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# An Ethno-Pragmatic Analysis of Insults in Akan Asafo Companies: the Case of Asebu Amantsendo Asafo Company of Abura-Asebu-Kwamankese District, Ghana

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John Andoh<sup>1\*</sup>, Daniel Arkoh Fenyi<sup>2</sup>, Mawuena Komi Zotoku<sup>3</sup>, William Osei-Appiagyei<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1\*,2,3,4</sup>Department of Languages, Enchi College of Education, Ghana

Email: <sup>2</sup>fenyigh@gmail.com

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**Abstract:** *This study sought to investigate the use of insults in Asafo companies at Asebu Amantsendo of Abura Asebu Kwamankese District in the Central Region of Ghana. The study aimed at finding out the various instances where insults are not considered as face threatening acts (FTAs) and identifying the various reasons which permit members to use insults in Asafo activities. The theoretical base for the study was Brown and Levinson's (1978) Politeness Theory. Data was sampled from fifty participants from Asebu traditional area through interviews and observations. The study revealed that verbal forms of insults manifest through songs and greetings while the nonverbal forms manifest through flags, posts and surrogate. The study also showed occasions where insults are treated as non-face threatening acts. These occasions include specific occasions (such as funerals, enstoolment of chiefs, festivals etc), and during insult competition games. Also, the study revealed that entertainment, correction and trademark were some of the reasons for which members engaged in insults. The study contributes to the politeness theory by proving that among the Akan Asafo groups, insults were used as cohesive tools for strengthening togetherness..*

**Keywords:** *Asafo Companies, Face Threatening Acts, Insults, Politeness Theory.*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The Asafo companies of the Akan play many roles in traditional society. Some of the significant roles are political, social, recreational, religious, economic and cultural [1] [2]. For instance, they are responsible for clearing bushy footpaths, roads and organizing general sanitation enhancing exercises. In addition, the Akan Asafo companies respond and act on emergencies that occur in the society. For example, when a person is reported missing or when there are occasional accidents such as capsizing of canoes and drowning of amateur swimmers, an Asafo Company has the responsibility of saving survivors and retrieving dead bodies from the sea [3] [4]. Sam (2014) and Li (1995) have shown that aside the Akan who



are well noted for the Asafo concept, the Ga, Guan, Krobo, and Ewe of Ghana, have also developed groups similar to the Akan Asafo companies.

As part of the various activities and utterances of Asafo Companies, they often trade in insults. Insult is a verbal behaviour that is usually frowned upon in any civilized society [7]. Many scholars have argued that insults are meant to cause mental pain, embarrassment and disgrace [8]. Therefore, they may be considered in many societies as socially unacceptable. Insults are anti-politeness forms; they usually cause the breakdown of social cohesion and threaten interpersonal relationships. As such, insults are generally considered as a violation of the principle of politeness and are face threatening acts [9] [10] [11]. Whenever members of Asafo bump into each other in the course of performing their activities, they engage in insults. Asafo companies in their rituals and other activities such as funerals and festivals meet their counterparts or colleagues at a durbar. It is during such public encounters that they exchange insults. These insults can be both verbal and non-verbal. For example, in Asafo, if someone clenches the fist and raises the thumb up-and-down while directing it at a target, it is interpreted as insult of the target's mother's genitals. This action threatens the face of the hearer.

It is to be emphasized that insults in communicative contexts are understood differently in different societies. In some societies, an abominable communication could spark a bitter fight or war. In the same culture, the same word may be prohibited and labelled as insult in one context but not in another [8] [12]. In cultures around the world, in order to ensure social harmony, communicative conventions are established about what to say and what not to say. This sets the agenda on the principles of politeness and impoliteness in public discourse [10] [11] [13] [14].

Indeed, an insult, whether verbal or non-verbal, is deployed in most communicative contexts by speakers emotionally involved with their audiences. They are used even if the primary objective is to hurt the hearer. Very often, insults are used by speakers to attack. On the other hand, hearer could also deploy insults as a defensive device. The general result of the use of insults in this way is that it leads to a breakdown in social interaction. In view of this, the typical Akan child is given a sound orientation in Akan values with regard to politeness, in order to avoid embarrassment. Chiefs and clan leaders are tutored very well in public speaking. The focus of such tutoring is to help leaders avoid sanctions and belittlement arising from the use of insults when addressing others. Again, politicians are admonished almost always to “eschew the politics of insults to promote peace and development” [16, p. 8).

Among the Asafo companies, it is observed that insults are not treated as offensive tools; rather, they are seen as a form of socialization, a marker of group affinity, and an indicator of common identity. It is against this background that this study sets out to investigate and understand the contexts for which insults are not seen as offensive. Despite the positive roles that Asafo groups play such as entertaining people through drumming, dancing and hoisting of flags, insults are exchanged any time the Asafo members meet. However, the insults that are exchanged during such meetings do not trigger conflict among themselves. What accounts for this state of affairs? This question is especially important given the argument that an insult is considered to be a Face Threatening Act (FTA), and according to Brown and Levinson (1978), the addresser needs to maintain self-esteem and be respected.



