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Abstract — The people of Agbarha-Otor in the Niger-Delta Region to be precise, Delta State, have a flourishing tradition of dirges which are yet to be subjected to critical literary scholarship. These funeral poems are subjected to critical evaluation anchored on a sociological framework with a tinge of formalistic analysis. The study unveils that the dirge form of Agbarha-Otor is a rich mine of artistic appurtenance in terms of the aesthetics of morality. This paper therefore, is an attempt at excavating some of the technical devices employed in Agbarha-Otor funeral poems which are many and variegated as they contribute to the genre of poetry. This paper goes further to engage these devices as they confer literariness on the dirges.

Keywords — Oral Literature, Agbarha-Otor, genre of poetry.

I. INTRODUCTION

Agbarha-Otor dirges are interesting for their qualities. A close reading of the funeral songs will open up different appropriation of the resources of poetry. The language of the threnodies is steeped in imagery and other figures of speech. The form and content of the funeral poems exhibit all the poetic devices that make the funeral songs acquire a literary value. This is in line with the statement of F.B.O. Akporobaro as regards value: “Their rhythm, figurative language, and symbolism make them poetical and literary in form.”(Akporobaro,314) The lyrics of the funeral songs appeal deeply to our minds. These tally with the words of F.A. Anene-Boyle. He posits that, “They are personal in subject matter and the language is usually simple and full of emotions.”(Anene-Boyle, 17) This tendency also recalls the statement of Isidore Okpewho about poetry, “The essence of true poetry therefore lies in its power to appeal strongly to our appreciation and, in a sense, lift us up …”(Okpewho, 7) This assertion also reminds us of the statement of J.P. Clark concerning the language of Udje songs, “The language of each song works by images, metaphors, similes, proverbs and a whole gamut of figures of speech.”(Clark, 286)

The technical devices employed in Agbarha-Otor funeral poems are many and variegated as they contribute to the genre of poetry.

II. THE HISTORICAL BACKGROUND OF THE AGBARHA-OTOR PEOPLE

A historical source book entitle: The Urhobo People edited by Onigu Otüe, has it that the Agbarha-Otor people migrated from Ogoroviri in the present-day Ughelli-North Local Government Area.

When Agbarha, the immediate younger brother of Ogo left Ogoroviri with his family, they settled first at a place called Owvodavware of Agbarha. Agbarha traditions, however, refer to certain peoples who were in the land before the arrival of Agbarha from Ogoroviri. They include Olaha and Uhrude people of Ogbe. In addition, there were Owevwe aborigines. These three groups: Olaha, Uhrude and Owevwe later met at the present site of Agbarha and settled there. These three quarters subsequently produced their separate Ivie (Kings) which later gave rise to a saying: Agbarha ‘ki vi vie’, meaning Agbarha is full of kings.

The Owevwe people at Okokoobor were the children of Ovwerhe who gave his daughter Oberuke, to Oghwoghwa. Ovwerhe was thus a maternal grandfather of Ogor and Agbarha. The various elements in Agbarha-Otor subsequently became a mixed breed through inter-marriages between the aborigines and the descendants of Agbarha.

A warrior called Inegbesia, we are told, is an important figure in Agbarha history. He lived in what is now Agbarha before another man, Ebele, arrived from the Benin River. Although, Ebele is described as a prince, the tradition is silent on who his father was. If he was a prince, he was a noisy one, for when Ebele arrived, Inegbesia had to leave the town for him. Inegbesia
went and settled at the present site of Ibru College in Agbarha-Otor because while Ebele was fond of noise, Inegbesia was a lover of quietude. Today shrines are dedicated to Inegbesia where libations are poured annually to him before the Iyeri festival in Agbarha.

Many villages later sprang up from the quarters of Agbarha and each set of villages remained loyal to the Ovie (king) of their quarter of origin. The origin of the villages is associated with the desire by some subjects to keep the Ovie at a distance and to escape from his despotic rule this they did by converting their farmlands to settlements. Indeed some people had actually emigrated far away from what is today Agbarha-Otor. These people include the predecessors of those who now constitute Idjerhe and Oghara polities near Sapele and Agbarha-Ame in what is today Warri township.

