



POLITENESS AS POWER IN YORUBA TRADITIONAL RELIGION: EXAMINING (IM)POLITENESS STRATEGIES IN *IJALA* POETRY

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Abstract

This study explored the dynamics of politeness and impoliteness strategies as expressions of power in Yoruba traditional religion, particularly through the lens of *Ijala* poetry, a traditional Yoruba oral art form often associated with hunters and deities. The motivation for the study stemmed from the need to understand how politeness and impoliteness are strategically employed in Yoruba religious contexts to assert authority, negotiate status, and manage relationships with deities. The study aimed to analyze how these strategies serve as mechanisms of power within *Ijala* poetry. Using a qualitative content analysis approach, the study examined selected *Ijala* poems that depict interactions between humans and Yoruba deities, focusing on speech acts, verbal exchanges, and contextual interpretations. Three major findings emerged: first, impoliteness strategies were often used to challenge or provoke deities to demonstrate their power; second, politeness was employed to show reverence and establish rapport; third, both strategies were context-dependent, influenced by the deity's nature and the speaker's intent. The study concluded that politeness and impoliteness in *Ijala* poetry are critical tools for managing power dynamics and reinforcing social hierarchies in Yoruba traditional religion. The findings contribute to the broader understanding of Yoruba oral traditions and their role in religious and cultural discourse.

Keywords: Politeness, Impoliteness, Yoruba traditional religion, *Ijala* Poetry, Power Dynamics

Introduction

The Yoruba people of southwestern Nigeria have a rich cultural heritage characterized by a vibrant oral tradition that has been passed down through generations (Adeniran 2014). Among the various forms of oral literature that exist in Yoruba culture, *Ijala* poetry stands out as a significant genre (Adegbite 2015). Traditionally associated with hunters and deities, *Ijala* poetry is more than a mere form of entertainment; it serves as a medium for expressing reverence, conveying wisdom, and negotiating relationships with both humans and the divine (Ogunbiyi 2012). The poetry is filled with rich language that can range from respectful and deferential to confrontational and provocative, depending on the context (Omoniyi 2011). In Yoruba cosmology, deities (*òrìṣà*) such as Ogun, Orunmila, and Sango play essential roles in human affairs, and *Ijala* poetry is one of the mediums through which humans engage with these powerful beings (Ndlovu 2018). Understanding the language used in these poems is crucial for comprehending how power dynamics are managed in Yoruba religious contexts (Harris 2006). However, despite the significance of *Ijala* poetry in Yoruba culture, there has been limited scholarly attention on how politeness and impoliteness strategies are strategically employed within this genre to manage power relations (Scollon and Scollon 2001).

While previous studies have explored the thematic and stylistic elements of Yoruba oral literature, including *Ijala* poetry, a research gap remains in understanding how politeness and impoliteness



function as communicative strategies in these texts (Omoniyi 2011; Ogunbiyi 2012; Adeniran 2014; Adedina 2024). Politeness theory, developed by scholars like Brown and Levinson (1987), has been widely applied in analyzing various forms of discourse to understand how speakers explore social hierarchies, express power, and build relationships. However, the application of politeness theory to Yoruba oral traditions, specifically *Ijala* poetry, is underexplored. Most existing studies on Yoruba oral literature focus on themes, symbolism, and cultural values but often overlook the subtle ways in which language is used to assert authority, challenge power, or show reverence within religious and cultural contexts. This study addresses this research gap by investigating the use of politeness and impoliteness strategies in *Ijala* poetry, particularly in relation to the portrayal of Yoruba deities. The research aims to provide a comprehensive analysis of how these strategies are contextually applied to reflect and reinforce social hierarchies and power dynamics in Yoruba traditional religion.

The objectives of this study are threefold. First, the study seeks to analyze the use of impoliteness strategies in *Ijala* poetry to understand how they are employed to challenge or provoke deities to demonstrate their power. Focusing on poems such as *Ijala* for Ogun, *Ijala* for Orunmila, and *Ijala* for Sango, the research aims to uncover the verbal techniques and speech acts used to challenge the authority of these deities. Second, the study explores how politeness strategies are used to show reverence and establish rapport with the deities. This study aims to reveal the ways in which respectful language and deferential expressions are strategically used to build positive relationships with powerful beings. Third, the study examines the context-dependent nature of both politeness and impoliteness strategies, considering how the choice of strategy is influenced by the deity's nature and the speaker's intent. These objectives are geared toward providing a deeper understanding of the role of language in the spiritual and social lives of the Yoruba people and the significance of oral traditions in maintaining religious and cultural values.

The significance of this study lies in its contribution to both linguistic and anthropological scholarship on Yoruba oral traditions and religious practices. Applying the concepts of politeness and impoliteness to the analysis of *Ijala* poetry provides a fresh perspective on how language functions as a tool for negotiating power and reinforcing social hierarchies in Yoruba traditional religion. It extends the application of politeness theory beyond Western contexts to a non-Western, indigenous setting, thereby enriching our understanding of how different cultures use language to manage relationships and express authority. Furthermore, the study provides insights into the challenge of Yoruba oral literature, revealing its role not just as a form of artistic expression but also as a means of engaging with the divine and exploring the spiritual context. This research also has practical implications for the study of African oral traditions and can serve as a foundation for future studies exploring the intersections of language, culture, and religion in other indigenous contexts.

