
The Study of Form and Structure of Oral Funeral Poetry of Elugwu Ezike Jgbo

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ABSTRACT

The study examines the form and structure of oral funeral poetry of Elugwu Ezike Igbo. Oral literature has been used as an instrument through which society passes down its rich experiences of life from one generation to another. Dirge performance is common to all cultures in the world. In particular, dirge has been a means of expressing people's innermost and most intense beings, beliefs, and reactions to the cut of death in a community. Dirge chanters freely express their emotional sense of loss, praise the deceased expansively and bring their own personality into the poetry. A lot of images are used to showcase events and objects. A descriptive survey approach was adopted for this study. Primary and secondary sources of information were consulted. The study revealed, among other things, that the solo-and-response form is the basic structural feature in most Elugwu Ezike dirges. There is constant repetition of words and sentences in the dirges. The funeral artists make use of linguistic and paralinguistic features at their disposal to realize the aim of their performance.

KEYWORDS: Form and Structure of Oral Funeral Poetry and Elugwu Ezike Jgbo

Introduction

Literature in Indigenous African Languages abounds in the oral and written form and is easily associated with and recognized among the more popular and well-known codified African languages like Igbo, Hausa, Yoruba, Swahili, or Kikuyu. (Mokenge, 2003:87). In this paper we undertake to examine and analyze the language of dirges among Elugwu Ezike Igbo. We also intend to expose the fascinating language variety of Elugwu Ezike Igbo dirge form as poetry. More significantly, this study will reveal that minority oral literature, properly so-called, is as rich, complex, intricate, and absorbing as the oral literature of indigenous, codified languages. As the performance of these funeral songs reveals, African oral literature is dynamic in nature, vivid and vigorous, supple and subtle. Expectantly, like malleable clay in the hand of the experienced potter, it constantly awaits transformation by the creative tongue and impulse of the verbal artist to re-shape it into an even more fascinating form.

The performance of dirges among the Elugwu Ezike people actually begins during the all-night wake that lasts till dawn. When the deceased is laid in state, the tempo of the mourning rises, and the performances of the dirges heighten and enhance the mourning. Because of the

influence of Christianity, particularly in the more urban towns, it is now fashionable for the deceased's relatives to invite church choirs (bands) to sing and dance during the wake. Some of them have masquerades (ma) playing assorted paraphernalia of musical instruments such as Orumnyi (big metal gong), Okanga, among others, to show up at some wakes, especially the wakes of important people in the community. In the course of the night, wake keepers can hear isolated wailing, otherwise the wake is characterized by singing and dancing all night. The performance of these dirges is mostly a women's affair in the form of song and dance groups, although in recent years there has been a proliferation of mixed dance groups made up of both women and men, with the men playing musical instruments and constituting the background chorus of voices. Among these dance groups, there exist skilled and professional performers such as "Ogele" performers for women and "Okanga" for men only who are formally hired for a fee and, as Okpeho (1992: 156) puts it, "invited by the bereaved family to lend a certain grandeur or fullness to the occasion. The other less skilled performers, in most cases, are not formally invited but are provided with food and drinks after their performances. Whether the performance is semi-skilled or professional, it usually involves dancing and drumming. In between group performances, occasional soloists and dual performers come forward, sometimes sobbing, sometimes weeping, to lament the passing of the deceased or to express a variety of themes about the nature of death.

Most of the dirges performed during funerals are well known by the audiences. Moved by the music, singing, and emotion of the performance, it is not unusual that many a member of the audience could leap forward and join the performers in their song and dance.

Literature Review

The related literature is reviewed under theoretical and empirical studies.

Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored on the ethnopoetics theory developed by Dell Hymes (1982). Ethnopoetics to Hymes is part of a larger theoretical vision revolving around narrative and performance and embedded in a view of language in society. Ethnopoetics focuses on the aesthetic structuring of oral art. The ethnopoetics approach developed by Hymes is based on the idea that works of verbal art are subtle organizations of lines and verses. Hymes observes that these expressions are founded upon a socially constituted poetic structure that is prosecuted both in the organization of experience as well as in the organization of reports on that experience. This approach also focuses on the stylistic and grammatical features in order to find out the formal poetic structure of the text and the underlying rhetorical form in the text. It employs a structural method and is an application of the elementary principle of structural linguistics. It is based on the pragmatic study of language in which signs and texts are studied in terms of the relationship between a sign and its users.

