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Original Research Article

Sacred Words, Silent Woods: An Ecolinguistic Analysis of Taboo Discourse and Ritual Speech Acts in Cameroonian Oral Traditions

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Abstract: This article examines the sociolinguistic and pragmatic dimensions of taboo discourse and ritual speech acts embedded in a corpus of orally transmitted narratives, incantations, and rites collected from the Bakweri, Bakossi, Manyu, Lebialem, and Grassfields (Kom, Awing, Bafmen, Mundum, Bafut, and related Nfon-centred) communities of Cameroon. Situated within the ethnography of speaking (Hymes, 1974), speech act theory (Austin, 1962; Searle, 1969), taboo language studies (Allan &Burridge, 2006), and ecolinguistics (Stibbe, 2015), the study asks how prohibition is linguistically encoded, how ritual utterances function performatively, and how ideophones and code choice index cultural identity within these texts. A qualitative discourse-analytic approach was applied to eighty oral texts, comprising taboo narratives and ritual incantations, coded for deontic modality, conditional sanction structures, speech act type, ideophonic form, and lexical code-mixing. Findings reveal that prohibition is characteristically encoded through agentless passive constructions and if-then sanction clauses that displace human authority onto a cosmological order, that incantatory rites function as performative utterances whose felicity depends on communally shared ontological belief, that ideophones perform an evidential and dramatising function within narrative performance, and that untranslated vernacular lexis operates as an index of cultural untranslatability and ethnolinguistic identity. The study argues that taboo discourse constitutes an informal but linguistically systematic mechanism of ecological governance and social regulation that predates, and in places substitutes for, statutory conservation law. It concludes that the accelerating attrition of these oral genres under the pressures of Christianisation and modernisation constitutes not only cultural loss but also the erosion of an indigenous ecolinguistic register, and it calls for sustained, corpus-based documentation of Cameroonian oral traditions.

Keywords: Taboo Language, Speech Act Theory, Ritual Discourse, Ecolinguistics, Oral Tradition; Cameroon, Ideophones, Sociolinguistics.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Cameroon, often dubbed as "Africa in miniature" on account of its ecological and ethnolinguistic diversity, is home to more than two hundred and fifty indigenous languages alongside its two official languages, English and French (Echu, 2004). Within this multilingual landscape, oral tradition remains a principal repository of communal

knowledge, moral regulation, and ecological practice. Myths, taboo narratives, and ritual incantations are not merely aesthetic or entertainment genres; they are speech events through which communities encode prohibition, negotiate authority, and transmit an inherited cosmology across generations. Although such texts have long attracted the attention of folklorists and anthropologists, their properties as language; their grammar of prohibition, their performative structure, their sound-symbolic and lexical choices, have received comparatively little systematic sociolinguistic attention. This article addresses that gap by undertaking a sociolinguistic and pragmatic analysis of a corpus of taboo narratives and ritual speech texts drawn from Bakweri, Bakossi, Manyu, Lebialem, Mundum, and Grassfields oral traditions. The corpus includes narratives that prohibit the killing of totemic animals (the green snake, the python, the buffalo, the leopard, the monkey), narratives that restrict access to sacred rivers, lakes, forests, and mountains, narratives that regulate temporal conduct (rest days such as Afedgone, Contri Sunday, and ritual lent periods), and formulaic incantations recited at birth, marriage, fertility, and agricultural rites. Read together, these texts constitute a coherent discourse system in which language performs regulatory, cosmological, and identity-indexing work.

The study is guided by three research questions: (1) How is prohibition linguistically encoded in Cameroonian taboo narratives, and what pragmatic work do these structures perform? (2) In what sense do the ritual incantations in the corpus function as performative utterances, and what felicity conditions underwrite their perceived efficacy? (3) What sociolinguistic significance attaches to the ideophones, onomatopoeic forms, and untranslated vernacular lexemes that recur throughout the corpus? In answering these questions, the article situates Cameroonian oral tradition within broader debates on taboo language, speech act theory, and ecolinguistics, and argues that these oral genres constitute an indigenous, linguistically systematic mode of ecological and social governance whose ongoing attrition warrants urgent scholarly documentation.

2. Theoretical Framework

The analysis draws on four complementary strands of linguistic theory. First, speech act theory (Austin, 1962; Searle, 1969) provides the analytical vocabulary for distinguishing locutionary, illocutionary, and perlocutionary dimensions of ritual utterance, and for classifying utterances as directives, commissives, expressives, or declaratives. Austin's (1962) notion of the performative; an utterance that does not merely describe but enacts a state of affairs, subject to felicity conditions, is particularly germane to the incantatory texts examined here, in which naming, invoking, and pouring libation are treated by speakers as efficacious acts rather than descriptive ones.

