

Technical Devices in African Oral Literature: The case of Agbarha-Otor Dirges

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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 tallies 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 Ote, 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 Ovwodavware 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.

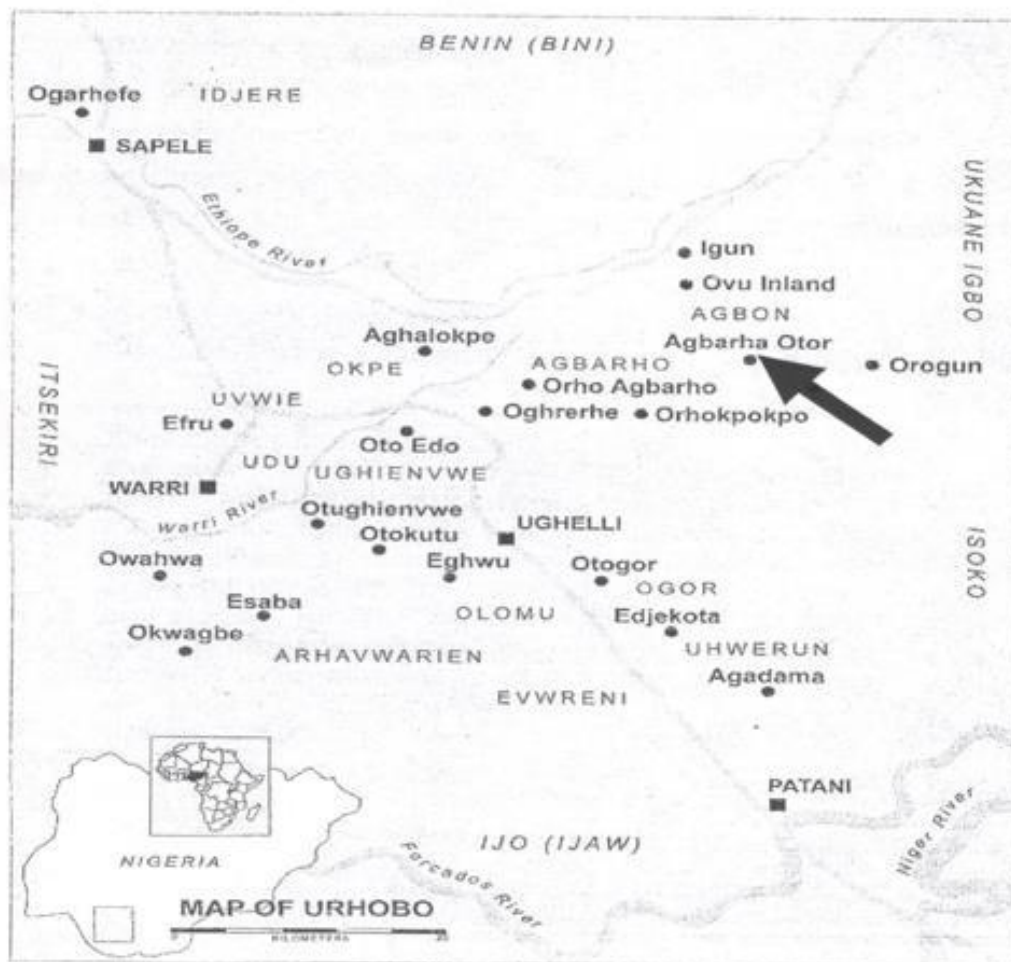
The Owevwe people at Okokoebo were the children of Owverhe who gave his daughter Oberuke, to Oghwoghwa. Owverhe was thus a maternal grandfather of Ogor and Agbarha. The various elements in Agbarha-Otor subsequently became a mixed breed through inter-marriages between the aborigines and the descendants 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 Edoiphorhi, Ehwahwa, Edjikemevo, Idjerhe, Oghara, Omakowhre, Edorogba, Edjeba, Awirhe, Ujovwre, Imorje and Ogorode; and (2) Olaha under which are Omavovwe, Okpara, Oteri, Etefe, Owewwe, Opheri, 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.



Map of Urhobo showing the location of Agbarha-Otor.

Key:

Agbarha-Otor →

Culled from: *Where Gods and Mortals Meet: Continuity and Renewal in Urhobo Art*. By Perkins Foss. Page 20

Some Technical Devices in Agbarha-Otor Dirges

(i) Image

English Language Equivalent

Urhobo Language Equivalent

Dirge 1:

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

Urhukpe avwaren furu
 Avwaren bemroree
 Kono rukavwaren
 Obo avwaren guonore?
 Ohwo vuovo roo

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.

English Language Equivalent

Urhobo Language Equivalent

Dirge 2:

Eh! Eh!
 Death is bad
 Death is bad
 Our *umbrella* is gone
 The *iron hand* of death has torn my heart to pieces
 Eh! Eh!
 Death is bad.