Scholars such as Agyekum (2010), Sekyi-Baidoo (2008) and Ofori (2015) have worked on insults. All these scholars have examined insults in different dimensions, but very little has been done on insults traded by members of Asafo. Whilst scholarly work on the linguistics of insults abounds globally, it is perturbing to recognize that not much attention has been given to the insults traded by Akan Asafo members. So, in this study it is deemed expedient to investigate various instances (occasions) that insults are considered as Non-Face Threatening Acts and why insults are permitted as part of the activities of Akan Asafo companies.

### **Ethno-Linguistic Background of the Akan**

Akan is one of the biggest ethnolinguistic groups in Ghana [8] [18] [19]. Statistical data of the 2021 Ghana Population and Housing Census reveals that Akan represents 47.5% of the total population of Ghana [20]. The Akan language which is spoken in the southern part of Ghana belongs to the Kwa group of languages found in West Africa [8]. Akan is made up of various distinguishable dialects that are mutually intelligible. These are Asante, Akuapem, Fante, Agona, Kwahu, Akyem, Assin, Akwamu, Twifo, Wassa, Denkyira, Bono and Buem [21] [7]. Three out of these dialects, namely Asante, Akuapem and Fante have been codified and are used in schools [22]. The language is relatively used in several domains of communication and these are as follows; media, advertisement, education, entertainment, market and few to mention [23].

Studies show that majority of Akans are found in the Eastern, Asante, Western, Central, Bono, and Volta regions of Ghana and some part of La Cote d'Ivoire [24]. As a result of the new administrative regional demarcation in 2019, the Akan language has L1 speakers in nine (9) regions of Ghana, with the highest concentration in Ashanti, Bono, Bono East, Ahafo, Eastern, Western, Western North, Oti and Central regions of Ghana [23].

## **2. RELATED LITERATURE**

Agyekum (2011) provides three key referents of Asafo in relation to three schools of thought. He notes that for the first school of thought, Asafo comes from the word 'ase fo' which means 'colleagues' who come together to accomplish a basic or common goal. The second school of thought considers Asafo to mean dancers. This is because they break the word asafo into two morphemes, that is, 'asa' which means dance and 'fo' which indicates plurality. Therefore, to this school of thought, 'asa' means 'dance' and 'fo' means people. The third school of thought perceives the meaning of asafo from the noun phrase 'osa' to mean 'war' and 'fo' is attached to the noun to denote plural, so 'Asafo' (warriors). Thus, fo does not only show plural, it is an agentive plural. According to Agyekum (2011), these three views on the etymology of Asafo were originally given by Aggrey (1978). Agyekum expounds that with the three views given for the meaning of Asafo, the most plausible meaning is the one that refers to dancers. The reason given was that people who dance together are essentially colleagues. It is easy to bring on board those who share common views to perform a particular act or action for a common course. So, they come together to wage war to defend and protect their communities. It is through such actions that come to earn the name as the people who wage war or war people [25] [26]. However, prior to Aggrey's work, Nketia (1974) presented a different view on the etymology of the term Asafo which is 'Kwasafu' meaning commoners. However, Nketia's etymology was vehemently debunked by Aggrey



(1978) who maintains that this term, *commoners*, comes from indirect rule by British when the traditional authorities acted in collaboration with English officials [29]. Aidoo (2011) also argues that Asafo companies are made up of able-bodied men and women who share a common goal to protect and defend the town from both internal and external invasions under a leader known as *safohen*. Again, Anderson (2013) sees Asafo as a quasi-military organization, which is part of the socio-political set-up of almost all Akan societies whose task is to protect and defend their communities [31] [32]. Anderson (2013) agrees with Agyekum (2011) and Aggrey (1978) who argue that the meaning of Asafo covers the three aspects which include the ‘colleagues’ (*ase fo*), ‘dancers’ (*Asawfo*) and finally ‘warriors’ (*Asafo*). Indeed, the third meaning of Asafo for all practical purposes does not apply today. The members of Asafo or Asafo companies do not actually engage in any war to protect their communities. In spite of this, they still perform limited security functions such as apprehending suspected criminals. The Asafo groups are always invariably close to the chiefs and elders, especially during annual festivals and funerals of chiefs and other important traditional leaders. In this case, they protect their chiefs as well as the elders in the communities. In view of this, I consider Asafo as a well-organized group of people led by the *safohen* who dance to entertain an audience or community members, protect and defend the chiefs and elders especially during traditional ceremonies of state. The reason for this working definition is that the researcher agrees with the ideas espoused by Aggrey (1977), Agyekum (2011) and Anderson (2013). Similarly, an Asafo company “cannot operate in any of the Akan communities without permission from any of the Asafo leaders or a chief” [25, p. 205]

### **Conceptualisation of Insults**

Conley (2010) considers insult as an expression of extremely negative opinion of a person or group in order to subvert their positive self-regard and esteem. Schwegler (2007), however, stretches the issue beyond the adversarial to hint at the performative dimensions of insult when he describes it as “competitive exchanges of usually obscene invectives between at least two parties”. Thus, the speaker consciously or unconsciously packages insults intended to offend the addressee. A speaker deploys invectives against the target through abusive expression which clearly shows hatred for an adversary. In this respect, the expression from the speaker to the addressee compels the target to retaliate with more offensive words directed at the addresser. Agyekum (2010) expounds that insults are linguistic offensive weapons used in verbal warfare to cause some psychological pain to one’s addressee. Pagliai (2009, p. 63) sees insults as an “argumentative language that entails exchanges between two persons, parties, or characters that challenge each other to a performative display of verbal skillfulness in front of an audience. 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. More often than not, many participants engage in insults just for entertainment. For those involved in the playing of draught, invectives are used to shift the attention of the opponent from the game [7]. Also, Yankah (1998) and Croffie (2016) argue that insults are a tool used in a society to regulate and restore deviant behaviour. Insults are used to train the recalcitrant children to be reformed. Yankah (1998) further stretches his argument about insults by stating that they are a means for the publication of social flaws. For example, during the celebration of Bakatue festival, certain misdeeds of opinion leaders are criticized vehemently through abusive expressions. It is hoped that these abusive expressions would bring the corrective measures after the celebration.



