

# The Pragmatics of Edo Praise Expressions

**Esohe M. Omoregbe**  
and  
**Osaigbovo O. Egbuomwan**  
University of Benin,  
Benin City, Nigeria

## Abstract

This paper examines praise expressions in the Edo language community. It discusses some of the personal qualities that these expressions are generally used to extol and, on the basis of this, classifies the expressions into different groups. The paper goes further to discuss the pragmatic uses of praise expressions in Edo. This study, which is based on the 'doctrine of illocution' in 'performatives', is an aspect of speech acts theory<sup>1</sup>, which holds that language can be used as a tool to perform given actions in order to achieve certain aims. The paper concludes that praise expressions are used to obtain favour from people, improve people's reputations, regulate people's behaviours, entertain, and enhance historical record keeping, among other things.

## 1. Introduction

People are generally happy when others speak well of them. When people are praised for their achievements, they are motivated to do more. Praises in Edo occur in different forms and are used to achieve various distinct aims for the 'praiser' or praise singer, the subject (the person or persons being praised), the

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<sup>1</sup> John Austin, *How to Do Things With Words*. (Cambridge: Oxford University Press, 1962) 6, Kira Hall, 'Performative.' *Journal of Linguistic Anthropology*. 9:1/2 (2000) 184–187, Seumas Miller, 'Speech Acts and Conventions.' *Language Science*, 22 (2000) 155–166 and Yoshitake, Masaki 'Critique of Austin's Speech Act Theory: Decentralization.' *Kyushu Communication Studies*, 2 (2004) 27 – 43.

audience or spectators and the society. Thus praise expressions are a viable aspect of Edo language and culture.

Edo is spoken in seven local government areas (LGAs) in Edo State, and these are Oredo, Egor, Ikpoba-Okha, Ovia South-West, Ovia North-East, Uhunmwonde, and Orhionmwon. Imasuen (1998: 40) reports that the language is also spoken in other areas outside Edo State, such as Okitipupa, Akotogbo, Idoani, and Akure in Ondo State and Oza N'Ogogo in Delta State.

The language is listed as Bini under the Kwa sub-family of the Niger-Congo<sup>2</sup> and as Edo (Bini) under the Proto-North-Central Edoid (PNCE) sub-group of the Proto-Edoid language family<sup>3</sup> classify it under the New Benue-Congo.

This paper describes Edo praise expressions in different settings and discusses the different aims these expressions are used to achieve for the praise singer, the person or people being praised, and the audience, as well as the community at large. The expressions used in the study are contained in several recorded speeches of different palace officials, ommunu (masters of ceremonies), women, and other praise singers in public events and ceremonies (such as palace events, festivals, burials, marriages, and social-dances around Benin City in which Edo was used as a medium of communication). The glosses of the examples are presented in three levels. The first two levels correspond to the lexical (where there is one-to-one conceptual equivalence between the Edo lexical items and the English forms) and the free (where the information is expressed in its English free form) translation levels of Catford<sup>4</sup> (1965) and Uwajeh (1994, 2007). The third level

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<sup>2</sup> Joseph Greenberg, *The Languages of Africa*. (The Hague: Indiana University, 1966) 8.

<sup>3</sup> Ben Elugbe, *A Comparative Edoid: Phonology and Lexicon* (Port Harcourt: University of Port Harcourt Press, 1989) 29 and Kay Williamson & Roger Blench "Niger Congo." In Heine, Bernd & Derek Nurse (eds.) *African Languages: An Introduction* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000) 121.

<sup>4</sup> John Catford, *A Linguistics Theory of Translation: An Essay in Applied Linguistics*. (London: Oxford University Press, 1965) 25, Matthew Uwajeh, 'A Case for Performative Translatology' *Perspective: Studies in Translatology*, 7:1, (1994) 245–257, and Matthew Uwajeh, *Translation Equivalence: An Essay in Theoretical Linguistics* (Munchem: Lincom Europa, 2007), 231.

corresponds to the pragmatic translation level (where the given expression is rendered in idiomatic English) of Omoregbe and Evbuomwan.<sup>5</sup>

The ideas in this paper are presented in five (5) sections. Section 1 discusses what praise expressions generally mean, section 2 presents the theoretical orientation of the study, section 3 discusses some qualities that are extolled in praises, section 4 examines the uses of praises in Edo society, and section 5 presents our concluding remarks.

