instances of institutionalised contexts for the creation and performance of insults worldwide (Pace, 2010; Weigel, 2011; Conley, 2010; Neu, 2008; Schwegler, 2007; Avorgbedor, 1994; Apter, 1983; Johnson, 1948). Such deliberate institutionalised contexts of insults creation and usage present an ambivalent picture when viewed against the convention that taboos it all over the world, and frames people who resort to insult as antisocial beings (Agyekum, 2010; Allan and Burridge, 1991; Grimes, 1977). Indeed, in some of the formalised contexts in Africa, insults have been ironically elevated to function as purification and confinement rituals for priest and chiefs. In such cases, neither the rituals nor the liminal officials for whom they are held are deemed to be ritually cleansed without the required doses of insults. This perspective is shared also by Beidelman (1966) when he argued in relation to the Swazi Ncwala festival that its main feature, the songs of dispraise against the Swazi King (Apter, 1983), represents a ritual of purification rather than a ritual of rebellion as argued by Gluckman (1954).

Why should there be room for ambivalence regarding the creation and use of insult in the face of such strong moral, religious and psycho-social bases for tabooing it? How can a tabooed communicative facility be of such critical importance to the maintenance of even sacred rituals such as divination and confinement of priest and chiefs? Or is it only the informal individualized contexts (that is outside of the sanctioned contexts), that insults are tabooed? Is the societal ambivalence regarding the creation and use of insult a worldwide call to linguistic propriety, or a sign of double standards?

We argue that the worldwide ambivalence regarding the insult creation and usage is a delicate balancing act between the attainment of psycho-social goals such as catharsis and entertainment on one hand and the need to moderate the occurrence of social conflicts caused by verbal and non-verbal insults. In other words, it is intended to ensure general propriety in language use as well as providing and keeping open the avenues for social control. Since neither the sanctioned uses of insult nor its tabooing do fully guarantee the attainment of the psycho-social necessities, the ambivalence provides a needed framework for managing it as a necessary evil. The principles that seem to guide the negotiating processes between the two poles seem to be informed by ‘context’ and ‘intent’ of insult creation and use.

## DEFINING INSULT

Even though there is a lot of written literature on the subject of insult, only a few have attempted defining it. Among the few scholars who attempted defining the subject, mostly scholars from literary, sociolinguistic and linguistic anthropology backgrounds, is the one by Thomas Conley who delimits insult to “...an expression of extremely negative opinion of a person or group in order to subvert their positive self-regard and esteem” (Conley, 2010). The essence of Conley’s definition is quite similar to Kofi Agyekum’s description of insult as a “linguistic warfare.” They both emphasise the use of insult as a communicative weapon for adversarial purposes. Other words and expressions that communicate similar meanings as insult include malediction, slighting, ridiculing, affront, (Neu, 2008). Others include dysphemism (Allan and Burridge, 1991); sledging (Pace, 2010); cutting gibe (Weigel, 2011); vituperation, profanity (Johnson, 1948); vitriolic and invective (Agyekum, 2010); taunt, snapping or dozens (Schwegler, 2007). Marco Jacquemet, however, stretches the issue beyond the adversarial to hint at the performative dimensions of insult when he related it to a “competitive exchange of usually obscene insults and invectives between at least two parties” (2005, p. 423). Valentina Pagliai had written much earlier to raise insult

to the status of an artistic genre of “argumentative language that entails exchanges between two persons, parties, or characters that challenge each other to a performative display of verbal skilfulness in front of an audience” (Pagliai, 2009, p. 63).

It is important to argue that the hint at the performative dimensions of insult implies a focus on the aesthetic/creative use of language with entertainment in mind rather than on its vitriolic nature alone. Indeed, Schwegler (2007), Avorgbedor (1994), Samarin (1969) and Parkin (1980) have all carried out similar studies among Afro-Colombian and Afro-Ecuadorian communities, Anlo Ewes of south-eastern Ghana, Gbeya of Central Africa Republic, and Europeans respectively emphasizing the creative/aesthetic dimensions of verbal abuse.