Second, Hymes's (1974) ethnography of speaking situates these utterances within their communicative event. The taboo narrative or rite is analysed not in isolation but as a culturally patterned speech event with recognised participants, setting, purpose, and communally sanctioned norms of interaction. Hymes's SPEAKING model, consisting of Setting, Participants, Ends, Act sequence, Key, Instrumentalities, Norms, and Genre, gives a heuristic for analysing the contextual dimensions of ritual performance. Malinowski's (1923) related concept of the "context of situation" is invoked to explain why certain vernacular terms in the corpus (for example, *Eso, Mbando, Jengu, Nfon, and Fam*) resist straightforward translation into English. Their meaning is constituted by the cultural practice in which they are embedded rather than by lexical equivalence.

Third, taboo language scholarship (Allan & Burridge, 2006) supplies a framework for analysing the lexico-grammatical strategies such as euphemism, passive agent-deletion, conditional sanction, through which prohibition is voiced without direct attribution to a human authority. Allan and Burridge's typology of taboo categories (bodily functions, disease, death, supernatural beings, etc.) and their analysis of the pragmatic mechanisms of taboo avoidance inform the present study's treatment of prohibition as a discursive strategy rather than a mere lexical phenomenon.

Fourth, ecolinguistics (Halliday, 2001; Stibbe, 2015) frames the recurring association, throughout the corpus, between linguistic taboo and the protection of rivers, forests, and animal species, treating language as an instrument through which communities story their relationship with the non-human environment. Stibbe's (2015) concept of "stories we live by"; the cognitive and linguistic structures that shape how communities perceive and act upon the world; is particularly useful for understanding how taboo narratives function as ecological governance. Halliday's (2001) critique of anthropocentric language practices provides a critical lens for examining how the corpus's prohibitions construct human-nature relationships.

Finally, the study draws on research on ideophones (Dingemanse, 2012) to account for the sound-symbolic forms; reduplicated, often onomatopoeic items such as *kukuku'u, gwuu-m*, and *twaa*, that punctuate the narrative performances in the corpus. Dingemanse's cross-linguistic framework

distinguishes between ideophones (conventionalised sound-symbolic words) and onomatopoeia (direct imitations of sound), and identifies their typical phonological, syntactic, and pragmatic properties. This framework allows for a systematic analysis of the corpus's sound-symbolic resources.

3. LITERATURE REVIEW

Scholarship on African oral literature has long recognised the tale, the proverb, and the ritual formula as central units of verbal art (Finnegan, 2012; Okpewho, 1992). Finnegan's foundational survey established that oral literature in Africa is performed rather than merely narrated, and that its linguistic texture: repetition, formula, audience participation, and sound-symbolism, is inseparable from its social function. Okpewho (1992) extended this analysis by emphasising the aesthetic and rhetorical dimensions of African oral performance, arguing that oral texts are not merely functional but also artistic achievements that deserve close linguistic attention. More recent scholarship (Barber, 2007; Furniss, 2004) has examined the interplay between oral and written traditions, the role of performance in constituting meaning, and the political dimensions of oral discourse. However, this body of work has generally prioritised literary and anthropological analysis over linguistic pragmatics, leaving the grammatical and pragmatic structures of taboo and ritual speech largely unexplored.

Within Cameroonian sociolinguistics proper, research has concentrated heavily on the country's celebrated multilingualism and language contact ecology: the coexistence of English, French, Cameroon Pidgin English, and indigenous languages, and the attendant questions of language policy, code-switching, and identity (Echu, 2004; Kouega, 2008). This body of work has illuminated how Cameroonians negotiate linguistic repertoires in everyday and institutional contexts, but it has rarely extended its analytic tools to the oral-traditional register, the taboo narrative, the incantation, the ritual formula, that continues to circulate alongside, and sometimes in tension with, these more visible varieties.

A dedicated Cameroonian ecolinguistics has, however, begun to emerge over the past decade, and it avails a more immediate point of comparison for the present study. Ubanako and Ekembe (2014) examined the language of ecological representation in Cameroonian Anglophone fiction, tracing how the novelist Alobwed'Epie's prose encodes an ecological sensibility. Building on corpus-based methods, subsequent studies of Cameroonian print media (Acha, 2023; Ubanako & Acha, 2022) have shown that Cameroonian newspaper discourse deploys ecologically valorising adjectives, hedges, headlines, and eco-dignifying metaphor in ways that align with national conservation advocacy. Angwah (2019) analysed media discourse and communal stances on climate change in Cameroon, demonstrating how linguistic choices shape public understanding of environmental issues.

