
Themes and Functions of Agbarha–Otor Dirges

By

TITUS R. OHWONOHWO
*Departments of Arts and Humanities
School of General Studies
Delta State Polytechnic,
Ogwashi – Uku, Nigeria*

Abstract

Dirges play cardinal role in the cultural life of the Agbarha - Otor people, who are part of the Urhobo in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria. Agbarha – Otor is a land full of dirges. They pervade the life and the world of the Agbarha people. The only way to prove this, is to collect document and showcase to the world that Agbarha – Otor is a rich source of dirges. The people of Agbarha – Otor, like many other communities in Africa believe that death is not the end of human life. This is the reason why they honour and escort the departed with melodies dirges. The thrust of this paper, therefore, is to examine the themes: lamenting the dead, putting blame on death and helplessness of the bereaved. The paper also reveals the profuse functions of Agbarha – Otor dirges. To the Agbarha – Otor people, dirges serves as rites of passage for the departed; enables the Agbarha – Otor people to admit their loss and also helps the bereaved express their feelings of loss.

Introduction

Dirges are melancholic songs sung in honour of a deceased. Dirges are also means of praising the dead person. He is honoured and mourned, and as well, the general links between the past and present, the living and dead are brought out in stock themes (Finnegan 1970: 148). According to a literary scholar, Ojaide (2004: 69), “dirge is a poem that deals with death.” Songs that are essential to the burial and memorial rites in different communities in Africa form the dirge. Besides, funeral songs sung by people or individuals; prayers offered during funeral ceremonies by presiding priest and encomiums by friends of the departed, are all forms of poetry for mourning the dead. Funeral are characterized by deep feelings that are partly expressed through poetry. Thus, dirge performances become useful avenues to let out pent emotions that could easily be harmful to health of the bereaved. Funerals are also characterized by feelings of joy that are expressed through dirges.

The Agbarha – Otor people, like many other communities, believe that death is not the end of human life. They see death as an opening to another life. The Agbarha – Otor people believe that the spirit of the dead advances to commune with

the spirit of the other departed members of the community, which congregate in *erivwi* the world of the spirits. The Agbarha perceive *erivwi* as the external domicile of final rest and therefore, it is generally accepted as a favourable abode.

In Agbarha – Otor, funeral songs are rendered as the deceased is being prepared for interment. Such songs comprise laments, which demonstrate the people's grief. On the one hand, the deceased person is eulogized and his contributions to the lives of those around are narrated. On the other hand, the dirges serve as means for expressing the feeling of loss. The gist of this paper therefore, is to examine the themes and functions of Agbarha – Otor dirges.

Themes of Agbarha – Otor Dirges

Agbarha – Otor funeral poems have their different themes drawn from different aspects of life. These themes encompass: Lamenting the dead, putting blame on death and helplessness of the bereaved.

Lamenting the Dead

Lamenting the dead is one of the themes, which naturally emanates from Agbarha –Otor funeral songs. This theme is the commonest type. The few lines of the poem below depict this fact.

Dirge 1: Uloho Kpore

Ulohoo, Ulohoo
Uloho Kpore
Ughwu ibaba davwarenje
Ulohoo, Ulohoo
Uloho Kpore
Ughwu ibaba
Ka Sa chowwero
Ulohoo, Ulohoo
Uloho Kporee.

Iroko is Gone

Irokoo, Irokoo
Iroko is gone.
The death of Iroko is a great pain to us
Irokoo, Irokoo
Iroko is gone
The death of aged father
Will never be forgotten.
Irokoo, Irokoo
Iroko is gone.

The above dirge indicates how painful the loss is to the bereaved. It goes further to suggest that the loss will ever remain in the memories of the bereaved. 'Lamenting the dead' has sub-themes. These include: *Eye* of the ancestors, loss of a breadwinner, loss of a companion. However, we shall treat a few of them.

Dirge 2: *Ero Esemo*

Eh *ero* esamo kpore
Odavwe ke semo
Onofa jimudia kanye?
Avwaren kese mudia edia vween

Eye of the Ancestors

Eh the *eye* of the ancestors is gone
I feel for our ancestors
Who will represent them again?
We cannot play your role.

The poem above, show that the deceased was an ambassador to his ancestors on earth. The poet therefore, laments this irreparable loss on behalf of the ancestors. The funeral song goes further to depict that none of the bereaved can be in the shoes of the deceased as a representative of the ancestors.

