HUMOUR IN BEREAVEMENT
SATIRICAL ELEMENTS IN URHOBO DIRGES

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The dirge as a poetic form, performed within the context of bereavement, constitutes an integral part of the rites of passage for the dead worldwide. Eulogy, lamentation, veneration, and satires are the principal types of funeral dirges. In many dirges humour is prominent despite the sad strain that runs through these chants. This paper presents the results of a field study on satirical dirges as poetic expressions emanating from death and the worldview of the Urhobo people of Southern Nigeria. The findings are given a functional and literary analysis. A major function of satirical dirges among the Urhobo is to underpin their moral values and they are directed mainly at the deceased and the living.

INTRODUCTION

The dirge as a poetic form, performed within the context of bereavement, constitutes part of the rite of passage for the dead by providing a framework for the people to express their thoughts about the nature of life and death and the ultimate purpose of human existence. The dirge also serves the people as an avenue for distinctive creativity, unchaining their poetic sensibilities in the process of the expression of grief and sorrow. As a unique literary type, the dirge takes various forms and tackles diverse subjects, especially those related to religio-philosophical contexts with effective displaying of artistic resources that make the dirge a valuable source of artistic and social and philosophical expressiveness (Ohwovoriole 2004: 31). Of the various types of funeral dirges, the satirical forms occupy a special place.
DEATH AND SATIRES

Among the common causes of death, as believed in Urhobo are witchcraft, sorcery, neglect of filial duties to the ancestors, breaking of any of the taboos and sanctions of the divinities. Trampling on the moral values of the society and thereby attempting to set disharmony and disintegration among the people evokes the anger of the ancestors who withdraw the person trying to cause chaos among the living. But as Mbiti (1955: 15) observes:

Although people may fear that the living-dead would cause them to die, there is little evidence of the belief that they actually cause death...if a family feels that its living-dead are dissatisfied, it immediately takes measures to harmonize the situation, and avoid its deterioration to the point of actual death.

However, Mbiti’s observation is only partially relevant to the Urhobo where a perpetually recalcitrant person within the family and society is not freed from the death penalties of the ancestors by sacrifices. Such a person must be withdrawn to erivwin (the land of the ancestors where the living-dead inhabit) and punished there.

The term satire is applied to any literary form in poetry or prose, which diminishes a subject by making it look ridiculous and evoking toward it attitudes of amusement, contempt, indignation, or scorn. It ridicules a situation, an individual or an idea. It differs from the comic in that comedy evokes laughter mainly as an end in itself, while satire “derides”; that is, it uses laughter as a weapon, and against a butt existing outside the work itself. That butt may be an individual in personal satire or a type of person, a class, an institution, a nation or even the whole race of man (Devereux, 1971: 18) Satire is generally aimed at the correction of manners and morals hence it is didactic. Satire makes use of mockery, broad humour, sophisticated wit, harsh invective,
parody or irony. It may be humorous or serious. In general however, the objective of the satire is made to seem ridiculous or foolish rather than evil.

In Urhobo satires are usually found within the context of festivals, communal dances and other social activities. Satires in the funeral context are less depicted as done in other areas such as that portrayed by Nwoga about the Igbo and among the Urhobo in other contexts by Tanure Ojaide, J.P., Clark and G.G.Darah who have studied the use of satires among the Urhobo of Nigeria but the role of satire in obsequies in the tribe have not been given appropriate recognition.

THE URHOOBO PEOPLE

The Urhobo people are found mainly in the Delta State of coastal Nigeria. The Urhobo consist of about two million people living mainly along the Atlantic and the riverine areas of the Niger Delta. They are the most populous ethnic group in the Delta State of Nigeria. They include Urhobo migrants living in other parts of the country and abroad. (Otite 1980: 9) Their neighbours are the Isoko to the South East, the Itsekiri to the West, the Benin to the North, the Ijo to the South and Ukwani (Kwale-Aboh) to the North East. There are twenty-two polities namely: Agbarha, Agbarha-Ame (Agbassa), Agbon, Agbarho, Arhavwarien, Avwiraka, Ephron-Oto, Evwreni, Egwhu, Idjerhe, Oghara, Ogor, Okparebe, Okpe, Olomu, Okere (Urhobo), Udu, Ughievwen, Uvwie and Ughwerun. (Otite 1980: 15) They are united by ties of ethnicity and culture and by the geographic features of the territory they occupy. The Urhobo people engage in a wide range of economic activities. These include farming, fishing, hunting, tapping of rubber, trading and manufacturing. Two distinct seasons—the wet and dry seasons characterize Urhobo land as with other parts of the country. The vegetation is mostly evergreen. They are believed to be Edo speaking peoples who migrated from Udo (Edo). At the end of the Ogiso dynasty.
many Urhobo and other Edo groups left Udo in different directions, each at its own pace, in search of more peaceful territories. It is stated that the Urhobo left under separate leaders in different directions to found separate governmental organizations.