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

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.

English Language Equivalent

Urhobo Language Equivalent

Dirge 3:

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

Ugbeyan me
 Ugbeyan me
 Wo werhe?
 Ovo wo vwa
 Wo yara na
 Ono die ugbeyan me?
 Karo wiyo ne ighwive vwa kere odeagbava
 Vue we
 Vue we
 Ono ghwe vwe?
 Ugbeyan me
 Ugbeyan me

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.

English Language Equivalent**Urhobo Language Equivalent****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.

Ughwumiakpo omiemie 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.

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**English Language Equivalent****Urhobo Language Equivalent****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.

Ose r’ vwaren okpori
 Da vwaren djobi
 Ughwu koye ghwonare
 O ughwu r’ baba
 Ka sa chovweroo!
 Ohwo ka cha avwaren uchebro beroo.

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**English Language Equivalent****Urhobo Language Equivalent****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

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

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.

English Language Equivalent**Urhobo Language Equivalent**

Dirge 7:Death, you are a taboo

You make us sorrowful

You killed us through your agents:

Illness and accident.

You are wicked.

We denounce you.

Ughwu we ogbemre

We lerhe avwaren weri

Wo ghwe avwaren ve emudiakewen:

Ehowan ve ikpregede

Wo bramo

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****Dirge 8:**

Aged mother's death is a pain to me

My aged mother died I feel the pain

The demise of this my aged mother

Is like exile

Where has aged mother run to?

Urhobo Language Equivalent

Inene ghawuru odavwe

Inene me ghawuru odavwe

Ughwu r' inene me na

Ovwa kire edjenorho

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 break with the mourners as they think of the possibility of a return through reincarnation.

English Language Equivalent**Dirge 9:**

Our mother has slept

The death of our mother

Is like sleep

We know that

Our mother shall be awake later.

Mother of children,

Sleep well!

Sleep well!

Urhobo Language Equivalent

Oni avwaren vwerhere

Ughwu oni avwaren

Owa kire ovwerhe

Avwaren riene

Oni avwaren che vre novwerhe siefa.

Oniemo,

Rie vwerhe!

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****Dirge 10:**

Eh! Eh!

When I woke up this morning

Death of my father embraced me

My father died and left children for me

My father who fed the wide world

Gone.

Urhobo Language Equivalent

Eh! Eh!

Mi vre novwerhe urioke na

Ughwu r' osemi koye deduvwe

Osemi ghwu dje emo kevwere

Osemi ogherakpo edje,

Kpore.

Gone!	Okpore!
Gone!	Okpore!

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:**

I was in my house	Uwevwi obome mevwa
When I heard the news of my brother's demise	Iku ughwu oniovo di dore
My brother,	Oniovo me,
My brother, I cried.	Oniovo me, me devie
My brother who <u>sponsored every youth</u> to school	Oniovo oyone emo orere kpisikuru.
Death, what is this?	Ughwu, ona kidie?

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:**

Did you come to watch the cinema of life?	Wo ri nughe akpo?
Aged mother came to watch life.	Inene riakpo ri nughe
Your <i>fingers</i> are all dead.	Irihio we ghwure
Now that you are dead,	Wo ghwu na
Who will bury you?	Kono shu we?
Who will fan your corpse?	Kono dju orivwin we?
Your life was dull before you died.	Akpo we mudje woki ghwu.
Let your <i>fingers</i> survive when you reincarnate.	Edje irihio we diakpo, edefa woriakpo.

“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:**

My <i>tooth</i> is pulled off	Ubiako me kporen
The devil is happy.	Eshu ghoghore
My enemies are also happy.	Evweghre me dji ghogho
My husband is dead	Oshare me ghwuru
The whole world sympathizes for me	Akpeje vheroma kevwe.
Sleep deserted me.	Ovwhere mrevwe dje
Husband who prevents me from catching cold	Oshare odjekpaye nuwoma
I no longer have.	Bi revwee.

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.

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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:

Ugbeyan me

Ugbeyan me

Wo werhe?

Ovo wo vwa

Wo yara na

Ono die ugbeyan me?

Karo wiyo ne ighwive vwa kere odeagbava

Vue we

Vue we

Ono ghwe vwe?

Ugbeyan me

Ugbeyan me

Dirge 4:

Ughwuniakpo omiemie 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 egbo vwen?

Okpemu phiare

Okpemu phiare

Dirge 7:

Ughwu we ogbemre

We lerhe avwaren weri

Wo ghwe avwaren ve emudiakewen:
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 urioko na
Ughwu r' oseme koyo 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 ghware
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 kporen

Eshu ghoghore

Evweghre me dji ghogho

Oshare me ghwuru

Akpeje vheroma kevwe.

Ovwhere mrevwe dje

Oshare odjekpaye nuwoma

Bi revwee.