Apparently, the definition by Conley (2010) is quite similar to Schwegler (2007) and that of Agyekum's (2010, p. 197) description of insults as a "linguistic warfare". They all emphasise the use of insult as a communicative weapon for adversarial purposes. Again, they all see insults as malediction, slighting, ridiculing and affront. Insults can therefore disturb peaceful co-existence among the members in a group. Askew (2003) stretches the issue beyond the adversarial to hint at unidirectional dimensions of insult when he related it to an uncompetitive exchange. It is not always the case that insults are treated as an offensive device to hurt an addressee. Rather, it is can also be deployed as a jocular insult. Haugh and Bousfield (2012) delimit that jocular is a specific form of insult where the speaker casts the target into an undesirable category or as having undesirable attributes using conventionally offensive expression within a non – serious or jocular frame. This is because among the Akan, there are occasions when invectives are not seriously considered as offensive and therefore, could be used as entertainment or humour. It is generally believed that jocular abuses have its roots in the concept of ritual abuse which serve solidarity building in certain communities of practice [7]. Among Asafo, insults are treated for jocular abuse especially when they are displaying Asafo during occasion such as funeral and festivals. For example draught in Akan has an informal setting where participants have "licence" to use abusive expressions which, outside of the context, would have been considered offensive [7] [21]. Again, insults are seen as a device used to regulate and restore unacceptable behaviour in the society [36] [37]. In certain Akan festivals such as Bakatue festival, rules are disregarded, and insults can be hurled at opinion leaders. In this respect, chiefs and elders are at the receiving end of insults and the subjects are the actors. This is allowed within a stipulated time frame of about a week.

### **Humorous / Jocular Insults**

Humour is a universal phenomenon, which may be exhibited in various forms by various cultures. It encompasses an integral part of any culture because it forms part of the peoples' personality, cognitive and emotional processes [7] [21]. It is defined as the "amusing communications that produce positive emotions and cognitions in the individual, group, or organization" [38, p.59]. Dynel (2011 p. 4) delimits that "humour relevantly interwoven into conversations, both spoken and written". For a conversation to be considered as humorous or jocular, a play frame needs to be activated [23]. According to Ofori, Diabah and Agyekum (2021), this is done through signals or contextual cues such as laughter, giggles, the use of a smiling voice, change in tone of voice, among others.

### **The Structure of Asafo Company**

The Asafo Company is composed of the Tufohene who is the military advisor to the chief of the township. Next in line is the Asafobaatan the female advisor. The Supi is the commanding officer, while the divisional captain is called the Safohene (for the male) or Asafoakyere (for the female). Again, other ranks in the Asafo are the Asafokomfo (the priest), okyerema — head of the Akyeremafo (the drummers), Frankaatunyi (flag bearer), Sekanbonyi (sword maker), okyeame (spokesperson or linguist), Abrafoo (police officers) and Edumfo (executioners) [39] [26] [40]-. This has been represented in the diagram below. The Structure of Asafo is shown in the diagram below:

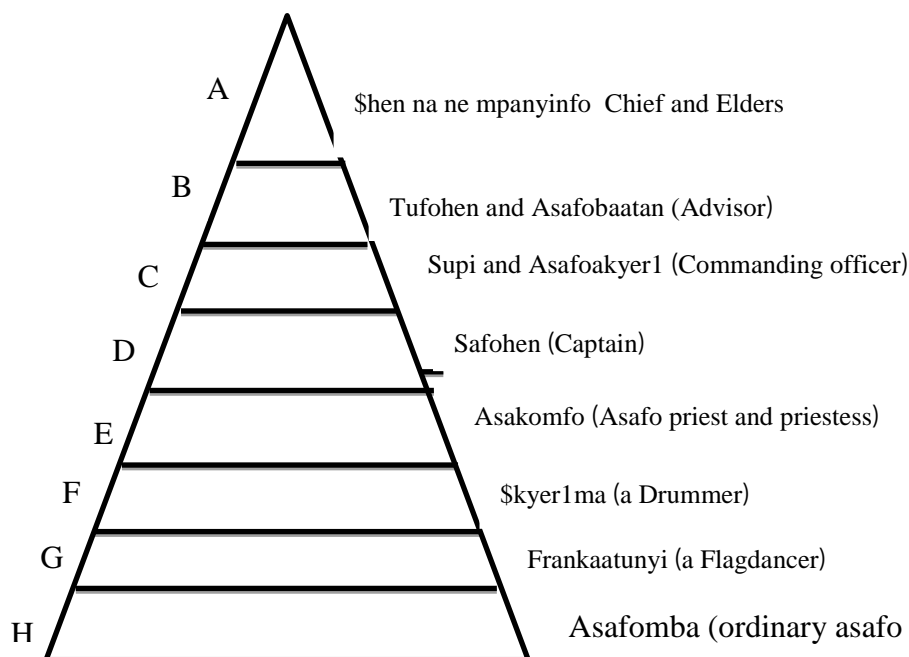


Figure 1: The Structure of Asafo Groups

### Brown and Levinson's Politeness Theory

The study is founded on Brown and Levinson's Politeness Theory. According to Kitamura (2000), Brown and Levinson's Politeness theory was originally published in 1978. Brown and Levinson (1978) introduce the notion of 'face' in order to illustrate politeness in the broader sense. Brown and Levinson (1978) further identified the concept of 'face' as a requisite quality in all social relationships. Goffman (1967) refers to face as a speaker's sense of linguistic and social identity. Goffman further iterates that to negotiate successfully in social interaction, interlocutors must identify and respect one another's face wants. When these face wants are not respected, an individual's face is threatened. Such acts are Face Threatening Acts (FTAs) and represent a threat to the individual's expectations regarding his or her self-image and the infringement on his or her self-esteem. In a bid to maintain politeness, speakers often attempt to minimize or mitigate such acts through Face Saving Acts (FSAs) and politeness strategies. Face Saving Acts are acts that lessen the possible threats to another person's face. For example, indirection, honorifics, address forms, and expressions such as please, apologies, and many others [23]. Yule (2010) suggests that face is a person's public self-image, hence, politeness is seen as an awareness and consideration of a person's face. To buttress Yule's assertion, Brown and Levinson (1978, p. 55) argue that 'politeness is concerned with how a speaker constructs an utterance and the way the hearer interprets that utterance. This is to say that all interactants have an interest in maintaining two types of 'face' during interaction which are 'positive face' and 'negative face'. Positive politeness is used to express 'positive face' in two ways: i. by indicating similarities amongst interactants; or ii. by expressing an appreciation of the interlocutors' self-image. For example, a nurse tells the guardian of a patient to wait outside [13]. Negative politeness on the other hand can also be expressed in two ways: i) by saving the interlocutor's 'face' (either 'negative' or 'positive') and by mitigating Face Threatening Acts (FTAs), such as advice-giving and disapproval; or ii) by satisfying 'negative face' by indicating respect for the addressee's right not to be imposed on. For instance, "the man has a bald head because of

hair loss” is a face threatening act. This strategy makes no attempts to respect the wants of the hearer’s face and is typically used in emergencies, when the face threat is small and when the speaker is superior to or has power over the hearer. In short, politeness is expressed not only to minimise FTAs, but also to satisfy the interactant’s face regardless of whether an FTA occurs or not.

### 3. METHODOLOGY

#### Research Area or Study Area

The below is the map of the district.

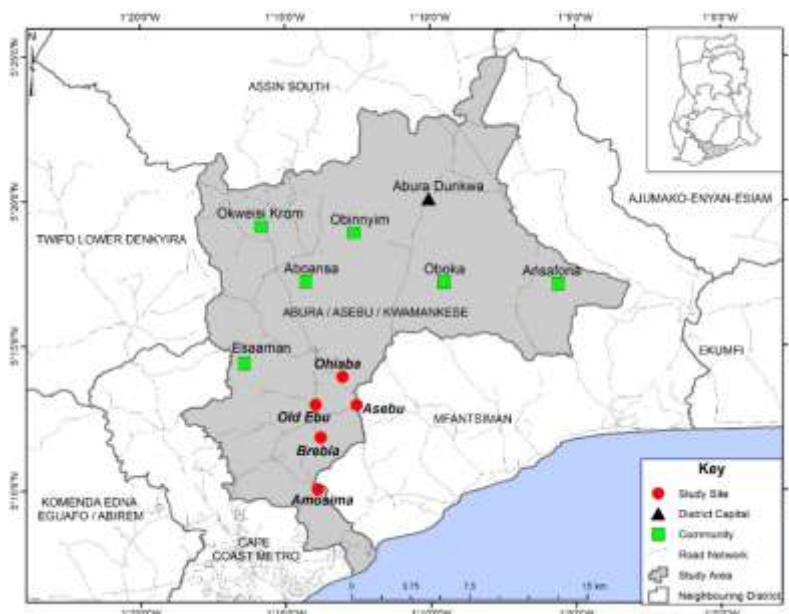


Figure 2: Map of Abura Asebu Kwamankesse District

Source: Department of Geography and Regional Planning, UCC (2021).

Traditionally, the district has three paramencies, namely the Asebu Traditional Area on the south with the paramount seat at Asebu, the Abura Traditional Area, which lies further inland towards the North and North –West with its paramount seat at Abakrampa and, the Kwamankesse Traditional Area on the North-East has its capital at Ayeldu (GSS, 2014).

The Asebu Traditional Area comprises the following towns: Amosima, Mbowura (Moree), Akonoma, Putubiw, Pataase, Asebu Ekroful, Ohiaba, Brebia, Abaasa and Sorodofu. Each community has its own chief who sees to the welfare of the people and among them is a paramount chief who is enstooled at Asebu [20]. All other sub-chiefs pay homage to the paramount chief called *okatakya Amanfi*. Asebu Amantsendo is not one community; it is the various neighboring villages which owe allegiance to the chief of Asebu. Each town or village has a formidable Asafo Company. For example, there is Dentsefo Asafo Company of Ohiaba, Dentsefo Asafo of Akonoma, Kyirem Asafo of Brebia, Ankobea Asafo of Asebu, Bentsir Asafo of Old Ebu and others.



