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1 Introduction¹

Praise poetry is a well-known and culturally significant form of oral literature in Zimbabwe and other parts of Africa and beyond.

In fact, as Ruth Finnegan states, praise poetry, also known as panegyric, is one of the most common and elaborate poetic genres on the African continent (Finnegan 2012: 111). She especially highlights its prominence in

¹ The poems, performances and linguistic practices discussed in this paper are based on research in Zimbabwe in July 2018 as well as on published sources and literature on praise poetry in Zimbabwe. The former includes interviews, group conversations and discussions as well as ethnographic methods, in particular participant observation (especially with the performance group *Zim Totems* founded by Chiremba Hwesa Masango). I want to express my deepest gratitude to the speakers of chiShona and isiNdebele who have shared their knowledge on praise poetry, totems, ancestors and related cultural practices with me and commented on various preliminary thoughts, in particular Mapfumo B. Tinago, Venna Tinago, Chiremba Hwesa Masango, Shiloh P. Mafukidze, Helen Kauma and Bryan Kauma. I thank the Global South Studies Center, University of Cologne for sponsoring and supporting my research. I am indebted to Axel Fanego Palat, Anne Storch and Janine Traber for their helpful comments and to Mary Chambers for proofreading the text.

Southern Bantu/Sintu² language practices and states that praise poems constitute a specialized and complex form of verbal art in Southern Africa (ibid.: 121).

ChiShona and isiNdebele, the two main African languages spoken in Zimbabwe, exhibit rich forms and performative practices of praise poetry that will be discussed in this contribution. ChiShona is the most widespread Sintu language (or language cluster) in Zimbabwe and serves, alongside the colonial language English, as a *lingua franca* in the country.³ It is comprised of several regional varieties (often referred to as 'dialects'), including chiZezuru, chiKorekore, chiManyika, chiNdau and chiKaranga. However the term 'Shona' as an umbrella term for the dynamic varieties spoken in Zimbabwe is not unproblematic and is rejected by several linguists and speakers.⁴ Zimbabwean isiNdebele (often referred to as 'Northern isiNdebele') is another Sintu language spoken in the country. It is part of the Nguni group and closely related to isiZulu, from which it branched off as King Mzilikazi migrated with his followers in the early 19th century. This article deals with Zimbabwean isiNdebele, which is related to, but distinct from South African isiNdebele varieties.⁵

The reciting of praise poetry fulfills various functions and is used as a form of ritual

communication in a number of culturally significant domains such as giving thanks, greetings, courting and love, respecting in-laws, engagement and marriage negotiations, and funerals, among others. Moreover, it is also a form of recounting history and local or regional histories and can be regarded as a mnemonic technique. Praise poetry is deeply rooted in cultural and spiritual beliefs; it praises clans and ancestors by evoking the *mitupo* ('totems', chiShona) and *izibongo* ('clan names', isiNdebele). These cultural practices are also connected to taboos: for example, members of the same clan who share the same totem are not allowed to marry. While the underlying concepts are different in Shona and Ndebele culture, the practices exhibit significant parallels and also influence each other through cultural and linguistic contacts.

This paper tries to disentangle some of these complexities and to shed light on the practices in context. While there are a number of popular publications on totems and praise poetry in Zimbabwe, there are just a few academic publications available, mostly on chiShona praise poetry. This paper seeks to contribute to the study of praise poetry by describing the cultural genre from an anthropological perspective and through the lens of ritual communication. In describing the practice and its

² The term *Bantu* is commonly used by many linguists, but has a problematic history in parts of Southern Africa, especially South Africa. While the term is widely used in large parts of (Eastern and Southern) Africa with its original linguistic meaning 'people', it acquired negative and racist connotations during the colonial apartheid regime with its dehumanizing policies and ideologies of categorizing and segregating people. Many South African linguists prefer the term *Sintu* for the large group of languages spoken in eastern and southern Africa, which is also adopted in this paper.

³ The number of speakers is estimated at about 10 million, but this figure depends on which varieties are included in the count.

⁴ For a critical discussion of the term and its establishment in the context of colonial and missionary linguistics see Makoni, Brutt-Griffler and Mashiri (2007).

⁵ While Zimbabwean isiNdebele is often referred to as 'Northern isiNdebele' and is also characterized by internal variation, the picture becomes more complex when including South African isiNdebele, which comprises three main varieties: the Ndzundza variety, on which the official South African Standard isiNdebele is based, spoken in the western parts of the Mpumalanga province and in and around Pretoria/Tshwane, the closely related Manala variety and the Sindebele variety spoken in the Limpopo province. The latter is characterized by language contact with Sotho-Tswana varieties (Axel Fanego Palat, personal communication).

uses and contexts, the paper compares chiShona and isiNdebele and therefore also contributes to an understanding of oral literature and ritual communication in a typological perspective. Furthermore, while popular accounts such as newspaper articles (e.g. Sekai 2014) bemoan the loss of this cultural practice, there are also new and continually developing usages and contexts in which totems/clans and their praises play significant roles. This will also be discussed in this contribution.

Basso and Senft's (2009) account of ritual communication offers an anthropological-linguistic framework for the study of Zimbabwean praise poetry, that looks at the linguistic practice as multimodal performance, as embedded in and simultaneously creating cultural knowledge, and as characterized as artful, formulaic, repetitive and following local aesthetics (Basso and Senft 2009: 1).⁶ This approach seems to fit perfectly to address praise poetry in Zimbabwe as it brings together many relevant components of the phenomenon under study and places them in a frame of cultural context, pragmatics and communication.

The main objective of this paper is to describe praise poetry in chiShona and isiNdebele as forms of ritual communication. This will shed light on the performative linguistic practice and the language of praise poetry as well as on its role within cultural communication in a changing society, and as ritual activities which "instantiate, represent and memorialize" (Tavárez, 2022: 197). The paper will also reflect on differences and commonalities between chiShona and isiNdebele forms of praise poetry.

The next section will introduce chiShona and isiNdebele praise poetry in more detail and reflect on its various contexts of use. This will also include pragmatic issues such as personalized forms of praise and will shed light on the underlying ethnohistoric and cultural concepts. Section three will focus on the language of praise poetry and look at two examples of praise poems: one in chiShona and one in isiNdebele. The section will shed light on linguistic features and rhetorical/literary devices in the verbal art. Praise poetry as ritual communication is the theme of section 4. As an approach to praise poetry, ritual communication offers an excellent perspective to discuss various functions of the practice in its cultural context, looking at aspects such as anticipation, indexicality, recontextualization and change.

2 ChiShona and isiNdebele praise poetry in Zimbabwe in its cultural context

Praise poetry in Zimbabwe is a performative practice that is closely connected to the social structure of the cultural groups involved, in particular clans and families. Clans as a social structure are common among Suntu-speaking communities of eastern and southern Africa. They serve a number of purposes with regard to social organization, cultural memory and ritual communication. However, it should be highlighted that clans and family structures are not static entities but characterized through social mobility, migration and other dynamics.

In chiShona, *madetembedzo* is the name for what is called praise poetry in English, while it is referred to as *izibongo* in isiNdebele.⁷ In some

⁶ In this regard, ritual communication refers to diverse forms of communicative practices that are ritualized in various contexts including special occasions as well as daily life. Basso and Senft's (2009) book presents anthropological-linguistic perspectives at forms of ritualized communication that examine language practices in their cultural contexts.