## 1.1 What Are Praise Expressions?

Praise expressions are generally positive statements that show approval, admiration, appreciation, and celebration of persons, objects, or ideas. These expressions are used to extol good qualities in people and sometimes used to appreciate the good deeds of people. People who commonly employ these expressions in praising people as some form of occupation are referred to as praise singers or, as Finnegan puts it,<sup>6</sup> ‘professional flatterers’. Praise expressions are discussed mostly within the context of panegyric literature and are most often directed at notable members of the society in such a way that the ‘enigmatic characteristics and deeds of the subjects are clothed in metaphor’.<sup>7</sup>

Praise poetry has existed in Africa for centuries. Malungana states that it ‘occurs almost everywhere in the entire African continent’ and that the African panegyric forms generally have historical allusions but are never historical narratives.<sup>8</sup> Court artists, who are dedicated to composing songs and poems that are sung or recited in public gatherings to praise their leaders, feature in several African monarchies. The usual aim of these artists is to eulogize and not necessarily to present actual facts. In this regard, praise poetry largely involves the

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<sup>5</sup> Omoregbe, Esohe & Osaigbovo Evbuomwan (2014) “Translating Edo Euphemism.” In *RALL: Researches in African Languages and Linguistics*, Vol. 13., 89–98.

<sup>6</sup> Ruth Finnegan, *Oral Literature in Africa*. (Cambridge UK: Open Books Publishers, 2012), 112.

<sup>7</sup> Christoffel Groenewald, “I Control the Idiom: Creativity in Ndebele Praise Poetry.” *Oral Tradition*, 16: 1 (2001), 33.

<sup>8</sup> John Malungana, *Vuphatu: Praise Poetry in Xitsonga*. PhD. Thesis, Rand Africana University, (1994), 14.

use of one's knowledge—of historical events, qualities, personalities, language, and so on—in performance to achieve a particular aim.

African praise poems are usually about the males in the society.<sup>9</sup> Because of the male-dominance nature of the African culture, praises of women are rare and are hardly done in public places. It is for this reason, maybe, that Eladji Gaye (a Wolof musician in Senegal who sang a popular praise song 'Fatou Gaye' in celebration of his late wife) is thought to be weak by most men in that country, having openly sung the praise of a woman.<sup>10</sup> Despite this, Gunner (1995) explains that praise poems of both African men and women exist and give insights into the social and economic lives of the people. She states, for example, that 'Zulu praise poetry is a form that is in many ways closely related both to power and to patriarchy',<sup>11</sup> which shows that African praise poetry also gives insights into the people's political life.

African praises perform different functions for those involved – the praiser, the one being praised—who may also participate actively<sup>12</sup> –as well as the society. These functions may be classified as historical, political, social, educational, or religious and include to inform, convince or persuade, educate, entertain, amuse, introduce (i.e. present leaders in public gatherings), and so on.<sup>13</sup> Praise songs/poems, if well harnessed, are also viable means for promoting unity among people.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Liz Gunner, "Clashes of Interest: Gender, Status and Power in Zulu Praise Poetry" In Graham Furnis, & Liz Gunner (eds.) *Power, Marginality and African Oral Literature*. (Cambridge; UK: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 188.

<sup>10</sup> Gunner, 'Clashes of Interest: Gender, Status and Power in Zulu Praise Poetry' In Furnis, and Gunner (eds.) *Power, Marginality and African Oral Literature*, 185 – 196.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 185.

<sup>12</sup> Paulo Fernando, and Farias Moraes "Praise Splits the Subject of Speech: Constructions of Kinship in Manden and Borgu." In Furnis and Gunner (eds.) *Power, Marginality and African Oral Literature*. 225–243.

<sup>13</sup> Malungana, John (1994) *Vuphatu: Praise Poetry in Xitsonga*. PhD. *Thesis*, 315, and Mlama, Penina (1995) "Oral Art and Contemporary Cultural Nationalism." In Furnis, and Gunner (eds.) *Power, Marginality and African Oral Literature*. Cambridge; 23–34.

<sup>14</sup> Luke Eyoh, "Indigenous Oral Poetry in Nigeria as a Tool for National Unity." in *Journal of Communication*, 2: 2 (2011) 83–91.

Praises are effective tools in the hands of those who are aware of their pragmatic uses. People (especially the Oba, chiefs, etc., and other notable members of the society), places, animals, objects, families, and, in some cases, the dead can be praised. Praises, to a large extent, depend on the context and situation of performance<sup>15</sup> and also on what the praiser intends to achieve with a given praise statement. These factors also relate to the concept of ethnography of communication.<sup>16</sup> By bringing to bear the individual characters and achievements of the people and making them appear significantly unique, among other techniques, the praiser employs praise expressions as tools for particular purposes.

The use of praise expressions abounds in the everyday lives of the Edo people. This aspect of Edo culture is highly significant, and it is also highly subjective. Turney and Littman note that 'a positive semantic orientation denotes a positive evaluation (i.e., praise) and a negative semantic orientation denotes a negative evaluation (i.e., criticism)'.<sup>17</sup> Hence, the evaluation of the praiser determines the type of expression to be used—whether he or she will use positive or negative words. Over a given period, the expressions may become appellations and may even become names that parents give to their children. Finnegan, in line with this, observes that 'Among the Yoruba, the oriki or praise names are permanent titles held by individuals, given to them by friends or, most often, by the drummers'.<sup>18</sup> The use of drums to accompany praise singing is a common feature in panegyric events. In public display, praisers use instruments to beautify their art and entertain their audience. Hence, praise expressions have become a common aspect of today's musical performances.

