

The Ethnopoetic Study of Igbo Oral Funeral Poetry: A Case Study of Edda Dirge

Mercy Agha Onu, Ebonyi State University, Nigeria

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Abstract

This study is an analysis of Igbo oral funeral poetry with particular reference to Edda. The principal objective of the study is to analyze oral funeral poetry performance of the Edda people with emphasis on the form and structure of Edda dirges, belief of causes and effects of death, themes and significance of oral funeral poetry, funeral rituals and rites in Edda and the impact of Christianity and Western lifestyle on the performance of Edda dirges. An aspect of ethno poetic theory known as infracultural model in folklore analysis developed by Alembi is used in the analysis of data. The funeral artists make use of linguistic and paralinguistic features at their disposal to realize the aims 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. The findings of the study revealed that the dirges poetically reiterate the theme of futility of life, social commentary, and reflection on life, spirituality and reference to the deceased. Dirges function as a repository of historical knowledge, a tool for social criticism, didacticism and as a medium of mourning and celebrating the life of the deceased. Ndiishina (spirits of the ancestors), witchcraft, charm, poisoning and suicide were identified as the major causes of death in Edda. This paper is set out to investigate the impact of Christianity and Western education on the performances of dirges.

Keywords: ethnopoetic, funeral, poetry, dirge, death, belief, causes, effects, Christianity, western lifestyle, Edda.

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Introduction

Dirge as a form of oral poetry makes use of language to communicate experience. Funeral dirges, no matter where they are performed, have one thing in common that is, they all express the emotion of loss. Ikueze (1977) defines dirges as a sorrowful expression over the loss of someone. It involves wailing, sobbing and weeping around the corpse of the deceased. Dirge is more of a personal expression of grief over the loss of a dear one. They are mainly sung at burials. The fact that dirges are chanted on the occasion of death also tells us that they constitute a very important way of bidding farewell to our departed ones. The success or failure in the performance of dirges at a funeral could therefore determine, to some extent, whether the deceased has been accorded a decent burial or not. It also determines whether the deceased's spirit or the deceased's spirit could come back and demand an apology from the living for failure to organize a befitting burial ceremony for the deceased. Apart from the context of the funeral, there are other instances outside it in which dirges can be heard. The distinctive features of dirges outside the funeral context are that they are solo performances, that is, they are performed by one person. They do not involve wailing and crying. Also, they are never accompanied by drumming. It is only in the funeral context that dirges can be performed with musical accompaniment. One of the factors that motivate the singing of dirges outside the funeral context is the desire to practice singing so that individuals can take an active part in the performance of dirges during official mourning process. Some of the women who usually act as chorus during the performance of dirges at funeral rehearse dirge singing while grinding pepper on a stone or working on the farm.

Another factor that may explain the singing of the dirge outside its formal setting is where a woman who has lost several relatives is overcome with grief. She might have been reminded of her lost relatives through a particular incident or event that may set her singing dirges alone. In this, the motivation behind the performance is not the desire to practice.

The objective of this study is to contribute towards the understanding and appreciation of Edda cultural values through the analysis of Edda dirges. This study covers four main areas. The first is the analysis of the form and structure of Edda dirges in order to bring out their cultural values and artistic qualities, causes and effects of death among the Edda people, the analysis of themes and functions emanating from the dirges and the impact of Christianity and western lifestyle on the performance of these dirges. The import of documenting, analyzing and encouraging the youth to go into professional dirge performance so as to ensure the continuity of funeral dirges and in Edda constitute the motivation behind this study.

Theoretical Framework

This study used an aspect of ethnopoetics known as the infracultural model in folklore analysis in developing this work. This strand of ethnopoetic is developed by Alembi (2002) for research into oral poetry. The infracultural model of oral poetry analysis combines elements from two strands of ethnopoetics developed by Dell Hymes (1982) and Tedlock (1983). The term infracultural model is used in this paper to mean interpretation of words and actions can only be located within the perceptions of the study community. This model seeks to bring together the writer and the study community in a reflective process to gather information on funeral poetry and interpret it together as partners. This entry by the writer into the rhythm of life of the Edda community act as a good basis to learn and experience their beliefs, expectations, fears and perceptions of death.

Thus, instead of concentrating on Hymes strand of ethnopoetics which lays emphasis on the written text or Tedlock which emphasizes living discourse, the infracultural model gives cognizance to performance, the oral text, and the written text. The key elements of the model are that it demands an insider analysis and interpretation of works of art in a given reality of a community, and interpretation of oral literary pieces in their cultural context. It also examines oral texts beyond mere concern with stylistics in order to elucidate the theme of the study. It equally emphasizes the researcher's deep involvement in dialogue and interaction in order to understand the structural and underlying issues surrounding a phenomenon and a community. It assigns meaning to oral text based on the cultural traditions of the performer and audience and a close observation and participation in live performances of a given genre of oral art (Alembi, 2002).

