

**FACE-SAVING SPEECH ACTS IN NDONI DISCOURSE: THE ÓNÍTÈ AND ÀKÀSHÌ
TABOOS**

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines Ndoni taboos concerning the monitor lizard (Ónítè) and cocoyam (àkàshì) as structured communicative practices within the community of Rivers State, Nigeria. Using the ethnography of communication framework, the study analyzes how ritualized speech, metaphorical expressions, and culturally sanctioned forms of silence and avoidance function as discourse resources. Expressions such as Nígḃō nígḃō nígḃō nígḃō (addressed to the monitor lizard) and cocoyam-based blessings reveal how Ndoni speakers encode moral instruction, social norms, and communal values within language. These taboos operate as face-saving speech acts, enabling indirect guidance, affirmation, and social regulation without confrontation. The findings demonstrate that Ndoni taboos are not merely prohibitions but performative linguistic tools that maintain cultural cohesion, transmit shared knowledge, and sustain ethical interaction within the community.

KEYWORDS: Ndoni; totemic taboos; discourse pragmatics; face-saving; ethnography of communication; symbolic language.

INTRODUCTION

The concept of *tabu* originates with the Tonga of Polynesia, where objects, persons, or places associated with sacredness could not be used or named by ordinary people, and violations invited supernatural sanctions (Mengxun, 2020, p. 89). Importantly, the original meaning of *tabu* was ‘sacred’ rather than ‘forbidden’ in the modern sense. This semantic nuance is crucial for understanding Ndoni classifications of sacred animals and plants, where restriction is inseparable from reverence, and taboo operates as a moral and social regulator.

Across many African societies, communication is conceived not merely as the exchange of information but as a morally and socially charged act linking the living, ancestors, and the broader community (Mbiti, 1970). In these contexts, speech, silence, gesture, and ritual function as semiotic resources that maintain social order and transmit ethical knowledge. The Ndoni people of Rivers State, Nigeria, exemplify such a worldview. Among them, totems and taboos are culturally encoded expressions of moral and social relationships rather than arbitrary prohibitions.

Two taboos are particularly salient in Ndoni life: the sacred status of the monitor lizard (Ónítè) and the dietary prohibition on cocoyam (àkàshì). The monitor lizard is regarded as an ancestral ally and is never harmed, while cocoyam, despite its agricultural prominence in southern Nigeria, is culturally proscribed and carries rich symbolic meaning. Both taboos manifest in

ritualized speech, moral conduct, and social behavior, forming structured communicative systems that regulate interaction, mediate respect, and maintain social harmony.

This study approaches these taboos as communicative events (Hymes, 1974), highlighting how language, ritualized speech, and symbolic action function as instruments of social regulation and face-saving. Expressions such as *Nígbō nígbō nígbō nígbò*, addressed to the monitor lizard, or cocoyam-based metaphorical blessings, exemplify pragmatic strategies through which Ndoni speakers manage social expectations, maintain moral propriety, and navigate the potential tension between cultural prohibition and daily interaction.

Ndoni is spoken primarily in the Ogba/Egbema/Ndoni Local Government Area of Rivers State (Kari, 2019). Linguistically, it belongs to the Igbo-related Ukwuani–Aboh–Ndoni cluster within the Igboid group of the Benue–Congo branch (Williamson & Blench, 2000; Kari, 2019), and while mutually intelligible with Ukwuani and Aboh, it preserves a distinct identity. Social life is structured around shared ideologies, moral frameworks, ritualized linguistic practices, and collective responsibility. Within this context, culturally significant elements such as *ónítè* and *àkàshì* carry strong communicative weight, encoding ethical norms, reinforcing communal cohesion, and signaling social identity.

The paper is organized as follows. Section 2 presents the theoretical background, covering ethnography of communication, linguistic ethnography, African communication systems, and discourse pragmatics. Section 3 outlines the ethnographic methodology, incorporating participant observation, oral tradition collection, and ritual discourse analysis. Section 4 examines Ndoni taboos, ritualized speech, and symbolic practices, highlighting their social and moral functions. Section 5 concludes by reflecting on how these practices operate as face-saving communicative acts that transmit respect, identity, and ethical norms.