The approach places emphasis on fieldwork. This implies that all materials studied must have been collected and transcribed by the researcher studying it (Tedlock, 1983). Ethnopoetics theory is relevant to this study because it examines narrative patterns beyond mere concern with stylistic features and other formal elements to elucidate the theme of the story. It also accounts for the deep involvement in dialogue and issues surrounding a phenomenon and a community (Melhuus, 1995). The theory also recognizes the significance of the performance arena for the performer

audience and folklorists for the focused way of speaking to become a fully experienced event. As a result, the researcher participated in some of the oral funeral poetry performances in Elugwu Ezike.

Empirical Study

Egwuagu (1995) carried out a case study on the content of funeral dirge in Ezinifite in Aguata Local Government Area of Anambra state. 'This study found that dirge is a creative verbal musical expression which takes place alongside the poetry of songs, drums, horns and pipes. The study also found that living situations provide the contexts in which dirges are created and re-created. Some Ezinifite funeral dirges take the form of lyrics, and the musical element is more pronounced and the verbal aspect is less developed than dirges without instruments, which are delivered in a spoken or recitative style. The language of Ezinifite dirge has the following stylistic features: dialect words, proverbs, rhythm, figures of speech such as personification, hyperbole, idiom and metaphor. Uzochukwu (2001) also conducted a study on traditional funeral poetry of the Igbo. He discovered that funeral poetry inculcates in the living the knowledge of what constitutes good character and that in some areas in Igbo land, funeral artists constitute themselves into a sort of trade union. In Elugwu Ezike, Okanga group performers constitute themselves into such a trade union and their services are hired for use during funeral ceremonies to entertain the audience. The study further revealed that the most prevalent stylistic devices employed by Igbo funeral artists are figures of speech. This gives us ample scope to include the following in our treatment of funeral poetry: simile, metaphor, and metonymy personification, euphemism, and hyperbole, among others, which constitute poetic imagery. The study also revealed that most songs sung on the occasion of death are typical and ephemeral. Many of these songs are full of praise for the dead. In some of the songs, there is resignation and acceptance of death as being inevitable.

Similarly, Ugwuoke (1998) conducted a case study on the death and burial rites of ozo-titled men in the Obimo community in Nsukka. The study found that the burial of ozo title holders in the Obimo community is very expensive and colourful. Even if the bereaved family does not have money, they would borrow it in order to give the deceased title holder a befitting burial. Burial rites of ozo title holders in the Obimo community include: washing the corpse thoroughly with a local pomade (elu aki), supervision of the corpse by the ozo titled men to know whether the body was given due preparation, covering the body with black cloth, placing his cap on his head with an eagle feather and a red feather (awo), and placing his titled staff (arua) in his hand. In Obimo, the dead ozo titled man's grave is dug into two chambers, one chamber for his corpse and the other one for his bed.

Data Presentation and Analysis

Form of the Elugwu Ezike Igbo Funeral Dirges

The performance aesthetics of Elugwu Ezike Igbo dirges is most often enhanced by the chant and antiphonal forms. Of equal importance is the structure of the dirges themselves. Structure here refers to the length of the dirges and alternating stanzas created by the constant vocal interaction between the lead singer and the chorus. The language employed by the performers of

Elugu Ezike Igbo dirges constitutes the third useful element in the discussion and appreciation of the stylistics of these funeral dirges. It includes unique phonological and grammatical forms, lyrical repetition, and an elaborate utilization of appropriate imagery, apt metaphors, allusions, and other figurative languages. The most outstanding and identifiable literary quality of Elugwu Ezike dirges is repetition. Most often, the lead singer repeats lines she has previously sang, while the chorus re-echoes the same lines. Here, the lead singer will be represented with "L.S." while the chorus will be represented with "Ch".

Dirge No I - Nwanne m kachite obujiire onuma — Presevere with your sorrow

LS Nwanne rm kachite ob* jiiree onuma — persevere with your sorrow

Kachite obu g* - take heart.

Kachite obu g* jiire onuma — persevere with your sorrow

Kachite obu g* - take heart

Nẹ o bu kẹ uwa shi adā - that's how the world is.

Ch Nẹ o bu kẹ uwa shi adā - that's how the world is.

L.S. Nẹ o bu kẹ uwa shi adā - that's how the world is.

Ch Nẹ o bu kẹ uwa shi adā - that's how the world is.

L.S Ya bu gə jiire ye — so take heart

Where the stanza is longer, repetition occurs both within the individual lines of the lead singer. As Isidore Okpewho (1992:71) puts it:

Repetition is no doubt one of the most fundamental characteristic features of oral literature. It has both aesthetic and utilitarian value: in other words, it is a device that not only gives a touch of beauty or attractiveness to a piece of oral expression but also serves certain practical purposes in the overall organization of the oral performance.