Pagliai’s association of insults with ‘verbal duels’, Agyekum’s ‘linguistic warfare’, and Conley’s ‘...expression of extremely negative opinion’, all raise two fundamental issues. The first relates to the tendency to privilege, perhaps unduly, logocentrism- that is to limit insult to verbal action only (Askew, 2003); and the second is the apparent limitation of its performance to a duel- between two contestants. Our considered opinion is that insults need not always be verbal neither do they need to be duels. Indeed they are more than ‘verbal duels’ fundamentally because the performance of invectives, unfair as it might be, can be a unidirectional performative act- of one actor doing the insults and the other party solely at the receiving end. This often happens when the participants are in a power relationship- where a more elderly or senior person condescends on someone in a subordinate position. Often the subordinate hardly reacts, and this makes the performance a unidirectional affair. The opposite scenario is also possible. For example, Dagbon praise singers known as *lunsi* and Mande griots may criticise and also insult their Chief/King to his face for reasons including failure to provide for them. Similarly, in ritual contexts where insults are also intended for purposes of purification and/or to ward off imaginary malevolent spirits from a community, the liminal beings (be they human or imaginary) only receive the insults without the power to respond back. A typical example is what the Nzema (of south-western Ghana) calls *afooky*. According to Agovi (1979), *afooky*, is a half-beast and half-human figure, and they cause evil (diseases and conflicts) in the society. As part of the climax of the Nzema *kundum* festival celebrations, there are ritualized skits to symbolically chase *afooky* out of the community with disgrace.

The second issue is that insults need not be verbal. Indeed they are not (Conley, 2010). Drawing from our shared experiences of the way and manner insults work, we think that any definition should go beyond emphasizing the verbal dimensions only to include the non-verbal. For instance, in all human cultures, there

are also volumes of human bodily gestures, inactions and objects or things whose rightful or wrongful application in specific contexts can be (mis)interpreted as constituting insults to some persons or group of persons based on existing communication and social codes. For example, an action such as greeting people with the left hand, or speaking with elders or superiors with one’s legs crossed; inactions like failure to greet someone when one should in most African communities; and things or objects such as certain types of clothes in certain forms and shapes at particular times and places can all be rightfully or wrongfully communicate insults. For example, public use of any of these Ghanaian fabrics (Figures 1 and 2) may be mis/interpreted as insults directed at some targeted persons because of their names. *Nantwi bin* and *ahwenepa nkasa* are Akan expressions for ‘bull shit’ and ‘good beads do not make noise’- same as ‘empty barrels make the most noise’ in the English language (Agovi, 1979; Darku, 2012; Yankah, 1995).

What is of utmost importance in defining insult, therefore, is to look beyond the spoken word and to focus instead on communication which accommodates non-verbal forms as well.

Another important factor to consider in explaining the insult phenomenon is that language use is of the exaggerated kind. Labov (1974) alludes to this feature of insults when he said insults are not intended to be factual statements but rather as a means of getting your opponent worked up to the maximum. Arguing from the background of sports, Hughes (2010) also asserted that sledging is about “finding a real or invented weakness in another’s technique or approach in the hope that highlighting it might lead to undermining their confidence. At the highest level of competition, this can mean the difference between winning and not”.

Contrary to perceptions that insult functions as “an alternative to the rule of law in societies that lack Western-style legal system, it is evident from the reviewed literature that, it is nothing but a universal human communication phenomenon (Bohannon, 1967; Hoebel and Llewellyn, 1983, 682; Conley, 2010; Eckert and Newmark, 1980; Ojoade, 1983). People may resort to insult as an outlet for repressed impulses (Freud, 1904); to gain psychological advantage at the highest level in sports (Hughes, 2010), and also in warfare (Hale, 2007); to assert or assume dominance (Neu, 2008), “to establish social distance or proximity and social rank...” (Schwegler, 2007), to straighten up social deviants... given that many people behave abominably (Richler, 2010), to purge society of wrongs and moral filth, to subvert social order (Nii-Dortey, 2012), and finally, to entertain (Weigel, 2011; Howard, 2010; Yankah, 1985).

Thus, insult is essentially a performative display of both verbal and non-verbal communicative skilfulness



**Figure 1.** *Nantwi bin* (bull shit)



**Figure 2.** *Ahwenepa 'nkasa* (good beads do not make noise).

exercised either in a competitive context in front of an audience (Pagliai, 2009), or in a unidirectional condescending power relationship. While insult can be offensive, aggressive, dirty and profane, it need not be. It is also witty, metaphoric, skilfully crafted, and often involves the poetic use of language, and that is where its aesthetic dimensions reside. It can, therefore, be a communicative game people play intended to cause amusement.