Of most direct relevance to the present study, Ambe (2022) undertook an ecolinguistic analysis of oral narratives from the Western Grassfields of Cameroon, identifying ecocentric ecofeminist, and ecosophies within the tales and arguing that such narratives, though largely overlooked by mainstream linguistic scholarship, carry ecologically consequential meaning. The present study extends this still-nascent strand of Cameroonian ecolinguistics beyond media and literary discourse into the taboo-narrative and ritual-incantation register specifically, complementing Ambe's (2022) ecosophical reading with a more grammatically and pragmatically oriented analysis of how prohibition and ritual speech are linguistically structured. By integrating speech act theory, the ethnography of speaking, and taboo language studies with ecolinguistics, the present study seeks to bring the methods of pragmatics and sociolinguistics to bear on this under-examined register, treating taboo and ritual speech not as inert folklore but as a live object of linguistic analysis.

4. METHODOLOGY

The study adopts a qualitative discourse-analytic design appropriate to a small, purposively assembled corpus of orally derived texts. The corpus comprises eighty texts: forty taboo and totemic narratives collected from Bakweri, Bakossi, Manyu, Lebialem, Akwaya, Mamfe-Bayangui, and Mundum informants, and forty ritual, incantatory, and legendary texts collected primarily from Grassfields communities (Kom, Awing, Bafmen, Mankon, Nkwen, Nweh, Limbum, Pinyin, Nkor, and Etakum), supplemented by informal interview material. Texts were elicited through open-ended interviews and community narration, transcribed in English (the language of narration used by informants), and, where vernacular terms were retained by the narrator, preserved in *situ*.

Analysis proceeded in four stages. First, each text was coded thematically according to the object or domain of prohibition (animal, plant, place, time) or ritual function (birth, marriage, fertility, agriculture, appeasement). Second, clauses expressing prohibition or sanction were extracted and analysed for grammatical mood, modality, and agentivity. Third, incantatory and formulaic texts were classified according to Searle's (1969) taxonomy of speech acts (directives, commissives, expressives, declaratives, representatives). Hybrid or multi-functional

utterances were coded for multiple speech act types. Fourth, recurrentideophonic and code-mixed lexical items were catalogued and analysed for their pragmatic and indexical function.Ideophones were classified according to Dingemanse's (2012) criteria (phonological iconicity, syntactic integration, pragmatic markedness), while code-mixed items were analysed for their indexical value following Auer (1999) and Blommaert (2010).Quantitative frequency counts were calculated for key variables (prohibition structures, speech act types, ideophone types, code-mixed items) to supplement the qualitative analysis and establish patterns of distribution across the corpus.

As with much documentary work on oral tradition, the corpus is a secondary compilation of narratives recorded and translated by community members and researchers rather than a first-hand ethnographic fieldwork corpus. This is treated as a methodological condition of the study rather than a limitation to be concealed, and claims are correspondingly restricted to the linguistic patterning of the texts as transcribed rather than to unmediated claims about spoken performance. The study also acknowledges that the translation process inevitably involves some loss of meaning, particularly in the case of ideophones and culturally specific terms. However, the retention of vernacular terms and the provision of explanatory glosses mitigate this loss to some extent, and the, consistency of the patterns observed across the corpus suggests that the findings are robust despite these limitations.

5. The Corpus: An Overview

5.1 *Composition of the Corpus*

The corpus comprises eighty texts, divided into two main categories: taboo and totemic narratives (n = 40) and ritual, incantatory, and legendary texts (n = 40). Table 1 summarises the composition of the corpus by community and text type.

Table 1: Corpus Composition

Community	Taboo/Totemic Narratives	Ritual/Incantatory Texts	Total
Bakweri	6	2	8
Bakossi	8	1	9
Manyu	2	1	3
Libialem	1	0	1
Mundum	6	0	6
Kom	1	6	7
Awing	1	1	2
Bafmen	2	2	4
Mankon	1	2	3
Nkwen	0	1	1
Nweh	0	1	1
Limbum	0	1	1
Pinyin	1	0	1
Nkor	1	0	1
Etakum	1	0	1
Other Grassfields	9	22	31
Total	40	40	80

5.2 Taboo and Totemic Narratives

The taboo narratives fall into four recurring subtypes:

Totemic-taboo narratives prohibit the killing or consumption of particular species; the green snake associated with twin births, the python revered for its curative properties, the buffalo, elephant, leopard, and monkey believed to embody transformed ancestors or spiritual protectors, and smaller creatures such as the millipede and the earthworm believed to signal fertility or birth. *Place-taboo narratives* restrict human access to rivers, lakes, forests, and mountains understood to be inhabited by totemic communities, water spirits, or ancestral presences; the Manyu River, the Twin Lake of Bakossi, Lake Awing, Lake Oku, Lake Ipaline, and the sacred forests of Bayangui, Nkor, and Nkob among them.