Literature Review

This section explores the concept of politeness and its theoretical underpinnings, particularly as articulated by Brown and Levinson, and examines its relevance within African oral traditions. It examines how politeness functions as a pragmatic tool for managing social relationships, power dynamics, and face-threatening acts. Drawing on examples from Yoruba *Ijala* poetry and broader African oral practices, the review underscores how politeness and impoliteness strategies are culturally adapted to express reverence, assert authority, and negotiate human-divine relationships in traditional African societies.

The Concept of Politeness and Its Application in African Oral Traditions

Politeness theory, originally developed by Brown and Levinson (1987), provides a framework for understanding how speakers use language to manage social relationships and maintain face in interactions. The theory posits that politeness strategies are employed to mitigate face threats and manage social hierarchies, focusing on the concepts of positive face—the desire to be liked and



admired—and negative face—the desire to be free from imposition (Brown and Levinson 1987). Jegede, Yusuf, Aliyu, and Aladetan (2024) note that politeness is a crucial aspect of human communication that helps maintain social harmony and mitigate potential conflicts. It involves the use of linguistic strategies to show respect, deference, and consideration for others in interactions. Politeness can manifest through positive strategies, which seek to establish rapport and solidarity, or negative strategies, which emphasize respect for personal space and autonomy (Singh et al. 2024). In digital interactions, politeness plays a significant role in shaping discourse, as seen in online debates where courteous language fosters constructive discussions and reduces hostility (Jeong and Chiu 2024).

The concept of politeness is also tied to power dynamics, where individuals of higher status may dictate the level of politeness in communication, as observed in literary interactions and public discourse (Suparno et al. 2023; Jegede 2024a;). Beyond everyday interactions, politeness is often strategically employed in various contexts such as politics, media, and literature. For instance, political debates highlight how gender influences the use and perception of politeness, with female candidates often expected to exhibit more courteous behaviour (Hinck et al. 2023). In journalistic discourse, politeness strategies in headlines help shape public perception of crime and legal proceedings (Jegede 2024b). Additionally, cultural and linguistic factors influence politeness norms, as seen in the use of Singlish particles to navigate face-threatening speech acts in Singaporean English (Lai and Tan 2022). The digital age has further transformed politeness by redefining its function in online interactions, where users negotiate status and power through language choices (Trifiro et al. 2021; Wang 2021). These studies underscore the multifaceted nature of politeness and its evolving role in contemporary communication.

In the context of African oral traditions, including Yoruba *Ijala* poetry, these concepts offer valuable insights into how language is used to explore complex social and religious dynamics. For instance, politeness strategies in Yoruba oral literature often reflect an important balance of deference, respect, and authority, demonstrating how speakers negotiate their social roles and relationships with the divine. Researchers have applied politeness theory to various African languages and oral traditions, revealing that similar principles govern interactions, though the specific strategies and their applications can vary significantly across cultures (Harris 2006; Ndlovu 2018). In the Yoruba context, *Ijala* poetry serves as a prime example of how politeness and impoliteness strategies are significantly incorporated into the domain of oral expression. *Ijala* poetry, traditionally associated with hunters and deities, is rich in linguistic features that reflect the poet's relationship with the deities and the social order (Adegbite 2015). Politeness strategies in *Ijala* often involve praising deities, expressing reverence, and acknowledging their power, which aligns with the broader principles of maintaining positive face and showing respect (Ogunbiyi 2012). Conversely, impoliteness strategies may include challenging or provoking deities, which can be seen as a way to assert the speaker's own authority or test the deity's power (Omoniyi 2011). Applying Brown and Levinson's framework to these poetic forms allows scholars to gain deeper insight into how Yoruba poets use language to explore interactions with the divine and negotiate social hierarchies within their religious and cultural context.

The Role of Oral Poetry in Yoruba Culture and Religion

Ijala poetry is a central component of Yoruba oral literature, significantly tied to both cultural and religious practices. Traditionally performed by hunters, *Ijala* serves as a means of expressing personal achievements, invoking spiritual power, and engaging with deities. This poetic form is characterized by its use of elaborate imagery, rhythmic patterns, and repetitive structures, which are designed to capture the listener's attention and reinforce the poem's thematic elements (Ogunbiyi 2012). The content of *Ijala* often revolves around themes of bravery, divine intervention, and moral lessons, reflecting the values and beliefs of Yoruba society. As such, *Ijala* not only functions as a



form of artistic expression but also plays a vital role in reinforcing cultural identity and social cohesion among the Yoruba people (Adegbite 2015).

In the context of Yoruba traditional religion, *Ijala* poetry holds significant spiritual and ritualistic importance. The Yoruba pantheon includes a diverse array of deities, each associated with specific aspects of life and nature. *Ijala* poems frequently address these deities, invoking their power and seeking their favor or protection. This interaction between humans and the divine is central to Yoruba religious practices, where verbal expressions of praise, supplication, and even challenge are used to manage relationships with the deities (Omoniyi 2011). For instance, poems dedicated to Ogun, the god of iron and war, might emphasize themes of strength and valor, while those dedicated to Orunmila, the deity of wisdom and divination, focus on knowledge and foresight. These thematic elements reflect the deities' attributes and their roles within Yoruba cosmology, showcasing how *Ijala* poetry serves as a medium for both religious devotion and cultural storytelling.