#### **INSTITUTIONALIZED CONTEXTS AND THE QUESTION OF AMBIVALENCE**

From the reviewed works cited above, it is reasonable to conclude that nearly all cultures have contexts that elevate verbal and non-verbal insults to a ritual and institutional necessities. For the purpose of this paper,

we examine a few institutionalized events, within and outside Africa, that not only make use of insult (veiled or/and explicit), but also organize it within the hallowed environs of traditional religious rituals. Immediate reference can be made to the many ethnographies on the Central and Greenland Eskimo song contests/duels including Knud Rasmussen's (1929) famous three-volume series (VII, VIII, IX) on the Netsilik Eskimos..., and one of the more recent ones by Penelope Eckert and Russell Newmark (1980) on the Central Eskimo Inuit. All such studies give evidence to the existence and performance of song contests/duels as one of several institutionalised media for dealing with actual individual and inter-community conflicts. The ritualized communal song duels provide a safe therapeutic context for defusing conflicts, according to Eckert and Newmark. This is achieved by isolating the conflict, heightening the festive aspects of the duel,

and introducing ambiguity into the confrontation so that everyone involved is able to live with the outcome of the duel (ibid).

In neighbouring Nigeria, the case of the Yoruba *Oriki orisha*- prayer of praise for *orishas* and ancestral deities like *Sango*, *Ogun*, *Osun* and *Oya* is another sacred genre worth looking at. In the midst of the profusion of the usual praise names, imageries and honorifics recited and/or sung to some of the *orishas*, there are instances of harsh descriptions of their characters (including their weaknesses and excesses) in words and expressions that are by no means complimentary (Lindon, 1990). For example, the proverbial deceptive tendencies of *esu- elegbara*, the trickster deity in Yoruba mythology, as well as the unbridled terror associated with the character of *soponna* (the god of smallpox) and *Ogun* (the god of iron) are all repudiated in *oriki* praise poetry.

From his collection of “Yoruba Proverbs,” Oyekan Owomoyela includes a number of proverbs which contain explicit words of insult about worshippers of oya and esu. Even though these are proverbs, using words like ‘imbecility’ and ‘madness’ to describe worshippers of the two *orishas* is no doubt insulting. Below is one of such proverbs (number 3707) (Owomoyela’s 2005). They are written in the Yoruba language and followed by a translation into the English language:

Bí iwín bí iwín ní ñṣe ọlO ya; bíi wèrè  
bíi wèrè ní ñṣe eIÈṣù; àjótápá àjópòyì ní ñṣe oní Ṣàngó.

Like imbecility, like imbecility is the action of the Ọya worshiper; like madness, like madness is the action of the Èṣù worshiper; dancing-with-kicking, dancing and-spinning is the hallmark of the Ṣàngo worshiper (Owomoyela, 2005).

Similarly, performances of veiled and explicit insults have been cited as one of the main attractions of the *Apoo* festival celebrated by the Techiman people of Ghana. The chiefs look forward to the insults and the festival. As far back as the 1920s, Rattray had noted how chiefs of Techiman put a great premium on the insulting aspect of the *Apoo* festival. The following is a statement purported to have been made by a chief who sought to prepare his (Rattray) mind ahead of that year’s *Apoo* festival, in 1922: “wait till Friday when the people really begin to abuse me, and if you will come and do so too it will please me” (Rattray, 1923, p. 155). As recent as 2009, Brempong records the following song text in his native *bono* language to prove that the tradition lives on. The English translation is provided below it.

Wo ti kotoo, y’agye wo nsamu hene, woate? Nana Dotobibi Takyia Ameyao, wo ti kotoo Y’a gye wo nsamu hehe, woate?

Takyiman hene, wo ti kotoo (Brempong, 2009) the English translation

Your oversized head, we are destooling you, do you hear?

Nana Dotobibi Takyia Ameyao, your oversized head We are destooling you, do you hear?

King of Takyiman, your oversized head.

They usually would end the festival by making a pronouncement to the effect that, “today, all is well and we can say whatever we want to talk about but at other times, we may not say so” (Rattray, 1923, p. 156).