Indeed, as Nketia (1955:104) also states repetitions in dirges are not monotonous, neither are they due to barrenness of thought: “on the contrary, they’ may have a musical mode of meaning or they may be a means of emphasizing points that mourners might wish to make”. It is in the same mode of thinking that Okpewho (1992:71) goes on to emphasize that:

It is necessary to grasp first the aesthetic value of repetition in a piece of oral performance. In a fundamental way, the repetition of phrase, a line or a passage does have a certain sing-song quality to it, if the repetition occurs between intervals in, say, a song or a tale, the audience is often delighted to identify with it and to accompany the performer in going over a passage that has now become familiar.

The refrain is another familiar pattern of poetic repetition in Elugwu Ezike dirges. Here, the lead singer sings the first verse of’ the dirge twice and the chorus takes up the repetition of the central

thought of “the king has gone to the grave” over and over in several lines, to emphasize the importance of the dirge.

Dirge No. 2 Eze ala nẹ obu ẹja — the king has gone to the grave.

- L.S. Eze ala nẹ obu ẹja — the king has gone to the grave.
Ngwere chishima ụkwụ — the lizard has strengthened its leg.
Eze ala nẹ obu ẹja — the king has gone to the grave.
Ngwere chishima ụkwụ — the lizard has strengthened its leg.
- Ch. Ngwere chishima ụkwụ — the lizard has strengthened its leg.
Chi chi ngwere chishima ụkwụ - chichi, the lizard has strengthened its leg.
- L.S. Nẹ Agbẹdo Onoja ala nẹ obu ẹja – that Agbẹdo Onoja has gone to the grave.
Ngwere chishima ụkwụ — the lizard has strengthened its legs.
Inuma chichichi – when you hear chi chi chi
Ngwere chishima ụkwụ — the lizard has strengthened its legs.
Nẹ Ugwuanyi Edogba Aanya ala, Ugwuanyi ala nẹ obu ẹja – Edogha Aanya has gone to the grave.
Nẹ nna muru anyi ala nẹ obu ẹja – that our father has gone to the grave.
Ngwere chishima ụkwụ — the lizard has strengthened its legs.

The effect of the performance of this kind of dirge is that it cues the audience to sing along, repeating the familiar lines of the refrain with the chorus (Ngwere chishima ụkwụ — the lizard stretches its legs), thereby intensifying the mournful atmosphere in the funeral. “Eze ala nẹ ẹja” (the king has gone to the grave) means that the king has died while “Ngwere chishima ụkwụ — (the lizard stretches its legs)” demonstrates the posture of the deceased. One line can, in fact, be repeated several times. This trend in which dirge lines are repeated over and over is frequent in most of Elugwu Ezike Igbo dirges. It is a popular technique that the lead singer and chorus employ very regularly in the rendition of the dirges. This is seen in the dirge below:

Dirge No 3 – Udele ne-eru n’lu ooo – the vulture is hovering on the air

- L.S. Udele nẹ-eru n’elu ooo – the vulture is hovering on the air.
Udele nẹ-eru n’elu ooo – the vulture is hovering on the air.
- Ch. O roo nélu si ya roo n’ala – if it hovers in the air let it hover on the ground as well.
- L.S. Okanagba atomiire - the mighty has fallen.
- Ch. O roo n’elu si ya roo n’ala oo—if it hovers in the air let it hover on the ground too.
- L. S. Enyimenyi atomiire - the elephant has fallen
- Ch. Elelelele wewewelo — Elelelele wewewelo
- L.S. Ogbodogbo o o o — Ogbodogbo o o o
- Ch. Elelelele wewewelo - Elelelele wewewelo
- L. S. Ogbodogbo o o o — Ogbodogbo o o o
- Ch. Ọmadere etegu egwu n’efu - Ọmadere does not dance without reason.

- L.S. Kamọbu egwu ida - unless there is a drum music
 Ch. Ogbodogbo o o — Ogbodogbo o o
 L.S. Orihoro etegu egwu n’efu — Orihoro does not dance without reason.
 Ch. Kamohu egwu nryi — unless it is a food dance
 L.S. Ogbodogho ye bu ememe — Ogbodogbo, movement is sluggish.

The peculiarity about this chant form is that it is performed by a single, individual performer, and, in most cases has a sustained verse form with repetitions. Of equal interest too is the fact that the performer acts as both lead singer and chorus.