The role of *Ijala* poetry extends beyond mere performance to include its influence on social and ritual practices. Poets, or bards, who perform *Ijala* are often regarded as intermediaries between the human and divine spheres, possessing the ability to articulate complex spiritual concepts and invoke supernatural forces through their craft (Ogunbiyi 2012). The performance of *Ijala* can occur in various settings, including festivals, rituals, and community gatherings, where it functions as a vehicle for communal expression and reinforcement of shared values. Furthermore, the poetic form contributes to the preservation and transmission of oral traditions, ensuring that cultural narratives and religious practices are maintained across generations (Adegbite 2015). Through its dynamic and diverse role, *Ijala* poetry exemplifies the rich interplay between language, culture, and religion in Yoruba society, revealing its significance as a cornerstone of Yoruba oral tradition and spiritual life.

Power Dynamics and Language in Yoruba Traditional Religious Practices

In Yoruba religious practices, language plays a crucial role in managing power dynamics and establishing social hierarchies. The Yoruba pantheon, consisting of numerous deities, each presides over different aspects of life and nature, and interactions with these deities are mediated through carefully crafted language (Adeniran 2014). Yoruba religious discourse often employs linguistic strategies to reflect and negotiate the power relations between humans and the divine. For instance, in rituals and prayers, the use of honorifics, elaborate praise, and supplications function to display reverence and acknowledge the deity's superior status (Ogunbiyi 2012). These linguistic practices are integral to maintaining harmony in religious interactions and ensuring that the appropriate respect is given to the deities, thereby reinforcing the social and spiritual order within the Yoruba community.

In addition to formal reverence, Yoruba oral traditions, including *Ijala* poetry, utilize both politeness and impoliteness strategies to explore the complex power dynamics inherent in religious practice (Adegbite 2015). *Ijala* poetry often reflects the dual nature of the deities, portraying them as both benevolent and fearsome. For example, in addressing Ogun, the deity of iron and warfare, poets might use aggressive language to evoke his formidable power while simultaneously employing respectful phrases to acknowledge his protective role (Omoniyi 2011). This strategic use of language allows the poet to negotiate the boundaries of divine authority and human agency, illustrating the important balance between challenging and appeasing the deities. Through such poetic expressions, the Yoruba community maintains a subtle understanding of their deities' power and the appropriate modes of interaction.

Furthermore, the performance of *Ijala* poetry serves as a social and ritualistic act that reinforces and negotiates power dynamics within Yoruba religious contexts (Harris 2006). The act of reciting poetry in communal and ritual settings allows poets to assert their own authority and position within the community while simultaneously engaging with the divine. The language used in these



performances not only reflects but also shapes the power relations between the poet, the audience, and the deities. Analyzing these interactions provides scholars with insights into how Yoruba oral traditions function as mechanisms for managing and expressing power within both the spiritual sphere and the social structure (Ndlovu 2018). Thus, Yoruba religious practices, through their linguistic and performative elements, offer a rich field for examining how language mediates power and authority in cultural and spiritual contexts.

Language and the Representation of Deities in Yoruba Oral Literature

In Yoruba oral literature, the representation of deities significantly influences language use, reflecting both the characteristics of the deities and the cultural values associated with them. Deities in Yoruba traditional religion are imbued with specific attributes and powers that are articulated through language in various oral forms, including *Ijala* poetry, folk tales, and praise songs (Ogunbiyi 2012). For instance, the language used to address Ogun, the deity of iron and war, often emphasizes strength and aggression, aligning with his martial and protective qualities (Adegbite 2015). The poet's choice of words and expressions serves to evoke Ogun's formidable presence while simultaneously acknowledging his role as a protector. This strategic use of language not only reflects Ogun's divine nature but also reinforces his significance within the Yoruba cosmology and social structure.

Similarly, the depiction of Orunmila, the deity of wisdom and divination, employs language that reveals his intellectual and prophetic attributes (Omoniyi 2011). In *Ijala* poetry dedicated to Orunmila, the language often revolves around themes of knowledge, foresight, and spiritual guidance. Phrases that emphasize Orunmila's role as the "witness to destiny" or the "bringer of dawn" are indicative of the respect and reverence accorded to him as a source of divine wisdom (Adeniran 2014). This linguistic portrayal not only reinforces Orunmila's status as a central figure in Yoruba traditional religion but also emphasizes the cultural value placed on wisdom and insight within the community. Through this subtle language, poets and performers articulate and maintain the deity's revered position in the spiritual and social spheres.

The influence of deities on language use extends to how oral literature shapes and is shaped by the interactions between humans and the divine. In *Ijala* poetry, for example, the language used can both challenge and appease deities, reflecting the challenge of these relationships (Harris 2006). The use of impoliteness strategies, such as invoking the deities' fearsome aspects, serves to test their power or assert the speaker's own authority, while politeness strategies reinforce respect and establish rapport (Ndlovu 2018). This dynamic interplay between respect and challenge in the language reflects the broader Yoruba understanding of deities as powerful and complex beings whose influence permeates all aspects of life. Through these linguistic interactions, Yoruba oral literature provides a rich domain of how language mediates relationships with the divine, shaping both the spiritual experience and the cultural identity of the Yoruba people (Ogunbiyi 2012).