Perhaps, a more explicit instance of the use of insult within the hallowed precincts of culture is the confinement rituals for would-be chiefs, priests and other public officials among the Ga. No one can become a public official, particularly queens, king/chief and priests, unless as undergone a confinement ritual called *klomɔtsumliɔwɔɔ* (which means sleeping in the abode of the first-borns). A necessary part of this confinement ritual is an endurance test/purification ritual through exposure to public ridicule by ordinary members of his/her community. The liminal official is paraded through the major streets and alleys of the township, first to show him/herself to his/her would-be subjects, and for them to test his ability to endure verbal ridicule and insult. The value is that the official would not have to go through such a ritual again upon his/her elevation to the high office s/he aspires for. All members of the community are to extend all the necessary courtesies and honorifics due his/her office and to cease from making public statements that bring his/her person and office into disrepute, or risk being sanctioned. This is particularly so of the *wulɔmei* (priests) whose routine responsibilities require very little direct contact with the general public and therefore are far less-susceptible to human-centred errors. Thus, in one sense, the ritual of insults is a parting ceremony between the liminal being and his previous status and contemporaries. On another level, however, the vitriolic is meant not only to test his/her endurance but also to cleanse him/her psychologically, and without it, the whole confinement ritual would be deemed to be incomplete. Below is the text of a prototype song of insult chanted by an informed audience at Nungua recorded in September 2010 during the confinement ritual of the current *Nai* priest of Ga-mashie.

Tɔkpo, tɔkpo, ashikponɔto!

Mɛi gbɛnaa oyɔɔ?

Omanyɛ kɛ omanyɛɛɛ!

Namɔ yɔɔ obutu?

Ashimashi obutu.

Kwɛ oyitso tamɔ lɛ1ɛ fa.

Jee bo oya ju nii?

(Transcription from the Ga language into English is by Esther Naa Duodua- our research assistant).

The content of this song text fairly illustrates all the possible themes and metaphors employable to demean liminal official in the Nungua community. S/he





**Figure 3.** Picture of the would-be *Nai Wulɔmɔ* in the middle. Seating to his left and right are *Gɔɔbu Wulɔmɔ* (in white) and the *Nai Wulɔmɔ*'s special assistant (*Tooyitso*) respectively.



**Figure 4.** Picture of would-be *Nai Wulɔmɔ*'s special assistant (in cloth) undertaking the endurance test on behalf of his superior. In the background are some of the community members lampooning him (Picture by Nii-Dortey, 23/09/2010).

is referred to as a thing- a tortoise, a thief, as hailing from another ethnic area- *obutu*. Part of his body (head) is described as a broken canoe and his status is questioned. Above all, the liminal being is threatened with punishment. Even though the threat is empty, it is of a demeaning kind- often reserved for young girls and boys who are perceived to be exhibiting tendencies of sexual promiscuity and pilferage. Figures 3 and 4 illustrate the Nungua episode described above.

The obligatory nature of the ritual is underscored by the fact that, if for any reason the official cannot perform it in person, then his/her personal assistant (called *tooyitso* in the Ga language) must step in on his/her behalf as depicted in Figure 4.

Among the Ga, the confinement ritual does not end

the Chief and his *jaase's* (council) encounter with public ridicule and insult. There is also the context of the festival meant to conclude one ritual year and to usher in another. In Tema and Nungua, that context is the annual *kplejoo* festivals (Nii-Dortey, 2012), and in La and Teshie it is the *kpa* and the *hɔmɔwɔ* festivals respectively. In Axim and Techiman the occasions are the *kundum* and *apoo* (Agovi, 1990; 1979; Brempong, 2009; Ratray, 1923) festivals respectively. These are just but a few of traditional festivals that provide contexts for institutionalized uses of insults. Thus, in all these jurisdictions, youth groups are allowed to openly lampoon and to verbally insult anybody, including the chief of the town, if he had done anything deserving a reprimand. It is part of the ritual activities institutionalized

to cleanse and heal the land from the spiritual and moral filth of the outgoing ritual year and to usher in the new in the hope that it will guarantee greater hope and prosperity. Perhaps, the chief's role as the one who performs the routine human-centred leadership functions makes him more susceptible to human-oriented mistakes.