⁷ Due to the imbalances in academic works which feature chiShona praise poetry more prominently than isiNdebele (or other Zimbabwean languages), the elaboration of chiShona practices takes up more space in this section.

instances, in dictionaries and other publications, praise poetry is also referred to as 'praise songs'. Praise poetry is a complex cultural practice that includes a number of aspects such as names for genres, totems, clans and specific practices, and expressing respect and praise through a number of linguistic and non-linguistic communicative acts that often follow ritualized patterns of interaction (including the reactions they anticipate) and are part of the shared cultural knowledge of the group. In this regard, the power of names and proper nouns often have distinct referential properties in ritual speech practices, especially in terms of the historical narratives, social orders and social differences as well as identities they refer to and represent (Tavárez 2022: 201).

Among the maShona and the amaNdebele, as elaborated in their praise poetry as well, the history of the clan in its natural and social environment plays an important role with regard to the (perceived and prescribed) shared clan identity and the cultural knowledge shared by the members, which is based on the (accepted version of the) history of the ancestors, including migration, settlement, wars and overcoming other obstacles. The clan history often features in the elaborate versions of the clan praise poetry, especially in isiNdebele praise poetry, which strongly focuses on the leaders and founders of clans or on kings. This is quite common in (African) praise poetry, as Finnegan (2012: 111) argues: "It seems to go with a particular ethos, a stress on royal or aristocratic power, and an admiration for military achievement". In this sense, Southern African praise poems usually contain a narrative element that evokes the shared history of a clan. Pongweni

(1996: 27) elucidates: "There is a sense in which such glorification can be viewed as a celebration of the clan's survival in what was obviously a bare-knuckled fight against all the insurmountable problems that a hostile environment presented". In this regard, there is also a connection between ritual and authority, whereas praise poetry enacts and celebrates authority in social relations rooted in cultural history by calling on ancestors and clans, producing and reifying authoritative ontological models about the cosmos (see Tavárez 2022).

In chiShona, there are different types of *madetembedzo* which have different names, contexts and purposes. Fortune and Hodza (1974: 65) identify the clan/totem praise poetry, called *nhetembo dzorudzi* ('praises of the clan') as the most renowned form. Musiyiwa (2003) refers to this type of clan praise as *madetembedzo edzinza/rudzi* ('clan praise poetry'). Other types of chiShona praise poetry include personal praise (*madetembedzo okurumbidza munhu*) and boasts (*madetembedzo kuzvirumbidza*) as well as various sub types (Musiyiwa 2003).⁸ Another important genre of praise poetry is the domain of love, marriage and sexuality. While totem praise poetry can be used in that domain, there are other love poems which are recited in such contexts. The oral performance poetry for love and courtship includes *madetembedzo okupfimbana* ('courtship praises') and *zvirevereve zvomugudza* (men) and *madanha omugudza* (women) which are regarded as 'praises for love-making' and which praise the partner for sexual performance (Chimhundu 1995: 148; Hodza and Fortune 1979: 289-338). The great variety and repertoire of poems in this domain illustrates the important link between sexuality, marriage

⁸ For a more detailed typology of praise poetry of the maShona, see Musiyiwa (2003), Fortune and Hodza (1974, 1979).

and ancestors/totems which is fundamental in chiShona philosophy and culture (Chimhundu 1995: 149).

Clan praise performance poetry focuses on praising the *mitupo* ('totems', SG.: *mutupo*), which stand for the clan and address all clan members, the ancestors as well as the living. The maShona are historically comprised of various groups that settled in certain areas and their clans play a vital role in kinship, political and social relations. Every clan is represented by a *mutupo*, a 'totem'. Nyamutswa (2018: 1) states that the totemic system (*zvomitupo*) in chiShona cultures consists of the totem (*mutupo*), the principal praise name (*chidawo*), the totemic animal (*mhuka inoerwa*), and the totemic praise poem (*nhetembo yomutupo*, cf. alternate names above). In chiShona, totems are usually animals such as a lion, monkey, mouse or eland, as well as human or animal body parts such as the heart or the leg. Mugovera (2017) highlights the reciprocal relationship between the clan and its totem, as the clan possesses characteristics of the totem and the totem "contributes to the survival of the clan". This implies that members of the clan are not allowed to eat the totemic animal related to their clan, but rather protect it, which is also seen as a contribution to "preserving the balance of the ecosystem" (ibid.). This turned out to be a relevant point in my research, as my interview partners also highlighted the respect for the totem and the balance of nature expressed through the totemic system. The totems also serve to construct and stabilize in-group solidarity within the clan, as they provide characteristics that stand for the whole clan, play a vital role in

processes of socialization within the clan and determine forms of addressing, naming and ritual communication. They tie the group of the living to their ancestors and shared history and hence provide a strong sense of belonging. Moreover, to address someone by his/her totem or totemic praise name is an expression of utmost respect. Nyamutswa (2018: 1) elucidates:

The totemic system strings together people of the same genetic identity and provides a spiritual connection between an individual, family, clansmen and the ancestors. When someone is praised using the totemic system, the praise reverberates through that chain. Addressing someone by their totem, praise name or totemic symbol is the utmost show of respect among Zimbabweans. The person being addressed feels respected, inspired, encouraged and motivated. One feels that they are a great ancestor reincarnate. Ancestors are held in high esteem. An address by the totem is more respected than any other honorifics that one may think of such as the British term Sir, an address by name or surname.

In isiNdebele, the shared history and ancestry of the group is of particular importance and features prominently in the clan praise poetry. The breaking off of King Mzilikazi and his followers of the Khumalo clan from the Zulu kingdom under King Shaka in the early 19th century, the wars and battles with various groups, their migration and subsequent settlement in present-day Zimbabwe is well documented in the oral history of the amaNdebele, and their praise poetry consti-

tutes an important part of that history (see for instance Khumalo 2003).⁹ In fact, the praise poetry *izibongo* usually focuses on the kings and leaders (and not on totems) who stand out in the history of the amaNdebele. Their praise poetry is therefore also referred to as ‘royal poetry’ (see Musiyiwa 2003) and the poems that praise outstanding leaders such as King Mzilikazi or King Lobengula are often recited by a special person, the poet or praise singer called *imbongi* (Matshakayile-Ndlovu 2003). Highlighting important aspects of shared history through praise poetry can be regarded as selective deployment of metasemiosis which produces epistemological framing that foregrounds certain processes. In *izibongo* we can see that the ritual behavior produces chronotopes (Bakhtin 1981) which frame the ontological authoritative order in their historical context as well as their social and convivial ways of living (see Tavárez 2022).

While chiShona and isiNdebele share several aspects of this cultural practice, there are also significant differences. For instance, while the *mitupo* (chiShona) relate clans mostly to totems, such as animals and body parts, creating strong cultural ties on the level of cultural conceptualizations and metaphorical extensions of the beings and their respective clans, in isiNdebele it is the clan names themselves, *izibongo*, that are praised. Mugovera (2017) elucidates:

While the Shona people use mitupo based on animals and nature, in Ndebele izangelo/izibongo

were derived from names of the ancestors, from power, looks and deeds. For example, ‘abakoKhumalo ngondlangamandla’ (those of the Khumalo totem live by the sword) illustrates how they settled in present day Zimbabwe and established their kingdom.

Mangena and Ndlovu (2016: 254), on the other hand, explain that the totems in isiNdebele also serve as surnames, while in chiShona the surnames (family names) are usually different from the totems and their praise names (although there are several exceptions, such as *moyo* ‘heart’ which is not only a totem but also a common surname).¹⁰ Musiyiwa (2003) explains that while chiShona praise poetry centers on totems and their general characteristics, isiNdebele praise poetry focuses on outstanding leaders in the clan history and their individual features and achievements. This is shared among the Nguni cultures, whose praise poetry is more formalized and is also recited at specific public events (in opposition to chiShona praise poetry, which is more informally recited in daily contexts, Musiyiwa 2003).