Agbarha-Otor now consist of two major subgroups: (1) Uhrude, under which are Edoiphori, Ehwahwa, Edikemen, Idjerhe, Oghara, Onakowhe, Edorogba, Edjeba, Awirhe, Ujovvre, Imorje and Ogorode; and (2) Olaha under which are Onavovwe, Okpara, Oteri, Efe, Oweywe, Opere, Otokutu, Saleko, Gana, Ophori and Omovwodoririhibo villages (Otite, 94-95). Thus, while the Urhobo people of Agbarha-Otor today and those in the Diaspora share a common identity and ancestry, Agbarha-Otor has close neighbours in Agbon, Orogun, Ughelli and Emevon.
Some Technical Devices in Agbarha-Otor Dirges

(i) Image

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>English Language Equivalent</th>
<th>Urhobo Language Equivalent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Our lamp is off</td>
<td>Urhukpe avwaren furu</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>We no longer see</td>
<td>Avwaren bemroree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Who will provide for us</td>
<td>Kono rukavwaren</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Our needs?</td>
<td>Obo avwaren guonore?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nobody</td>
<td>Ohwo vuovo roo</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The keyword “lamp” is a striking reminder of how important the deceased was. The choice of this image is an indication that the deceased contributed immensely to his community. He made his people comfortable in life. This actually gives him the eulogistic representation, “lamp”. By making use of this image, the oral poet seems to be expressing the huge loss. The use of this images also underscores the level of intimacy between the mourner and the mourned.

Dirge 2:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>English Language Equivalent</th>
<th>Urhobo Language Equivalent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Eh! Eh!</td>
<td>Eh! Eh!</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Death is bad</td>
<td>Ughwu brare</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Our umbrella is gone</td>
<td>Eharha avwaren kpore</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The iron hand of death has torn my heart to pieces</td>
<td>Abo utehru ughwu bere ubiudu kpe ibro</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eh! Eh!</td>
<td>Eh! Eh!</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Death is bad</td>
<td>Ughwu brare</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The word “umbrella” is the funeral song courier image that enhances the untimely, brutal and cruel nature of death. The image of “umbrella” is suggesting the protection received from the deceased. The use of “our” in the dirge is emphasizing nothing more than the collective shared painful loss. The funeral poem is highlighting the impact of the protector’s death on the entire community. The phrase “iron hand” is a description of the brutality and cruelty of the nature of death. It is a horrifying picture of the violence brought by death. The “iron hand” image is employed to emphasize the severity of death.

Dirge 3:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>English Language Equivalent</th>
<th>Urhobo Language Equivalent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>My friend</td>
<td>Ugbeyan me</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Are you sleeping?</td>
<td>Wo werhe?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What are you doing?</td>
<td>Ovo wo vwa</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Now that you are gone</td>
<td>Wo yara na</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Remember we were like Siamese plantain</td>
<td>Karo wiyo ne ighiwive vwa kere odeagbava</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tell me</td>
<td>Vue we</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Who killed you?</td>
<td>Ono ghwe vwe?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My friend</td>
<td>Ugbeyan me</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

This is another funeral poem where image is used. In this poem, the image “Siamese plantain” symbolizes intimacy with which the funeral song artist addresses the deceased. The technique is to show that the dead is not dead. The speaker wishes to keep a close relationship with the departed, hence the choice of that image. Furthermore, the image is employed to demonstrate the intimacy of friendship that existed between the deceased and the bereaved friend.
Dirge 4:
It is death that spoilt this interesting world.
You drove our mother to a forbidden coast
Who will curb the children of our mother
Is this your havoc?
The blame is yours
Because you have dragged
The children into suffering already.

 Dirge 5:
Our father is gone
Is a pain to us.
It is death that caused this.
Oh, death of father
Will never leave my memory!
Who will give us advice is no more.