One of the post-colonial innovations in the institutionalization of the art of insults is the targeting of political party leaders, (presidential candidates in particular) in the yearly lampooning rituals, ostensibly because they have taken over most of the routine human-to-human roles of the traditional chiefs. Thus, there have been as many songs of ridicule and satirical skits composed to either praise or lampoon political functionaries since the days when Kwame Nkrumah was the political leader of Ghana (1950s-1966), throughout the twenty years reign of Jerry John Rawlings (1981- 2000), to the present. Indeed, there are many recorded instances from Ghana that target politicians as there are songs that target traditional leaders (Brempong, 2009; Kambon and Adjei, 2017; Nii-Dortey, 2012).

## JOCULAR RELATIONSHIP

Another context that speaks to the widespread nature of ambivalence in the creation and use of insult is the existence and practice of Jocular/joking relationships among some ethnic groups. "Joking relationship is a peculiar combination of friendliness and antagonism... but it is not meant seriously and must not be taken seriously. There is a pretence of hostility and real friendliness. To put it in another way, the relationship is one of permitted disrespect" (Radcliff-Brown, 1940, p. 196). Joking relationships manifest mainly as verbal (abuse) games and horseplay between two persons as well as ethnic groups, and it is practised on a daily basis during normal human interactions (Agyekum, 2010; Yankah, 1985; Rigby, 1968; Sharman, 1969). In Ghana, Agyekum writes about the existence of such relationships between Asantes and Nzemas, Gonjas in Northern Ghana and Kasenas in the Upper East of Ghana; between the Dagaaba and the Frafra of Upper east and west regions respectively; and also between Dagombas and Moshies of Burkina Faso whom the former regard as their grandparents. When people from these friendly ethnic groups meet, they playfully engage in insults, irrespective of the social differences based on age, sex and status. The operative convention in these relationships seems to be that no one should take offence and neither should the friendly hostilities degenerate into a fight (Agyekum, 2010).

Paradoxically, such insulting relationships have been identified as important catalysts in the maintenance of peaceful coexistence, conflict prevention and conflict

resolution between neighbouring ethnic groups that practice joking relationships. In northern Ghana in particular, no two ethnic groups bounded by a joking relation will ever resort to warfare as a means of settling any conflict. Indeed, records exist to show that it has often taken sister ethnic groups in a joking relationship to mediate successfully in conflicts that involve their joking partners. The potential of joking relationships among neighbouring ethnic groups preventing conflicts and fostering peace contradict the primordialists position that such relationships exacerbate conflicts (Ekeh, 1975; Dunn et al., 2019; Thomson, 2016). This discovery therefore underscores the place of ethnography and the liberal arts in particular as important sources of data for research efforts into conflict prevention and resolution in Africa.

It is important to emphasize that in all the discussions about ritualized appropriations of verbal and non-verbal insults above, the mediums for communicating the insults include speech, songs, lampoons and parodies, miming, and paralinguistic forms such as gestures, costumes and effigies or caricaturing of targeted people. The use of songs and chants as preferred media in most lampooning rituals is partly to moderate the immediate impact of the ritual insults, particularly for those at the receiving end of the insults. Music (and the arts in general) has the inherent mechanisms for mitigating the harsh effects of insults on the targeted people through its entertaining qualities. As a result, it also insulates the performers of the insults from possible reprisal attacks from hurting persons and their supporters.

## THEORIZING SOCIETAL AMBIVALENCE

The challenge, as stated earlier, is to understand the fundamental principle(s) and reason(s) behind the obvious societal ambivalence regarding the use of insults and the potential psycho-social function(s) that seeming contradiction serves. On the face of it, it would seem that the love-hate societal attitude towards the creation and use of insult borders on double standards. That is, leaders of societies and institutions only feigning to uphold high moral values in public discourses and functions, and then turning round to do what they criticize others for.

In a much earlier research on what he captioned as 'tabooed obscenities,' Evans Pritchard (1929) collected and analyzed several tabooed expressions from song texts used in festivals, funerary and circumcision ceremonies of the Ba-Illa and Ba Thonga, both in Central and Southern Africa. Theorizing on the underlying philosophy behind the institutionalized uses of such tabooed words and expressions, Evans Pritchard literally pointed to contexts of social crises as the fundamental reasons to such usages. He stated:

The general function of collective and prescribed obscenity is to give emphasis to the social value of the activity with which it is associated. (a) Many of the occasions of this type of obscenity are crises in human life fraught with peril to the individual and to society. The further function of obscenity, therefore, is to provide a socially regulated means of expressing this emotion (Evans-Pritchard, 1929: 327).