Politeness and Impoliteness Theories: An Overview

Politeness and impoliteness theories are central to the study of pragmatics, exploring how language is used to manage social relationships and navigate power dynamics. The primary proponents of politeness theory are Penelope Brown and Stephen Levinson, whose seminal work *Politeness: Some Universals in Language Usage* was published in 1987. Their theory introduces the concepts of positive and negative face, which are crucial for understanding politeness strategies. Positive face refers to the desire to be liked and admired, while negative face pertains to the need for autonomy and freedom from imposition (Brown and Levinson 1987). According to the theory, speakers employ various politeness strategies to protect both their own and their interlocutor's face, including indirectness, mitigation, and politeness markers. The theory identifies four main strategies for maintaining face: bald on record (direct communication), positive politeness (enhancing social



closeness), negative politeness (minimizing imposition), and off-record (indirect communication) (Brown and Levinson 1987).

In contrast, impoliteness theory, developed by Jonathan Culpeper in the early 2000s, addresses the ways in which language can be used to undermine face and create conflict. Culpeper's work, particularly his 1996 article "*Towards an Anatomy of Impoliteness*" and subsequent book *Impoliteness: Using Language to Cause Offense* (2005), expands the understanding of how language can function not only to maintain but to challenge or disrupt social harmony. Impoliteness theory categorizes various strategies used to affront face, such as direct insults, derogatory remarks, and aggressive speech acts. These strategies are designed to diminish the recipient's positive face or impose on their negative face, often reflecting power struggles or social conflict (Culpeper 1996, 2005). The theory is notable for its focus on the intentional use of language to cause offense and disrupt social norms, providing a framework for analyzing conflictual interactions in various contexts.

Both theories have broad applications across different fields, including sociolinguistics, communication studies, and cultural analysis. Politeness theory is used to analyze how individuals navigate social hierarchies and maintain relationships in contexts ranging from everyday conversations to formal negotiations (Holmes 1995). It has been particularly influential in understanding cross-cultural communication, where politeness norms can vary significantly between cultures (Scollon and Scollon 2001). Impoliteness theory, on the other hand, is applied to examine conflict and power dynamics in interactions, including political discourse, media communications, and interpersonal relationships (Culpeper 2005). Both theories offer valuable insights into how language functions as a tool for managing social relationships, whether through enhancing harmony or creating discord.

Methodology

The study employed a qualitative research design to explore the use of politeness and impoliteness strategies in *Ijala* poetry within Yoruba traditional religion. Data for the study were drawn from three selected *Ijala* poems dedicated to the Yoruba deities Ogun, Orunmila, and Sango. These poems were chosen based on their prominence in Yoruba oral tradition and their representative nature of the genre. A purposive sampling technique was utilized to select these poems, ensuring that they encompass a range of strategies relevant to the study's objectives. The selection criterion included the prominence of the deity in Yoruba traditional religion, the richness of the linguistic content, and the availability of well-documented versions of the poems. Data collection involved transcribing the poems from audio recordings and written texts into a digital format. The collected data were then subjected to qualitative content analysis. This analysis focused on identifying and categorizing instances of politeness and impoliteness strategies within the poems, examining how these strategies were used to challenge, revere, or negotiate relationships with the deities. Specific attention was given to the context in which these strategies were employed, the linguistic techniques used, and the impact of these strategies on the portrayal of power dynamics. The findings were interpreted in relation to the broader Yoruba religious and cultural context, providing insights into the role of language in managing power and respect within this tradition.

Results

This section analyzes the politeness and impoliteness strategies in three selected *Ijala* poems: *Ijala* for Ogun, *Ijala* for Orunmila, and *Ijala* for Sango. Each poem is examined for the use of speech acts, verbal exchanges, and context to understand how these strategies serve as mechanisms of power within the Yoruba religious context. Three major findings are drawn from each *Ijala*: (1) the use of impoliteness strategies to challenge or provoke deities, (2) the employment of politeness to show reverence and establish rapport, and (3) the context-dependence of both strategies influenced by the deity's nature and the speaker's intent.



1. *Ijala* for Ogun (Òríkì Ògún)

Excerpt 1:

"Ògún májèjèjé, Ògún alágbèdè-mérin-máyé"

("Ogun who drinks blood, Ogun, the blacksmith of the four corners of the earth")

This excerpt uses an impoliteness strategy by emphasizing Ogun's fearsome and destructive traits. The phrase "Ogun who drinks blood" is a bold invocation of the deity's violent and ferocious nature, portraying him as a force capable of extreme brutality. Focusing on this aspect, the speaker aims to challenge Ogun, using aggressive language to provoke the deity into asserting his power and confirming his authority. This impoliteness strategy not only reveals Ogun's raw strength but also suggests a relationship between the speaker and Ogun that is complex, possibly marked by fear, respect, or a need to witness the deity's power in action. The reference to Ogun as the "blacksmith of the four corners of the earth" adds to his omnipresence and supreme authority, reinforcing his status as an influential and formidable figure in Yoruba cosmology.