SATIRICAL DIRGES

In spite of sorrow that accompanies death of a loved one, humour can be found within the framework of dirge performances. In the following satirical dirge about a chief priest, his passing away is grossly exaggerated:

1. Ejaye ra ooo
2. Ejaye ra ooo
3. Ekete ro hworigbe.
4. Abe no maa
5. Eee ona gbunu
6. Ekete de ke hworigbe
7. Enaibe omi she oghogho
8. Ejaye ra ooo
9. Ejaye ra ooo
10. Iyerin te ede ke obo re aye ria
11. Obi vwo ghwu na
12. Edjo re Ekete obi hworo o
13. Eee ughwu re ohwe Ekete
14. Eberokpa mu ophu je effi vwo
15. Ejaye ra ooo
16. Ejaye ra ooo
17. Eee ughwu ro hwe Ekete
18. Ineki mue ophu je eki vwo
19. Orere muo ophu je avware vwo
20. Ejaye ra ooo
21. Ejaye ra ooo

1. let them be gone
2. let them be gone
3. Ekete who stages a carnival
4. see what has befallen us
5. This is unspeakable
6. Each time ekete stages a fiesta
7. Enaibe is all joy
8. Let them be gone
9. Let them be gone
10. Fish and plantain are what they consume
11. Now that he is dead
12. Ekete’s festival too is no more
13. On account of Ekete’s death
14. The palm nut collectors dumped their implements
15. Let them be gone
16. Let them be gone
17. On account of Ekete’s death
18. Angry traders abandoned their shops
19. The angered town abandons the fishing festival
20. let them be gone
21. Let them be gone

In this dramatic dirge we have the expression of grief of an indispensable personality in the community. Here we have a theme of physical and spiritual separation. A chief priest has passed away. The anguish of the people is so much that life has ceased. The market women refused to sell out of grief. The palm nut and wine collectors abandoned their implements and refused also to perform their normal duties. The butt of satire here is Enaibe the selfish wife and by implication the representative of every selfish widow. Ekete, apart from being a chief priest was also a family man and a main source of income to his wife.
When he was alive, Enaibe had lots of foodstuff to eat as those who came to pay homage to the husband as well as those who came to him for spiritual help used to bring food supplies. The demise of Ekete has changed all that. The point of exaggeration here is that the people refused to go about their daily pursuits. Occupations mentioned are those, which are prevalent in Urhobo society, activities such as fishing, palm nut collection, rubber tapping, farming of various crops and so on. The orientation of the dirge is primarily narrative and descriptive; it tells the story of representative characters; Enaibe a selfish woman and Ekete an important personality in the community. In performance, his role while alive is embellished. In the subsequent dirges there is a juxtaposition of satire and the lament:

1. Ozighe obo
2. Ozighe obo
3. Uvwohwo obo
4. Emete kpo nu
5. Wo ki vughe obo ri ru we
6. Ozighe obo

1. there will be confusion
2. there will be commotion
3. There will be loneliness
4. When the sympathizing ladies are gone
5. You will realize what has befallen you
6. There will be confusion

1.S: obe re uwara kpa re she
2.C: Obe re uwara kpa re she
3.S: mi sue osen me ti djede
4.C: Mi sue osen me ti djede
5.S: Ogo re oyovwen emu je ghwa
6.C: ogo re oyovwen emu je ghwa
7. S: Omote ro yovwirin je ghwa
8. C: Omote ro yovwirin je ghwa
1. S: The leaf of the evergreen has withered
2. C: The leaf of the evergreen has withered
3. S: I saw my love off
4. C: I saw my love off
5. S: The fertile soil shall too become barren
6. C: The fertile soil shall too become barren
7. S: The maiden too shall become aged
8. C: The maiden too shall become aged.

1. Eee eke kpo, Idama
2. Eee eke kpo Idama
3. Oghwere ro vwe obo de oren ji
4. Eee eke kpo Idama

1. Oh Idama the sun is setting
2. Oh Idama, the sun is setting
3. A farmer tries to prevent the sun from setting.
4. Oh Idama it is sundown.

1. Ovwiere ra aye na
2. Tivo wo eghwa vwiyo
3. Oro re heto re ye aghwa wen re
4. Gbe to be eghwwen
5. Oreho re he udju rere

1. You indolent wife
2. Where is your farm?
3. The land grabber has taken your farm
4. Go and see your farm
5. Weeds have swallowed everywhere.
The song reveals man’s inability to subdue death just as overgrown weeds in the farm of a lazy woman publicly reveals her indolence. There is diminution of the subject as shown in these songs:

1. Ehe ehe ehe
2. Ono pha ruko re eghwro
3. Oberiko

1. Alas alas alas
2. Who can wrap a crab with leaves?
3. The one that tears parcels.

Death is likened to a crab, which is not easy to wrap with leaves and the deceased likened to a millionaire.