In other words, there are certain social contexts, particularly those that threaten to plunge individuals and groups into indeterminate statuses, which are psychologically endured by breaching the code regarding verbal propriety. Clarifying Evans-Pritchard's crises thesis, Smith and Dale also likened such institutionalized liminal contexts for the use of insults and obscenities to abnormal socio-cultural happenings in need of radical solutions. "In normal times the abnormal is a taboo, but in abnormal times the abnormal things are done to restore the normal conditions of affairs" they emphasized (in Evans-Pritchard, 1929, 84).

Our contention is that Evans-Pritchard's crises thesis may be useful in explaining the penchant for military institutions whose traditional jobs often predispose them to perilous situations to resort to songs with obscene text. Similarly, the theory may be equally helpful in explaining the ritualized place of songs with obscene texts in, for example, the confinement rituals of would-be Ga public officials, of Thonga young boys under-going circumcision rituals, and also of Ba-Illa funerary rites for deceased souls in transition to ancestorhood. All these qualify as crises occasions for the societies and individuals concerned because of the liminal crises implications (Adjaye, 2007; Stevens Jnr., 1978; Turner, 1982). However, even though in the celebration of festivals, there may be reenactment of crises moments in the communities' histories, the festivals also constitute the highest entertainment events for the communities (Cole, 2003). This, therefore, makes it difficult to justify the crises theory as sufficient explanation for the use of songs of insults and obscene texts during traditional festival celebrations. For some of the institutionalized applications, therefore, it might be equally useful to explain the phenomenon in terms of other psychological functions such as cathartic purging and healing for purposes of social renewal (Beidelman, 1966).

A careful study of the dialectics, however, reveals that tabooing insults seems more prevalent within informal inter-personal contexts- of one person or group of persons using insult against another individual or a group. Mostly, such informal usages are either occasioned by existing feuds between the parties, or likely to occasion feuds- a sort of social drama (Avorgbedor, 1999; Schechner, 2003; Turner, 1982). Such insults are the ones more likely, compared with the communally sanctioned ritual contexts, to be

motivated by an intent to offend (Agyekum, 2010), "...wound targeted persons' self-respect" (Neu, 2008, p. 6), and disturb existing peaceful social order. Such insulting duels may start-off as ordinary verbal games but may escalate into full-blown conflicts because they are not controlled by any set of rules.

On the contrary, institutionalized contexts of insulting rituals are far less likely to be outlawed primarily because they are governed by enforceable rules (Mvula, 1985; Apter, 1983; Eckert and Newmark, 1980; Gluckman, 1954). There are a few exceptions to this rule, and two indigenous Ghanaian institutions readily come to mind: the Anlo-Ewe *haló* that features feuding clans trading insults through songs (Avorgbedor, 1994; 1999), and Fante *asafo* warrior associations that stage group rivalries and conflicts through street processions, singing, dancing, insults and fighting (Labi, 1998; Sutherland-Addy, 1998). Both were, at one point in Ghana's history proscribed because of reprisal attacks and injuries that affected both individuals and the larger communities. Indeed, whilst some of the entertainment-oriented verbal duels, like the dozens (Labov, 1974; Pagliai, 2009; Schwegler, 2007), are also engaged in by individuals, it is important to acknowledge that most of the references to the real cutting gibe (Agyekum, 2010; Neu, 2008) are all contested at the personal and informal levels of usage.

This argument, therefore, highlights 'context' and 'intent,' perhaps more than any other communication variable, as very important elements in the determination of which insulting context gets tabooed and which one does not. Thus, it is neither the personal nor ritualized communal usages per se that qualify insults as playful or serious as argued by Labov (1974), but rather the 'intent' to demean and the demeaning 'context' of usage. When the feuding context and intent to offend are taken out of the question, words that would have otherwise passed for offensive insults may be construed as harmless and sometimes as entertainment to the audience and society at large. Such insults, appraised from the institutionalized contexts, become mere exaggerated creative slogans whose entertainment values displace their offensive literal meanings. They are not factual and therefore not insulting (Labov, 1974).