Excerpt 2:

"Ògún nì í jó k'ó má pa olójú méjèjèjì"

("Ogun dances not to kill the innocent")

In this excerpt, the speaker uses a politeness strategy to show respect and reverence for Ogun by emphasizing his sense of justice and moral integrity. The phrase "Ogun dances not to kill the innocent" portrays the deity as not only powerful but also wise and discerning in his actions. This acknowledgment of Ogun's capacity for controlled destruction creates an image of a deity who, despite his immense power, exercises discretion and refrains from unnecessary violence. revealing Ogun's restraint allows the speaker to establish a respectful relationship, appeal to his fairness, and align with his divine principles of justice. This expression of deference also works to cultivate rapport between the speaker and Ogun, portraying the deity as approachable through righteous conduct and reverence. This politeness strategy recognizes Ogun's dual nature as both a fearsome and a just protector, fostering mutual respect.

Excerpt 3:

"Àjàlù méjì, Ìjà ònà kílí fí í ẹ̀ méjì"

("Twin disaster, the road's fight cannot last twice")

This excerpt illustrates the context-dependent nature of both politeness and impoliteness strategies, revealing Ogun's complex role as both a protector and a destroyer. The phrase "Twin disaster" evokes Ogun's capacity for causing calamities, revealing his formidable power. At the same time, "the road's fight cannot last twice" suggests the inevitability of Ogun's decisive actions, which may either end conflict or further his destructive force. Depending on the speaker's relationship with Ogun and the context in which the statement is made, this phrase could serve different purposes. As a form of politeness, it could be an appeal to Ogun's sense of mercy, recognizing his ability to bring swift resolution and avoiding further conflict. Conversely, it can be interpreted as a veiled impoliteness, challenging Ogun's unpredictability and urging him to act wisely, preventing repeated disaster. This duality showcases the strategic use of language in managing relationships with deities in Yoruba cosmology.

2. *Ijala* for Orunmila (Òríkì Òrúnmìlà)

Excerpt 4:

"Òrúnmìlà, ẹ̀léríí ipín, Ọ̀ba tó ń wọ̀ bàtà kùkùrú tíí fò léré"

("Orunmila, witness to destiny, the king who wears short sandals but leaps in style")



This line exemplifies a politeness strategy through the expression of admiration and respect toward Orunmila, the deity of wisdom and divination in Yoruba cosmology. Referring to Orunmila as "ẹlẹrì ípín" (witness to destiny) positions him as a powerful overseer of human fates, acknowledging his omniscient and guiding role. The second part of the phrase, "Ọba tó ń wọ bàtà kùkùrú tí fò lẹrẹ" (the king who wears short sandals but leaps in style), enhances this reverence by revealing Orunmila's unique combination of humility and excellence. The imagery of short sandals suggests simplicity and modesty, while the description of his leaping in style conveys grace and agility, symbolizing his ability to transcend earthly limitations with ease and wisdom. Using these respectful descriptors strengthens the speaker's bond with the deity, appealing to his favor through admiration and deference.

Excerpt 5:

"Eni ò mò ó tàbí ọ̀dàkà, kò lè dáfá fún ara rẹ"
("He who does not know him cannot divine for himself")

This excerpt demonstrates an impoliteness strategy by indirectly challenging those who lack reverence or understanding of Orunmila, the deity of wisdom. The phrase emphasizes the futility of attempting to engage in divination without acknowledging or fully grasping Orunmila's wisdom and power. Stating that "he who does not know him cannot divine for himself" reinforces Orunmila's authority as the ultimate source of knowledge and insight. The impoliteness here is subtle but effective, as it belittles the ignorance of those who might try to bypass Orunmila's guidance. This approach asserts the deity's superiority, emphasising the importance of respect, understanding, and adherence to the divine order. In essence, the phrase not only reveals Orunmila's indispensable role in divination but also serves as a reprimand to those who dare to neglect or underestimate his significance.

Excerpt 6:

"Àgbà tí ń fì ọ̀kìtì-òye tọ ojúmọ̀ rọ"
("The elder who brings the dawn with the cloak of wisdom")

This line demonstrates the context-dependent nature of politeness strategies. In contexts where wisdom and knowledge are highly valued, the phrase shows reverence to Orunmila by calling him the "elder who brings the dawn with the cloak of wisdom," emphasizing his role as a guiding force of enlightenment and understanding. Associating him with the dawn, a symbol of new beginnings and illumination, enhances Orunmila's status as a source of wisdom and foresight. This usage establishes a respectful tone, acknowledging the deity's intellectual superiority. However, this politeness can also serve as a subtle challenge to others, urging them to recognize their own limitations in comparison to Orunmila's vast knowledge. It places the responsibility on those less wise to defer to his judgment, reinforcing both his esteemed position and the expectation of humility from others in his presence.

3. *Ijala* for Sango (Ọ̀ríkì Ẹ̀sàngó)

Excerpt 7:

"Ẹ̀sàngó Olúkòso, Olúgbóná á yèréyè"
("Sango Olukoso, The Lord who spreads fire gracefully")

This phrase exemplifies a politeness strategy by glorifying Sango's mastery over fire and his imposing nature. Referring to him as "The Lord who spreads fire gracefully" reveals not only his control over a dangerous element but also the elegance with which he wields his power. The juxtaposition of fire, typically seen as a force of destruction, with the word "gracefully" emphasises



Sango's divine control and precision. This elevates his status and evokes admiration, establishing a tone of reverence and respect for the deity's authority. Emphasizing his ability to handle power with grace fosters a respectful relationship, acknowledging Sango's might while also praising his balance of strength and refinement. This portrayal encourages deference and awe from the audience, reinforcing Sango's place as a revered and powerful figure in Yoruba cosmology.