### **Sample Size and Sampling Procedure**

Purposive sampling technique was used to select participants for the study. This is because the researcher perceived that the participants have special knowledge about the phenomenon under study. According to Sarantakos (1998: 152) this sampling technique is suitable since researchers purposely choose who, in their opinion, are thought to be relevant and knowledgeable to the research topic. A sample size of fifty (50) Asafo members were selected for the study comprising ten (10) Asafo members each from the five communities namely; Asebu, Akonoma, Brebia, Old Ebu, and Ohiaba. The following are the breakdown; five (5) traditional priests and priestesses, five (5) Asafohemfo, five (5) Asafosupi, five (5) drummers and five (5) flag hoisters which together makes 25. Then, twenty-five (25) Asafo members (Asafomba) of the Asafo groups in Asebu Amantsendo were also selected- Five from Dantsefo Asafo (Ohiaba), five from Kyirem Asafo (Brebia), Five from Nkum Asafo (Asebu), five from Dantsefo (Old Ebu), and five from Kyirem (Amosima). Considering the nature of the study and data required, interviews and observations were used for the purpose of triangulation. Leedy and Ormrod (2005) explain triangulation as the state of richness and complexity of human behaviour and compare multiple sources of data by studying it from more than one standpoint. It involves not only the selection or designing of the instruments, but also the conditions under which the instruments were administered. The language of communication was in Fante as well as in English. The researcher arranged meetings with the respondents at different times. The interview sessions were recorded with a smart phone and some of the phrases were written in the form of notes. Thus, to make the data gathering simple and possible for the research; interviews, observations, transcribing of video and audio files into text and taking of photograph were used.

### **Types of Data Used**

The researcher used both primary data and secondary sources. Primary data is the first-hand information that was obtained from a series of interviews conducted and the observations made by the researcher. Semi- structured interviews were conducted for selected Asafo opinion leaders and members to get the background information about the songs, greetings and semiotic insults of Asafo. The interviews gave the participants the free-will and space to express themselves, thereby giving their views and opinions about activities and artifacts used in Asafo groups. Their responses were recorded with a camera and mobile phone. The camera was used for the photographs and the mobile phone for recording audio/verbal intercommunication with the respondents (with the permission of the participants). Overall, a total of twenty-five (25) interviews were recorded.

## **4. RESULT AND DISCUSSION**

This presents the analysis of the data collected. The recurring patterns that were identified were thematized. The analysis of the data was done guided by the Politeness theory. Patterns that consistently emerged from the data have been put into themes, subthemes and interpreted. The present section talks about instances where insults are not considered as Face Threatening Acts (FTAs) among the Asafo groups. The study actually focuses on the situations where members of Asafo do accept the invectives as Non-Face Threatening Acts (NFTAs) and treated as jocular insults.





### **Specific or Special Occasions**

One of the instances where Asafo does not consider insults as face threatening act is during their engagements in specific or special occasions. Asafo group members are not permitted to meet except on the command of a leader for specific reasons and for specific occasions. The occasions which are considered to be special for which Asafo members are allowed to gather for their activities include, festivals, installation of chiefs, destoolment of a chief, death of a chief, death of an Asafo member. Again, when there is an emergency situation which would need the display of the members. This assertion is actually confirmed by Aggrey (1977), Acquah (2002) and Anderson (2013) that Asafo could not do anything or meet on their own will except under the command of a leader and on special occasions. During festivals, the chiefs and the elders of Asebu Amantsendo task all Asafo groups to display. Here, all forms of insults are allowed. Every member in the Asafo groups welcomes any sort of insults because the occasion demands that. In an interview with Supi Kwame Bentsir of Boroko Asafo, conducted on 15<sup>th</sup> February, 2020, he disclosed and cited example that, on the 3<sup>rd</sup> day of December, 2019 Kae Arko festival of the Asebu-Amantsendo, the Dentsefo Asafo group coincidentally met the Brebia Asafo group at the durbar ground at Amantsendo. In the example below, the Supi Bentsir gave example that the former (Dentsefo group) threw the first insult illustrated in excerpt 1 below.

Dentsefo Asafo: “sɛ eyɛ banyin a, pinkyɛn dɔm” (“if you are a man come on board)  
abowa nye wo a, pikyɛn dɔm!, (you are an animal come on board!)  
mbrɛana wo bo efuw? (You are now expressing your anger?)”

The latter then insulted back as indicated in excerpt 2 below. Brebia Asafo:  
abasin fa w’i tur, an amputatee pick your gun!  
sɛ eyɛ banyin a? ‘if you are a man’ obaa nye wo” meaning “You are a woman.”