Theoretical Background

Communication is fundamentally shaped by its sociocultural context. As Hymes (1974) observes, “the speaking of a language is always a social act” (p. 50). His SPEAKING model – comprising Setting, Participants, Ends, Act sequence, Key, Instrumentalities, Norms, and Genre – provides a framework for examining how speech events are socially and culturally embedded. This framework guides the present study in exploring how language, ritualized talk, and embodied practices are coordinated within moral and social frameworks, regulating behavior, reinforcing norms, and maintaining communal harmony.

Linguistic ethnography (Duranti, 1997; Creese, 2008) complements this perspective by linking linguistic analysis with ethnographic inquiry, revealing how social values, moral expectations, and cultural ideologies are enacted through language. Drawing on Austin’s (1962) theory of speech acts, this approach emphasizes the performative nature of language: utterances do not merely convey information, but actively shape social relations, structure interaction, and reinforce communal norms. Within this framework, the analysis examines how culturally significant speech acts operate performatively to enact social rules, signal respect, and guide behavior in Ndoni discourse.

Totems and taboos in African societies provide a culturally sanctioned system of social regulation. Iordaaah (2023, p. 125) describes this as the “interest and pursuit of the common good

... characteristic of traditional African ethics,” while Mengxun (2020, p. 88) observes that taboos “standardize people’s speech behaviour and social communication.” These perspectives highlight that taboos are both morally and linguistically productive: they structure interaction, shape communicative behavior, and reinforce shared cultural knowledge. In the present study, this framework is applied to explore how taboo-related practices govern conduct and regulate speech within Ndoni communities.

Discourse-pragmatic theory further informs this analysis by accounting for the strategic and relational dimensions of language use (Goffman, 1967; Brown & Levinson, 1987). Speakers manage relationships, negotiate obligations, and maintain face through culturally sanctioned speech practices. This study examines how ritualized and taboo-related utterances function as strategic instruments for social regulation, moral instruction, and identity marking, highlighting the interplay between performativity, pragmatics, and cultural norms.

By integrating these theoretical perspectives, the study frames Ndoni communicative practices as socially embedded, performative, and morally guided. The analysis that follows applies these frameworks to understand how language, ritual, and taboo intersect to structure interaction, transmit cultural knowledge, and sustain communal cohesion.

METHODOLOGY

This study employed a linguistic ethnography approach, combining ethnographic fieldwork with discourse analysis to investigate Ndoni taboos as communicative practices. Data collection took place in April 2024 and February 2025 and involved two key Ndoni informants from the Umu-Onyema clan: a 60-year-old male and a 78-year-old female, both bilingual in Ndoni and English.

The primary researcher, a native Ndoni speaker, conducted interviews, participant observation, and documentation of spontaneous speech and ritualized utterances, including phatic interactions, exclamations, and ritual expressions associated with the monitor lizard (*Ónítè*) and cocoyam (*àkàshì*) taboos.

Data analysis employed Hymes’ SPEAKING model (Setting, Participants, Ends, Act sequence, Key, Instrumentalities, Norms, Genre) to examine the context, tone, performativity, and face-sensitive functions of speech acts. Historical oral narratives, myths, and proverbs were integrated to interpret the symbolic meanings and social functions of the taboos, revealing how language enacts moral norms, maintains social hierarchies, and fosters communal identity.

This methodology foregrounds the interplay of language, ritual, and social morality, emphasizing how speech acts, silence, and symbolic behaviors operate as mechanisms for moral regulation, face-saving, and communal cohesion within Ndoni society.

The analysis is framed within discourse pragmatics, particularly face management and speech act theory. In this perspective, Ndoni taboo expressions relating to the monitor lizard (*ónítè*) and cocoyam (*àkàshì*) function as face-saving communicative strategies that regulate interaction between individuals, community members, and spiritually significant entities.

Utterances are primarily understood as ritualized discourse acts used to negotiate social harmony, express reverence, and avoid potentially offensive or dangerous speech.

This perspective aligns with politeness theory developed by Penelope Brown and Stephen Levinson, which conceptualizes communication as a process of managing interpersonal “face,” that is, the socially recognized self-image individuals seek to maintain in interaction.