 Dirge 6:
Tragedy has happened
Tragedy has happened
Big tree with branches has fallen
Who caused this?
This is a severe pain we have sustained
This is a severe pain
Who will cater for your branches?
Tragedy has happened
Tragedy has happened

The image employed in the above funeral song is “forbidden coast”. This image connotes the abode of the departed. The coast is forbidden because it is a no-go-area for man. The poet’s use of this image, “forbidden coast”, is effective in that it portrays the forbidden abode as an infertile place for man. Nothing good or profitable will come from there. This actually motivates the use of this technical device. The “forbidden coast” image is apt because life does not terminate with the death of the physical body. This thought instigated the use of the “forbidden coast” image by the speaker.

(ii) Personification

Dirge 5:
Our father is gone
Is a pain to us.
It is death that caused this.
Oh, death of father
Will never leave my memory!
Who will give us advice is no more.

The personified concept is “death”. Here, “death” is spoken of, as though it were a human being that can carry out an action. The use of personification is meant to stress the loss of the father. Apart from this, the oral poet uses this technical device to express his grief-stricken state. Moreover, the funeral song singer personifies death as a person who caused the demise of the deceased. Furthermore, the use of personification gives concreteness and human attributes to the abstract notion of death.

(iii) Metaphor

Dirge 6:
Tragedy has happened
Tragedy has happened
Big tree with branches has fallen
Who caused this?
This is a severe pain we have sustained
This is a severe pain
Who will cater for your branches?
Tragedy has happened
Tragedy has happened

The major technical device employed in this funeral song is metaphor. The “big tree” is a metaphor for breadwinner while the “branches” refer to the many people whom the deceased catered for. The deceased took on a lot of responsibilities. Thus “big tree” is figuratively the deceased (benefactor) and the “branches” the beneficiaries. The responsibilities shouldered by the deceased motivated this direct comparison of “big tree” with “branches” with the deceased.
Dirge 7:

Death, you are a taboo  
Ughwu we ogbemre
You make us sorrowful  
We lerhe avwaren weri
You killed us through your agents:  
Wo ghwe avwaren ve emudiakewen:
Illness and accident.  
Ehowan ve ikpregede
You are wicked.  
Wo bramo
We denounce you.  
Avwaren se wen.

A similar technique of metaphor is also present in the above poem. The metaphorical remark is in the first line of the poem thus: “death you are a taboo”. In the quoted line above, “death” is referred to as a “taboo” because of its cruelty on man generally. Again, the “death”, you are a taboo” connotes the destructive nature of death.

(iv) Simile

English Language Equivalent

Urhobo Language Equivalent

Dirge 8:

Aged mother’s death is a pain to me  
Inene ghwuru odavwe
My aged mother died I feel the pain  
Inene me ghwuru odavwe
The demise of this my aged mother  
Ughwu r’ inene me na
Is like exile  
Ovwa kire edjenorho
Where has aged mother run to?  
Tivo inene djera?

In this funeral poem, the death of the aged mother is compared to exile. Here, the “like exile” is a simile. The demise of the aged mother is conceived like exile itself. The word “exile” as used in the poem shows that the dead has only travelled to a distant land. Furthermore, the death of the dead does not indicate a final separation with the bereaved but the possibility of a return through reincarnation.

English Language Equivalent

Urhobo Language Equivalent

Dirge 9:

Our mother has slept  
Oni avwaren vwerhere
The death of our mother  
Ughwu oni avwaren
Is like sleep  
Owa kire ovwerhe
We know that  
Avwaren riene
Our mother shall be awake later.  
Oni avwaren che vre novwerhe siefa.
Mother of children,  
Oniem,
Sleep well!  
Rie vwerhe!
Sleep well!  
Rie vwerhe!

In the foregoing funeral song, the demise of the deceased mother is described as sleep. The idea of “sleep” used in the poem shows that the dead is asleep. In addition, the death of the deceased does not show a final separation with the bereaved but the possibility of her waking up. Again, this brings us to the same idea of reincarnation, mentioned in the previous analysis.

(v) Hyperbole

English Language Equivalent

Urhobo Language Equivalent

Dirge 10:

Eh! Eh!

Eh! Eh!