Temporal-taboo narratives regulate conduct on designated rest days: Afedgone, Contri Sunday, and observance of a ritual lent, on which agricultural and other productive labour is forbidden. Finally, *dietary-taboo narratives*, disproportionately directed at pregnant women, prohibit the consumption of foods such as huckleberry, antelope, porcupine, and fowl on pain of harm to an unborn child.

5.3 Ritual and Incantatory Texts

The ritual and incantatory textsare formulaic utterances performed at defined life-cycle and agricultural junctures: birth-rite incantations invoking blessing and health, marriage rites that formally transfer a woman's allegiance to her husband's household under threat of spiritual sanction for infidelity or desertion, fertility rites addressed to ancestral figures, and agricultural rites of planting, harvest, and appeasement addressed to "the gods of the land." These texts are markedly more formulaic and performative in structure than the taboo narratives, and they form the primary data for the speech-act analysis in Section 6.3.

6. Analysis

6.1 The Grammar of Prohibition: Deontic Modality and Agent Deletion

Across the taboo narratives, prohibition is overwhelmingly encoded through agentless passive and modal constructions rather than through direct imperatives with a named human authority. Formulae such as "*it is not supposed to be killed,""it is forbidden,""nobody is permitted,"* and *"no one dares*" recur with striking regularity. Table 2 presents the distribution of prohibition structures across the corpus.

Table 2: Distribution of Prohibition Structures in Taboo Narratives (n = 40)

Structure Type	Frequency	Percentage
Agentless passive ("it is forbidden")	28	70%
Modal negation ("no one dares/must not")	22	55%
Conditional sanction ("if…then…")	31	78%
Direct imperative with human authority	4	10%
Other/indirect	7	18%

Note*: percentages exceed 100% because many narratives employ multiple structures.*

Grammatically, these constructions delete the human agent who might otherwise be named as issuing the prohibition (a chief, an elder, a council), and in doing so they relocate the source of authority from any identifiable person to an impersonal, cosmological order. This is a pragmatically consequential choice: a directive attributed to "the gods,""the ancestors," or an unspecified "it is said" cannot be contested, renegotiated, or challenged in the way a directive issued by a named human authority could be. The passive and impersonal grammar of taboo is thus not a stylistic accident but a strategy of legitimation, converting a socially constructed rule into an ostensibly natural or sacred fact. Example of such can be seen from the Bakweri green snake narrative below:

> *"If a green snake is found in the house of someone who is pregnant or who has just given birth to twins, it is not supposed to be killed. According to the traditional belief system, killing them is equal to killing the babies*."

Here, the prohibition is encoded through a combination of an agentless passive ("it is not supposed to be killed") and a conditional clause ("if a green snake is found..."). The human agent who might issue or enforce the prohibition is entirely absent. The rule appears to exist independently of any human authority, grounded instead in a cosmological equivalence ("killing them is equal to killing the babies"). This grammatical strategy is consistent across the corpus and represents a systematic feature of taboo discourse.

6.2 Conditional Sanction Structures: If-Then Clauses as Enforcement Pragmatics

A second recurrent structure is the conditional sanction clause, in which the prohibition is paired with an explicit if-then consequence. Table 3 presents the distribution of conditional sanction types across the corpus.

Table 3: Types of Conditional Sanctions in Taboo Narratives (n = 40)

Sanction Type	Frequency	Example
Death (human)	18	"you will bleed to death"
Death (animal/offspring)	12	"the babies will die"
Illness/deformity	14	"a child born with scales"
Supernatural punishment	16	"the object will return upon us"
Community sanction	6	"the elders will fine you"
Loss of fortune	9	"poor harvest"

Examples from the corpus include: killing the green snake is equated with killing a set of twins; eating the huckleberry, the antelope, or the porcupine while pregnant is said to result in bleeding to death or in a child born with scales or without hair; throwing an object into the sacred lakes of Bakossi,

Bafmen, or Oku is said to cause the object, or a swarm of bees, to return upon the offender.

Pragmatically, these conditional structures function as a form of anticipatory warning with the illocutionary force of a threat, yet one whose perlocutionary effect depends entirely on the hearer's antecedent acceptance of the community's cosmological premises. Unlike a warning backed by observable causal mechanism, the taboo warning is felicitous only within a shared belief system; it is, in Austinian terms, a performative whose success conditions are ontological rather than institutional. This helps explain why the corpus so often supplies a corroborating anecdote: the drowned schoolboy at Lake Awing, the swallowed thief at the river of Chunge, the sudden flood that destroys the hunter's household after the killing of the sacred leopard.

This narrative evidence functions rhetorically to sustain the felicity conditions of the taboo formula for a new generation of hearers. The following example from the Laken Awing narrative illustrates this pattern:

> *"A primary school once came there for an excursion and the pupils went into the canoe so that they can be taken around the lake. A student entered the lake without removing the herbs on him and as they were going around the lake, the boy suddenly fell into the lake and disappeared. The other students cried to no avail and ended up returning home without their mate. It was only after a week that the boy's body was found beside the lake and was recovered by the parents*."