The Ndoni People and Their Cultural Context

The Ndoni community, located in Rivers State, Nigeria, shares cultural affiliations with Ukwuani (Obodugwa) and the Agaidoko clan of Idah in Igala, while maintaining distinct social, ritual, and religious practices. The Ímónítè River, a tributary of the Niger that connects to the Orashi River during the rainy season, has historically shaped settlement patterns and livelihoods. Ndoni people are primarily fishermen, farmers, and traders, and their social life is organized around kinship, ancestral traditions, and ritual observances.

Language plays a central role in expressing respect, maintaining social order, and communicating shared beliefs. Specific animals, plants, and objects are imbued with ritual significance, and interactions involving them are often accompanied by conventionalized forms of speech. In particular, expressions associated with taboos—such as the monitor lizard (*Ónitè*) and cocoyam (*àkàshì*)—function as culturally recognized communicative strategies, allowing speakers to express caution, explanation, assertion, and social alignment. Drawing on Mengxun (2020), Ndoni practices exemplify how linguistic taboos encode moral and social expectations within discourse. Two prominent types emerge: totemic taboos, exemplified by the monitor lizard, and dietary taboos, exemplified by cocoyam.

The Monitor Lizard (*Ónitè*) Taboo

Ndoni oral traditions recount that the monitor lizard led the early settlers during migration to the present location. It is claimed that migrants who were looking for a place to settle, sought the guidance of ancestors and the monitor lizard as a pathfinder until it stop at the present location of Ndoni, indicating it was safe to settle there. It also protected ancestors during migration or conflict, producing distinct signals that guided or warned the community. These narratives underpin the animal’s sacred status and justify prohibitions against harming or consuming it. In discourse terms, such accounts function as explanatory narratives, transmitting cultural knowledge and legitimizing contemporary practices. Elders use these stories to link past events to present behavior, ensuring continuity of cultural norms across generations.

When a monitor lizard enters domestic space, ritualized speech is employed to address it without harm. The conventionalized expression:

Nìgbō nìgbō nìgbō nìgbò “See Igbo!”

performs multiple functions: it directs the animal to leave, signals adherence to cultural norms, and marks the speaker’s alignment with Ndoni practice. The meaning derives from shared cultural knowledge, illustrating the community’s reliance on indirect and circumstantial speech to enact respect while avoiding confrontation.

Ethnographic observations show that encounters with monitor lizards outside Ndoni territory elicit strong reactions among community members. For example, in a Nigerian market where live, fresh, and dried monitor lizards are sold, the immediate response of an adult male Ndoni speaker was one of revulsion and moral discomfort; although aware that others might consume the animals, the author's reaction reflected deeply internalized cultural norms. Another Ndoni speaker in the market expressed exasperation, exclaiming:

"How can someone descend so low as to eat a lizard?"

This encounter demonstrates how the monitor lizard taboo is enacted both cognitively and socially: it elicits embodied responses, generates moral judgment, and produces verbal censure that reinforces communal norms. Even outside local Ndoni spaces, the taboo shapes perception, emotion, and speech, showing how cultural prohibitions are internalized and projected in everyday interactions.

In situations where a lizard is inadvertently killed, ritualized apologies operate as communicative repair:

Óbúnà mú gbùnṓ. Ákám ádìní ifé mèyíṓ. Ànwàwóm ikém ígbábùsáíṓ. Ákám dì óchá ṓ
Literal translation: "Oh I am not the one who killed you. Oh My hand is not in what is happening to you. Oh I have tried my best. Oh My hands are clean."
Communicative translation: "I did not harm you. I rather tried my best to help you. Let peace remain between us."

These utterances acknowledge the violation, distance the speaker from responsibility, and restore alignment with communal norms. Together, ritualized speech forms, moral exclamations, and communicative repair illustrate that the monitor lizard taboo functions as both performative and regulatory discourse: it directs action, enforces respect, maintains social and spiritual order, and manages affective responses and communal identity.