Empirical Review

Ogede (1995) carries out an investigation on the context, form and poetic expression in Igede funeral dirges, Igede, a minority tribe in Benue state has a tradition of expression that is as vibrant as that of any of Africa's large language group. As a storehouse of Igede beliefs, practices and wisdom, the dirge leads us into a world of spirits, a dreadful world of ancestors fearfully conjured up as a universe of monstrous, malignant forces before whom man is a vulnerable being, constantly constrained to plead for protection. Ogede in this study demonstrates that there is genuine creativity in Igede dirges which compares favorably with those found among other people the world over.

Alembi (2002) conducted a study on oral funeral poetry in Abanyole in Kenya using ethnopoetic theory in the analysis of data. He found out that majority of deaths among the Abanyole people are blamed on the people exercising mystical powers. He demonstrates that people who use mystical powers are greatly feared and hated to the extent that the sons and daughters of such people often fail to get suitors from among the Abanyole. They then marry from distant ethnic groups or families within Bunyore or outside of it with the same characteristics.

In a similar study, Egwuagu (1995) carries out a study on the content of funeral dirge in Ezinifite in Aguata Local Government Area of Anambra State. This study reveals that dirge is a creative verbal musical expression which takes place alongside the poetry of songs, drums, horns and pipes. The study also observed 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 verbal aspect less developed than dirges without instruments, which are delivered in a spoken or recitative style. The language of Ezinifite dirges has the following stylistic features: dialect words, proverbs, rhythm, figures of speech such as personification, hyperbole, idiom and metaphor.

Uzochukwu (2001) also conducted funeral poetry of the Igbo he holds that funeral poetry inculcate in the living the knowledge of what constitute good character and that in some areas in Igbo land, funeral artists constitute themselves into a sort of trade union. The findings of this study is similar to the present study because in Edda *Okprowu* group performers constitute themselves into such a trade union and their services are hired for during funeral ceremony to entertain audience. They study further revealed that the most prevalent stylistic devices employed by the Igbo funeral artist 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, all of which constitute poetic imagery. Many of these songs are full of praise for the dead.

Forms of Edda Dirges

The performance of Edda Igbo dirges is most enhanced by the chant and antiphonal forms. Of equal importance is the structure of the dirges themselves, structure here is referring to the lengths of the dirges and alternating stanzas created by the constant vocal interactions between the lead singer and the chorus. About form and structure, King (1999) observes that one of the greatest characteristics of Africa dirge is the use of call and response song forms. The call-and-response gives room for flexibility in the way it is organized. It can be adapted, augmented, shortened and expanded. It all depends on the needs and goals of the song at the time that it is sung. The refrain is another familiar pattern of poetic repetition in Edda 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 “Eze has gone to the grave” over and over in several lines, to express feelings or idea of loss.

The effect of the performance of this kind of dirge is that it motivate the audience to sing along, repeating the familiar lines of the refrain with the chorus “Ngwuru agbatileokpa” (the lizard stretches its legs), thereby intensifying the mournful atmosphere in the funeral. “Eze alaghale obu eja” (Eze has gone to the grave) means that Eze has died while “Ngwuru agbatileokpa” (the lizard stretches its legs), demonstrates the posture of the deceased. One line can be repeated several times. This trend in which dirge lines are repeated over and over is frequent in most of Edda Igbo dirges. It is a popular technique that lead singer and chorus employ very regularly in the rendition of the dirges.

Etaudu atogborole	Etaudu now lay dead
Gọ utobo aghoro azima naagu	That utobo is harvesting ground pea
Nnachi Nkama si	Nnachi Nkama says
O nwo ewu linde ewu	One who has goat should tie it on a tether
Gọ onwu nonwa okporo	Because death is on the way
Onwu bu ogbu o yaara	Death kills and leaves the deceased
Ma agu bu ogbu o buru	But the lion kills
Lagha ofia je ria	And take the corpse to the bush for meat