Excerpt 8:

"Sàngó o! A má gbérù àrá kó nílé"

("Sango! Who hurls bolts of lightning without resting")

This line demonstrates an impoliteness strategy by provoking Sango and emphasizing his unyielding nature. The description of Sango as one who "hurls bolts of lightning without resting" reveals his relentless power and aggression, portraying him as a deity of unstoppable force. This verbal challenge subtly dares Sango to prove his might, invoking his characteristic anger and ferocity. Drawing attention to his ceaseless activity, the speaker both reveres and provokes Sango, motivating him to take action. This approach can be seen as confrontational, where the speaker's acknowledgment of Sango's power is tempered with a bold challenge to unleash it. The impoliteness lies in the implicit dare, encouraging Sango to respond to the description of his tireless efforts, and in doing so, the speaker acknowledges Sango's superiority while also engaging in a provocative exchange typical of Yoruba oral traditions.

Excerpt 9:

"Bí a bá mò, àà rẹ̀, àà tó iwà lọ́ra"

("If we know his way, we shall tread with care")

This excerpt illustrates the context-dependent nature of politeness, particularly when dealing with powerful deities like Sango. The line conveys a cautious strategy that hinges on understanding Sango's temperament. Stating, "If we know his way, we shall tread with care," the speaker shows deference, implying that one must approach Sango with awareness and respect to avoid provoking his wrath. Depending on the context, this could either be interpreted as a respectful acknowledgment of Sango's unpredictable and fierce nature, or it might serve as a subtle critique, implying that Sango's volatility necessitates careful behavior. This duality reveals the challenge of Yoruba oral traditions, where politeness and impoliteness can shift based on the speaker's intention and the circumstances. The speaker's awareness of Sango's nature allows for the strategic use of language to either mitigate conflict or respectfully engage with his authority.

Discussion of Findings

The analysis of the selected *Ìjálá* poems—*Ìjálá* for Ogun, Orunmila, and Sango—illustrates the strategic deployment of politeness and impoliteness within the discourse of power in Yoruba traditional religion. These strategies are not merely rhetorical but deeply embedded within socio-religious frameworks, reflecting the dynamic negotiation of reverence, authority, and identity. The first major finding is the functional use of impoliteness strategies to provoke or challenge the deities, thereby prompting them to affirm their power. For instance, in *Ìjálá* for Ogun, the invocation "Ògún májèjèjé, Ògún alágbèdè-mérin-máyé" ("Ogun who drinks blood, Ogun, the blacksmith of the four corners of the earth") exemplifies what Harris (2006) terms "ritualised confrontation" in African discourse. This phrase aggressively foregrounds Ogun's violent and assertive persona, positioning the speaker as one who dares the deity to reveal his potency. Similarly, in *Ìjálá* for Orunmila, the assertion "Ènì ọ̀ mò ọ̀ tàbí ọ̀dàkà, kò lè dáfá fún ara rẹ̀" ("He who does not know him cannot divine for himself") reflects a dismissive stance toward the ignorant, reaffirming Orunmila's epistemic authority. This aligns with the observations by Singh et al. (2024) that impoliteness strategies often reinforce hierarchical boundaries and role legitimacy in discourse. Likewise, in *Ìjálá* for Sango, the phrase "Sàngó o! A má gbérù àrá kó nílé" ("Sango! Who hurls bolts of lightning without resting")



serves as a performative provocation, daring the deity to validate his mythic aggression. This usage aligns with findings by Jegede et al. (2024) who argue that impoliteness in ritual discourse functions not as a breakdown of decorum but as a rhetorical strategy for eliciting divine response and asserting proximity to power.

The second major finding reveals that politeness strategies are central to establishing reverence and maintaining relational harmony with the deities. These strategies help frame the speaker as respectful, discerning, and aligned with divine attributes. In *Ìjálá* for Ogun, the phrase “Ògún ní í jó k’ó má pa olójú méjèèjì” (“Ogun dances not to kill the innocent”) reflects what Suparno et al. (2023) describe as “deferential politeness,” where power is acknowledged but framed within a moral lens. Ogun is presented not merely as powerful, but as just—an attribute that invites veneration. In *Ìjálá* for Orunmila, the line “Òrúnmìlà, ẹlẹ́ríí ipín, Ọba tó ń wọ bàtà kúkúrú tíí fò lére” (“Orunmila, witness to destiny, the king who wears short sandals but leaps in style”) employs poetic elegance to elevate the deity’s wisdom and agility, aligning with the positive politeness strategies outlined by Jeong and Chiu (2024), which build solidarity and shared values between the interlocutor and the subject. In Sango’s praise, “Sàngó Olúkòso, Olúgbòná á yèréyè” (“Sango Olukoso, The Lord who spreads fire gracefully”), the deity’s fearsome attribute—fire—is softened through aesthetic admiration, reflecting the strategic balancing of respect and caution. This mirrors Jegede’s (2024) observation that in religious discourse, politeness not only mitigates social distance but also reaffirms ritual and moral order.