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<sup>15</sup> Groenewald, "I Control the Idiom: Creativity in Ndebele Praise Poetry.", 33.

<sup>16</sup> Erving Goffman, (1967) *Interaction Ritual: Essays on Face-to-face Behavior*, (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1967) and Madalina Matei "The Ethnography of Communication." In *Bulletin of the Transylvania of Brasov*, 2: 51 (2009) 155 – 162.

<sup>17</sup> Peter Turney, & Michael Littman (2013) "Measuring Praise and Criticism: Inference of Semantic Orientation from Association." *ACM Transaction on Information System (TOIS)*, 21: 4 (2013) 316.

<sup>18</sup> Finnegan, *Oral Literature in Africa*. 112.

In Edo society, praise singing has evolved from a means of paying homage to the Oba and entertaining members of the royal families to a common feature of public events and ceremonies. The *omunu* (i.e., masters of ceremonies) rely on praise expressions during social events to carry the audience along and to gain credibility for their art. Praise singing in Edo is usually rendered as either prayer or songs and is generally referred to as *egbo*. The palace society that is notable in this art is called *isikhuian*, headed by *Okao-Isikhuian*.<sup>19</sup> Edo praise expressions, though, exist in the literature as aspects of poetry.<sup>20</sup> This aspect of Edo praise expressions has not been given detailed consideration as a phenomenon on its own, a gap we wish to bridge by means of this paper.

## 2. Theoretical Orientation

This study is based on the ‘doctrine of illocution’, which is in the ‘performatives’, an aspect of J. L. Austin’s speech acts theory<sup>21</sup> Speech acts theory is an aspect of pragmatics, which deals with how language is put into use. Austin argues that certain utterances such as sentence 1 below, can be subjected to the true-false analysis (i.e., they can be either true or false). Others, such as sentence 2, cannot be so analyzed.

1. This is my book.
2. I promise to buy you a car on your birthday.

Sentence 2 represents the promise to ‘do something’, that is, to perform an action. Austin calls the first type of sentence constatives and the other performatives.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Ivie Uwa-Igbinoba, (2014) *Aspects of Edo Greetings: Uniqueness and Significance* (Benin City: Ivie Cultural Organisation, 2014) 85.

<sup>20</sup> Gabriel Obazee, et al. (eds.) *Asikoko Ekharha Oghe Edo (A Collection of Edo Poems)*. (Abuja: National Council for Arts and Culture, 1997) 38-55, Ikponmwosa Osemwegie *Poems in Bini*. (Benin City: Fortune & Temperance Ltd, 2003) 5-10, and Uwa-Igbinoba, Ivie, (2014) *Aspects of Edo Greetings: Uniqueness and Significance*, Benin City: Ivie Cultural Organisation, 85 -86.

<sup>21</sup> John Austin, *How to Do Things With Words*, (Cambridge: Oxford Univ. Press, 1962), Miller “Speech Acts and Conventions.” *Language Science*, 22 (2000), 155-166 and Masaki Yoshitake, “Critique of J. L. Austin’s Speech Act Theory: Decentralization of the Speaker-Centered Meaning in Communication.” *Kyushu Communication Studies*, 2 (2004), 27–43.

<sup>22</sup> Fareed Al-Hindawi, Hameed Al-Masu’di, & Ramia Mirza “The Speech Act Theory in

(Performatives (or performative utterances) are utterances that do not just express ideas but are used to achieve certain aims, such as to promise, persuade, convince, coerce, thank, subdue, encourage, explain, describe, ask a question, make a request, issue a command, and so on. In this case, by saying it, you are doing it. Validity, here, is not based on the true-false condition, but on ‘felicity’, that is, whether the person making an utterance and the context in which the utterance is made are appropriate. The felicity conditions ensure the viability of the utterance.

Within performatives, utterances have three forces: the locution force (associated with the ordinary meaning of the utterance in its denotative sense), the illocution force (associated with the effect intended by the user of the utterance), and the perlocution force (associated with the utterance’s actual effect on the hearer or audience).<sup>23</sup> The illocutionary act is the act performed by a given expression as used by the speaker.<sup>24</sup> It is what the speaker intends to accomplish by means of a given expression. For example, when a couple standing before the registrar or altar during a marriage ceremony say the words I do, they are not reporting on a marriage but indulging in it.<sup>25</sup> The relevance of this theory on the use of praise expressions in Edo society relies on the fact that praise singers generally use praises as tools to achieve certain aims. Language (as in praise utterance) is, here-in, used as an instrument in the hands of praise singers to achieve certain (sometimes selfish) goals for themselves, their leaders, heroes, an audience, the family, or the society in general. The illocutionary force of speech act theory is necessary in accounting for the praisers’ intentions in this regard.