Oko Chima	Oko Chima
Si ya anubaghi mini alì	Says that he doesn't drink pond water
Maka ntiti	Because of dirt
Nnachi Nkama ekeelem mu	Thank you Nnachi Nkama
Nnachi Nkama ekeelem gi	I am grateful to Nnachi Nkama
Nnachi Nkama aka kpara oke ewu	Nnachi Nkama when the owner of the house is dead
Nekwu eghere ọ̀nụ	The house becomes desolate
Liyifu Oduma	Life Oduma
Si ya bụ nkita	Says that he is a dog
Da eri akpakwuru	That eats the stomach
Nnachi Nkama apalile ije	Nnachi Nkama is dead
Ele ekika enwerezulu	So termites will take control of the house.
Nnachi Nkama ọ̀nwụ ma oo	Nnachi Nkama, as it pleases death oo
Nnachi Nkama, ọ̀nwụ oo	Nnachi Nkama, as it pleases death oo
Odogwu Ogiri, ọ̀nwụ ma oo	Odogwu Ogiri, as it pleases death oo
Odogwu Ogiri ọ̀nwụ ma oo	Odogwu Ogiri, as it pleases death oo
Ọ̀nwụ ma kee o mere	Death do as it pleases you
Ọ̀nwụ ma oo	As it pleases death oo
Orie Ude nwa Ikpo Eze	Orie Ude, daughter of Ikpo Eze
Orie Ude si ya adìbaghi ebuọ elu ugwu	Orie Ude says that she cannot be two on top of the mountain.

This dirge form consists of direct statement to the theme of death. This dirge form involves the repetition of key phrases over and over. The chanter begins the dirge by singing a simple verse alone. Also, due to the fact that narratives are sometimes used in the composition of the dirges, vocabulary is sometimes drawn from the world of tales which has close links with nature. In consequence, names of animals such as goat (ewu), agu (lion), birds such as hawk (egbe), udele (vulture) and reptiles such as snake (agwo) feature prominently in the vocabulary of the dirges. While Oko Chima, and Ikpo Eze represents the human world, lion, hawk, vulture and snake represent the animal world. The dirge indicates that there is an interaction between humans and other animals which represent the world of nature.

The funeral artists realize much of the cash in the form of donations received during performances, through praises of the host and some of the members of the audience. In addition to the praising of the host and members of the audience, the dirge singer praises herself. Here is an instance of such self praise by the dirge chanter.

Nnachi Nkama ọ̀nwụ ma oo –	Nnachi Nkama, as it pleases death oo
OrieUde nwa Ikpo Eze –	Orie Ude, daughter of Ikpo Eze
Orie Ude si ya adìbaghi ebuọ elu ugwu –	Orie Ude says that she cannot be two on top of the mountain

The chanter here refers to herself as OriUde (a praise name) who do not wish to compete with any other funeral artist in funeral occasion. Once she comes out to perform in any funeral occasion other 'iteri' dirge chanters around are silenced. She quickly, diverts the attention of the audience from every other funeral artist to herself, holding everybody spell-bound.

Another type of Edda dirge involves antiphonal collaboration between the lead singer and chorus. That is the solo chorused refrain. The lead singer usually uses the refrain to gain time to think of the next thematic statement to insert in the dirge. In this case, the refrain takes the form of a predominant image from a preceding line.

Structure of Edda Dirges:

The length of Edda Igbo dirges varies with the number of performer determining the length of each dirge. Dirges performed by 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 are sometimes commissioned to compose tailor-made dirges for particular funerals. The content is not only concerned with a particular topic but generally draw on vocabulary from the world of death, history nature and from everyday life as illustrated in the dirge below. The dirges reflect a common theme in which life and death find enough expression. Again the lines “ji enyile ugwu” (the yam is climbing the hill), and “ayi da -anọ ọkpa ugwu elere “(we are at the bottom of the hill watching Agaligbo) is describing the inevitable nature of death. Once it is time for one to pass on to the next world, nothing can prevent it from happening. The difficulty involved in removing the climbing yam tendril that has got itself firmly attached to a hill is compared with the arduous task of saving life from the claws of death. These kinds of tailor -made dirges, are usually long, constituting not more than three stanzas:

Egbeke Nkama Anya N’Owutu Edda Nwa oke eene Kọrọ onye awọ aakọ man.	Egbeke Nkama Anya In Owutu Edda Son of a great man Tells a tale better than a grey haired
M m onye ije nahi akwakọta Ji enyile Ugwu Nkama Anya Owutu Ayị da anọ ọkpa ugwu elekiri watching	M m a traveler is about to depart The yam is now climbing the hill. Nkama Anya of Owutu. We are at the bottom of the hill watching
Agaligbo Ije gi were were Laa doori Onwegho onye amaghi anwuba Eleghi ọbụ afia ayị bịara Gọ onye bịara ụwa gha –ala Kaa nna m oo Nkama Anya Agha Gị bụ ebule ọcha asọ afia orie taken to orie	Agaligbo Let your journey be successful. Go in peace For we shall all die one day The world is a market place. Death is certain for everyone of us. Thank you my father oo Nkama Anya Agha You the white ram that will not be
Okenwa nwa Okam Uduma Etta Mụrụ Egbeke Nkama Anya Ugwu juru Ugwu Laa doori –	market. Okenwa Okam son of Uduma Etta The father of Egbeke Nkama Anya. Hill upon hills. Go in peace.