For example, the tradition of joking relationships practiced among certain ethnic groups (details above) lends sufficient credence to the 'intent' and 'context' thesis (Stevens Jnr., 1978). Between the Dagaaba and the Frafra, they would call each other names such as, my slave and *balorigu* (the ugly one). This can take place in informal as well as the most formal of contexts without raising eye brows from those who belong to the two groups. Even though joking relationships are institutionalized contexts for practicing safe insults, the communal ethos of such relationships also allows it to be appropriated at the levels of inter-



personal/informal relationships with a great deal of camaraderie and humour.

There are also, several ritualized contexts in the Sahelian cultures of Africa where what would have passed for very demeaning insults have been institutionalised for various psycho-social purposes. For example, songs of insults are still being performed as part of pre-marital rituals among the Wolof of Senegal and the Songhai-Zarma women of Niger to welcome new brides (Diaw and Mounkaila, 2005). Such marriage ceremonies often present opposite psychological experiences of joy and sorrow for the new bride and her groom on one hand, and the first wife and her friends and supporters on the other. For the first wife, in particular, the occasion can be as unsettling as the disclosure of her divorce news. *Xaxar*, as the Wolof call the ritualized performance, is, therefore, an institutionalized avenue for first wives to deal with their troubled emotions through oratory and songs mainly. Below is a text of one *Xaxar* song transcribed into English by Diaw and Mounkaila (2005, p. 103):

First wife: My greetings to you, new bride, like one greets a donkey.

My respect and honour to you, but you're worse than a bitch.

Chorus of friends and supporters of first wife (mine emphasis):

We greet you, new bride, as we would greet a donkey.

We respect and honour you, but you're worse than a bitch.

First wife...Will she stay, the new bride, will she stay?

Will she stay, the new bride, will she stay

Look at her, this new bride, her skin's dull and ugly etc...

She is snotty and dirty, and lousy in bed,

Will she stay, the new bride, will she stay etc.

Chorus of friends and supporters of first wife (mine emphasis):

Will she stay, the new bride, will she stay?

Will she stay, the new bride, will she stay

Based on the assumption that only first wives (not the new bride or her groom) hurt during such liminal ritual events, and also based on the power relationship between first and second wives, the entirety of the insulting performance is one-sided, issuing from the first wife to the second. The lyrics contain some harsh words for. The metaphoric association of the new bride to a donkey and, particularly, a bitch, is harsh indeed for a Muslim woman. However, the vicious effect of the insults is hugely mitigated, first, by the sanctioned cathartic context intended to assuage a hurting first wife, and second, by the fact that the song texts are not factual. Perhaps, the Songhai-Zarma version of the same art form provides a fairer context for both first and second wives to deal with their own emotional challenges. The following is the lyrics of the song duel from a group of first and second

wives respectively:

The second wife is worthless:

May God curse the woman who is worthless.

The second wife is a stork of misfortune.

Who heralds winter but cannot stay.

Then the group of second wives sing back:

Have they gone mad,

These first wives with their empty heads.

You were brought here

We were brought here

Stop the assault (Niandou and De Jager, 2005).

As outlined in Victor Turner's social drama theory (1982), the demeaning effect of the Zarma-Songhai song text is mitigated by a concluding redressive action, initiated by members of both teams, to enable both wives to co-exist peacefully in their new roles as co-wives. Thus, even though sinister motives may not be ruled out when individuals participate in institutionalized performances of insults, the primary psycho-social ethos underpinning such communal events qualify them as acceptable cultural performances hence they are not tabooed. Such ethos may include: for cleansing of would-be officials and whole societies psychologically and socially; for liminal personalities to go through simulations of life's tensions as s/he moves up on the social strata; for individuals and groups to ventilate for purposes of achieving catharsis; for purposes of social control; for participants to be entertained; and for groups and entire societies to be renewed. The entertainment value seems to be derived through the freedom to publicly gorge oneself on words, expressions, acts and images that are forbidden for the most part of the year.