It is a great pain when the only person that shoulders the responsibilities of an entire family dies. This brings us to another sub-theme: ‘Loss of a breadwinner.’ Here the dirge perform chants the lamentation of the deceased breadwinner. Below is an example of a funeral poem that bears the sub-theme in question:

Dirge 3: *Urhukpe avwaren furu*

Urhukpe avwaren *furu*
Avwaren *bemroree*
Kono rukavwaren.
Obo avwaren guonore?
Ohwovuovo eroo.
Eh eh

Our Lamp is Off

Our *lamp* is *off*
We’ ll no longer see
Who will provide for us
Our needs?
Nobody
Eh eh.

The above poem suggests that the deceased was the only hope or benefactor to the bereaved. The dirge singer therefore, laments that all hope is lost. This is evidence in the rhetorical question in Lines 3-4: kono rukavwaren / oboavwaren guonore? (Who will provide for us / our needs?)

Agbarha funeral poem also explores the theme of companionship. Below is a poem that expresses the loss of a companion:

Dirge 4: Ugbeyan Me

Ugbeyan me
Ugbeyan me
Wo werhe?
Die wo rue?
Wo yara na
Ono die Ugbeyan me?
Karo ho ne ighwive vwa kere *odeagbava*
Vue we,
Vue we.

My Friend

My friend
My friend
Are you sleeping?
What are you doing?
Now that you're gone
Who will be my companion?
Remember we were like *Siamese plantain*
Tell me,
Tell me.

This poem suggests the pain sustained by the bereaved as a result of a loss of an intimate friend. The bereaved feels the loss greatly because no other friend or person can fill the vacuum created. The worry over the death of this companion generates the rhetorical question in the threnody. Line 8 of the dirge shows the intimacy that existed between the bereaved and the deceased. This proximity is compared with a clustered seed of plantain. The conjoined plantain suggests the inseparability of the two friends. Only death can separate them.

Putting Blame on Death

Putting blame on death is another theme that emerges from Agbarha – Otor funeral poems. Here, blame is put on death for its callous attack on everyman. Death is seen as responsible for spoiling this interesting world. Below is a dirge where this blame is predominant:

Dirge 5: Ughwumiakpo

Ughawmiakpo omiemiena

Owe dje oni avwaren kpurie agha
Kono semo oni avwaren bruche?
Ona kobo wo soro?
Ekan na owe
Fikidie wokpolo
Emo wiodjare
Ughwu we gbemere
We lerhe avwaren weri
Wo ghwe avwaren ve emudiake wen:

Ehowan ve ikpregede
Wo brano
Avwaren se wen

This World is Spoilt by Death

It is death that spoilt this interesting world
You drove our mother to a forbidden coast
Who will curb children of our mother?
Is this your havoc?
The blame is yours
Because you have dragged
Children into suffering
Death you are an eyesore
You made us to be sorrowful
You killed us through your agents:
Illness and accident
You are too bad
We denounce you.

Lines 1-7 of the poem above, suggest that it is death that drives the deceased from this world to great beyond. Death is being attacked for putting the bereaved in a state of trauma and suffering.

In lines 8-13 of the same poem, death is seen as an eyesore, a despicable thing and a custodian of sorrow and pain. It lunches attack on man at will. Blame is put on death and its agents for their brutality on man. The bard finally denounces death and its agents

From this major theme: Putting blame on death; a sub-theme; ‘death kills good people and leaves bad people’ emerged.

Death is a respecter of no man. It kills good people in lieu of bad people. It destroys at will. Below is a good example of a dirge that bears the aforementioned theme.

Dirge 6: Ughwu Ruonana

Ughwu die lerhe woruonana?
Wi kemu kemuakpo
Ohwo avwaren wo *gerenshe*
Wo ya dje irumwuemu wo
Wo di *geneshe* emamihwo
Ughwu we ozighe
Wo ru muemu
Dje me vue we
Wo garee
Wo cheji ghwe

Death Did This

Death why did you do this?
For everything on earth,
Is our person you choose to *pull down*
You left the evildoers
And *pull down* good people
Death you're a murderer
You are wicked
Let me tell you
You are not strong
You will also die.

In the above poem, line 1 opens with a question directed to death. It is a clear indication of putting blame on death. Here, death is attacked for killing good people and leaving the despicable people. Lines 6-10 center on abusive words rained on death. Death is painted bad as a result of its black deeds. It is labeled a murderer.