Finally, the balanced antiphony both gives the poem a clear structure and adds to its musical attractiveness. It is quite obvious in this discussion that Elugwu Ezike dirges, like other varieties of African poetry, cannot be analyzed following the rules of English verse that are based on the measured effect of stressed and unstressed syllables. The musical accompaniment to the dirge, the rhythm of the dance as the dirges are performed, the energy, emotion, and passion with which the performers give vent to their inner feelings, all these elements provide a unique perspective in the appreciation of the Elugwu Ezike dirges.

Structure

The length of Elugwu Ezike Igbo dirges varies, with the number of performer determining the length of each dirge. Although some dirges performed by single performer are relatively short, the rule, rather than the exception, is that dirges performed by a single performer tend to be longer. Quite remarkable is the fact that the performance of these dirges is usually, though not always, executed by individual artists who sing and perform alone without musicians or a chorus. Such artists are sometimes commissioned to compose tailor-made dirges for particular funerals. These kind of tailor—made dirges, like the following are usually long, constituting not more than three stanzas:

Ugwu Edogba Aanya — Ugwu Edogba Aanya.

N’ọdori n’odome — In Ọdori of Odome.

Nwa oke eene — Son of a great man.

Kọla onye ishi ẹwọ aako — Tells a tale better than a grey haired man.

Mẹ onye ije ga-agbaliko — A traveler is about to depart.

Ji enyiire Ugwu — The yam is now climbing the hill.

Edogba Aanya n’odori — Edogba Aanya of Odori.

Anyi ga-ano n’abada ekyirijeniye Agalibo – we are at the bottom of the hill watching Agalibo
 Agaligbo Agalibo.

Agaligho Agaligho.

Ije gi buru ahaga — let your journey’ be successful.

Mẹ anyi nweru ahogo — so that we shall earn the praises.

Ladoore oyi — Go in peace

Nẹ onwegi onye nẹ alakogu — For we shall all die one day.

Nẹ o bu afwa bẹ anyi biacharu — the world is a market place.
 Nẹ onye byiaru uwa ga – ala- Death is certain for everyone of us.
 Aanya nna m oo — Thank you my father oo.
 Edogba Aanya Onogwu — Edogba Aanya of Qnogwu.
 Gi bu ebule ocha azugu orye — You the white ram that will not be taken to orie market.
 Onu nwa okwo owaa Eje — Onu nwa okwo son of Qwaa Eje.
 Muru Edogba Aanya — The father of Edogba Aanya
 Ugwu juru Ugwu — Hill among hill.
 Ladoore oyi — Go in peace.

This three-stanza structure makes it possible for the message in the dirge to be delivered by a lone performer who resorts to improvisation in the course of the performance. Nonetheless, some dirges performed by a single performer could also be relatively short, closely mimicking the regular and irregular phrases in the song. The following dirge Performed by a lead singer and chorus, for example, is just six lines:

L.S. Ije nduru — Dove’s movement
 Ch. Uu we ee - just swiftly
 L.S. Qmada ala oo — Qmada is dead
 Ch. Uu we ee – just swiftly
 L.S. Nene ala oo — mother is dead
 Ch. Uu we ee – just swiftly.

This short dirge is characterized by lyrical repetition. The /o/ and /ẹ/ sounds in the lines of both lead singer and chorus echo the sense of loss and sadness of the mourner. The lyrical repetition is not just limited to sound it also extends to words in the song. For instance, the following dirge illustrates the above assertion:

Nene mu oo — my mother oo
 Cho ogoro oo — cho ogoro oo
 Nene ala oo — mother has gone oo
 Cho ogoro oo — cho ogoro oo
 Nwomaja ala oo — Nwornaja is gone
 Cho ogoro oo — Cho ogoro oo
 Nene ala oo — mother is gone oo
 Cho ogoro oo — cho ogoro oo
 Nene ala oo — mother has gone oo
 Cho ogoro oo — cho ogoro oo
 Nene ala oo — mother has gone oo
 Cho ogoro oo — cho ogoro oo

The constant repetition of the words “Nene mu” and cho ogoro” emphasizes the reality that although the performers wish the dead woman (Nwornaja) farewell, she is in fact, dead and will never respond. The chanter of the above dirge has limited opportunities for verbal improvisation

in contrast to the lead singer who has more flexibility to improvise in the course of performing the dirge. In like manner, dirges performed by the chorus tend to have a relatively stable structure. Since most choruses of the dirges are short and repetitive, they are easy to memorize and master. The occurrence of parallelism in these dirges enhances their structure. In this regard, Elugwu Ezike Igbo dirges reveal a remarkable sense of balance in the form of semantic parallelism in which various images within a chant are developed independently and the relationship between them is not apparent on the surface (Okpewho, 1992:81).