Among the Akans, it is an insult to say to a man or a particular group that ‘obaa nye wo’ you are a woman. This has different interpretations which include, cowardice, impotence [8]. So, by using such abusive expressions on the Asafo group, it teases and demeans them and their integrity becomes questionable. When a person or a group is labeled as ‘woman’ in Akan context, it is a face threatening act because the image of the members is lowered. Interestingly, none of the members considered these exchanges as insults and therefore they did not take any offence. In all these, the addressees do not take offence because they have consented to be insulted and entertained themselves with humorous or jocular insults [9] [23]. This shows that the participants resorted to teasing in the form of jocular mockery and jocular abuse. This is confirmed by Agovi (1987, 1995), that during a similar occasion like the Apoo festivals, people are permitted to insult themselves in any manner they want without any of them getting offended. Also, Awoonor (1975) reveals that insults are entertained at a particular period of time as an institutionalized type of insults. This confirms the reason why insults are permitted in certain circumstance. Again, the installation, destoolment and death of a chief are occasions equally considered as special by the Asafo groups. Even though the installation of chiefs predominantly takes place during festivals, it is considered to be a completely separate occasion. The belief is that, during festivals, the gods naturally come around to bless their people and give them directions into the future. On the account of this, a new chief, when the need be, is installed in the “presence” of his subjects.



In an interview, the leader of the Asafo in consultation with the Elders of the land tasks the Asafo members to display. Supi Yamoah of Old Ebu Asafo indicated that, “Asafo atsekuw no nyinara wɔma hɔn edwuma ma wodzi no wɔ ɔhen fofor bi ne mpuei bi ase. Odu dem aber no, asafomba dzi ayeyaw dze kyere hɔn ngyentom. Wɔma ɔhen no akɔaba na wɔsere nkwa ma ne wɔ n’ ahendzi akwantu no mu. Asafo tum yeyaw ɔhen no a aber worupue nana wɔ gua mu”. To wit “asafo groups are tasked to display when a new chief is being enstooled. During such occasion, members trade in insults to indicate acceptance, welcome and well wish of the chief in the new journey that lies ahead of him. Sometimes, the insults are even directed at the chief when he is being introduced to the Asafo members”. In excerpt 3 below, the Supi cited an instance where a newly installed chief greeted the Asafo and this was put in a dialogue:

ɔhen fofor : Asafo ɔko eyi hɔn, (Asafo war has delivered them)

Kyirem Asafo: yeyi hɔn (we have delivered them)

ɔhen fofor: ɔye wo hen? (where does it happen?)

Kyirem Asafo: ɔye wo na ne twemu (it happens on your mother’s vagina)

Neither the chief nor the Asafo members got offended at this, and in fact, they even laughed it off, reiterated Supi Yamoah. Clearly, this is a lineage abuse because the statement extended to the immediate members of the lineage. However, the new chief was not resented because Asafo uses jocular insults just to tease each other and also deployed it as their motivation for amusement. Even though insults pose negative face threats, the new chief did deem it as jocular abuse and did not frown upon it [7] [21].

In another interview, Supi Kwegya cited an instance of the death of a chief. During the burial service, supi exemplified that there was a man who came to greet the Old Ebu Asafo Company, which, at the time, had pitched camp at the burial ground and were busily displaying. Excerpt 4 below shows what transpired after the man had greeted the group

Nkum Asafo member: “ɔman bi botum hɔn”, (can a group fight you?)

Dentsefo Asafo: “oho” (No)

Nkum Asafo member “ɔye wo hen?” (where does it happen?)

Dentsefo Asafo ɔye wo saadwe oo” (You are impotent or sterile).

On any normal day, the term “barren or sterile” is considered a very sensitive insult which is not readily countenanced by anyone in the Akan society but because it was used during an Asafo display, the Nkum Asafo member considered this as a jocular insult and did not take offence. The above instances confirm that insults which are traded during special or specific occasions insults are not considered as face threatening acts but jocular (Ofori, 2019). Notwithstanding, Asafo members are not always invariably displaying because there is an adage in Akan that says ‘se wɔbɔ Asafo a, wɔkɔ fie’ literally, ‘when we play Asafo, we close for our various homes’. When Asafo members are not in groups, their members greet each other in appropriate forms. Safohen Kodwo Krah disclosed that ‘a member of Asafo was summoned at Tufohen’s palace for intentionally greeting Supi Kofi Yemoa. Members were not in their various Asafo groups displaying. Supi Kofi Yemoa was demanding from the member to convince him that (for ethical reasons the member’s name is withheld) why that member should not be taken to court. This is because that member wanted a leeway to insult him. This actually shows that Asafo also observes the politeness strategies such as apologetic device, please and few to mention when they are not in groups [48].



### **Competitive Games of Insult**

Another instance where insults are used but not considered to be face threatening is when competitive games are held among the members. One of such competitive games is the *abrɔ̃mɛ* game. This game is normally played between two or more people who meet to verbally exchange insults. However, when it is played among the Asafo members, the dynamics are a bit different. Instead of its characteristic verbal exchange, the Asafo rather uses drum language/ text to play the *abrɔ̃mɛ*. In an interview with Borɔ̃ko Asafo group, opanyin Kwame Dadzie revealed that the game has the general rule of the Akan *abrɔ̃mɛ*.

In this game, the general rule is that, the *akyerɛma* (drummers) poses questions to one another for the correct answers. If the addressee is able to answer the riddle correctly, he or she then poses riddle to the opponent and this ensures continuity of the game. This is done through the drum language. When a member gets a riddle wrongly, he is then insulted. The competition in the game becomes tensed when the opponent is not able to cope with the questions. For instance, in an interview with Ohiaba Asafo, one drummer *akyerɛma* Kwame Dadzie demonstrated in Excerpt 5.

Excerpt 5.