The third finding concerns the contextual flexibility of politeness and impoliteness strategies, which are shaped by the nature of the deity and the speaker’s pragmatic intent. This dimension reinforces the argument by Doni Suparno et al. (2023) that politeness must be redefined as situationally and culturally contingent, particularly in contexts where power, reverence, and spirituality intersect. For example, the *Ìjálá* line for Ogun, “Àjàlù méjì, Ìjà ònà kii fi í ẹ méjì” (“Twin disaster, the road’s fight cannot last twice”) is a polyvalent utterance. Depending on tone and context, it may function as a warning, a lament, or a plea—thus oscillating between impoliteness and cautionary reverence. Similarly, “Àgbà tí ń fi òkìtì-òye tó ojúmọ̀ rọ̀” (“The elder who brings the dawn with the cloak of wisdom”), addressed to Orunmila, is both praise and an indirect reminder of human limitations. Such instances support the findings by Harris (2006) and Adedina (2024) that African verbal arts frequently rely on ambiguity and duality as communicative resources for navigating status and power. In the case of Sango, the line “Bí a bá mò àà rẹ̀, àà tó iwà lọ̀ra” (“If we know his way, we shall tread with care”) articulates strategic caution. This aligns with Doni et al.’s (2023) conception of politeness as “an anticipatory act,” where speakers navigate unpredictable authority figures through pragmatic mitigation.

Consequently, this study affirms that Yoruba *Ìjálá* poetry employs politeness and impoliteness not merely as stylistic choices but as mechanisms for negotiating power, deference, and identity within the religious cosmos. The invocation of impoliteness to challenge or awaken divine forces parallels the Yoruba belief in reciprocal agency—where human invocation invites divine response. Conversely, the strategic use of politeness affirms social and cosmic hierarchies, reinforcing the centrality of order, discipline, and respect. In line with Adedina’s (2024) exploration of retributive justice in Yoruba cosmology, these strategies reflect an ethical framework where speech acts have both ritual and moral consequences. This analysis contributes to the expanding scholarship on African pragmatics, particularly in its attention to the intersection of tradition, orality, and power. This study also situates Yoruba *Ìjálá* within global discussions on politeness theory, while affirming its cultural specificity and enduring rhetorical sophistication.



Conclusion

This study has examined the use of politeness and impoliteness strategies in *Ijala* poetry as mechanisms of power within the context of Yoruba traditional religion. Through the analysis of three selected *Ijala* poems—*Ijala* for Ogun, *Ijala* for Orunmila, and *Ijala* for Sango—it was revealed that these strategies are crucial for negotiating relationships with deities, asserting authority, and reinforcing social hierarchies. Impoliteness strategies were found to challenge or provoke deities to demonstrate their strength, while politeness strategies were used to show reverence and establish rapport. Both strategies were highly context-dependent, shaped by the nature of the deity and the speaker's intent, revealing the challenge of Yoruba oral traditions. The study emphasises the significance of *Ijala* poetry not only as a cultural expression but also as a dynamic tool for managing power dynamics within religious discourse. These findings contribute to a broader understanding of how language functions in the religious and cultural practices of the Yoruba people, providing valuable insights into the interplay of respect, power, and spirituality in their worldview. Further research could explore these dynamics in other forms of Yoruba oral literature and religious practices.

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APPENDIX

ÒRÍKÌ ÒGÚN

(Praise Poetry for Ogun, the God of Iron and War)

Ògún làkáàyè,
 Ọ̀ṣin Mọ̀lẹ̀, ẹnì tí gbogbo ọ̀nà n bọ sí,
 Ọ̀gún májèèjé,
 Ọ̀gún alágbèdẹ-mérin-máyé,
 Kò sí ohun tí a fí irin ẹ́ tí Ogun kì í mọ́.

Ọ̀gún aláda méjì,
 Ó fí ọ̀kan sàńko, ó fí ọ̀kan yèna,
 Ọ̀jọ́ Ogun n tí ọ̀kẹ̀ bó,
 Asọ iná lo mú bọra,
 Èwù èjẹ̀ ló wọ́ lówó.

Ọ̀gún onílẹ̀ owó,
 Olóna ọ́lá,
 Ọ̀gún onílẹ̀ kòngòn kòngòn ọ̀run,
 Olómi ní ilé, f'ẹ́jẹ̀ wẹ́.
 Olàsọ ní ilé, f'ímọ́-kímọ́ bọra.

Ọ̀gún apon lẹ̀yìn ijù,
 Ẹ̀gbẹ̀ lẹ̀yìn ọ̀mọ kan,
 Ọ̀gún méje lógun mi:
 Ọ̀gún Alárá ní n gb'aja,
 Ọ̀gún Onírẹ́ á gb'agbò,
 Ọ̀gún Ìkòlẹ́ á gb'agbìn,
 Ọ̀gún Ìlà á gb'èsùn isù,
 Ọ̀gún Akírìn á gb'awọ́ agbò,
 Ọ̀gún Elémòndò, ẹ̀ran àhùn ní jẹ́,
 Ọ̀gún Mákindé tí dógun lẹ̀yìn odi.