Rhythm

Elugwu Ezike Igbo dirges, like most African songs have a free rhythm and no rigid metrical scheme. It is in this regard that Ruth Finnegan (1978:265) observes that:

The fundamental importance of rhythm in vocal as in other African **music** is widely accepted, but there is little agreement as to its exact structure. One helpful distinction is between songs in “Free”, and those in relatively “strict” rhythm.

In the former songs, the singing is not coordinated with any bodily rhythmic activity such as dancing. The very common songs to strict time, however, have a beat that is articulated with dancing, rhythmic movement, percussion by instruments, or hand-clapping, all of which contribute to the form and attractiveness of the song. These rhythms are worked out in many different ways in various types of songs. But one commonly recurring musical feature seems to be the simultaneous use of more than one metre at a time, as a way of heightening the rhythmic tension. The corpus of dirges in this study reveals a free rhythm like the rhythm in Yoruba Ijala which Babalola (1966:344) says has “a poetic language organized so as to create impressions and fulfill functions of poetic rhythm”. In this regard, dirges performed and sung by one lead singer tend to have a free rhythm. For instance, during the “Igba Ogige” (war song) performed in the honour of a married man, the flutist (Okwa opu) will recite with his flute thus:

Onye byaru ije alaare oo — the visitor has gone.
elele lele, e lele lele — Elele lele lele
Agu anaru ubuhu nwa ya oo — the lion has snatched an antelope its offspring.
O chi uta chita uta — He who has a bow, let him come along with it.
O chi egbe chita egbe — He who has a gun, let him come along with it.
Ne agu anaru ububu nwa ya oo — the fact that the lion has snatched an antelope its offspring.

The dirge demonstrates how the individual performer has the flexibility to treat the themes in his own way, and by so doing, expresses his emotions in the words and melodies he chooses. Dirges performed in collaboration with a chorus, on the other hand, have a beat that is articulated by dance, the accompaniment of drumming, and the playing of a host of assorted musical instruments. All these contribute to the Form and beauty of the dirge and bring out its poetic style. This can be illustrated in the Following dirge.

L.S. Onye ne-ewotenu anyi ose? —who will bring us pepper?
L.S. Onye ne-ewotenu anyi ose? —who will bring us pepper?
L.S. Me anyi woru gbayaaru olu — so that we can use it to clear our throat.

- Ch. Itodo nwa Eze wotenu anyi ose — Itodo nwa Eze send us pepper.
- Ch. Mę anyi woru gbayaaru olu — so that we shall use it to clear our throat.
- L.S. Mę anyi woru gbayaaru olu — so that we shall use it to clear our throat.
- L.S. Olu anyi soore ow oso - let our voice follow the — he is treading.
- Ch. O haare ęmu o ruure Ida - may our voice sound high so as to reach ida.
- L.S. Onye ne-ewotere anyi ose? — Who will bring us pepper?
Karo Onojo wotenu anyi ose — Karo Onojo bring us pepper.
- Ch. Mę anyi woru gbayaare olu — so that we shall use it to clear our throat.
Olu anyi soore uzo oso — let our voice follow the path she is treading.
O haare emu o ruure Ida - may our voice sound high so as to reach ida.
O haare emu o ruure Ida - may our voice sound high so as to reach ida.

As the deceased's women kindred sing the above song, they will be clapping their hands and dancing calling on the deceased's children to send edible things like kola, wine and food. This song is usually sung when the kindred women (umụada) are feeling hungry. The musical instruments such as the use of empty milk cup that accompany the singing of the dirge determine the tempo of the rhythm. Hence, Nalova Lyonga's (1979:240) observation that:

.....the drum principally dictates the tempo of certain kinds of performance for its rhythm slows down or quickens according to the movements of the dance, or more predominantly, its pattern may indicate change in action.

It is this rhythm which Lyonga refers to as contributing to the aesthetics of the dirges, especially when, as we have seen, they are accompanied by musical instruments which stimulate other mourners in the audience to sing and dance with the performers.

Men also use musical instrument such as Okanga drum to stimulate other mourners to dance. The Okanga musical group will sing the following dirges and transform them into okanga drum beats:

Onyoko nyoko o rigi Idagba — Qnyokonyoko cannot eat Idagba.

O gwuru Onu — He who has dug a hole.

Ba achiyima ęka — should come and dip his hands.

Ne okwu adigi ya — And there will be no problem.