The glossing translations adopted in this paper are the lexical level (where Edo words are directly replaced with English words that express the same information in the two languages), the free level (where the English equivalents of

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English and Arabic.” *Open Journal of Modern Linguistics*, 4 (2014), 28.

<sup>23</sup> Lyons, John (ed.) (1970) *New Horizons in Linguistics*. (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1970), 9 and John Austin, “Speech Acts.” In Allen, J. P. B. and S. P. Corder (eds.) *Readings for Applied Linguistics: Edinburgh Course in Applied Linguistics*. Vol. 1. (London: Oxford University Press, 1973), 42-43.

<sup>24</sup> John Lyons (ed.) *New Horizons in Linguistics*, 770.

<sup>25</sup> Austin, “Speech Acts.” In Allen, J. P. B. & S. P. Corder (eds.) *Readings for Applied Linguistics: Edinburgh Course in Applied Linguistics*. Vol. 1., 40.

the Edo expressions are given in their free form as used by English users)<sup>26</sup> and the pragmatic level (in which the actual use of the Edo expressions are shown in English.<sup>27</sup> This choice is driven by the need to show the denotative English use of an expression (as in the first two: lexical and free levels) as well as its pragmatic use (as in the last: pragmatic level).

### 3. Qualities Extolled with Praise Expressions in Edo Society

In Edo society, praise expressions are employed in different forms, usually to bring certain qualities of the person or group of persons being praised to the fore. These qualities are usually exaggerated in such a way that the praiser makes the person being praised feel recognized and honoured. In the following discussion, we shall present the common qualities of people that are generally extolled in praise expressions.

#### 3.1. Wisdom and Disposition

The ability to make good and dependable judgments, and show to great possession of knowledge and experience, are qualities that make a person stand out in a crowd. These are typical virtues extolled by praise singers to show that the person being praised is wise or, at least, to make the person in question feel wise and be seen as having a well-trained mind and character. The examples below show some praise expressions that are used to extol these qualities in people:

3. a) Omwa ne o ru emwi vbe ne Osa ru  
 Person that he do thing as that God do  
 One who does things as god does

<sup>26</sup> Matthew Uwajeh, (1994) "A Case for Performative Translatology" *Perspective: Studies in Translatology*, 7:1, (1994) 245-257 and Matthew Uwajeh, "The Task of the Translator Revisited in Performative Translatology." *FIT Revue Babel*, 47: 3 (2001), 228-247.

<sup>27</sup> Omoregbe, Esohe & Osaigbovo Evbuomwan "Translating Edo Euphemism." *RALL: Researches in African Languages and Linguistics*, 13 (2014), 89-98.

'One whose disposition is comparable to God's'

- b) Adaze ne ẹ i ru emwi oya  
Gentleman that he not do thing shame  
A gentleman who does not do shameful things  
'A well-behaved gentleman'
- c) Ne ọ gie ode ne i ọ  
That he show road that not bend  
One that shows a road that does not bend  
'A person who always give valuable advice'
- d) Ọmọ ne ọ renren enegbe  
Child that he know self  
A child that knows himself/herself  
'A well-behaved person'
- e) Ọmwa esi esi  
Person good good  
An emphatically good person  
'A very good person'

Such expressions highlight a person's good qualities. It should be noted, however, that the person being praised may not actually possess these characteristics. The praiser may not have known the person he or she is praising at all, but being compelled to praise the person for material gains. Since praises of people are usually recited during public events in Edo society, as in most other African societies, the recitations present the one being praised to the audience and gives him or her acceptance among the populace. The examples in 3 present the subject of praise as a hero to the people, even if he or she is not. The subject's participation in or acknowledgement of the praise efforts may make the audience see him or her as having these laudable qualities. Besides the praise act, therefore, the situation or context of use is also considered, so as to use the right expressions before the right audience in order to achieve a successful performance and ensure that the illocution of the expression is effective.

### 3.2 Beauty

In general, people want to be regarded as attractive. A praiser who tries to extol the quality of beauty makes the subject of praise feel assured of looking presentable and being accepted. Men may sometimes be praised in this regard, as in example 4 below.

4. a) Okpia ne ọ mose sẹ amwẹ ọnrẹn  
 Man that he fine pass wife his  
 A man that is finer than his wife  
 'A man who is more beautiful than his wife'
- b) Egbe bọlọzọ ne a miẹ itoto  
 Body succulent that one see itoto (a smooth medicinal plant)  
 A succulent body one finds on itoto  
 'One who always looks good'

Women are usually praised for beauty and attractiveness. Consider the examples in 5 below.