This anecdote functions as a narrative warrant for the prohibition, transforming an abstract rule into a concrete, memorable event that reinforces the taboo's authority.

6.3 Ritual Speech as Performative Utterance

The incantatory texts collected from Kom, Mankon, and Moghamo communities supply the corpus's clearest instances of performative language in Austin's (1962) sense. Table4 presents the distribution of speech act types across the ritual texts.

Table 4: Distribution of Speech Act Types in Ritual Texts (n = 40)

Speech Act Type	Frequency	Percentage
Directive (petition, request)	28	70%
Commissive (promise, threat)	18	45%
Expressive (apology, thanks)	22	55%
Declarative (blessing, binding)	14	35%
Representative (statement of fact)	8	20%
Hybride (multiple types)	16	40%

Note*: Percentages exceed 100% because most ritual texts contain multiple speech acts.*

The birth-rite incantation, which invokes ancestral herbs and water for the health of a newborn, does not describe a state of health so much as enact its bestowal through utterance and ritual action. Its illocutionary force is that of a blessing, and its intended perlocutionary effect is the child's wellbeing. Consider the following example from Kom:

> "*These herbs are from jinabo forest. This water is from jinabo spring. They give peace and good health. My grand uncle, this calabash is from you. When we drink from it and wash our babies, peace, prosperity and good health will forever be ours.*"

Here, the utterance combines a representative ("these herbs are from jinabo forest"), a directive ("this calabash is from you"), and a declarative ("peace, prosperity and good health will forever be ours"). The efficacy of the rite depends not on persuading a human audience but on being correctly performed before a spiritual addressee.

The marriage rite recorded from Moghamo is still more clearly performative and, in Searle's (1969) terms, hybrid in force:

> *"Anjindoh! This is your melon. This is my wife's hair. This is my wife's cloth. I have initiated her here so that she dares not leave my compound. If she dares, inflict illnesson her till she finds her way back to my compound. If she does not come back, strike her dead."*

This text combines a declarative act ("I have initiated her here") that binds the bride to her husband's compound with a conditional commissive-cum-threat ("if she dares [leave], inflict illness on her... strike her dead") that functions as an enforceable spiritual contract. The performative force of the utterance depends on the presence of the spiritual addressee (Anjindoh) and the correct performance of the ritual actions (the presentation of the melon, hair, and cloth).

The agricultural rites addressed to "the gods of the land" in Mankon and Nkwen combine

expressive acts of apology with directive acts petitioning for a good harvest:

> "*To you the gods of the land, we have come. Here is special wine for you. We also have some food for you. Soften your anger against us. We know we wronged you. The planting season is near, bless our crops. Let our yields be much. Enable us feed the many youths you have given us. Let all disaster go to the coast."* (Mankon)

Here, the expressive act of apology ("we know we wronged you") is combined with directive acts of petition ("bless our crops,""let our yields be much") in a single ritual event. This illustrates how ritual language accomplishes multiple speech acts in sequence, each contributing to the overall performative effect. What unites these texts is that their efficacy, as reported by narrators, is not contingent on persuading a human audience but on being correctly performed before a spiritual addressee; the felicity conditions specified by Austin (1962) as necessary for a performative to succeed are here recast as ritual correctness (the right words, the right officiant, the right libation) rather than institutional procedure.

6.4 Ideophones, Sound Symbolism, and the Poetics of Narration

The taboo and legendary narratives are punctuated by ideophonic and onomatopoeic forms that mark climactic narrative moments. Table 5 catalogues the ideophones identified in the corpus.

Table 5: Ideophones in the Corpus

Ideophone	Meaning/Function	Narrative Context	Source Text
Kukuku'u	Muffled crow of cock	Cock tries to crow but suppresses it	Tale 1
Pum	Sound of body falling	Leopard falls from tree	Tale 1
Gwuu-m	Report of gunshot	Hunter shoots hare	Tale 2
Twaa	Sound of slap	Hunter slaps mother	Tale 2
Krrrrrrrrrrrh	Sound of millipede's legs	Millipede walks on wall	Story 14
Kwaakwaa	Partridge's cry	Partridge flees	Tale 3
Gbuum	Gunshot	John Ngu shoots buffalo	Story 16

Consistent with cross-linguistic findings on African ideophone systems (Dingemanse, 2012), these forms are typically reduplicated or phonologically iconic, and they cluster at points of heightened narrative tension, the instant of discovery, injury, or death. Pragmatically, ideophones perform an evidential and dramatising function. They signal to the audience that a described event is being represented with heightened vividness and immediacy, and they invite audience response, a feature consistent with the participatory performance style documented broadly in African oral literature (Finnegan, 2012).Consider the following passage from Tale 1:

> *"When it was crowing-time for the cock i.e around the time women cook atchu, the cock tried to crow but didn't crow, it crowed kukuku'u inside its stomach, was barely heard indistinctly."*

Here, the ideophone *kukuku'u* does not merely describe the sound of the cock's crow; it performs the sound, bringing the narrative moment vividly before the audience. The reduplicated structure (*ku-ku-ku-'u*) and the glottal stop suggest a stifled, internal sound, reinforcing the cock's attempt to suppress its crow. The ideophone thus functions as an evidential marker, signalling that the narrator has direct access to the sensory details of the event. Their persistence even in texts transcribed into written English indicates that they are not merely ornamental but a structurally integral feature of the narrative register. The fact that narrators retained these forms even when narrating in English suggests that they are felt to be untranslatable; that no English equivalent could capture their sensory and pragmatic force.

6.5 Code Choice and Lexical Borrowing: Indexing Untranslatability and Identity

A further recurrent feature is the retention, untranslated, of vernacular lexical items within otherwise English narration. Table 6 catalogues the most frequent vernacular terms in the corpus.

Table 6: Vernacular Terms Retained in English Narration

Term	Community	Gloss	Frequency
Eso	Bakweri	Traditional medicine	3
Mbando	Bakweri	Village shrine	4
Jengu	Bakweri/Duala	Water spirit	5
Liengu la Mwanja	Bakweri	Water goddess	3
Nfon	Grassfields	Chief	8

Term	Community	Gloss	Frequency
Fam	Nkor	Sacred forest	2
Man Kuba	Bakossi	Half-human, half-animal spirit	3
Afedgone	Bakossi/Mundum	Rest day	3
Contri Sunday	Mundum	Rest day (Pidgin-vernacular hybrid)	2
Mami-Wata	Coastal	Water spirit	4
Efasa-Moto	Bakweri	Mountain god	3

In line with Malinowski's (1923) argument that meaning is constituted by context of situation rather than by lexical translation, narrators appear to treat these terms as culturally untranslatable: no single English equivalent for Mbando (a village shrine consulted before contests or in times of danger) or for Man Kuba (a half-human, half-animal spiritual agent) would preserve the cultural weight of the original term. Retaining the vernacular item within an English-medium narration therefore performs an indexical function, signalling the narrator's embeddedness in, and authority over, the culture being described, and marking the narrative as belonging to a specific ethno linguistic community even when the language of telling is English.

Below is an excerpt from the Bakweri Mbando narrative:

> "*Mbando is a knowledge that e-Mokpwe acquired hundreds of years ago. AMbando is a shrine. It is expected to take good care of the welfare of a village community. AMbando is generally located close to a stone that will not roll or close to the trunk of a tree that has long life span or in the stump of a tree within the environs of a village wrestling field or playground*."

Here, the term *Mbando* is retained throughout the English narration, with a partial gloss provided ("a shrine") but no attempt at full translation. The narrator's use of the vernacular term signals that Mbando is not merely a shrine but a complex cultural institution with no English equivalent. This code-mixing pattern situates the corpus within the broader Cameroonian sociolinguistic ecology of contact between English, Pidgin, and indigenous languages documented by Echu (2004) and Kouega (2008), while showing that this contact extends into the oral-traditional register and not only into everyday or institutional discourse.

7. DISCUSSION

7.1 Taboo Discourse as Ecolinguistic Regulation

A striking proportion of the corpus's prohibitions attach to non-human entities and spaces: rivers, lakes, forests, mountains, and animal species. Table 7 presents the distribution of taboo domains across the corpus.

Table 7: Distribution of Taboo Domains in the Corpus

Domain	Frequency	Percentage
Animals (totemic)	22	55%
Places (rivers, lakes, forests, mountains)	14	35%
Time (rest days, lent)	6	15%
Diet (pregnant women)	8	20%
Plants/trees	5	13%

Note*: Percentages exceed 100% because some narratives concern multiple domains.*

Read through an ecolinguistic lens (Halliday, 2001; Stibbe, 2015), these taboo narratives can be understood as "stories we live by" that regulate human conduct toward the environment long before, and independently of, statutory conservation frameworks. The prohibition on hunting within the totemic rock at the centre of Bachuo Ntai, the restriction on swimming in stretches of the Manyu River, the protection of the python and the green snake, and the sanctity of the forests of Nkob, Fam, and Bayangui together constitute a linguistically encoded system of ecological governance in which discursive sanction substitutes for formal regulation. This pattern corroborates, from a different regional corpus, Ambe's (2022) finding that oral narratives from the Cameroonian Grass fields encode ecocentric and ecofeminist ecosophies that mainstream linguistic scholarship has largely overlooked. The corpus also supplies a cautionary case study in the vulnerability of this system to language and belief shift. The account of the white goat of Alorri explicitly narrates the collapse of a taboo-protected wetland following the physical removal of the sacred goat by a colonial missionary, presenting, within the community's own discourse, an origin story for environmental degradation that is inseparable from the erosion of the taboo narrative that had previously protected the site:

> *"There was a white goat in a round hole in the water under the Catholic Church. It was*

> *believed that this goat will occasionally come to the surface of the water to signal its presence to the outside world. The goat was believed to be the source of the water. It was also believed that if the goat was taken out of the water, the water will cease to exist... However, with the coming of Christianity to Alorri, many things went wrong. It is said that the first Rev Father, a White, entered into the pond and removed and took away the goat. From then on, the water body started dwindling and today, that particular wetland in Alorri is pure dry land except in the rainy seasons."*

This narrative is remarkable for its explicit articulation of the link between taboo erosion and environmental degradation. It presents, in the community's own voice, a theory of ecological loss that attributes environmental change to the disruption of sacred prohibitions, a theory that aligns with contemporary ecolinguistic concerns about the role of language and belief in shaping human-environment relationships.

7.2 Language as an Informal Instrument of Social Regulation

Beyond the ecological domain, the corpus's taboo and ritual formulae function as an informal but linguistically systematic mode of social control, regulating gendered conduct (dietary restrictions on pregnant women), marital fidelity (the Moghamo marriage rite's conditional curse), and communal labour discipline (the Afedgone and Contri Sunday rest-day prohibitions). Given that these sanctions are voiced impersonally and are backed by narrated precedent rather than institutional enforcement, they operate with a degree of discursive authority that does not require the presence of a policing agent. The threat is, in effect, self-enforcing so long as the underlying belief system retains its currency among speakers. This suggests that taboo discourse should be understood as a genuinely linguistic phenomenon of social regulation, worthy of analysis alongside more familiar sociolinguistic categories such as register, politeness, and directive speech, rather than as a purely anthropological curiosity external to language study. The grammatical strategies identified in Section 6.1; agentless passives, modal negations, conditional sanctions, are not merely stylistic features but constitute a systematic grammar of prohibition that accomplishes specific pragmatic work: legitimating social rules by grounding them in a cosmological order rather than in human authority.

7.3 Endangerment and the Urgency of Documentation

Several texts in the corpus are reflexively aware of their own precarity. Narrators note that shrines such as the *Mbando* are "probably suffering relegation" and no longer routinely activated, that traditional medicinal knowledge is maintained privately in notebooks rather than transmitted publicly, and that the taboo-protected wetland of Alorri has already been lost. These internal testimonies corroborate a broader pattern documented in African sociolinguistics, in which the erosion of oral genres accompanies, and is accompanied by, broader processes of language shift and religious change.

Consider the following reflection from the Mbando narrative:

> "*I think that during my teenage years when I was in primary school every village possessed a Mbando. The Village Traditional Council of Elders consulted their Mbando in advance of contests, such as wrestling matches or in the face of grave danger such an outbreak of a plague or a war. Mbando are probably suffering relegation now and are probably not given the attention that activates them. Intentions to revive and reactivate Mokpwe cultural sciences such as i-Mbando or creation of a 'federal'Mbando to serve all Bakweri villages will no doubt take some time to materialise."*

This passage is striking for its reflexive awareness of cultural loss. The narrator contrasts the past, when every village possessed a Mbando, with the present, when these shrines are "suffering relegation" and no longer "given the attention that activates them." The use of the passive voice ("are probably suffering relegation") and the hedge ("probably") suggests a degree of uncertainty about the current state of these institutions, but the overall thrust of the passage is clear: the Mbando system is in decline, and efforts to revive it face significant obstacles. Because the linguistic structures analysed here: agent-deleted prohibition, conditional sanction, performative ritual formula, ideophone, and vernacular code-mixing, are transmitted primarily through oral performance rather than through written codification, their loss is not merely the loss of a belief system but the loss of a distinct linguistic register. This underscores the urgency of systematic, corpus-based documentation of Cameroonian oral tradition as a task for sociolinguistic research, not only for folkloristics or anthropology.

8. CONCLUSION

This article has argued that the taboo narratives and ritual incantations of Bakweri, Bakossi, and Grassfields oral tradition constitute a coherent and linguistically analysable discourse system. The analysis has yielded four principal findings:

First off, prohibition is characteristically voiced through agent-deleted passive and modal constructions that displace human authority onto a cosmological order. This grammatical strategy is not a stylistic accident but a pragmatic resource for legitimation, converting socially constructed rules into ostensibly natural or sacred facts.