Helplessness of the Bereaved

Dirge in Agbarha – Otor also contains the theme of helplessness and sympathy of those left behind by the deceased. The funeral poem that bears the theme of this nature, is used for consoling the bereaved. In spite this theme, the bereaved are given hope that all is not lost. This theme is commonly described or compared with a cow without a tail. Among the people of Agbarha, this comparison is between an orphan and a cow without a tail. It is believed that God, who drives flies from a tailless cow, will always be there to help the bereaved in times of need. Here is a poem with the above theme.

Dirge 7: Eruephiophio Jero

Emo eruephiophio jero
Oghene odje iyenke erhueh ovwurhurhuvwu,
Oti okeeje owo kewe ukecha rodavwe.
Avwaren vwerhoma kewe
We ughwu ose vwen
Ose vwen
Ose kihweje
Ihwo eka diese kewe djero

There is still hope

Children all hope is not lost
God who drives flies for the tailless cow,
Will always be there to help you
We sympathize with you
On the death of your father
Your father was a Father to all

There are people that will be your fathers

Lines 1-3 of the above funeral song, elevates the prospect of hope for the bereaved. In addition, it is a verbal measure taken to alleviate pain of loss or sorrow of the bereaved. Lines 4-5 of the same dirge dwell on sympathy. The bereaved are sympathized with over the final *exit* of their father from this world. The sympathy is a way of putting the bereaved from a state of trauma and melancholy. The funeral song further depicts people who will play the role of a father to the bereaved.

Functions of Agbarha – Otor Dirges

Dirges in Agbarha – Otor have ample functions. Some of these functions include: rites of passage, unbroken family relationship, admittance of loss, purgatory, medium of request and vehicle for conveyance of feelings.

Rite of Passage

In Agbarha-Otor, the living and dead derive some benefits from the performance of dirges. Dirges serve as rite of passage for the departed as they leave one state of existence for another. To the Agbarha, death is not an end to existence. This is because the deceased is expected to continue the cycle in another world. The funeral is looked at as a process of seeing off the dead to their next abode (Alembi, 2002). The poems therefore, function as songs of farewell to the departed as they leave for the world beyond. Further more, dirges serve as bridge between the living and the dead.

Unbroken Family Relationship

The dirges that are part of the funeral rituals and performed by the family of the deceased portray the unbroken family affinity. This relationship is between the dead and the living. For the kindred of the departed in Agbarha-Otor, the dirges sung seem to fulfill family obligations. In Agbarha, there is the fear that unless some one is properly buried, he remains restless in the great beyond and be a source of perennial harassment to the living that have failed to do their duty to the departed.

Admittance of Loss

Dirge performance enables the Agbarha people to admit their loss and also help the survivors to express their feelings and finally discard their afflictions.

During the burial vigil when these dirges are sung, the spirits are believed to be comforted and prevented from roaming and tormenting the living.

Purgatory

The performance by the group of women singers before the interment of the deceased is a kind of purgatory. Singing eases them of the state in which the loss has put them psychologically. A scholar, Ohwovoriola, corroborates this fact in her study of Urhobo dirges. She stated this:

A major usefulness of any form of literature is that it offers delight and so relieves us of various pressures and tensions both physically and mentally. Under the physical conditions of grave digging, the dirge mostly in the form

*of chants, help to keep up the spirit and relieve the diggers of boredom
...(136).*

Medium of Request

In Agbarha-Otor, dirges serve as a medium of request. The funeral songs are used to pass multifarious requests through the deceased to the world of the dead. Such demands encompass: call for protection, prosperity, good health, bumper harvest and long life.

Vehicle for the Conveyance of Feelings

Dirges in Agbarha-Otor function as vehicle that conveys feelings of pity and sadness.

They also serve as expression of people's feelings of joy if the dead person is old.

In all, dirge helps to emphasize the value of good life, the pain of loss and the lesson to be learnt from the demise after which sorrow is finally repudiated.

Conclusion

In view of the foregoing, funeral songs are salient in the burial context in Agbarha-Otor. Through the dirges, this community not only bids farewell to the departed members but also, communicates important messages. The researcher has analyzed some dirges and brought out some major sub-themes predominate in Agbarha-Otor. The paper goes further to draw out some functionalities of these dirges.

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