The Pragmatics of Êdo Praise Expressions

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Abstract

This paper examines praise expressions in the Êdo 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 Êdo. This study, which is based on the ‘doctrine of illocution’ in ‘performatives’, is an aspect of speech acts theory¹, 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 Êdo 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

Edo is spoken in seven local government areas (LGAs) in Edo State, and these are Orọdo, Egọr, Ikpoba-Okha, Ovia South-West, Ovia North-East, Uhunmwonde, and Orhiomwan. 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 and as Edo (Bini) under the Proto-North-Central Edoid (PNCE) sub-group of the Proto-Edoid language family 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, ọmụnụ (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 (1965) and Uwajeh (1994, 2007). The third level

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corresponds to the pragmatic translation level (where the given expression is rendered in idiomatic English) of Omoregbe and Evbuomwan.\(^5\)

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,\(^6\) ‘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’.\(^7\)

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.\(^8\) 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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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.9 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.10 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’,11 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 actively12—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.13 Praise songs/poems, if well harnessed, are also viable means for promoting unity among people.14

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11 Ibid., 185.
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 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. 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)’. 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’. 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.

18 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 song and is generally referred to as egbo. The palace society that is notable in this art is called isikhuan, headed by Okao-Isikhuan.\textsuperscript{19} Edo praise expressions, though, exist in the literature as aspects of poetry.\textsuperscript{20} 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\textsuperscript{21} 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.\textsuperscript{22}

\textsuperscript{22} 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). The illocutionary act is the act performed by a given expression as used by the speaker. 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. 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


the Edo expressions are given in their free form as used by English users\(^\text{26}\) and the pragmatic level (in which the actual use of the Edo expressions are shown in English.\(^\text{27}\) 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) Ọmwa ne ọ ru emwi vbe ne Osa ru
   Person that he do thing as that God do
   One who does things as god does


‘One whose disposition is comparable to God’s’

b)  Adazẹ  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  odẹ  nẹ  i  gọ
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 rẹn rèn enegbe
Child that he know self
A child that knows himself/herself
‘A well-behaved person’

e)  Omwa  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 Ẹdo 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 sër amwẹ ọmọrn ẹ
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 mịt 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 amè
Bitter-kolanut black that it be water
Black bitter-kolanut inside water
‘Black beauty’

b) Uvbi ne øรณmwo
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:

6. a) Ẹkpẹn ne ô gbe ene ô sê ôre
Leopard that it kill that it pass it
A leopard that kills what is greater than it
‘An all powerful being’

b) Ẹkpẹn nê i de

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Leopard that not fall  
A tiger that does not fall  
‘One that is unbeatable’

c) Ọba ne ugborirri  
King that cause-shiver  
A king that make one shiver  
‘The awesome king’

d) Ọmọ ọkpa ọdị na ọ se ọmọ ụrụ  
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 o mweet igho  
Chief that he has money  
A chief that has money  
‘A leader that cannot be poor’

f) Ọba ne ọ kpọ ụbe unu ne ọ kpọ ụbe aruo  
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 ekeneke na doyo  
Child star not go-off  
A child of the star that does not go-off  
‘The everlasting shining star’

h) U gha ụgbọ egbe egie re  
You will last kill title eat  
You will live long in title  
‘You will live long to enjoy your title’

i) Ẹrịrị 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
singing 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) Ezomo 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 Uzẹbu  
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 ṣevo  
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 nẹ i gie a bi
Heap that not let one push
A heap that cannot be pushed
‘He who cannot be defeated’

b) Eni nẹ i gie a dede
Elephant that not let one embrace
An elephant that cannot be embraced
‘A mysterious one’ (i.e., fighter)

c) Okuta etébéte nẹ i guoghọ
Stone everlasting that not break
An everlasting stone that does not break
‘An indomitable being’

d) Ọmọ nẹ i mọ ne a kọọ
Fruit that not produce that one pluck
A fruit that cannot be plucked
‘One who cannot be killed’

e) Onwẹ nẹ 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 mię ne o 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 olo
Upper-arm that-be grinding-stone
Arm like grinding stone
‘The arm that is mighty in hard work’

h) Ikadele ne o da agbon yi
Pillar that it take world hold
Pillars that hold the world

‘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 Oba. This tradition may be a result of the ancient Obas’ status as the commanders in chief of the warriors and soldiers in Edo during the periods of the warrior kings, circa AD 1440–1600, 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 Oba and idols of the people. The Oba, 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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god of iron and thunder) is believed to be responsible for vengeance. Following are examples of praise expressions that show divine qualities:

9. a) Úghēgbē ne ò gheē agbọn gheē ërinmwi
    Mirror that it look life look beyond
    A mirror that sees life and beyond
    ‘The all seeing eyes’

b) Ñdēghomwa ne a i deghē
    Seer that one not see
    That which sees one but cannot be seen
    ‘The mysterious being’

c) Òba ne amẹ ne ò se ne ò 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) Ọsinmwiomwa nẹ i gie a ze
    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 reverenced. 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 Òba, as in 9c where Òba ne amẹ ‘the water king’ may refer to Olokun ‘the god of the sea’ and [Òba] ne ò rre oke ‘the mountain/land king’ refers to the earthly king (i.e., the Òba).
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) Adazẹ nẹ i ru emwi oya
   Gentleman that not do thing shame
   Gentleman that does not engage in shameful acts
   ‘A careful gentleman’

   b) Ikpẹsi nọkhua ne ọrre ugbo
      Stump big that it be-in farm
      The big stump in the farm
      ‘A prominent member of the society’

   c) A ma miẹ ruẹ a i ru
      One not see you one not do
      Without you we can do nothing
      ‘Nothing can be done without you’

   d) Ene ọ ke aro ẹzẹ
      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 miẹ ruẹ a i ru) shows how relevant that person is to the occasion, just as Ene ọ ke aro ẹzẹ 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'.

Consider the following examples:

11. a) Ṣi re ne ọgue 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’

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c) Ayighoghagha, do ye igho ghagha ma mwę
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.32 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’.33 Exaggerated praises (such as in 12, below) generally have entertaining effects on both the subject of praise and the audience, making the event livelier.

33 Finnegan, Oral Literature in Africa, 140.
12. a) Ṭọmọ ne Ọba vbe ebo ọrẹnẹn
   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 ọrri 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 Ṽmọnụ (master of ceremonies) in Ẹdo 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’.34

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

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) Ezomọ ne Utigbeni ‘Uzomo the mighty one.’
b) Ẹwuare ne Ogidigan  ‘Ewuare, the great and scary.’

c) Ehêngbuda ne Òbo ‘Ehengbuda, the herbalist/healer.’

d) Òvonrramwé nògbaisi  ‘Ovonrramwe, the well-traveled.’

e) Akènzua 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 Òba 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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