Onye nna ya chiri Eze — One whose father was a chief.

E chiire ude - is now being crowned a king.

Onye si ne ajęde ne-egbu eryl — He who says that the hunter kills and eats alone.

Ba afuma ajęde ne-ekparyikpa — should come and watch the hunter in a thick forest

Ba afuma ajęde ne-ekparyikpa — He who says the hunter kills and eats alone.

Ba afuma ajęde ne-ekparyikpa — should come and watch the hunter in a thick forest

Odo ne-egbu ervi — Odo kills and eats alone.

Ba afuma ajęde ne-ekparyikpa — should come and watch the hunter in a thick forest.

Onye na-achi chiire anyi — let the ruler rule us.

Mę okwu adalę ozo — so that there will be no trouble again.

Abugu Eze chiire anyi — Let Abugu Eze rule us.

Mę okwu adalę ozo — so that there will no trouble again.

The Okanga drummers will recite the above songs and translate them into Okanga music. This Okanga music will be accompanied with dancing by the deceased children and relations. This Okanga music is only played when a cow is provided For the Funeral ceremony of the deceased. It is important to note that in Elugwu Ezike Igbo, it is only those who have provided cow during their deceased's father's funeral ceremony that are qualified to dance the music. Thus, the popular adage in Elugwu Ezike Igbo that "okanga adagu n'okwu ogbenye", that is, okanga music is not played in the compound of the poor.

Figurative Language

The language used by performers of Elugwu Ezike Igbo dirges is relatively ordinary and straight forward. The following dirge demonstrates the direct nature of the vocabulary of some dirges in Elugwu Ezike:

Nweze Omada. Nwaeze Okoro Owo — son of Eze Omada Okoro Owo.

Anyi evute manya — we have brought wine.

Mę onwu ekwegi anyi numa ye — but death does not allow us to drink it.

Anvi eshime nryi — we have cooked food.

Mę onwu ekwegu anyi ryime ye — but death does not allow us to eat it.

Nweze Omada Okoro owo — son of Eze Omada Okoro Owo.

Unę o o, unę o o unę o o - unę o o, unę o o, unę o o.

Qsayi Ukwaba, nwa okee eene — Qsayi Ukwaba, the son of a great man.

Onwu gi ememe anyi putu putu — your death, have kept us miserable.

Nwa agbenu — Son of the rich man.

Akų okpurukpu ne-eju onu — the dry kernel that fills the mouth.

O bu gini be I ji hafunu anyi? — Why did you leave us?

Onwu, anyi mere gi gini? — Death, what have we done to you?

Nene Omada Ugwu — mother Omada Ugwu.

Onye je-enye anyi nryi — who will give us food?

Mę eguu guma anyi — when we feel hungry.

Onye ja-achunu anyi ekwa? — Who will wash our clothes for us?

Mę anyi jekonu ekwukwo? — When we resume school?

However, beneath this apparent ordinary straight forward use of language, there are complex allusions, hidden meanings and connotative implications concealed within the sub-text of the

songs, which may not be evident to the casual onlooker in these funeral occasions. A good number of these dirges draw their imagery from nature, principally from animals and plants. They utilize apt metaphors and spiritual experiences of the Elugwu Ezike people. The literary significance of the dirges is made manifest in the elegance of the words used by the performers, their appropriateness, and their perceptiveness with which they are chanted within the context of grief and mourning.

In some dirges comparison is evoked by the use of metaphors. It is not unusual that a comment is made about human life and action through reference to non-human activities. Most of the metaphors employed by the performers of these dirges centre on death because the nature and purpose of death is still a mystery to the people of Elugwu Ezike. Hence, in the dirge that follows, the performer compares death to a male cow that has been taken away and its enclosure (fence) left open.

A kparu oke eshu — the he cow has been caught.
 Nẹ nkwu e yeru onu — and the fence is let open.
 Egbu e vuru nwa ooku — the kite has taken the chick.
 La nẹ ugere elu — very high up the sky.
 Nko e rugu — the hook cannot reach it.
 Mẹ ẹka erugu — neither do the hand.

This implies that when the owner of the house dies, the house becomes desolate. At other times, the lead singer uses metaphors with euphemism. In other words, the mourner avoids using the name “death”. For example, in the above poem, “egbe” (kite) that takes the hen’s chick symbolizes death. We also have the situation where the lead singer will recite:

“Ugwuja aladore oo’ (Ugwuja has embarked on a journey to his home).