5. a) Ẹdun nekhui ne ọ rre amẹ  
 Bitter-kolanut black that it be water  
 Black bitter-kolanut inside water  
 'Black beauty'
- b) Uvbi ne ẹrọnmwọ  
 Girl that-is bronze  
 A girl that is a bronze-cast  
 'A very beautiful girl'
- c) Imose gbe ose  
 Beauty meet beauty  
 Beauty that surpasses beauty  
 'One who is extraordinarily beautiful'
- d) Imose ne ebo  
 Beauty that-be white-man  
 Beautiful like a white man  
 'As beautiful as the whites'

The above examples make one think of beauty as a physical attribute. However, praisers can use praise expressions to reveal what may be regarded as inner beauty, making it possible to see people as beautiful in character, thought, and

relationship. Both men and women may be seen as beautiful in this regard. While the expressions in example 4 may refer to physical beauty, those in 5 are interpreted in the sense of pragmatic use of language. This abstractness results from the fact that the comparison and exaggerations employed can be understood only connotatively (i.e., pragmatically), since such beauties are not physically visible. The speech act here is intended to present those being praised as beautiful, both physically and otherwise, which has the perlocutionary effect of influencing the audience's mind-set positively towards the subject of praise.

### 3.3. Royalty

In Edo society, use of praise expressions is most commonly visible in celebration of royalty. The Oba and members of the royal families have numerous expressions with which their praises are sung. The palace of the Benin monarch usually has professional praise singers whose duties are to praise the Oba and members of the royal families. Praise expressions are also employed to announce the entrance of the Oba. This feature of praise is also extant in Yoruba society in a very elaborate form. Past generations of Obas—such as Ewuare, Ehengbuda, Ovonramwen, Akenzua II, among others—are easily remembered in praises and appellations, which help sustain people's memories of their nature and achievements. Praising the king usually results in an outpouring of the king's favour on his subjects. It also helps to keep the king happy, so as to 'keep away his wrath'. Praises of the Oba liken him to animals and objects that symbolize strength and longevity. He and may also be referred to as a divine being, such as a god. This feature of loyalty is illustrated using the following examples in Ero<sup>28</sup> :

6. a) Ekpẹn ne ọ gbe ene ọ sẹ ọre  
 Leopard that it kill that it pass it  
 A leopard that kills what is greater than it  
 'An all powerful being'

b) Ekpẹn ne i de

<sup>28</sup> Ero, Osayomwabo (2007) *Enometo Ene N'Ugbo: Eto The Riddle of Life*. Benin City: Osun Ero Consult Publishers, 48.

Leopard that not fall  
 A tiger that does not fall  
 'One that is unbeatable'

- c) Ọba ne ugborrirri  
 King that cause-shiver  
 A king that make one shiver  
 'The awesome king'
- d) Ọmọ ọkpa tẹlẹbu ne ọ sẹ ọmọ uri  
 Child one chubby that he pass child two-hundred  
 Child one chubby that is more than two hundred children  
 'An all-important child'
- e) Ogie ne ọ mwẹẹ igho  
 Chief that he has money  
 A chief that has money  
 'A leader that cannot be poor'
- f) Ọba ne ọ kpọ vbe unu ne i kpọ vbe aro  
 King that he common in mouth that not common in eye  
 A king that people talk about but do not see  
 'A king that is easier talked about than seen'
- g) Ovbi ekeṅekeṅe ma dọyọ  
 Child star not go-off  
 A child of the star that does not go-off  
 'The everlasting shining star'
- h) U gha tọ gbe egie re  
 You will last kill title eat  
 You will live long in title  
 'You will live long to enjoy your title'
- i) Ẹrriẹ ghaa ma, ugha ghaa ma  
 Harem will-be good, room will-be good  
 Your harem and room will be good  
 'Your harem and entire household will prosper'

The palace of the Ọba, usually, features court jesters, whose role is to herald the arrival (or appearance) of the Ọba with praise citations. The jester serves as the primary praiser of the king, although others (especially women) do

sing his praises each time he appears in public. Whenever the Ọba appears (or is to appear) in public, the appropriate context for praise event is set. The praiser(s) engage in praises with illocutions that will make the king more revered among his subjects. Examples 6a–c above praise the Ọba as a strong and undefeatable being, 6d–g praise him as rich and important, while 6h makes the audience see him as always healthy and constant in leadership. The illocutionary intention of the performative utterances of the praiser has the perlocution of making the subjects see their king as a divine being that is always dependable: the praiser makes the audience see the king in a particular manner.

While the expressions in example 6 above are generally used with reference to the Ọba, some others are used to praise chiefs in the kingdom. Consider 7 below.

7. a) Ezomọ ne Uti gbe eni  
Ezomo that-be Uti kill elephant  
Ezomo the Uti that killed the elephant  
'Ezomo, the killer of elephants'
- b) Ekharra ne ọ gue Uzebu  
Umbrella that it cover Uzebu (name of a place)  
The umbrella that covers Uzebu  
'The protector of Uzebu community' (i.e., Chief Ezomo)
- c) Ọkaroo ẹvbo  
Pioneer village  
The village pioneer  
'The village head'

A great majority of the appellations of the Ọba are drawn from praise expressions. These expressions become exclusively reserved for the Ọba and, after several generations of use, they constitute known appellations.