Despite these differences, animal imagery is commonly used among the amaNdebele and maShona with regard to clans/totems in in other domains: “In both Shona and Ndebele cultures, images of the relationship between human beings and animals do take a variety of forms” (Mangena and Ndlovu 2016: 251). Various domestic and wild animals feature in rhetorical devices in Zimbabwe and al-

⁹ It should be pointed out that the amaNdebele of Zimbabwe and the amaNdebele of South Africa should not be confused with each other. Although their paths have crossed at various points and their roots and routes in Southern Africa are certainly entangled, the two groups invoke different migration, clan and settlement histories and their languages also differ significantly (see Skhosana 2009, who studied variation in isiNdebele with a focus on the South African scenario).

¹⁰ This is likely to go back to the time when surnames (a Western tradition) were introduced in the area and clan names were taken as surnames.

lude to perceived similarities between humans and animals. The role of animal symbolism is deeply rooted in Zimbabwean culture and can be traced back to medieval times, where it is evident in the architecture, designs and structures of the ruins of ancient Zimbabwe such as Great Zimbabwe (see Huffman 1996).

The human behaviors that are usually compared to those of animals include sexuality, eating, diligence, socialization, movement, and communication (Mangena and Ndlovu 2016). The authors state that animal imagery is used to express positive as well as negative human characteristics and behavior. Examples of negative connotations include the comparison of humans who seem to have lost their sense of humanity to wild animals or the use of ritual insults among school children, while positive analogies refer to aspects such as good character, faithfulness, beauty and intelligence (ibid.: 252ff). The complex relationship between animals and clans with regard to totemic systems among the maShona and amaNdebele is regarded as a special area of animalization and can be seen as constructions of group identity, belonging and descent (ibid.: 254). The association with animals through totems usually highlights positive characteristics of the animal, which symbolically stands for the clan as well as for the individual addressed in the praise poem. For instance, the strength of the lion, the greatness of the elephant or the beauty of the zebra are common features highlighted in praise poetry. Interestingly, negative attributes also feature in the performances and oral recitations, and the members of the clan/totem take pride in them as well. The praise poem for the *soko* ('monkey') totem, for example, contains the lines "those who survive on stealing", "those who bathe once a year" and "those who always

scratch their skins" (ibid.: 255). Mangena and Ndlovu (ibid.) explain this aspect as follows:

These are less virtuous traits, yet in the totem world, people embrace these for the simple reason that they are attributes of their totem animal. This is quite revealing: in African culture, all qualities have their special places, be they positive or negative. [...] This speaks to the centrality of harmony and balance in African cultural thought and philosophy.

In this regard, praise poetry can "reveal connections and hidden faces in society that would not otherwise be accessible" as part of the making of social relations (Barber 1991: 2). Similar to *oriki* in Yoruba society, praise poetry in Zimbabwe can be "used to swell up the reputation of the person they are addressed to and to lay claim to membership of certain social groups", but, beyond that, they also "represent social action [...] in a mediated and refracted discourse. Whether implicitly or explicitly, they offer a commentary on it: a commentary which is made up of heterogeneous and sometimes competing views" (ibid.: 3).

Moreover, and this is also illustrated in Mangena and Ndlovu's (2016) contribution, there are one-to-one analogies of phrases of praise poetry relating to totemic animals in chiShona and isiNdebele. The authors show this for poems praising the zebra (chiShona: *mbizi*, isiNdebele: *dube*), the elephant (chiShona: *zhou*, isiNdebele: *ndlovu*), the lion (chiShona: *shumba*, isiNdebele: *sibanda*), the monkey (chiShona: *shoko* [*soko*], isiNdebele: *ncube*) and the baboon (chiShona: *mukanya*, isiNdebele: *mfene*) by citing lines of their poems in both languages (ibid.: 255). While this seems to contradict the above-mentioned contexts and

histories of isiNdebele praise poetry being based on clans and their outstanding founders and leaders and not on totems/animals, these analogies of totemic animals and their praise in both languages, which have also been attested and produced by a number of chiShona and isiNdebele speakers, may be a result of cultural and language contact. Inter marriages (which are common in Zimbabwe, especially due to exogamic marriage practices), migration and numerous contexts of contact have led to many convergence phenomena in chiShona and isiNdebele that have only partly been studied from a linguistic perspective (see for instance Khumalo 2004). Furthermore, while some authors stated that isiNdebele praise poetry refers to surnames/clan names rather than totems (see above), it is also a fact that animal names are common surnames among the amaNdebele (such as *ncube* 'monkey', *ndlovu* 'elephant', *nkomo* 'cow', *dube* 'zebra', among others).

In order to illustrate the cultural concepts of the complex chiShona and isiNdebele terminology concerning praise poetry that have been mentioned in this section, table 1 summarizes various terms in the semantic field of praise poetry in both languages.¹¹

It is interesting to note, in this regard, that although some of the concepts in this table seem to be very similar in chiShona and isiNdebele, they are treated differently grammatically. This becomes evident in particular when taking a closer look at the noun classes. For instance, as table 1 shows, the general term for

praise poetry in chiShona, *madetembedzo*, is in class 6, a plural class which in chiShona (as well as in numerous other Suntu languages) is mostly associated with fruits, body parts (that come in pairs), liquids, animals, loan words (e.g. from English), plural nouns and, as in this case, terms that denote abstract concepts (see Brauner 1993). The class is also associated with big things and can serve as an augmentative. The isiNdebele term for praise poetry, *izibongo*, is a plural form in class 8, whose singular form *isibongo* (class 7) refers to a clan name. The class 7/8 in isiNdebele encompasses varied lexemes denoting inanimate objects as well as people and some abstract concepts (see Bower and Lotridge 2002). Since systems of nominal classification can be manifestations of cultural conceptualizations (for instance with regard to the formation of culturally influenced categories), the assignment of these terms to different noun classes in chiShona and isiNdebele may reflect their particular underlying cultural cognition (for a broader discussion of the semantics of Suntu noun classes and cultural conceptualizations see Dingemanse 2006, Maho 1999).

The introduction to praise poetry in this section makes clear that this genre of verbal art fulfills a number of functions and occurs in various contexts. Praise poetry is performed in special situations which all involve the expression of gratitude and/or praising another person, the most common and everyday occasion being the expression of thanks to another person. Praise poetry is performed in a rhythmic style with a voice, facial expression and other gestures that

¹¹ It should be pointed out that the interlinearizations in Table 1 and in the entire paper are in some instances rather detailed/explicit and deviate from common practice in Suntu linguistics, where some features (such as the marking of indicative mood through the final vowel -a) are not always made explicit in interlinearizations. Since this paper seeks to discuss linguistic forms in their cultural context and looks at two language practices in comparison, the present author believes that the detailed interlinearization is justified as a means to provide as much background information on grammatical elements as possible due to their (potential) significance in these cultural and regional contexts.