The ritualized interaction can also be analyzed through Hymes' SPEAKING framework, highlighting its social and moral structure, as in Table 1:

Table 1: SPEAKING Structure of the Monitor Lizard Ritual Apology

Component	Description
Setting	Occurs when a monitor lizard is found captured or dead, typically outside Ndoni territory (such as in markets, neighboring villages, or along roadsides) where Ndoni individuals are unable to physically restore its dignity through purchase, release, or proper burial rites.
Participants	Ndoni community member (speaker), monitor lizard (nonhuman participant), occasional observers or elders.
Ends	Restore moral, social, and cosmological balance; express communal respect; reinforce ecological and cultural norms.
Act Sequence	Discovery of the lizard → decision to intervene → verbal ritual (if purchase is impossible) → symbolic gestures or offerings → closure with acknowledgment of peace.
Key	Solemn, respectful, remorseful, and ritualized; communicates ethical seriousness and moral accountability.
Instrumentalities	Ndoni language; ritualized verbal apology as the sole means of reestablishing moral and cosmological balance.
Norms	Always respect sacred animals; never cause harm intentionally; perform apology sincerely; maintain ritual propriety.
Genre	Ritualized speech act / performative apology / communicative repair / ethical redress.

Through this structured ritual interaction, the monitor lizard taboo is enacted, reaffirming communal norms, transmitting moral knowledge, and maintaining spiritual and social equilibrium. The combination of narrative, ritualized speech, and ethical judgment illustrates how language operates as a central medium for preserving cultural values within Ndoni society.

The Cocoyam (*àkàshì*) Taboo

Unlike surrounding communities, Ndoni people abstain entirely from cocoyam, neither planting, touching, nor consuming it. Explanations for the prohibition vary, often linked to ancestral precedent or associations with sacred beings. In discourse, these prohibitions are reinforced through declarative statements, cautionary remarks, and brief narrative explanations. Such practices transmit cultural knowledge, reinforce norms, and ensure intergenerational continuity.

Ethnographic observation illustrates how deeply ingrained this taboo is. During fieldwork, the second author, a non-Ndoni, was repeatedly rebuked by a Ndoni acquaintance for buying, cultivating, or speaking favorably about cocoyam. The acquaintance would exclaim:

"Come and see this one o. He even buys cocoyam! If you were in my house, I would never use the pot you use to cook that thing. Please, do not bring it close to me!"

Communicative Translation: "Look at this person! He even buys cocoyam! If you were in my house, I wouldn't use the pot you cooked that with. Please, don't bring it near me!"

This encounter highlights several key aspects of Ndoni taboo discourse. First, it demonstrates how social sanction is enacted through verbal rebuke and public censure, reinforcing communal norms and signaling disapproval. Second, it shows that even indirect threats or expressions of avoidance carry strong moral and social weight, shaping behavior through discourse rather than coercion. Third, it illustrates how non-Ndoni participants in everyday interactions are socialized into the cultural expectations surrounding taboo objects, emphasizing the performative and regulatory role of language in Ndoni society.

Despite its material prohibition, cocoyam remains linguistically productive. The term frequently appears metaphorically in blessings and advisory discourse, emphasizing symbolic qualities such as firmness, stability, and reliability. For instance, elders may bless children with expressions likening them to pounded cocoyam:

Úmùí nàbùlú útàlà àkàshì nà àkái

Literal Translation: Your children will be pounded cocoyam in your hand

Semantic Translation: 'Your children will endure like pounded cocoyam that stays firm in one's hands.'

Communicative translation: "May your children remain strong and dependable."

Here, cocoyam functions as a figurative reference point, conveying moral or social instruction while respecting the material prohibition. Such usage demonstrates the distinction between material avoidance and linguistic availability, showing how culturally restricted objects can continue to function rhetorically within socially sanctioned discourse.

The ritualized use of cocoyam imagery in blessings can be analyzed systematically through Hymes' SPEAKING framework, which highlights the social and moral structuring of such interactions. Table 2 instantiates a structure during a typical blessing:

Table 2: SPEAKING Structure of the Cocoyam Blessing Ritual

Component	Description
Setting	Family gatherings, festivals
Participants	Elder and family
Ends	To affirm fertility and continuity
Act sequence	Invocation → metaphor → affirmation
Key	Sacred, solemn
Instrumentalities	Ndoni language, gesture, silence
Norms	Respect for sacred restriction
Genre	Blessing speech / ritual poetry

Through this structured interaction, the cocoyam taboo is continuously enacted and reproduced. Elders’ blessings convey moral authority, reinforce communal values, and ensure that culturally sanctioned knowledge is transmitted across generations. The integration of metaphor and ritualized speech demonstrates that while cocoyam is materially prohibited, it remains a potent linguistic and symbolic resource within Ndoni discourse.