Such traditions are not exclusive to West Africa. One such example from East Africa, recorded by Enoch Mvula, is about how Tumbuka women in Northern Malawi use pounding songs as a licensed context to indirectly manage "what might be termed as trifocal or triadic familial conflicts in their patrilineal and patrilocal society" (Mvula, 1985, p. 93). As wives living in their husbands' family homes, Tumbuka women are no strangers to familial conflicts from their interactions with their husbands, in-laws and co-wives. Thus, the communally organised corn-pounding sessions, which are ordinary everyday occurrences in the lives of the women, become the debating ground for ventilating pent-up emotions through creative songs.

Whilst some of the songs are oblique in the issues they address, others are direct, critical and forthrightly insulting. For example, in the following song text, a dissatisfied wife sings to accuse her husband of indolence because he failed to clothe her.

Mr Jere.

How will he clothe me? This man of mine

Ah, my son.  
 His friends go to Johannesburg to work And buy suits.  
 Ah, my son  
 That's when he picks up a hoe And goes to dig mice.  
 Ah, my son.  
 Give me the mouse's skin To carry my son on my back.  
 Ah, my son (ibid. 101).

Expressions like, "how will he clothe me?", "he goes to dig mice", and "give me the mouse skin to carry my son..." in lines two, nine and eleven respectively, are veiled insults. But the comparison with the man's own peers in lines five and six is one that many men would find most demeaning. Thus, not only do pounding songs function as creative verbal avenues for highlighting existing familial conflicts, but they also serve as a vehicle for social control. The songs help the singers to fight for improved living conditions and relationships.

We can, therefore, argue that ritualized insulting events, represent a collective decision to relax the moral codes that govern interpersonal and intra-community communicative interactions, albeit occasionally. It is perhaps a formalized way of acknowledging the obvious: that, no matter the level of moral uprightness attainable, all humans possess the potential to be base, and that, depending on a person's own psychological predisposition, s/he may resort to one form of such tendencies when situations call for it- that is when his/her 'normal' life seems to be breached (Evans-Pritchard, 1929). Among the Akans of Ghana, this psycho-social fact is well acknowledged in an axiom formulated around the biological relationship between the liver and the bile- *bodwoma bata breboɔ ho*. The liver, which is one of the most important and delicate bodily organs of all mammals, also hosts the bile which, arguably, has the bitterest taste among all the bodies parts. It is perhaps to repress such vile human tendencies to hurt people's self-image through communication and its potential to disrupt social harmony (Agyekum, 2010; Neu, 2008), that the creation and usage of insult, particularly those that are appropriated in inter-personal situations, have been tabooed by many societies. Insult is, therefore, a necessary communicative evil, and the obvious societal ambivalence regarding its creation and use is therefore not ambiguous but regulatory- for purposes of maintaining social control and harmony.

## CONCLUSION

In this article, we have sought to revisit the communicative subject of verbal and non-verbal insults based on the premise that there is an obvious ambivalent attitude towards its creation and use universally. As demonstrated, the subject of insult, which has attracted a lot of scholarly interest mainly from socio-linguists and linguistic anthropologists, is generally

tabooed because of perceptions that its usage constitutes anti-social communicative behaviour. It was argued, however, that socio-linguistic tag on insult is only one-sided and does not represent the whole picture about its creation and usage. In nearly all societies of the world, the tendency is to openly frown on insult and insulters, and yet elevate aspects of it to even sacred ritual statuses that participated in by sanctioned ritual officials and whole communities.

It was discovered that tabooing of insult is confined to contexts that fall within the relatively less-regulated, informal and interpersonal usages because such contexts seem most susceptible to abuse. Tabooing of insults in such contexts, therefore, appears to serve as a reasonable mediatory exercise to preserve social sanctity and harmony. Conversely, however, the institutionalized appropriations of insult are regulated in time and space based on different set of ethos even where the insult is targeted at individuals. It is such institutionalized regulatory framework that has allowed for the toleration of insult within same societies that taboos it.

Thus, there is a clear case of ambivalence regarding insult creation in many human societies. However, ambivalence attitude has served as cultural framework for negotiating between the attainment of important psycho-social and aesthetic goals and the avoidance of social conflict through insult in same societies. 'Context' and 'intent' of use are the most fundamental bases for choosing between when to taboo insult use and when to permit it.

## CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

The authors have not declared any conflict of interests.

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