Table 1: Semantic field “praise poetry”¹²

(partly adapted from Hannan 1974, Fortune and Hodza 1974, Pelling 1971, and Matshakayile-Ndlovu 2003)

chiShona	isiNdebele
<i>madetembedzo</i> CL6.praise.CAUS.NMLZ ‘praise, praise poetry’ ‘praise names peculiar to a clan or sub-clan’	<i>isibongo</i> CL7.praise.NMLZ <i>isibongo</i> (SG) ‘clan name’ <i>izibongo</i> (PL) ‘praise songs’
<i>-tetemba</i> praise.IND ‘praise in rhythmical fashion’ ‘greet ceremoniously (using praise names and phrases)’	<i>-bonga</i> thank.IND 1. ‘appreciate, thank, give thanks’ 2. ‘praise, worship’ <i>imbongi</i> CL9.thank.NAG ‘poet, praise singer’
<i>nhetembo</i> CL10.praise.NMLZ (alternate form: <i>nhetembedzo</i>) ‘Litany. Series of praise greetings or sayings in praise of a person’	

¹² Please note that the respective chiShona and isiNdebele forms that are listed in the same line as pairs are not necessarily analogies of each other. The list presented here provides an insight into the semantic field. This list is not considered to be complete.

<i>nhetembo</i> CL10.praise.NMLZ ‘clan praise poetry’	<i>dzorudzi</i> CON10.clan 	<i>izibongo</i> CL7.praise.NMLZ ‘praises of the kings’	<i>zamakhosi</i> CON.CL6.king
<i>madetembedzo</i> CL6.praise.CAUS.NMLZ ‘clan praise poetry’	<i>rudzi</i> clan 		
<i>mutupo</i> CL3.totem/clan ‘totem, clan name’		<i>isangelo</i> CL7.clan-name ‘clan name’	
		<i>isitemo</i> CL7.ancestor-name ‘a name associated with ancestors (used as clan name)’ <i>-tema</i> cheer.IND ‘cheer, greet, etc. (using person’s isitemo)’ <i>-temeleza</i> cheer.CAUS.IND ‘praise extravagantly’	
<i>chidawo (chidao)</i> CL7.praise-name ‘praise name’ Hannan translates the terms as ‘sub-clan name (e.g. the clan with the <i>mutupo soko</i> has a sub-clan with <i>chidao: murehva</i>). The <i>chidao</i> name is most frequently used when greeting a person.’			

underline the solemn, usually respectful character of praising and thanking.

In chiShona, this reciting style exhibits a characteristic final cadence and is referred to as *kutetemba* ('to praise in rhythmical fashion', Fortune and Hodza 1974). In isiNdebele, the practice is referred to as *ugubonga* ('to thank, praise, worship'). A common context for a spontaneous recitation of a praise poem, which has been brought up as an example by a number of my interlocutors, is when a woman wants to thank her husband for something that she has received from him (meat from hunting, groceries from the supermarket, clothes or any other gift). She thanks the man by performing a praise poem for his totem/clan. This context seems to be so typical of the recitation of totemic praise poetry that a bride who fails to recite her husband's clan's praise poem can be sent home to her family for re-education (Pongweni 1996: 16). It is common in these contexts and beyond to address the other person by his/her praise name or *chidawo*, which not only identifies the clan/totem, but also the subgroup within the clan. Other contexts in which praise poems are recited include marriage and dowry negotiations (chiShona: *roora*, isiNdebele *lobola*), where the male relatives of the groom come to the prospective bride's home and express their utmost respect to the bride's family by invoking the family's totem. Moreover, praise poems can be recited to chiefs and leaders at a variety of official and social gatherings. At funerals, the clan/totem of the deceased should be called upon and worshipped to facilitate the transition into the world of the ancestors. This also highlights the close link between the totemic group and the ancestors (Pongweni 1996: 6). On the social level, praise poetry fulfills a number of functions, including "flattering those in power"

(such as chiefs, kings and leaders), "preserving accepted versions of history" as shared clan history, and "serving as an encouragement to emulation or achievement" (Finnegan 2012: 120). Furthermore, the recitation of a praise poem in the right context may encourage the praised to perform future actions and may serve as an act of triggering anticipated behavior through focusing on clan history and totem characteristics. Pongweni also adds to the functions of clan praise poetry that it serves to manifest a social system which regulates or prescribes social behavior, which also relates to Tavárez reasoning on ritual and authority where patterned and calibrated actions such as ritual speech manifest authoritative ontological models of social order (Tavárez 2022).

For instance, the exogamic marriage rules of the amaNdebele and maShona do not permit their members to marry someone from the same clan (who shares the same clan praise name). Breaking this taboo can be socially sanctioned or may have negative consequences for the entire family or clan. Pongweni summarizes the functions of totems in chiShona, which are also basically valid for clan praise poetry among the amaNdebele: 1. they regulate exogamy; 2. they serve as ceremonial forms of address with prescribed responses (praise poem as "social lubricant"); 3. they serve as social ties between members of the same clan; 4. people can swear on their clan name or totem; 5. totemic animals are charged with taboo: people are not allowed to eat their totemic animal (Pongweni 1996: 8ff). The author also stresses that members of a clan share "substance" through common descent and (and this includes members married into a clan) through the consumption of food grown on the land of the clan (ibid.: 11).

3 The language of praise poetry

While there are conceptions of praise poetry as a fixed and formulaic form, there is great variety with regard to the recited versions. This can be observed in the publications that have compiled praise poems for the same clans/totems. Today, only a few people can recite a large praise poetry repertoire for their totem. However, numerous Zimbabweans have claimed the ability to recite shorter versions and new creations. In other words, in the actual practice of praising someone in a particular situation, there is room for freestyle, and shorter, individual poems are commonly performed on various everyday occasions.

Example 1 provides a chiShona praise poem for the *mhofu* ('eland') totem. It addresses the *shava museyamwa*, whereof *shava* is the principal praise name (*chidawo*) for the *mhofu* ('eland') totem, while *museyamwa* designates a subgroup of the totem/clan (thus the title of the poem, *shava museyamwa*, refers to a specific clan that can be associated with a particular geographic location and clan history). This example illustrates a longer and rather formulaic version of the praise poem. Only a few people (nowadays) know such long praise poems by heart. The transmission of some of the ancient clan praise poems is fragmentary and incomplete (see Hodza and Fortune 1979).

There are several slightly different, longer or shorter versions of this praise poem in published written sources (see for instance Masango 2014: 42), and likewise, variation can be observed with regard to the other praise poems in the written sources. Of course, this reflects the nature of praise poetry as a form of oral literature. Variation can be observed with regard to length, the number and order of stanzas or lines, and the

culmination of various versions or poems into one (cf. Finnegan 2012: 127). Despite this variation, however, the poems show clearly their formulaic and at times repetitive character, which is typical of ritual communication. The most characteristic and outstanding feature of chiShona, and in fact most Southern African praise poetry, is the use of praise names and epithets that appear as complex nominal constructions, which can be substantival constructions, verbal constructions or ideophonic constructions (Hodza and Fortune 1979: 72). Many of these forms are deverbal epithets (with a prefix combined with either the verb stem, a verb phrase or an entire clause, *ibid.*), also referred to as "eulogues" (praises), which appear in the form of these complex constructions, as we shall see below (Pongweni 1996, 2012; Hodza and Fortune 1979). Pongweni states (actually with reference to the praise poem of the *shumba murambwi* 'Lion, the rejected one', but his statement is valid for all clan praise poetry): "The poem is awash with deverbal epithets which load the beneficiary of praise with eulogues that derive from actions performed by or on his ancestors" (Pongweni 1996: 35). This link with the ancestors and the clan's history and totem is at the core of the praises and is the basis for all of the creative linguistic derivations and metaphorical expressions. These linguistic and rhetoric devices underline the authoritative ontologies inscribed in the oral clan histories while they reflect "dominant epistemological stances and perceptions about language" (Tavárez 2022: 198).