Taboos as Communicative Systems

Ndoni taboo expressions exemplify indirect and circumstantial speech acts that manage human and spiritual face, enforce social norms, and communicate moral guidance. Drawing on Austin (1962) and Searle, such expressions are performative: utterances do not simply describe but enact respect, caution, or authority. Brown and Levinson’s (1987) framework highlights how taboo speech manages potential face-threatening situations, with Ndoni discourse functioning across pragmatic categories:

1. **Face-Threatening Acts** – caution against violating social or spiritual norms (e.g., reminders not to harm the monitor lizard).
2. **Face-Enhancing Acts** – reinforce communal identity and moral values (e.g., cocoyam metaphors in blessings).
3. **Informing and Explaining** – transmit cultural knowledge and legitimize prohibitions (e.g., origin narratives of taboos).
4. **Asserting Communal Authority** – reinforce traditional norms through ritualized utterances.

A defining feature of Ndoni taboo discourse is indirectness. Ritual formulae, metaphors, and circumstantial utterances encode moral instruction without explicit commands, allowing speakers to convey expectation and respect while avoiding confrontation or spiritual offense.

These practices align with Hymes’ (1974) observation that “the speaking of a language is always a social act” and Duranti’s (1997) view of language as a medium for enacting social values. Even brief utterances, such as *Nigbō nigbō nigbō nigbō*, function as complete communicative acts, transmitting social intention, moral guidance, and cultural meaning. Similarly, cocoyam metaphors convey instruction and encouragement while respecting material prohibitions.

Together, the monitor lizard and cocoyam taboos demonstrate that Ndoni discourse constitutes a socially and morally strategic communicative system. Narrative accounts, ritualized speech, metaphors, and corrective remarks form an integrated network through which social norms are articulated, transmitted, and reproduced, highlighting the inseparability of language, morality, and cultural identity.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that Ndoni taboos concerning the monitor lizard (Ónítè) and cocoyam (àkàshì) operate as structured communicative practices embedded in everyday social life. Through narrative explanation, ritualized speech, metaphorical language, and culturally recognized forms of silence or avoidance, these taboos guide how speakers talk about culturally significant animals and crops, transmit shared knowledge, enforce social norms, and maintain communal cohesion.

The ritualized expression *Nígḃō níḃḃō níḃḃō níḃḃō*, used when addressing a monitor lizard in domestic space, exemplifies how conventionalized utterances serve both directive and symbolic functions. Similarly, cocoyam-based blessings show how a materially prohibited item can remain linguistically productive, invoking qualities such as firmness, stability, and endurance. These examples illustrate the distinction between material restriction and linguistic use, where culturally forbidden objects continue to function as symbolic resources in discourse.

Applying Hymes' (1974) ethnography of communication, the study highlights that communicative competence involves knowledge of culturally appropriate forms and contexts. Ndoni speakers acquire and transmit understanding of how, when, and in what manner to reference the monitor lizard and cocoyam through storytelling, ritualized speech, and everyday interaction. Narrative accounts, formulaic expressions, and metaphorical references collectively form a discourse system that reproduces communal knowledge and moral expectations.

From a discourse-pragmatic perspective, Ndoni taboo expressions also operate as face-saving speech acts. They allow speakers to caution, inform, and affirm communal values indirectly, managing social relationships and protecting the moral 'face' of both individuals and the community. Through metaphor, ritual formulae, and narrative explanation, these taboos reveal how language functions strategically to sustain moral order, transmit cultural knowledge, and reinforce collective identity.

Building on these findings, further research can deepen insight into the interplay between language, culture, and the environment. Future studies should: formulate clear research questions examining how Ndoni taboo discourse shapes human–animal and human–environment interactions; investigate whether Ndoni possess emic categories for taboos to ground analyses in local conceptual frameworks; conduct comparative studies with other African and extant totemic practices to identify universal and culturally specific mechanisms of moral, ecological, and social regulation; undertake detailed ethnographic research (including interactional data, narrative accounts, and ritualized speech) to document how taboos are enacted, socialized, and transmitted; and explore ecological and ethical implications, such as their role in species protection or agricultural behavior, to advance ecolinguistic understanding of language as a cultural and environmental regulator.

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