The mourner says the deceased has gone on an everlasting journey instead of saying that Ugwuja is dead. Similarly, the dirge below demonstrates that instead of saying that “Abugu Idoko is dead”, the lead singer instead says his” name has been struck off the list of men and women.

Abugu Idoko adeḡmagi — Abugu Idoko is no more.
 Abugu Idoko a laarema noo — Abugu Idoko has been struck off
 O ladooreme no oo — He has been struck off.
 O deḡmagi n’ogu njikom — no longer from the list of men.
 N’ogu ndi onya — from the list of friends.
 Eha Abugu adeḡmagi — Abugu’s name has been struck off.
 Nẹ ndi be Idoko Eze — from the family list of Idoko Eze.
 Nẹ odeḡmagi — He has been struck off.

Another commonly used stylistic device which can be identified in Elugwu Ezike dirges is symbolism. This ability to use words whose meanings cannot be perceived from the face value is usually with the symbols associated with death that the mourners use during *their* performances. For instance the dirge Idoko Eze alaare oo” (Idoko has embarked on a journey) symbolizes a permanent separation. It is in this regard that Agbor Wilson (1989:90) observes that:

When one leaves for a journey, he leaves behind the others, then, turns his face to look forward to arrival at his destination. But when this destination is unknown, the journey becomes infinite and the separation permanent.

The idea that we are born only to die is a realistic characteristic of the Elugwu Ezike Igbo world view in which onwu (death) is seen as an inevitable reality and as a journey to the land of the ancestors. The inevitability of death is again presented in metaphorical language in the following dirge.

Eeke Ọmada ala nẹ obu ẹja — Eke Ọmada has gone to the grave.
Ngwere chishima ukwu — the lizard has strengthened its legs.
Chi chi chi — chi chi chi
Ngwere chishima ukwu — the lizard has strengthened its legs.

In everyday speech “ala” means “going home” but in the above dirge, Eeke Omada to have gone into his mud house means that he has been buried in his grave. “Obu ẹja” symbolizes the tomb which represents the world beyond the physical mortal realm in which the dead man’s abode exists. Personification, in which human attributes are ascribed to abstract or non-human entities, seems to be a regular feature used by performers of Elugwu Ezike dirges. It is in this vein that the lead singer in this single stanza dirge accuses death of snatching her entire family away.

Onwu e e — death e e
Gini bẹ I ga-ayanigi anyi? — Why don’t you want to leave us?
Nwanchi, nwa nwa nẹ ogerenyi — children, grand children and the elders.
I nẹ-egbu nẹ nwa nchi — you strike them down at birth.
Mẹ i nẹ-egbu nẹ-ogerenyi — you let them grow and then take them.
Onwu, onwu, onwu egbukpome anyi — death, death, death has struck this family.
Ndi be Ugwu Eze — Ugwu Eze’s family.
Mgbenye, anyi ga-abu mgbenye — Orphans, we have been left orphans.

Death here is personified as human monster that can snatch people away, or nurture and then kill them in the prime of their life when they least expect it. This act of snatching people portrays the unpredictability of death. The same notion is expressed in the following dirge which says that death is a rogue that steals and could not be caught.

Onwu bu abalidiegwu — death is a rogue.
O zuru o gbalaga — He steals and could not he caught.
Onwu bu ẹha gi — death is your name.
Ijide eene nẹ ihagu ya ẹka — death clutches firmly and never lets go.

Death in this dirge is referred to as having a name and clutching firmly, never letting go his victim. The dirge bestows upon death human attributes which are, by no means, pleasant, positive or favourable. Alliteration, assonance and idiophones abound in these dirges. The repetition of the consonant sounds in individual lines occurs in most of the dirges. In dirge No. I, for instance, /k/ is repeated several times in lines 2, 3, and 4 of the dirge. In the same vein, the /a/ and /o/ sounds in the same lines are repeated, creating rhythmic, musical assonance that is

complemented by musical instruments, singing and dancing, all of which enhance the beauty of the performance.

Similarly, the /m/ and /u/ sounds re-occur in dirge number .

“munyi ukwu ze, munyi ukwu ze.
munyi ukwu zegbo, o la n’oto”.

Like alliteration and assonance, idiophones, which literally mean “ideas in sound,” are actually sounds in these dirges that convey vivid pictures, images, and impressions to the audience for the purpose of achieving lyrical effect.