(1) Praise poem of the *Shava Museyamwa*
(adapted from Musiyiwa 2003)

Shava - Museyamwa

*Maita Shava,
Mhofu yomukono, Ziwewera
Hekani Mutekedza*

*Vakatekedzana paJanga
Vakapiwa vakadzi munyika yavaNjanja*

Hekani Mutekedza, vari uHera Mukonde

Zvaitwa Mhukahuru, vemiswe inochenga miviri

Ziendanetyaka, mutunhu une mago

*Vanovangira vashura vhu, kutsivira mutumbi
Chidavarume, vanovhimwa navanonyanga*

*Vasakamonera vakadzi dzenhema
Vanomonera vakadzi dzamangondi
Vanochemera wavatanga
Vane misodzi inodonha pasi*

Kuti yadonha yoda nhevedzo yeromunhu ropa

*Tinotenda vari Matenhere
Vari pazvikomo zveMbwenya
Maita veTsambochena, Mhofu yomukono*

Kuyambuka rwizi mvura yakwira makomo

Totenda voMuchimbare, veGuruuswa

Vane nzangachena kunge mwedzi wejenachena

Eland – One who can be leant on

Thank you Shava
The Great Eland Bull, The Runaway
Thank you very much The-one-who-carries-
heavy-loads

Those who challenged each other at Janga
Those who were given wives in the country of
the Njanja people

Thank you my dear Mutekedza, those in uHera
Mukonde

It has been done, Great Animal, those with tails
that are intimate with their bodies

One with sounding feet, one who comb of
wasps

Those who chase those who portend death, as
compensation for a corpse

One-who-likes-men, hunted only by those who
do so with caution

Those who do not wrap women with lies

Those who embrace and bend women

Those who yearn for the original one

Those with tears that are too sacred to fall to
the ground

But if they fall, they must be accompanied with
human blood

We are so thankful those in Matenhere

Those who lie in the hills of Mbwenya

Thank you those of White Bangles, Great Eland
Bull

Crossing the river after the waters have
ascended the mountains

We are so thankful those in Muchimbare, those
of Guruuswa

Those with white settlements that resemble the
whiteness of the full moon

<i>Kuziva zvenyu VaShava Mukonde, vari Gombe</i>	It is your custom to be kind, Shava Mukonde, those in Gombe
<i>Zvaonekwa vahombarume, zvaitwa Mbiru</i>	Your kindness has been seen great hunter, it has been done Mbiru
<i>Aiwa, zvaonekwa Sarirambi, zvaitwa Nyashanu</i>	Indeed, your kindness has been seen, Sarirambi, it has been done Nyashanu

In chiShona totemic praise poetry, the person who recites the praise usually starts with thanking the totemic animal by using its praise names: in example 1 *shava* constitutes the principal *chidawo* ('praise name') of the *mhofu* ('eland') totem, while the complex deverbal nominal construction *museyamwa* (lit.: 'one who can be leant on', from the verb *-seyama* 'to lean on a support') serves as a name for the sub-clan and at the same time expresses a characteristic of the animal that is praised as a virtuous attribute of the totem. There are more praise names (many of them deverbal with a verb as the base) that appear as complex nominal constructions and express characteristics of the totemic animal while serving as clan praise, such as *ziwewera* ('the runaway', from the verb *wewera* 'run away' (for big animals)), *mute-kedza* ('the one who carries heavy loads', from the verb *-teka* 'carry heavy burden in arms' + causative), *mhukahuru* ('great animal' or 'fierce beast' as a substantival construction with a noun phrase comprised of *mhuka* 'wild animal' + *huku* (also *hukuru*) 'big, great' (see Hodza and Fortune 1979: 82)), and *ziendanetyaka* ('one with sounding feet', lit. 'walk with cracking sound of joints', based on the verb *-enda* 'go'), among others. These characteristics, which are usually praised even if they don't seem to express a positive or virtuous trait, serve as metaphors that link the animal with the clan and its members. In chiShona totem praise

poetry, these creative and metaphoric epithets can be allegories for the clan and its individual members. The creative combination of praise names, characteristics and historic elements forms a colorful and complex piece of art. Furthermore, the metaphoric language of the totemic praise also contains references to love and sexual relationships, as in *Vasakamonera vakadzi dzenhema* ('those who do not wrap women with lies') and *Vanomonera vakadzi dzamangondi* ('those who embrace and bend women'), which, as mentioned above, are at the core of chiShona totem culture (Nyamutswa 2018).

The praised characteristics and names are combined with various terms that express thankfulness: above all, *maita* is a word that features prominently in chiShona praise poetry, and often initiates the poem. It is also frequently used when expressing other forms of thanks and praise in ritualized or formulaic ways, for instance when thanking family members, chiefs or elders (e.g. *maita basa* 'thanks [for the] work', when thanking someone for a favor). In chiShona culture, expressing thanks is often accompanied by a culturally significant and gendered gesture, namely the clapping of hands, which is referred to as *kuwuchira*. Men clap with the fingertips and heels of the hand touching while women clap with their hands at an angle, with the right hand over the left hand (as when forming a ball). Both keep their hands

cupped so that the clapping produces a hollow sound. Hand clapping accompanies (or even replaces the verbal expression of) greetings, thanking and praising. It can be short (often two claps when greeting someone) or long (for instance to accompany a praise poem praise, where it also provides a rhythmic backing)¹³. Moreover, the accompanying clapping gesture also testifies to the multimodal nature of ritual labor which includes multiple communicative modes and actors, such as a variety of speech genres, iconography and metaphor, human and non-human (e.g. totemic animals) actors (see Tavárez 2022: 198).

Another word to express gratitude which features frequently in chiShona praise poetry, and in example (1), is the verb *-tenda* ‘thank’, which can appear in various inflected forms depending on the (grammatical) context, such as in (1a) and (1b), extractions from example (1).

- (1a) *Ti-no-tenda* *va-ri* *Matenhere*
 1PL-PRES-thank.IND 3PL-be place name
 ‘We are so thankful (to) those in Matenhere’

- (1b) *To-tenda* *vo-Muchimbare* *ve-Guruuswa*
 1PL.PRES-thank.IND CON2-place name CON2-place name
 ‘We are so thankful (to) those in Muchimbare, those in Guruuswa’

- (1c) *Hekani* *Mu-tekedza*
 thank you CL1-carry heavy burden
 ‘Thank you, one who carries heavy loads’

A third expression of thanks includes the use of the word *hekani*, which is otherwise rarely used in daily communication. The phrase in (1c) occurs twice in the poem *Shava Museyamwa*.

The expressions for ‘thanks’ also fulfill an important structural function, namely marking and front-linking stanzas (which are quite flexible units in chiShona praise poetry; see Hodza and Fortune 1979: 112).

In addition (and relation) to praising the totemic animal and its traits, chiShona praise poetry also contains references to clan history and praises of the achievements of clans and individuals (leaders). This usually includes mentioning of significant places where members of the clan have settled, fought wars or defended their territory, among other praiseworthy activities. In the poem in example (1), a number of place names are mentioned, either with ex-

¹³ The clapping is a very characteristic non-verbal form of communication in chiShona culture, and distinguishes it from isiNdebele. There are male and female hand gestures and maShona will clap on various occasions. Most prominently and commonly, greetings and expressing thanks are accompanied by a few claps. Clapping is usually a rhythmic backing to praise poetry and other oral performances. The hollow sound that is achieved by holding the hands in a cupped position is characteristic and is different from applause in the western sense. Clapping also expresses respect and plays a significant role in in-law communication, starting with the clapping by male members of the family of the future groom when they pay a first visit to the family of the future bride in order to negotiate a marriage. The men (usually brothers, uncles) will clap outside the gate of the prospective in-laws to announce their presence and express respect until the father of the household acknowledges their coming and lets them in.

plicit words about what happened there, or in combination with the expression of thanks (to the people from that place), including *Janga*, the country of the *Njanja* people¹⁴, *uHera Mukonde*, *Metenhere*, *Mbwenya*, *Tsambochena*, *Muchimbare*, *Guruuswa*, *Gombe*. These place names are often fragmentary pieces of fossilized clan history, which are sometimes hard to reconstruct or understand for uninitiated people (especially nowadays, see Pongweni 1996: 35). This is why praise poetry can be regarded as insider-poetry which can be understood only by those who can make sense of the allusions to places, people and acts that characterize the history of the clan (ibid.. 13).