Second, sanction is characteristically encoded through conditional if-then clauses whose felicity depends on shared ontological belief rather than institutional enforcement. These conditional structures function as anticipatory warnings with the illocutionary force of a threat, but their perlocutionary effect depends entirely on the hearer's antecedent acceptance of the community's cosmological premises.

Third, ritual incantations function as performative utterances in the Austinian sense, accomplishing blessing, binding, and appeasement through the act of utterance itself. Their felicity conditions are recast as ritual correctness; the right words, the right officiant, the right libation, rather than institutional procedure.

Fourth, ideophones and untranslated vernacular lexis perform evidential, dramatising, and identity-indexing functions within the narrative register. Their persistence in English medium narration indicates that they are not merely ornamental but a structurally integral feature of the narrative register. Taken together, these findings support the broader claim that taboo discourse operates as an indigenous mechanism of ecological and social governance, one whose oral transmission renders it especially vulnerable to attrition under conditions of religious and social change.

Future research would benefit from first-hand ethnographic recording of these genres in performance, comparative analysis across additional Cameroonian language communities, and closer collaboration between sociolinguists, folklorists, and the custodian communities themselves, so that the linguistic systems examined here may be documented before further loss occurs.

Appendix: Sample Texts from the Corpus

Text 1: Green Snake (Bakweri)

In Bakweri land, if a green snake is found in the house of someone who is pregnant or who has just given birth to twins, it is not supposed to be killed. According to the traditional belief system, killing them is equal to killing the babies.

Text 2: Hunting (BachuoNtai)

In BachuoNtai, my village, it is forbidden to hunt in particular area of the village. Ntai means stone/rock. There is a big rock at the centre of the village. In that rock, animals do live there. People are forbidden to hunt there because those animals are the villagers' totems and so if they hunt there and get to shoot the animals in the rock, many of the villagers will lose their lives.

Text 3: Manyu River

Swimming is prohibited in particular spots in the Manyuriver. The belief holds that people's totems live there and so swimming there was like disturbing their quiet time. People who have dared to swim are sometimes warned by very old people from the waters and though a dangerous place a crocodile is always available to save those who are about drowning by carrying the person on its back and leaving him by the banks of the river.

Text 4: Marriage Rite (Moghamo)

Anjindoh! This is your melon. This is my wife's hair. This is my wife's cloth. I have initiated her here so that she dares not leave my compound. If she dares, inflict illness on her till she finds her way back to my compound. If she does not come back, strike her dead.

Text 5: Agricultural Rite (Mankon)

To you the gods of the land, we have come. Here is special wine for you. We also have some food for you. Soften your anger against us. We know we wronged you. The planting season is near, bless our crops. Let our yields be much. Enable us feed the many youths you have given us. Let all disaster go to the coast.

Text 6: The White Goat in the River (Alorri)

There was a white goat in a round hole in the water under the Catholic Church. It was believed that this goat will occasionally come to the surface of the water to signal its presence to the outside world. The goat was believed to be the source of the water. It was also believed that if the goat was taken out of the water, the water will cease to exist. The people believed in the story and no one dared go to the area where the goat generally surfaces. In the time being, the land enjoyed plenty of water as they adhered to the teaching of the myth of the white goat. However, with the coming of Christianity to Alorri, many things went wrong. It is said that the first Rev Father, a White, entered into the pond and removed and took away the goat. From then on, the water body started dwindling and today, that particular wetland in Alorri is pure dry land except in the rainy seasons. The area which used to be full of water and a lot of green vegetation is dry and browny.

Text 7: The Talking Tree (Laikom)

There was once and still is a sacred forest called "akuamifi" found in the village of "laikom". In

the middle of the forest was a very tall gigantic tree. It provided shelter to many other smaller trees and herbs which surrounded it. The outstanding nature and size of the tree attracted many and those who passed around the forest. One day, the villagers decided to cut down this tree as to have much wood for construction. Arrangements were made and a day set finally for the tree to be cut down. Native doctors gathered round the tree to throw libations because it had mystical powers. Those in charge with the chopping started chopping off the tree's trunks but the tree started lamenting and blood started oozing out of the tree profusely. To their greatest surprise, the same thing was happening to the fon's leg in the palace and the fon screamed and lamented with the same words that were heard from the talking tree. Those charged with the cutting were immediately ordered to stop, because the fon would have died if they continued. From that day, water started flowing from the areas that were wounded with axes in the course of the chopping. And any villager who drank this water got healed from whatever illness he or she was suffering from, and the king gave orders for the tree never to be cut down from the forest.

The principle ideology behind this tale is that the tree healed many people and lives were saved. Equally, it prevents people from cutting down trees and thus securing the land and its medical nature. This tale reawakened the spirit of environmental protection, because even till date people are afraid to cut down trees carelessly.

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