*akyerɛma* 1 (*asɛmbisa*) question: *akyerɛma* *ɔdomankoma akyerɛma* !

*ebɛn abowa na ne kɔtse si n'afon ho ?* (which animal has its penis on its cheek?)

*akyerɛma* 2 (*nyiano*) answer: *Abowa* *ɔwɔ* (that animal is snake)

*akyerɛma* 1: you are a child. The correct answer is "*nwɔba*" (snail)

In the excerpt above, an interaction is seen between two Asafo members, *akyerɛma* 1 and *akyerɛma* 2. They are playing the *abrɔ̃mɛ* game. While *akyerɛma* 1 poses a question to *akyerɛma* 2 and expected "*nwɔba*" as response, *akyerɛma* 2 wrongly responded "*ɔwɔ*". As a result, the former insulted the latter by calling him a "child" which implies that *akyerɛma* 2 is immatured, inexperienced and has low intelligence. This means that the drummer does not fit to be the *akyerɛma* for that particular Asafo group. This is an utterance which threatens the face of the target because the speaker does not appreciate the hearer's desire. However, neither party took offence in this exchange. The issue, as elaborated above, is that, during competitive games, insults are not treated as offensive but as a jocular. Indeed, other respondents from Asebu Nkum Asafo willingly disclosed that at times insults become a competitive game for various Asafo groups. Any time Asafo members engage in their activities, all sort of insults are welcome and accepted wholeheartedly. In fact, the activities even become dull when insults are not manifested. When the participants are consented to be insulted, insults are not considered as face threatening acts because members do not feel the pain that comes with the insults. This is not in line with the argument of Conley (2010) that insult is an expression of negative opinion of a person or group in order to subvert the positive self-regard and esteem. Notwithstanding, Asafo members do not allow or accept insults when they are not engaged in any display. This means that members do accept insults only when they are in session. In an interview with Dentsefo Asafo of Ohiaba, Opanyin Kodwo Oboafɔ disclosed,



Excerpt 6

“nyimpa bi botum dze ne nyenko berebo a ɔnye no wɔ Asafo kuw kormu akɔ ahemfie anaa de ɔasaman no de no nyenko no ahyehye no ahorba wɔ ber a wɔronngor Asafo anaa ber a Asafo wonnhya mu ma onyia no abɛkyere no ayeyaw no ase”,

To wit, “someone could summon his or her close friend who belong to the same Asafo company to the council of elders for arbitration for insulting while they are not engaged in any Asafo activities”. This then means that insults are permitted only when all Asafo members are gathered under an identifiable accepted ethnographic context. Here, politeness theory states that insult violates the principles of the politeness theory, that is, it is considered as face threatening acts [11] [15], but in the Asafo context, insults are no longer seen as such. Scholars have argued that insults are linguistic welfare and treated purely as adversarial tools for the addressees to retaliate with more offence words to the addressers [8] [33]. But, when Asafo members are displaying they do not adhere to the strategies which are used to maintain politeness through face saving acts. Any time members of Asafo meet, they intentionally overlook these strategies. One of the participants, opanyin Kodwo Ewusi indicated that ‘se wo kotse ewu, a mmbɔ Asafo osiandɛ Asafo pɛ hɔn dodow ntsi sadweenyi biara bekyia Asafomba a, wɔdze ne sadwee no bɛyɛ no ne nkyia ngyedo a wɔnnto sebew.’ This means, “if you have problem with your penis and you cannot give birth, you should not join Asafo because anytime such a person (member) appears to greet Asafo members, the members would use the impotency of that member as a response without using any of the strategies of politeness.

**Reasons Insults in Asafo are not ‘offensive’**

The researchers considered it important, for purposes of putting this study into perspective, to investigate the reasons for which Asafo members are permitted to use insults as part of their activities [8] [50]. It, indeed, seems absurd for people to brutally insult themselves, and yet still see themselves as friends. Such a phenomenon is able to, and meritably so, engage the curiosity of any researcher. And, this current study is not an exception. In the data gathering process, the respondents were asked about the reasons insults are allowed as part of their display. Their responses were then grouped into themes which have been analysed and discussed in the sub-sections below.

**Insult as a Humorous/Jocular Tool**

According to the Asafo companies, they use singing, drumming and dancing as medium of entertainment. Their motivation for insulting one another is just for jocular mockery and abuse. Anytime they meet, it is predictable that, at least, two of such activities would take place. In most occasions, insults are used to compose the songs they sing and dance to. Sometimes too, their style of dancing, which is a crucial source of amusement to them, sends messages of insults, collectively called “ekutsia” (innuendo) to other members. Naturally, one would have expected that these signals of insults would have been offensive. However, when it comes to Asafo groups, these insults rather make them excited and they laugh over them. It is in such light that Pagliai (2009) claims that it is not always the case that insults are treated as offensive to the addressee’s image.