When I woke up this morning  
Mi vre novwerhe urioko na
Death of my father embraced me  
Ughwu r’ oseme koye deduvwe
My father died and left children for me  
Oseme ghwu dje emo kevwere
My father who fed the wide world  
Oseme ogherakpo edje.
Gone.  
Kpore.
In the above threnody, the use of exaggeration in line 5 is noticed. The use of this technical device is to categorically point out the contribution of the deceased. The deceased fed many people in his community. This singular assistance of the dead prompted the expression: “fed the wide world”.

### English Language Equivalent

### Urhobo Language Equivalent

#### Dirge 11:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>English Language Equivalent</th>
<th>Urhobo Language Equivalent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I was in my house</td>
<td>Uwevwi obome mevwa</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>When I heard the news of my brother’s demise</td>
<td>Iku ughwu oniovo di dore</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My brother,</td>
<td>Oniovo me,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My brother, I cried.</td>
<td>Oniovo me, me devie</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My brother who <strong>sponsored every youth</strong> to school</td>
<td>Oniovo oyone emo orere kpisikuru.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Death, what is this?</td>
<td>Ughwu, ona kidie?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The above funeral poem is another example where the poet’s uses of exaggeration is noticed. Here, the poet use the expression “sponsored every youth” which shows how immensely the deceased, while alive, contributed to the education of the youths in his community.

(vi) **Synecdoche**

#### English Language Equivalent

#### Urhobo Language Equivalent

#### Dirge 12:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>English Language Equivalent</th>
<th>Urhobo Language Equivalent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Did you come to watch the cinema of life?</td>
<td>Wo ri nughe akpo?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aged mother came to watch life.</td>
<td>Inene riakpo ri nughe</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Your <strong>fingers</strong> are all dead.</td>
<td>Irhiabo we ghwure</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Now that you are dead,</td>
<td>Wo ghwu na</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Who will bury you?</td>
<td>Kono shu we?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Who will fan your corpse?</td>
<td>Kono dju orivwin we?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Your life was dull before you died.</td>
<td>Akpo we madje woki ghwu.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Let your <strong>fingers</strong> survive when you reincarnate.</td>
<td>Edje irhiabo we diakpo, edefa woriakpo.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

“The **fingers**” ordinarily are parts of the human body. Here, the poet now uses them to represent the whole human body.

The use of the word “fingers” is a device employed by the poet to represent the number of children the deceased had while alive. But unfortunately, they all died before their prime ages.

#### English Language Equivalent

#### Urhobo Language Equivalent

#### Dirge 13:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>English Language Equivalent</th>
<th>Urhobo Language Equivalent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>My <strong>tooth</strong> is pulled off</td>
<td>Ubiako me kparen</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The devil is happy.</td>
<td>Eshu ghogho</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My enemies are also happy.</td>
<td>Ewweghre me dji ghogho</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My husband is dead.</td>
<td>Oshare me ghwuru</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The whole world sympathizes for me</td>
<td>Akpeje vheroma kevwe.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sleep deserted me.</td>
<td>Ovwhere mevwe dje</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Husband who prevents me from catching cold</td>
<td>Oshare odjekpaye nuwoma</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I no longer have.</td>
<td>Bi revwee.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The word “tooth” denotatively means each of a set of hard white structures in the jaws, used for biting and chewing. But in this context, it represents the whole human body. Therefore, the oral poet has employed the “tooth” to represent the dead husband of the bereaved.

(vii) **Drumming and Dancing**
Drumming and dancing are also employed during the singing of funeral songs in Agbarha-Otor. This technical device, which accompanies the dirges, adds beauty to the performance. This is in line with the assertion of G.G. Darah. He asserts that, “the form and structure of the songs also determined the rhythm and beauty of the drumming and dancing that accompanied the songs” (Darah, 76). The drumming and dancing symbolize the idea that death does not mark the end of life.

In Agbarha-Otor, mourners and sympathizers are involved in the drumming and dancing. They converge at the compound of the deceased to sing funeral songs and engage themselves in the performance. The dancing round the dead person shows that he/she has left good people behind. This performance is effective in that it cushions the emotional and psychological effects of bereavement. This technique also makes the bereaved feel that death does not imply complete annihilation, but also a transition from this corporal world to the ancestral world.