Moreover, the poem contains several lines with metaphorical expressions, a feature that is characteristic of Southern African panegyric (Finnegan 2012) and that brings together the different strands of reference on a figurative

level: the expression of praising/thanking, the reference to the clan and its people and leaders, the person/clan member who is thanked by the performance of the poem, as well as the totemic animal and its characteristics that, again, relate to the clan, as in the extracts (1d) and (1e), taken from example (1) above.

The poetic language of this praise of the *Shava* totem brings together qualities of the person, the animal and the clan on a figurative level. This is partly enabled because of the linguistic forms chosen: the frequent use of CL2-forms, which also constitute the honorific form (*va-* etc., see example (1) and forms in the extracts (1a), (1b), (1d) and (1e)) make a general reading ('they', 'those') as well as a respectful address possible. Therefore, they can reference the past and present members of the clan (ancestors and the living) as well as the totemic animal as a personalized character who stands

- (1d) *Va-no-vang-ira* *va-shura* *vhu*,
 3PL-PRES-run-APPL 3PL-bring bad omen IDEO.come into sight
- ku-tsiv-ira* *mu-tumbi*
 INF-repay-APPL CL3-corpse
 'Those who chase those who portend death, as compensation for a corpse'
- (1e) *Vane* *mi-sodzi* *i-no-donha* *pasi*
 3PL-have CL4-tear CL4-PRES-fall CL5.ground
- kuti* *ya-donha* *yo-da* *nhevedzo*
 that CL4.PAST-fall CL4.PRES-need CL9.sequence of events
- ye-ro-munhu* *ropa*
 CON9-CON5-person CL5.blood
 'Those with tears that are too sacred to fall to the ground
 But if they fall, they must be accompanied with human blood'

¹⁴ This could possibly refer to the chiChewa/chiNyanja-speaking people of present-day Malawi.

for the clan (e.g. the eland) and can thus be regarded as poly-pragmatic. The linguistic form (including the use of plural forms instead of singular, even when praising an individual¹⁵) is thus all-encompassing and provides a frame for a collective identity that is embraced and expressed by the clan members through praise poetry. In this sense, the performances of praise poems “are display events in which the values of a society are embodied and enacted in an intensified way” (Basso and Senft 2009: 10). The language of chiShona praise poetry thus enables the enacting of identity constructions, of cultural memory and of social values and relations through the use of linguistic forms that can reference on multiple levels and create inclusiveness beyond the circle of persons present at the performance. It is particularly the use of figurative speech and metaphor that sets the tone and mood of the poem and characterizes the cultural ways of praising (cf. Finnegan 2012). Moreover, the expression of gratitude, respect and appreciation through the use of various forms of ‘thank’, and of indirect and hence respectful forms in the plural instead of direct forms of address (‘they’ and ‘those’ instead of ‘you’), is at the core of chiShona culture, in which respect and politeness play a significant role (Nyamutswa 2018). To be sure, such forms of respect and politeness (using plural forms and honorifics, expressing thanks) are also common in other societies, cultural groups and forms of praise poetry. However, all my interlocutors highlighted the importance of these aspects in chiShona cultural practices, which is why I consider it a significant observation. ChiShona praise poems usually end on a similar vein, by stating that the totems (and the

clan’s/individual’s) kindness have been seen and that ‘a service’ has been done (see Hodza and Fortune 1979). In many poems, the passive verb forms *zvaonekwa* and *zvaitwa* are used in the final verse (as in 1f and 1g taken from example 1).

- (1f) *zva-onekwa*
8.PAST-see.APPL.PASS
‘it has been seen’
- (1g) *zva-itwa*
8.PAST-do.PASS
‘it has been done’

These ritualized forms to end a praise poem recur in most totem praises and, although they exhibit some kind of variation, mark a known and anticipated end of the praise verses. They constitute a final expression of gratitude and assurance that the deeds and services (of the heroic ancestors and praised clan members) have been acknowledged.

In isiNdebele praise poetry, as stated above, the focus is not so much on the totemic animals as on the clan history and the praising of the outstanding leaders (kings) of the group. Example (2) shows the praise poem for King Lobengula, the son of the above-mentioned King Mzilikazi.

In this poem we observe, in contrast to the chiShona praise poems, a more direct focus on the praised individual, which linguistically manifests itself in the use of more singular forms (as opposed to the frequent plural forms in the totem praise poems of the maShona clans).

¹⁵ The use of plural forms is also common in respectful and honorific language/ways of addressing elders.

(2) Praise poem of King Lobengula¹⁶

Izibongo zika Lobengula kaMzilikazi kaMatshobana

*Ngwalongwalo kaMatshobana!
Watshonaphi, Mzac'omnyama
Otshay'izinkomo lamadoda.
Nkub'enkulu yamahlathi,
Eth'ezinye zitshiy'umzila,
Yona ingatshiyi lasonjwana.
Silwane samahlathi!
Ezinye ziyathungatheka,
Kanti lesi sakwaKhumalo
Sadabula singatshiyi mkhondo.
Amadoda wonke amangele,
Kwaze kwamangala lezinja ezimhlophe
Ukuthi watshonaphi, Khumalo.
Ngangelizwe uyindab'enkulu!
Wal'ukuthunjwa yizizwe
Wakheth'ukuf'ukhulekile
Ithuna lakho liyakwaziwa ngokhokho kuphela,
ngangeze!*

Matshakayile-Ndlovu 2003¹⁷

Praises of Lobengula son of Mzilikazi son of Matshobana

The owner of many books, son of Matshobana
Where did you disappear to, Black Rod
That beats cattle and men?
You the big elephant of the forests,
Whereas other elephants leave a trail,
You do not leave even the smallest trail.
You the lion of the forests!
Whereas other lions can be tracked,
But this one of the Khumalo
Moved across without leaving a scent
All men are surprised
And even the 'white dogs' are surprised
About where you disappeared to, Khumalo
You who is as big as the earth you are big news.
You refused to be captured by foreigners
You chose to die a free man
Your grave shall be known by your ancestors
only, you who is as big as the earth!

Like in the chiShona poem, we also observe the use of praise names and praises in the form of complex constructions. In the first line the praise name translated as 'owner of many books' is created by reduplication of the plural form derived from *ugwalo* 'book' (CL11/CL10), while the second part constitutes an ellipsis ('of Matshobana').

Other forms in the poem are phrasal constructions such as those illustrated in (2a) and (2b). It is interesting to note that while the classical chiShona praise poetry centers on one (totemic) animal and its qualities, this praise poem for Lobengula makes references to two different animals, namely the elephant and the lion. Both animals are used here metaphorically

¹⁶ This poem is characterized by the use of archaic and poetic language forms that do not occur in the same style in today's conventional discourse (the same is true for the chiShona poem discussed above). The isiNdebele poem for Lobengula is full of abbreviated and contracted forms, which is typical in poetry. However, certain forms are quite difficult to fathom with regard to the translation provided. For example, *Wakheth'ukuf'ukhulekile* is translated as 'you chose to die a free man'. While this translation makes sense in terms of the contextual meaning, one would expect the form *Wakheth'ukuf'ukhululekile* (*ukhululekile* meaning 'to be free' while *ukhulekile* could be read as 'to pray').