### 3.4. Strength

Praise expressions extolling strength are used mainly for warriors and others seen as deliverers, especially those involved in overcoming external

insurrections. Praises are used to make warriors and champions feel undefeatable, promoting boldness in the face of any rivalry. Following are some examples of praise expressions used to extol strength:

8. a) Utete ne i gie a bi  
 Heap that not let one push  
 A heap that cannot be pushed  
 'He who cannot be defeated'
- b) Eni ne i gie a dede  
 Elephant that not let one embrace  
 An elephant that cannot be embraced  
 'A mysterious one' (i.e., fighter)
- c) Okuta etebite ne i guoghọ  
 Stone everlasting that not break  
 An everlasting stone that does not break  
 'An indomitable being'
- d) Omọ ne i mọ ne a kọlọ  
 Fruit that not produce that one pluck  
 A fruit that cannot be plucked  
 'One who cannot be killed'
- e) Onwe ne i vbiè vbe ugie  
 Sun that not sleep in ceremony  
 The sun that does not sleep during ceremonies  
 'One who does not fail in his duties'
- f) A i miẹ ne ọ gbe vbe ne u gbe  
 One not see that he kill like that you kill  
 One cannot find a person that fights as you do  
 'You are most skillful in the art of war'
- g) Eku-abọ ne olọ  
 Upper-arm that-be grinding-stone  
 Arm like grinding stone  
 'The arm that is mighty in hard work'
- h) Ikadele ne ọ da agbon yi<sup>29</sup>  
 Pillar that it take world hold  
 Pillars that hold the world

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<sup>29</sup> Osayomwabo Ero, *A History of Ero Family and the Seven Kingmaker of Benin Kingdom, 1200–2008 AD*, (Benin City: Osun Ero Consult Pub 2008), 167.

### 'The backbone of the world'

While examples 8a–e above are intended to portray the subject of praise as undefeatable and very skilled in the art of defence, 8f–g portray him as also very skilled in the art of attack. This is performative, as it exaggerates the best qualities expected of warriors and fighters and ascribes these qualities to the person being praised (even when the qualities may actually be absent), thereby undermining whatever flaws may exist. The illocution, here, may not be directed only at the audience but may also encourage the subject of praise to behave boldly and to produce results that would be expected of a warrior with the ascribed qualities. These expressions also feature in praises of the *Ọba*. This tradition may be a result of the ancient *Ọbas*' status as the commanders in chief of the warriors and soldiers in Edo during the periods of the warrior kings, circa AD 1440–1600,<sup>30</sup> when kings fought in wars. Besides their applicability to warriors and kings, these forms of praise expressions can be directed at any person who has distinguished himself or herself through hard work and dedication in a chosen endeavour. Such a person is likened to a warrior in that field. Thus, such praise expressions could be used for anybody in whom the praiser intends to extol such qualities as strength and boldness.

### 3.5 Divinity

Praise expressions can be used to extol the perceived divine nature of individuals, especially the *Ọba* and idols of the people. The *Ọba*, for example, is regarded as a divine being—one that is divinely created and positioned. Hence, he possesses divine qualities that make him a 'god' on earth. For this reason, he is praised as a god and considered to share the qualities of a god.

The Edo people have several gods that are believed to have specific domains and are responsible for different aspects of people's lives. For example, while Olokun (the god of the sea) is said to be responsible for fertility, Ogun (the

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<sup>30</sup> Osarieme B. Osadolor, "The Military System of Benin Kingdom C.1440-1897" Doctoral Dissertation, University of Hamburg, 2001.

god of iron and thunder) is believed to be responsible for vengeance. Following are examples of praise expressions that show divine qualities:

9. a) Ughegbe ne ọ ghee agbọn ghee ẹrinmwi  
Mirror that it look life look beyond  
A mirror that sees life and beyond  
'The all seeing eyes'
- b) Ọdẹghọmwa ne a i dẹghee  
Seer that one not see  
That which sees one but cannot be seen  
'The mysterious being'
- c) Ọba ne amẹ ne ọ sẹ ne ọ rre oke  
King that-be water that he pass that he be mountain/land  
The water king that surpasses the mountain/land king  
'The king of kings'
- d) Ọsinmwịomwa nẹ i gie a zẹ  
Saviour that not let one choose  
The saviour that is not chosen  
'The one who determines one's fate'

These expressions are generally used to portray the divine qualities of the gods and particular people, showing that they determine the fate of the society's ordinary people, who are mostly at their mercy. The expressions declare that nothing can be hidden from the divine being who has all-seeing eyes as well as the capacity to save the people from trouble. Like the subjects of praise in 3.3, above, those praised in examples 9 are intended to be feared and revered. The illocution is to present the deities as omniscient (as in 9a–b) and omnipotent (as in 9c–d). The praiser, therefore, uses these expressions to make the deity awesome and even greater than the Ọba, as in 9c where Ọba ne amẹ 'the water king' may refer to Olokun 'the god of the sea' and [Ọba] ne ọ rre oke 'the mountain/land king' refers to the earthly king (i.e., the Ọba).