In view of the foregoing, drumming and dancing are salient in the funeral context in Agbarha-Otor. Through them, the people not only bid farewell and escort the spirits of the departed members but also communicate important messages about death and life.

III. CONCLUSION

In this study, an attempt is made to unveil the belief of Agbarha-Otor as regards death. We have been able to illustrate this with some technical devices drawn from Agbarha-Otor dirges. The artistic quality of the funeral poems is also expressed in their intensity of emotions, mood and tempers. This is reflected in many of the funeral songs analyzed.

We have seen that some of the dirges examined related to the experiences of unfortunate individuals as a result of death. Those who composed the funeral poems employed carefully selected technical devices to expressed pains and loss sustained by the bereaved persons. The few funeral poems we have used for illustrations show that they are of deep reflections and thought about the traumatic state death has put the living.

REFERENCES


Appendix

Texts from fieldwork

Dirge 1:
Urhukpe avwaren furu
Avwaren bemroree
Kono rukavwaren
Obo avwaren guonore?
Ohwo vuovo roo.

Dirge 2:
Eh! Eh!
Ughwu brare
Ughwu brare
Eharha avwaren kpore
Abo utehru ughwu bere ubiudu kpe ibro
Eh! Eh!
Ughwu brare.

**Dirge 3:**
Ugbayan me
Ugbayan me
Wo werhe?
Ovo wo vwa
Wo yara na
Ono die ugbayan me?
Karo wiyo ne ighwive vwa kere odeagbava
Vue we
Vue we
Ono ghwe vwe?
Ugbayan me
Ugbayan me

**Dirge 4:**
Ughwumiakpo omemie na
owe dje oni avwaren kpe urie agha
Kono semo oni avwaren bruche?
Ona kobo wo soro?
Ekan na owe
Fikidie wokpolo
Emo wiodja rere.

**Dirge 5:**
Ose r' vwaren okpori
Da vwaren djobi
Ughwu koye ghwonare
O ughwu r' baba
Ka sa chovweroo!
Ohwo ka cha avwaren uchebro beroo

**Dirge 6:**
Okpemu phiare
Okpemu phiare
Okpurhe v'gho ghwie che
Kono suo nana?
Ona emiavwon rode otoma
Emiavwon na doro
Kono ruke egho vwen?
Okpemu phiare
Okpemu phiare

**Dirge 7:**
Ughwu we ogbemre
We lerhe avwaren weri
Wo ghwe avwaren ve emudiakwen:
Ehowan ve ikpregede
Wo bramo
Avwaren se wen.

Dirge 8:
Inene ghwuru odavwe
Inene me ghwuru odavwe
Ughwu r’ inene me na
Ovwa kire edjenorho
Tivo inene djera?

Dirge 9:
Oni avwaren vwerhere
Ughwu oni avwaren
Owa kire ovwerhe
Avwaren riene
Oni avwaren che vre novwerhe siefa.
Oniemo.
Rie vwerhe!
Rie vwerhe!

Dirge 10:
Eh! Eh!
Mi vre novwerhe urioka na
Ughwu r’ oseme koye deduvwe
Oseme ghwu dje emo kevwere
Oseme ogherakpo edje,
Kpore.
Okpore!
Okpore!

Dirge 11:
Uwevwi obome mevwa
Iku ughwu oniovo di dore
Oniovo me,
Oniovo me, me devie
Oniovo oyone emo orere kpisikuru.
Ughwu, ona kidie?

Dirge 12:
Wo ri nughe akpo?
Inene riakpo ri nughe
Irhiabo we ghwure
Wo ghwu na
Kono shu we?
Kono dju orivwin we?
Akpo we mudje woki ghwu.
Edje irhiabo we diakpo, edefa woriakpo.

**Dirge 13:**
Ubiako me kparen
Eshu ghoghore
Ewweghe me dji ghogho
Oshare me ghwuru
Akpeje vheroma kevwe,
Ovwhere mrevwe dje
Oshare odjekpaye nuwoma
Bi revwee.