Ije nduru — Doves movement
Uu we e e — just swiftly
Omada ala oo — Omada is dead
Uu we e e — just swiftly
Nene ala oo — mother is dead

The dirge describes the movement made by the dove while taking off from where it perched on the ground. “Uu we e e” is used to convey the swift passing away of the deceased. This dirge is usually song when the corpse of a dead woman is being taken to her kindred home. Despite the mournful and sorrowful atmosphere of these funeral occasions, the performers attempt to inject occasional humour to relief the burden of sorrow that pervades both the audiences and relatives of the deceased. The humour emerges in the deliberate alteration of particular lines in some dirges. These alterations are not due to any exigencies of dirge singing techniques, but to the performers’ desire to amuse the audience. This kind of humorous diversion is to funeral performances what comic relief is to the stage performance of tragedy. This is seen in the dirge below: (Dirge No. 19).

- L.S. Ome nwa Eze ga-ano weee? Where can we get Ome nwa Eze?
Ch. Ome nwa Eze, ana-alu eenye n’eshi? — Ome nwa Eze, do we marry a sick woman?
L.S. Mba! — No!
Ch. Qonye na-asa ne ji ye onwa? — can a woman senior her husband’s mother?
L.S. Mba! — No!
L.S. Ome nwa Eze agbaliire ije — Ome nwa Eze is passing away.
L.S. Eeke nene Omada — mother Omada.
L.S. Eekara neere ni m enya — let termites take watch of my residence.
L.S. Edoga nwa Eze deeje oo — Edoga nwa Eze, I salute you.
L.S. Edoga Eze, onwu ma oo — Edoga Eze, as it pleases death.

The humour here arises with the interjection of the line “can a woman senior her husband’s mother” within the context of the funeral occasion that laments the absence of the dead father who cannot be replaced (from where can we get him). Sometimes performers deliberately sing

off tune or march out of the beat and rhythm of the music. At times too, some performers make obscene gestures while dancing, thereby moving the audience to laughter.

It is also important to note that when funeral song is rendered, the words, facial expressions of the singers, vocal expressiveness and other paralinguistic strategies all add to the impression it creates. In all forms of performances, the performer exploits linguistic, tonal, musical and visual resources at his disposal to realize the aim of performances. The funeral dirge of a man and a woman may have the same themes of loss, helplessness and regret but the words of rendition change as a performer recounts the achievements of the man which in most cases are different from those of the woman. Into the same dirge can therefore be introduced differences related to the age, gender profession, family background or other circumstances of the deceased. Discussing this phenomenon. Finnegan. (1970:38) notes:

First of all words differ. Each narrator (performer) has his own style, speaks freely and does not feel in any way bound by the expression used by the person who taught him the tale (form). It would be a great error to think that writing a story at the dictation of a native: we possess the standard form of the tale. There is no standard **at** all.

The performances of Elugwu Ezike Igbo dirges reveal an impressive array of descriptive passages in which persons and objects are described in vivid language coloured by the performers' emotions. These pictures are conjured from the performers' imagination, reproducing fine shades of feelings and making the audience perceive familiar images through their imagination as though they were seeing them for the first time. The performers use different symbols in association with variegated images in the dirges to convey different moods that arouse various emotions in the audience. It is in this sense that the performers portray their innate creative abilities to enhance their art, thereby giving this particular genre of funeral poetry much of its beauty.

Findings of the Study

The study revealed that solo—and—response form is the basic structural features in most Elugwu Ezike dirges. There is constant repetition of words and sentences in the dirges. The funeral artists make use of linguistic and paralinguistic features at their disposal to realize the aim of their performance and various imageries are used in the dirges to showcase emotion such as loss, events such as death and hunting, animate objects such as lion, kite and lizard, inanimate objects such as forest and mountain.

Conclusion

Textual repetitions serve the purpose of emphasizing the messages embedded in the Elugwu Ezike oral funeral poetry. Burial rite is not just performed for a mere entertainment of the audience. There are various virtues embodied in the form, content and performance of the funeral dirge that accompanies it. Most virtues emphasize the importance of bravery, hard work, respect, collective responsibility and communal ties among others.

The solo-and-response form is the basic structural feature in most Elugwu Ezike oral funeral poetry. However, in actual performance it was observed that there is no strictly fixed framework of funeral dirge as is the case in western music. The structure of Elugwu Ezike funeral dirge is a flexible one incorporating spontaneous creations of the individual mourner, her reflections and

statements, about the deceased. These may also include conventional features of allusions to ancestry and accomplishments, kingship terms, epithets and terms of endearment. Its flexible nature allows it to dwell at length on the qualities of the deceased. ‘Thematic development is based on spontaneity, extemporization and creativity. Variations in texts lead to variations in significant themes as dictated by speech rhythms and speech tones.

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