Bí o bá gbà tápà, a gb'abòkì,
 A gbà ùkùùkù, a gbà kẹ̀mbèrì.
 Àjàlù méjì,



Ìjà ònà kílí fí í ẹ̀ méjì.
Ògún ní í jó, kó má pa olójú méjèèjì.

Ẹ̀jẹ̀ níbo là tí gbé pàdé Ògún?
A pàdé Ògún níbi ìjà,
A pàdé ẹ̀ níbi itá,
A pàdé ẹ̀ níbi agbára ẹ̀jẹ̀ tí ń sà,
Agbára ẹ̀jẹ̀ tí ń déni lórùn bí omi àgò.

Bómọ̀dé bá ń d' alẹ̀,
Kí ó má ẹ̀ dá Ògún!
Ọ̀rọ̀ Ògún le e wò,
Ará Ògún kàn: gò! gò! gò!

ÒRÍKÌ ÒRÚNMÌLÀ

(Praise Poetry for Orunmila – the Deity of Wisdom and Divination)

Òrúnmìlà, ẹ̀lẹ̀rìí ipín,
Ọ̀ba tó ń wọ̀ bàtà kùkùrú tíí fò lére,
Alákòóso ayé àti ọ̀run,
Ará Ilé-Ifẹ̀, ọ̀lọ̀jọ̀ tí kò sẹ̀yìn nímọ̀.

Èni ò mò ó tàbí ọ̀dàkà, kò lè dáfá fún ara ẹ̀,
Òrúnmìlà tí ń ráyé wáyé, tó mọ̀ ohun gbogbo sáájú,
Àgbà tí ń fí ọ̀kìtì-òye tó ojúmọ̀ rọ̀,
Asẹ̀yọ́rí ọ̀mọ̀ aráyé, apeṣere ohun rere.

Alábáyọ̀ tí kò gbagbé ẹ̀ni kankan,
Alàgbọ̀n sísẹ̀, ọ̀lọ̀gbọ̀n sòro,
Ìràwọ̀ àtẹ̀lẹ̀wọ̀ ẹ̀ni tí ń mọ̀ ojọ̀,
Onímọ̀ ojọ̀ tí kò tii dé,
A kì í dá Ifá, ká fọ̀; Ifá a dá, ó dáa.

Baba àgbọ̀n, onípa àṣẹ̀,
Ajùmòbí ọ̀run tó mọ̀ ipò aráyé,
Akọ̀là ọ̀rọ̀, àtẹ̀lẹ̀wọ̀ ayé,
Tí ń kó gbogbo àṣẹ̀ sórí ojú Ifá.

Aláwò Mẹ̀rindínlógún,
Tí ó mọ̀ orí, tí ó mọ̀ iwà,
Tí ń sọ ohun tí kì í hàn sí ojú,
A dá ọ̀mọ̀ lójú, kó lè bọ̀ lórí.

Òrúnmìlà, ẹ̀ni tí Olódùmarè fí ọ̀gbọ̀n jù lọ,
Ẹ̀lẹ̀rìí ipín, akóni alákiyèsí,
Baba tó ń sọ ohun tó burúkú di rere,
Oníwà pẹ̀lẹ̀ tó mọ̀ ibi tí orí yíò yọ̀.

Kábíyèsí ọ̀run, asọ̀rò-ma-fọ̀,
Baba àtọ̀runwa, olùtọ̀ ipinnu aráyé,
Èdùmarè gbà á láàyè ká fí ọ̀gbọ̀n sàkóso,
Òrúnmìlà, kó bá wa dáfá rere.



ÒRÌKÌ SÀNGÓ

(Praise Poetry for Sàngó, the Deity of Thunder and Justice)

Sàngó Olúkòso,
Olúgbóná á yèréyé,
Ọba tí ń jà lójú àrà,
Aláṣe tó ń gbóná ilé ayé,
Tí ń ju àrà, tí ń da mánámáná.

Sàngó ọkan t'Ólórún dá,
Arińtẹlẹ ọrun, ẹni tí kò pé kúrò nípò,
Ọba tí ń jà lójú ẹfúùfù,
Ọmọ Ọya, akọ tí kì í fọrọ ẹrẹ.

Sàngó o!
A má gbérù àrà kó nílẹ,
Ọba tó ń yí igi dánígbo,
Ọba tó mọ ibi tí ọjò gbẹyà,
Ẹniyàn àtàwọn ọrun ń bẹrù rẹ.

Tẹmí l'Ọrun, mọ bẹbẹ l'ẹsẹ rẹ,
Bí a bá mọ àà rẹ, àà tó iwà lóra,
Ọba aláṣe, ẹni tí ibànújẹ kì í tán lẹyìn rẹ,
Ọba tó mọyì, tó mọ ètò, tó mọ ilànà.

Sàngó, ajé àrà ló l'ètẹ,
Tí ń wọ aṣọ pupa bí ẹjẹ,
Tí ń gbá àrà gẹgẹ bí ọba tó dákẹ,
Tí ara ń sán bí omi ojú ọrun.

Sàngó, kábíyèsí,
Adájọ ayé àti ọrun,
Tí kò sọrọ láláì gbìyànjú òtítọ.
Tí kò fọwọ bọnà, tó ń fẹsùn wí níwájú Olódùmarè.