¹⁷ Available online at: <https://bulawayo24.com/index-id-opinion-sc-columnist-byo-65994.html> (accessed January 2026)

to distinguish Lobengula from others of his kind, as someone outstanding who surprises others as he does not leave a trail and cannot be tracked. This poem is rife with rhetorical devices that provide the structure and impact on the style of the verses.¹⁸ For example, the lines repeated in (2c) and (2d), concerning the animals discussed above, show the use of parallelism.

(2a) *Wa-tshonaphi*
2SG-spend.where
'where did you disappear to'

(2b) *Ngange-lizwe* *u-yi-ndab-enkulu!*
as big as-CL5.country 2SG-COP-CL9.story-CL9.big
'You who is as big as the earth you are big news'

(2c) *Nkub'enkulu yamahlathi,* 'You the big elephant of the forests,
Eth'ezinye zitshiy'umzila[...] Whereas other elephants leave a trail [...]

(2d) *Silwane samahlathi!* 'You the lion of the forests!
Ezinye ziyathungatheka [...] Whereas other lions can be tracked [...]

(2e) *Amadoda wonke amangele,* 'All men are surprised,
Kwaze kwamangala lezinja ezimhlophe And even the white dogs are surprised'

Another rhetorical device used in this poem is the cross-linking between lines, by repeating an element from one line to the next (but not in a parallel style), as in (2e), where a form of the verb 'surprise' is repeated.

The poem is full of comparisons, metaphorical as well as through the use of a direct linguistic marker of comparison, namely *nganga/ngange*, which appears twice in the short

The parallelism is basically constructed through the names of the animals, *nkub'enkulu* ('big elephant') and *silwane* ('lion'), which appear at the beginning of the verse in combination with the word *mahlathi* ('forests') preceded by the connective prefix. The third parallel element is the word *ezinye* ('others'), which appears in the second line of the verse.

poem. All of the comparisons serve the purpose of praising King Lobengula and his clan, the Khumalo, which is also mentioned twice in the verses. A very interesting observation that can be made with regard to the praise poem for King Lobengula is with regard to variation: while the chiShona totemic praise poems are also characterized by variation (see above),

¹⁸ Of course, other praise poems in chiShona, isiNdebele and isiZulu exhibit numerous stylistic devices as well (for chiShona see Hodza and Fortune 1979, while isiNdebele praise poetry is not found much in the literature, there are many publications on closely-related praise poetry in isiZulu, see for example Vilakazi 2021). In this version of the praise poem for Lobengula, however, the rhetorical devices are evident in compact and demonstrative forms, which is why they are examined in this section.

there is another praise poem for Lobengula which is strikingly different from the one cited above.¹⁹ There are just a few parallels between the two versions. While the poem discussed here praises Lobengula in a positive fashion, outlining his skills, outstanding characteristics and achievements, the other version of the poem, presented on africanpoems.net, exhibits metaphors that have a negative reading and reveals – though in figurative manner – the criticism that Lobengula’s reign is associated with. The critical meanings are particularly visible in comparison to the praises of Lobengula’s father, King Mzilikazi, who is praised as a great warrior and leader while his son is conceptualized as a weaker ruler (who roars like a calf instead of a bull) and criticized due to his controversial strategies and behavior (especially with regard to his deals and contracts with the British South Africa Company, which invaded and subsequently colonized Matabeleland under the rule of King Lobengula). This is in line with Pongweni’s (1996: 15) view that praise poetry is not just to praise, but also “to admonish, to warn and to criticise”, and with Barber’s observation that commentary in praise poetry can comprise heterogeneous and competing perspectives (Barber 1991: 3).

This section has presented two different praise poems in chiShona and isiNdebele and has discussed some of the linguistic and cultural peculiarities of the two art forms. To summarize the shared cultural-linguistic features and functions, we can underline that praise poetry usually follows ritualized patterns and that in performing poetic praises speakers make use of specific ways of speaking/praising with words. We have seen in examples (1) and

(2) that certain metaphors and figurative language recur. Finnegan summarizes the creative use of language in praise poetry:

Most praise poetry, above all the official type, seems to adopt a more or less obscure and allusive style. The language may be archaic and lofty, there are often references to historical events or people which may need interpretation even to local listeners, and figurative forms of expression are common. Especially frequent are comparisons of the person praised to an animal or series of animals. His strength may be conveyed by referring to him as a lion, a rhinoceros, or an elephant, and, particularly in Southern African praise poetry, the actions and qualities of the hero may be almost completely conveyed in metaphorical terms, only the animals to which the hero is implicitly compared being depicted in action. [...] Praise of a person [...] is not something to be expressed in bald or straightforward language. (Finnegan 2012: 117)

Figurative and metaphorical language and rhetorical devices, together with the rhythmic performance of the poem are the major poetic features that distinguish it from other linguistic genres, not so much rhyme and meter like in western poetry (Finnegan 2012). In Zimbabwean praise poetry, structural devices that shape the poems include front-linking (forming “a verse out of a number of successive lines by the repetition of some common initial element or combination of elements”, Hodza and Fortune 1979: 92), parallelism (of consecutive or non-consecutive lines), cross-linking (e.g. repeating an element such as an

¹⁹ The other version of Lobengula’s praise poem can be found online: <http://africanpoems.net/praise/praises-of-lobengula/> (accessed January 2026)

affix from the end of a line to the beginning of a new line), chiasmus (as a more complex form of cross-linking, resulting in cross-parallel lines), apposition (placing together two lines which express the same semantic content or underlying conceptualization), and expansion of praise names (Hodza and Fortune 1979). These devices, in combination with the rhythmic recitation style, endow the praise poetry with its typical formulaic style which is the basis for the discussion of ritual communication in the next section.

4 Praise poetry as ritual communication

Ritual forms of communication can take many different shapes and occur in various contexts. Basso and Senft, in their seminal contribution to the field from an anthropological-linguistic perspective, define ritual communication as “artful, performed semiosis, predominantly but not only involving speech, that is formulaic and repetitive and therefore anticipated within particular contexts of social interaction” (Basso and Senft 2009: 1). The previous sections have established the linguistic nature and cultural background of chiShona and isiNdebele praise poetry. We have seen that, while there are various degrees of variation with regard to performance poetry, there are linguistic, rhythmical and figurative features that make the poems formulaic and facilitate

memory and recitation. These very features, the sound of the verses, the style of the performer and the cultural rootedness of the metaphors, trigger certain reactions among the listeners which can be anticipated. For example, during one field session in Harare in July 2018, we were sitting in a courtyard of a small house in Budiro, a high density suburb (commonly referred to as “ghetto”) of Harare, with a small group of people: a married couple, two common male friends and me. During our interview, the wife recited the beginning of the praise poem for her husband’s totem, *Soko Vhudzijena* (see (3)). While she only recited some fragments of the praise poem, we can observe a few practices that are significant. The context provided by her husband (for the sake of the interview) was that he came home and brought something for her. She received the gift and started to recite the poem rhythmically with a falling intonation at the end of each line (or rather, at the end of each praise name or phrase, since lines are only created in writing), while clapping her hands (*kuwuchira*, see above). This is a ritualized practice that is expected in certain social situations as explained above. When she recited the phrase *Vanodya zvekuba* ‘those who survive on stealing’, she (and this could be heard in her voice) and the others present smiled or started laughing. When I asked about the translation of that phrase later in the interview, everybody

(3) Extracts from the praise poem for *Soko Vhudzijena* performed by Venna Tinago

Maita soko
Mukanya
Vhudzijena
Vanodya zvekuba
 [...]