### 3.6. Prominence

In Edo society, people can gain prominence by demonstrating their leadership abilities. The quality of prominence is extolled in praises, especially when such people arrive at important events. On these occasions, their relevance in their area is brought to the fore. Examples of useful praise expressions in this regard are as follows:

10. a) Adaze ne i ru emwi oya  
Gentleman that not do thing shame  
Gentleman that does not engage in shameful acts  
'A careful gentleman'
- b) Ikpesi nokhua ne o rre ugbo  
Stump big that it be-in farm  
The big stump in the farm  
'A prominent member of the society'
- c) A ma mię ruę a i ru  
One not see you one not do  
Without you we can do nothing  
'Nothing can be done without you'
- d) Ene o ke aro eze  
One-that he near eye river  
One that is ahead of others  
'A pace setter'

The use of these expressions, therefore, presents the person(s) being praised as having not only these qualities but also the ability to live up to the expectations that the society places on such people. For example, the statement that nothing can be done unless a particular person is present (i.e., A ma mię ruę a i ru) shows how relevant that person is to the occasion, just as Ene o ke aro eze portrays a person whose previous experience enable him or her to find solutions to current problems. Besides presenting people as prominent members of the society, praises such as these may be used with the intention of regulating the behaviours of the praise heroes. Those receiving such praises are, afterwards, to embody the qualities that

were extolled. The perlocutionary force of these expressions conditions the person being praised to behave—or not to behave—in a particular manner.

## 4. Uses of Praises in Edo Society

In Edo society, praise expressions have different uses. These uses, which vary according to environments, persons, and events, are discussed below.

### 4.1 To Obtain Favour

In modern-day praise rendition, the praiser carefully selects expressions that will excite the people being lauded. This has the effect of exaggerating the qualities of the person whose praise is being sung. In most cases, the subject of praise is given qualities that he or she does not ordinarily possess. This type of exaggeration is commonly seen in social gatherings, such as marriage ceremonies attended by wealthy members of the society. When the praiser is successful, those being praised are forced to part with money and other valuables—or to perform any other favour being sought after.

Praisers, therefore, use praise expressions as instruments to get what they want. In his description of this form of language use, Halliday states that ‘language is brought to serve the function of “I want”, the satisfaction of material needs’.<sup>31</sup> Consider the following examples:

11. a) Ē i re ne ọ gue ọ loo, ne ọ loo ọ loo  
 It not be that it be-with he use, that he use he use  
 It is a user that uses, not necessarily he that has  
 ‘A giver that gives even when he doesn’t have enough’
- b) Ọba ọ ye ru  
 King he still do  
 A king that continues to do more  
 ‘A king that is persistent in doing good’

<sup>31</sup> Michael Halliday, “A Rich and Adaptable Instrument.” In Allen, J. P. B. & S. P. Corder (eds.) *Readings for Applied Linguistics (The Edinburgh Course in Applied Linguistics)*. Vol.1., 60.

- c)           Ayighoghagha, do ye igho ghagha ma mwe  
 One-who-flaunt-money, come use money flaunt show me  
 One who flaunts money, flaunt some money for me to see  
 'Money giver, come and give me some money'

Expressions such as those in 11 remind a person (as in 11a) or a king (as in 11b) that he or she is a giver who is ready to be generous to others at any time. In addition to praising a person, 11c makes a direct passionate demand on the subject of praise ('money giver', in this instance) to part with some monetary gifts.

This use of praises as a tool to get what one wants is performative in the sense that the expressions are used to perform intended illocutionary acts of bringing the desired results. This is particularly interesting, given that the praiser holds on to these expressions the way artisans hold on to their tools. The expressions, therefore, are a means of getting one's daily bread and of persuading people to give gifts.

## 4.2 Entertainment

Praising people, kings and nobles in particular, has become a means of entertainment, especially during ceremonial outings. Praise expressions are used as performatives in this sense to entertain. The persons or group of people being praised are gratified by the exaggerated speech of the praiser. The audience, then, applauds, demonstrating what Nwoye referred to as an element of the call-response conversational strategies in African languages.<sup>32</sup> Such responses from the audience help give the subjects more recognition and acceptance. This interaction reflects the opinion of Finnegan, who asserts that 'the effective earning of praises was one way in which a man could recommend himself to his chief for honour and advancement'.<sup>33</sup> Exaggerated praises (such as in 12, below) generally have entertaining effects on both the subject of praise and the audience, making the event livelier.