A language device found in Edda dirges is metaphorical allusion, in most instances, death or the act of dying is often referred to in the dirge as “ji enyiri ugwu” (the yam tendril is climbing the hill). The mental imagery depicted here is that the spirit of the deceased is embarking on a journey to the spirit world. In this context, instead of putting it that somebody has finally died, the idea of death is rather captured in the idea of the yam tendril climbing the hill. The difficulty involved in removing the yam tendril climbing the hill is being compared with the arduous task of saving human life from the claws of death. Allusions do not only go a long way in illustrating the creative manner in which Edda dirge singers can use languages in the circumstances of burial ceremony but they also enable dirge performers to capture emotions or events in imagery that is more compelling than long descriptive narratives. In the song, “the yam climbing the hill”, the artist use the image of climbing plant that has got itself firmly attached to a hill to paint the picture of death to his audience. Also in the dirge, a comment is made about human life and action through reference to non-human activities. Most of the metaphors employed by the performers of Edda dirges centre on death because the nature and purpose of death is still a mystery to the people of Edda.

Reflections on life also constitute another theme that is usually covered by the dirge performers. These reflections usually exhibit philosophical lessons and values that are pertinent to life. As a result of this, cultural, moral and religious lessons or values are often incorporated into reflections. The theme of reflections on life has more to do with the artist prescribing to the community some of the lessons and values of life. The reflections serve a simple direct didactic purpose. These reflections are not only influenced by everyday life but also contain practical lessons which can be very useful to the community and society at large when they are properly digested. For instance, the following lines of dirge illustrate:

Nnachi Nkama apalile ije Nnachi Nkama is dead
Ele ekika enwerezu ulo So termites will take control of the house.

The artist is here indicating that death is a permanent separation of the soul from the body from the physical world to the spirit world. To the singer, when one dies leaving no children of his own, his house becomes desolate and invariably the termite takes over the house as the deceased has left no one behind to look after the house.

The theme of death as a universal calamity is another theme incorporated into Edda dirges. The dirge performer often recounts the names of people who distinguished themselves in one way or the other in their life time but could not defeat death when it comes. The dirge below illustrates the theme of death as a universal phenomenon.

Ibe ọnwụ gburu Okam Etta nwa Etta Nnachi	For death to kill Okam son of Etta Nnachi
Onye ma etu e si azụ afia	A business tycoon
Gbua Chima Ama nwa Amaogbu	killed Chima Ama son of Amaogbu
Oke dibia Ekoli ji eme ọnu	A renowned herbalist of Ekoli
Nwa dibia aza ikuku ama ọnya	A herbalist nicknamed named the great wind
Gbua Eme Udu Oji ife Ekoli	Killed Eme Udu Oji The Light of Ekoli
Onye yara gọmentị e riko	He that dines with the Government
Gbua ma Chibua O mere ọha	Killed Chibua the philanthropist
Gbua ma Chibua O mere ọha	Killed Chibua the philanthropist
Ọnwụ a gha eme gi gini gha ijuru	Death what shall we do to please you
Gha i hapu ayi aka?	So that you will leave us alone?

Here the chanter mentioned some important personalities in Edda who were also revered in the entire town. Four persons (three men and one woman) were mentioned. The people were top and influential men and woman even a herbalist was also mentioned who could not save his live but died. The message here is that since these people were subject to death, then it means that death is a natural event that should not bother anyone and should be regarded as a universal occurrence. In the Edda context, dirges generally draw their vocabulary from the world of death, history, nature and from everyday life. It is believed that death is an integral part of life and that man is helpless in the face of death.

Since man cannot overcome death on this earth, it is better for him to make the best out of his short stay on it by living a life worthy of emulation.

Findings and Conclusion

Findings of the study:

The study revealed that solo-and response form is the basic structural features in most Edda 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 aims 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 object such as forest and mountain. The findings of the study also revealed that the dirges poetically reiterate the theme of futility of life, social commentary, and reflection on life, spirituality and reference to the deceased. Christianity and Western life education have negatively affected the performance of dirges in such a way that Christian music is used in funeral ceremonies in recent times.

Conclusion

The performance of Edda oral funeral poetry reveal an impressive array of descriptive passages in which persons and objects are described in vivid language coloured by the performers' emotions. The dirge singer uses linguistic and paralinguistic constructs which enhance one another in performance. These vivid 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 creative abilities to enhance their art. The survival of Edda traditional funeral poetry is threatened by forces of modernization. The senility of the Igbo funeral artists, coupled with the fact that the Christian mode of funeral celebration prevents the emergence of new practitioners of this form of oral art, makes Igbo traditional funeral poetry vulnerable to extinction.

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Contact email: aghaonumercy@yahoo.com