Thank you monkey
 Sociable One
 White Hair
 Those who survive on stealing
 [...]

laughed. This is part of the anticipated reaction of certain characteristics associated with the totem and, hence, the clan members, be they virtuous or not. This practice and context also illustrates that a short allusion is sufficient to evoke not only a reaction but also a shared understanding of the cultural background and social relations (the clan). In performing praise poetry, it is not necessary to be direct and elaborate: it is through figurative speech, through allusions and through indexing places, characteristics and people that meaning is created as representations of constructed social relations and identities. Mietzner and Storch (2018), who look at totally different communicative practices in Eastern Africa, also state that ritual communication often works through being indirect. They state, based on the thoughts of Ochieng'-Odhiambo, that through ritual and symbolic communication we express "our entanglements with others and with the entire world" (ibid.: 222)

Basso and Senft (2009: 2) depict ritual communication as a "special mode of semi-otic behavior" which perfectly describes the praise poetry presented: the poems are performed with a special intonation and rhythm and accompanying gestures, in appropriate situations, and they make meaning on a multilayered level (addressing the individual, the ancestors, and the clan/totem) through contextualized metaphors and other forms of figurative language. In this sense, the praise poems are a very special form of communication, although they find their place in daily communicative practices, which (as Basso and Senft also suggest) transcends the assumed opposition between ritual and everyday. Another aspect that the authors regard as significant with regard to ritual communication is indexical

linking (ibid.: 9). All the praise verses presented in this paper are full of indexical links, for instance names and complex constructions such as metaphors, that situate the praise in its cultural context and connect the praised person to his/her ancestors, the clan and the totemic or other animal, as well as to significant events, places and activities in the clan history. In fact, it is the indexical links that the praise poem contains that connect past and present, ancestors and living, human and animal. In that regard, even though the poem is only recited by one person, there is a "play of voices in interpersonal relations" (ibid.: 13) in which (a) the narratives of the ancestors merge with the narratives of the living through a construction of shared clan identity, evoked and enacted through the performance of praise poetry, and (b) in which social relations and social roles are transmitted and recalled through playful performance.

Moreover, I want to argue in this section that ritual communication can be more than the reciting of specific formulaic language forms. It can also be the underlying cultural conceptualizations that are ritualized and find new linguistic expressions in new forms of performance, new contexts and new interpretative frames. Looking at contemporary practices in Zimbabwe, we can observe that features from the praise poetry are recontextualized and appropriated in different ways. In Zimbabwe (and elsewhere), ritual communication is thus dynamic and continually transformed, as certain practices can live on in new contexts. While praise poetry is not so commonly used anymore in all contexts and at full length, it is often recited in shorter forms and with new creations. Several speakers have stated that praise poetry can also be a freestyle, where certain known phrases and praise names are combined

with new praises that particularly relate to the praised individual, that tell new stories and reference characteristics or deeds of the present addressee of the poem.

Moreover, it seems that the imagery and metaphors employed constitute representations of moralities and gender roles as their performance ascribes social status and prescribes social behavior. The social relations constructed through the imagery and metaphors of praise poetry can also be used in more recent domains of performative practices such as popular music:

Selected examples drawn from three sub-genres of love poetry and from Afropop recordings are used to show that, in many cases, traditional praises and modern lyrics are

quite similar in terms of imagery and symbolism, as well as in terms of socialization for contemporary role-relationships. This, of course, has wider implications outside the family and in effect this situation tends to support the status quo in gender politics at the national level. [...] Like the oral poets before them, the Afropop composers of today use aesthetically pleasing, sensuous language for social comment, moral persuasion and sentimental expression (Chimhundu 1995: 147).

In a more conservative vein, the poet Chiremba Hwesa Masango, who refers to himself as a herbalist, environmentalist and traditionalist, wrote not only a book about totems and totem praise poetry, he also founded a musical group called Zimtotems, who perform praise poetry

Figure 1: Chiremba Hwesa Masango and the Zimtotems (photograph by the author)



as songs accompanied by Zimbabwean instruments such as the mbira, the marimba and percussive instruments, as well as by dancing practices. Their objective is to maintain the Zimbabwean cultural heritage and they use the music group to educate the people about totems and praise poetry.

Apart from practices of commemorating praise poetry, there are also new verses being created: based on the images and characteristics of animals that are widely known and common in Zimbabwean society (see Mangena and Ndlovu 2016), people also construct new poems that may have meanings in political, social, religious or personal contexts. The short poem presented in (4) is a poem in isiNdebele created and performed *ad hoc* by Helen Kauma, based on the culturally scripted conceptualizations of the crocodile, which is of particular currency with regard to the political domain (ibid.: 252).

(4) <i>Ingwenya! Ingwenya!</i> <i>Inyamazana enkalakatha</i> <i>Inyamazana edla ezinye inyamazana</i> <i>Amehlo akho makhulu</i> <i>njengenkanyezi</i> <i>Nyamazana eyesatshwa ngezinye izilwane</i>	Crocodile! Crocodile! A huge animal An animal that eats other animals Your eyes are as large as the moon Animal that is feared by other animals
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Such practices can be regarded as “the reconfiguration of meaning and new contextualization of older practices as well as the creation of new forms of ritual communication from historically older forms” (Basso and Senft 2009: 15). In this sense, praise poetry as a form of ritual communication changes and adapts over the course of time. This illustrates the dynamicity and flexibility of seemingly fixed transmitted language practices. The interesting point here is that praise poetry is, on the

one hand (especially in its elaborated form), a very specialized and formulaic linguistic form characterized by archaic and poetic language whose understanding and interpretation often requires expert knowledge. On the other hand, it is also part of daily communicative behavior and anticipated social rituals while is room for individual creativity and situational flexibility.

5 Conclusion

This paper presented a broad introduction to praise poetry in chiShona and isiNdebele by looking at the cultural concepts related to the linguistic practices, the broader contexts and the implications for use. A special section has been dedicated to the linguistics of praise poetry, where poems in chiShona and isiNdebele have been analyzed with regard to language and stylistic devices. The discussion has focused on similarities and differences

between chiShona and isiNdebele, which are based on different underlying cultural conceptualizations, different clan histories and different social functions of the praise poems. All these aspects lead to the final section, which places praise poetry in the frame of ritual communication, an approach that takes an all-encompassing perspective on major relevant aspects of this form of verbal art: its formulaic yet flexible structure, its anticipated performance, its indexical links and its ever-

changing fluidity that transcends genres, styles and contexts. The main objective was to describe praise poetry practices in their cultural contexts, with a particular focus on a comparison between the well documented chiShona *madetembedzo* and the isiNdebele *izibongo*, and to discuss praise poetry as ritual communication. There is very little work available on isiNdebele praise poetry and it would be a rewarding task to investigate this culturally and socially relevant genre that combines oral history, cultural imagery and linguistic art in more detail, also with regard to its ties to other language practices within the Nguni group. Moreover, further studies could concentrate on performative aspects that were only briefly discussed in this paper, as well as on language contact.

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Abbreviations

APPL	applicative
CAUS	causative
CL	class (noun class)
CON	connective
COP	copula
IND	indicative
INF	infinitive
NAG	nomen agentis
NMLZ	nominalization
PASS	passive
PL	plural
PRES	present