<sup>32</sup> Gregory Nwoye, "An Overview of Igbo Oral Literature." *Bulletin of the National Museum of Ethnology*. 17: 3 (1993), 559–599.

<sup>33</sup> Finnegan, *Oral Literature in Africa*, 140.

12. a) Ọmọ ne Ọba vbe ebo ẹnřen  
 Child that king and white-man know  
 A child that is known by both the king and the whites  
 'A very popular person who is known, home and away'
- b) Unu ne ọ rri igho  
 Mouth that it eat money  
 The mouth that eats money  
 'One that lives in and uses wealth'

These combinations of words and their exaggerated forms, as obvious in the free English forms, provide the entertaining effects of these expressions. The ọmunu (master of ceremonies) in Edo society is, therefore, an artist with several responsibilities: to entertain the audience, solicit response from the audience, and provide an avenue for judging popularity.

### 4.3 Behavioural Regulation

Praising people can have regulatory effects on their characters. The praiser gives the subject of praise special status among their peers, thereby placing a sort of unwritten regulation on their behaviour. The quality of praises and degree of acceptance that those being praised usually get from the public affect their reputation and make them to be good people, even when they are not. As a result, the subjects of praise suddenly realize that there are certain actions they are expected not to take.

The use of language as a tool in this regard is what Halliday refers to as the 'do as I tell you' function of language. To him, the regulatory function of language 'refers to the use of language to regulate the behaviour of others'.<sup>34</sup>

Since people can be regulated by appeal, orders, blackmail, intimidation, caution, and coercion, praise singers could use their praises to influence their subjects and to make them behave in a particular way. Although there is no way

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<sup>34</sup> Halliday, "A Rich and Adaptable Instrument," 61.

for praisers to directly tell or order people in this regard, the idea is to convince the subjects to behave in such a way that the praises are not said to have been misappropriated. Consider example 13 below.

13. a) Uvbi ne ẹrọnmwọ  
 Girl that-is bronze  
 A girl that is a bronze-cast  
 'A very beautiful girl'
- b) Imose ne ebo  
 Beauty that-be white-man  
 Beautiful like a white man  
 'As beautiful as the whites'

Praising someone with such expressions also makes a demand that the person not behave irresponsibly, both as long as that event lasts and thereafter.

#### 4.4 Historical Records Keeping

Historical facts in Edo society have, for centuries, been kept as part of the oral tradition of the people. Such records form the reference points for most historical works in the language.

Praise singing is an aspect of the oral tradition of Edo people, and it is used to recount past deeds and achievements of individuals. The bulk of what people remember about the ancient warriors and warrior kings of the Edo kingdom is drawn from use of these figures' praise names and other praise expressions during ceremonies and traditional festivals. Such events include Igue festivals, New Yam festivals, and other palace ceremonies where the cultural heritage of the people is showcased, especially when the king is being introduced or presented. Following are examples of some of these praise names/expressions that have become appellations.

14. a) Ezọmọ ne Utigbeni 'Uzomo the mighty one.'

- b) Ẹwuare ne Ogidigan 'Ewuare, the great and scary.'
- c) Ehẹngbuda ne Ọbo 'Ehẹngbuda, the herbalist/healer.'
- d) Ọvọnrramwẹ nọgbaisi 'Ovonrramwe, the well-traveled.'
- e) Akẹnzua ne iso norhọ 'Akenzua, the rainy sky.'
- f) Igodo miẹ Igodo 'Igodo meets Igodo.' (ie. when the land was known as Igodo)

Praisers generally explore the past deeds and achievements of their subjects. Consequently, well-crafted praise songs can call up the events or series of events that led to the achievements. Hence, whenever people hear the praise expressions, their minds go down memory lanes and recount historical events. As the items in 14 show, the expression 'Ẹwuare ne Ogidigan', for example, calls up a great deal of the personality and exploits of Ọba Ẹwuare (c.1440–1473).

## 5. Conclusion

In this paper, we have explored the use of praises in Ẹdo society. The paper presents a classificatory grouping of different praise expressions in Ẹdo society with reference to the personal qualities they are used to extol. Six different groups have been identified: wisdom and disposition, beauty, royalty, strength, divinity and prominence. The paper has also examined the uses for which praises are employed among the people and has presented four significant functions that such expressions perform: obtainment of favour, entertainment, regulation of behaviour, and historical record keeping.

These findings show that praise is a significant and useful part of Ẹdo society. This aspect of the Ẹdo culture is useful not only to the praise singer but also to the subject of praise, the audience, and the society at large. Praises bring favour and gifts to the praiser, improve the reputation of the subject, provide entertainment for the audience or spectator and facilitate the keeping of historical facts for the entire society a function necessary for research and for perpetuation of the society from generation to generation.

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