In an interview conducted, Safohen Kwame Essa, emphatically made reference to one particular insult-ridden greeting which Asafo used during occasions. Excerpts of the greetings have been captured below,

Excerpt 7

Wo tsir de adwe (your head is like palm-kernel)

Amokuwa ne ba (A child of squirrel)

wo tsir de kube (2x) (your head is like coconut, 2x)

From the excerpt above, it is obvious that the greeting is loaded with insults. These insults transcend across the various forms. For example, part of the body insult could be seen (wo tsir de adwe) and lineage insult is equally not left out (you are a child of squirrel). Interestingly, this is a greeting that all the members of the group were exchanged with great fun. Even though Agyekum (2010), Conley (2010) and Schwegler (2007) noted with emphasis that the use of insult is a communicative weapon for adversarial purposes, this study reveals that the Asafo members use insults for amusement and entertainment. Insults are not taken as an offence in the context of Asafo because there is a lift of the social ban on insults [7] [42]. Again, in an interview with New Ebu Asafo on why insults are used for entertainment, Supi Kofi Nkodwo willingly alluded that ‘Asafo ayeyaw no boa ma Asafomba hu hõnho de wõye nyimpakor ntsi se eka Asafoba kor a na muhu de aka Asafomba nyinara’, to wit, ‘Asafo insults unify the members for their solidarity as one people.’ Insults in this respect are not considered as offensive as they would have been under normal circumstances. Rather, insults are considered as humorus, and this functions as a tool of social management, facilitating in-group interaction and strengthening in-group bonding [7] [8].

**Insults as Corrective Measures**

Asafo members use insults as a corrective measure to those members who misbehave in the community. Croffie (2016) and Yankah (1998) point out that insults are used to regulate and restore unacceptable conduct in the society. When Asafo members recognise that some of the members are misconducting themselves, the members could utilize any device in the form of singing and drumming as an insinuation to instill discipline in them. In an interview with a drummer (õkyerema) of Kyerem Asafo, he disclosed that “when Asafo members see that a member of the group is not hardworking but lazy, they use some of the drum text or songs to communicate to them to desist from such negative behaviour”. The excerpt below is taken from a drum text which he cited as an example of an insult for corrective measure.

Excerpt 8

õye a, dõw na w’enyim aba nyam’ (‘be hardworking so you will have honour’)

kwadwefo na odzidzi ne na ne gyaadze (It is lazy people who eat from their mother’s kitchen)

õye a, dõw na w’enyim aba nyam’ (‘be hardworking so you’ll have honour’)

kwadwefo na odzidzi ne na ne gyaadze (It is the lazy people eat from their moth’s kitchen)

õye a, dõw na w’enyim aba nyam’ (‘be hardworking so you will have honour’)

Source: õkyerema Kofi Bosomtwe of Old Ebu Asafo Date: 12<sup>th</sup> November 2019.

The members of the society welcome this drum language wholeheartedly though it contains insinuations. It is not only drum language that is used to carry insult as corrective measure. Songs are equally used to serve the same purpose. For example, in an interview with Supi



Begyina, of the New Ebu Asafo group, he stated clearly that there are specific songs which are sung to rebuke, reprimand, correct and reform misbehaving group members. The excerpt below is a song which was used for a member, who was truant and would not attend meetings regularly,

Excerpt 9

Ndeda ammba nde aba (2times) (yesterday you did not come today you have come)

Asafo de nnyim nyansa, (Asafo says you are not wise)

Asafo de egyim (Asafo says you are stupid)

Source: Safohen Kodwo Tsetse of Boroko Asafo Date: 11<sup>th</sup> December, 2019.

In the excerpt above, the song, which all members, sometimes including the addressee himself, dance to, is loaded with insults. These insults are deemed necessary because a member is acting wayward and has to be whipped back into the accepted norm.

### **Insults as a Trademark**

Insult, which many consider offensive in society, is, interestingly, seen as an inherent feature or a trademark for the Asafo groups. In other words, a meeting or display of Asafo without insult is almost considered a no meeting. Metaphorically, an Asafo without insult is like a teacher without teaching notes. Asafo and its insults are so inseparable that, even non-members would doubt the originality of an Asafo group if they (Asafo) meet without trading in insult. The excerpt below is a comment from a respondent who insists that insult is taken as a trademark among Asafo.

Excerpt 10

“Ei ɔye den na Asafomba tum hyia a, wɔnnhyehye hɔn ho ahorba? Mo nua ahorbahyehye wɔ Asafo mu papa. Asafomba dze mpen dodow a wɔhyehye hɔn ho ahorba no na wonya ahɔɔzen gor Asafo no yie. Mowɔ enyisom mpo de bɔhwɛadzefo hwehwe ahorba fi Asafomba nkyɛn ama woetum eenya aserewsem bi”.

To wit “Ei, how can Asafo meet to display without insult (laughs?). My brother, for us,

In Asafo insult is used. The more we insult, the more we get energy to display.

to perform longer and better. In fact, even the on-lookers expect us to trade in insult so that they could have a good laugh at some of the ‘funny words’ we use”.

(Opanyin Yaw Apeatse, Brebia Asafo Group, February, 15, 2020)

## **5. CONCLUSION**

In this study, the researchers have analysed and discussed the research data by responding to the research questions that serve as the basis for the research work. The discussion focused on instances where Asafo insults do not constitute a face threatening act. The discussion revealed that some of the instances where Asafo consider insults as non-face threatening acts are when they engage in special occasions like festivals, installation of chiefs, destoolment of the both paramount and sub chiefs, death of a chief and death of an Asafo member, and the members participating in the game of insults as a competition.



Finally, the discussion has revealed that insults among Asafo members are just a form of entertainment, a corrective measure and serves the group's trademark hence, insults are permitted to be used as part of the Asafo activities and so it considered non-abusive among Asafo members.

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Nil

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