1. S: Edje bre dje oyibo se
2. C: Monoria
3. S: Edje bre dje oyibo se
4. C: monoria
5. S: Iyongu re ovwi igho oyibo se
6. C: Monoria
7. S: Ohwo re ovwi shele oyibo se
8. C: Monoria
9. S: Edje bre edje oyibo se
10. C: Monoria

1. The whiteman calls a man of means
2. A millionaire
3. The white man calls the rich
4. A millionaire
5. The white man calls the wealthy young
6. A millionaire
7. The white man calls the tycoon
8. A millionaire
9. The white man calls the magnate
10. A millionaire

1. Ehe ehe odudu ee
2. Ughwu hwe re ee
3. Omo re avware gbo odud ee
4. Ehe odud e-e
5. Ughwu hwe re e-e

1. Behold he stinks offensively
2. Yes he is dead indeed
3. Our child stenches nastily
4. Yes he really festers nauseatingly
5. He is really dead.

Under the physical conditions of grave-digging the dirge mostly in the form of satire helps to keep up the spirit and relieve the diggers of boredom and provides temporary respite. The emotional and psychological release is more openly demonstrated as the diggers pour out their sorrow or grievances directly in songs indicated above. During funeral ceremonies, a variety of interest groups emerge-the-in-laws, elders in a deceased’s family, children of the deceased, women assembly and the youth in the community. Each of these interest groups struggles to assert itself against one another especially after the interment and this is demonstrated in satirical songs. The latter afford mourners a very effective medium for praising and denouncing children of a deceased and also requesting favours from them.
THE PERFORMANCE OF SATIRICAL DIRGES

Majority of these dirges consist of either folk numbers fixed in form and content, or familiar tunes into which may be improvised, topical remarks reflective of the occasion and mood of the performance. Nwoga (1971: 223-39) makes the point quite clearly in his discussion of the function of satirical songs as an instrument of punishment among the Igbo of Nigeria:

Homogenous, kindred societies depended on the sense of full human dignity being shared by all members. To find oneself regarded as in any way below the standard, to become the object of ridicule, or of children pointing fingers at one and sniggering, was punishment of a great dimension. Satire was the verbal equivalent of actions like tying a stolen object round the neck of the thief and parading him through the village...Everybody is brought into full knowledge of what the person did so that his spirit would fight an internal battle with him and he would spend sleepless nights worrying about himself. Shame and the scorn and amusement of others would prevent his free movement in the town for some time. This is punishment that would stop others from following the same line of action, just as most judicial punishment of an offender is preventative of other of similar action; satire therefore served as a means of social control.

Its spirit is one of criticism, a criticism vigorous enough to make culpable actions and injustices appear reprehensible and repulsive. It is this attitude of censure that informs all satirical song-poetry in Urhobo land. Both mourners and audience derive pleasure from hearing
people reduced to caricatures of themselves. But beyond this, the artist and audience can, through a satirical dirge view with deeper philosophical perception the world and the vast drama of human existence.

The effectiveness of the performance of a satirical dirge depends on the ability of the satirist to find a strong enough resemblance in the life of the deceased or the person being actually attacked and that of the purported referent. In this way the listeners can be aided in easily identifying the real person in the mask.

The gravediggers occasionally stop digging, saying orivwin ro gbon meaning the deceased is stinking badly. They will ironically demand gifts from the children and close relatives of the deceased. The descendants, anxious to see to the peaceful and successful interment of their parent, present them with drinks and money. Once they get these things, digging starts but more of such dirges are repeated after a while.

Once funeral rites are completed the descendants would be very happy expressing this mood in dirges such as this:

1. Adjare re vw’oma
2. E e ise
3. Ire vw’oma o
4. E e ise

1. I am rid of insults
2. Yes indeed
3. I am free of them
4. Yes indeed
In the above song the mourners are in effect expressing their happiness that having done everything about the parent's burial rites; they are now free from the troubles of constant afflictions from the departed, and the mockery of the society. In traditional Urhobo society harlotry is shameful profession, and the families whose daughters go into such trade are ridiculed hence the performance of these songs:

1. *Amre egoo*
2. *Vwo she orivwin ke igheradja*
3. *Amre egoo*
4. *Vwo she orivwin ke igheradja*

1. In-laws, none there are
2. To perform the burial rites of a harlot's parents
3. In-laws, none there are
4. To perform the burial rites of a harlot's parent

In the funeral rituals one observes the importance of procreation. Like in many other Africans, the Urhobo need many children so that they may be accorded fitting and respectable burial rites. The Urhobo believe that a person who is not "properly" buried cannot enter the society of his dead kith and associates. For his survival as a social being he is dependent on the performance of the mortuary ritual by his children. As a result, burial rites are the most important symbols of the parent-children relationship as it is idealised in Urhobo philosophy of life and religious belief. The children are satirised if they fail to accord their parent full burial rites:

1. *Ophidje hwe oni royen*
2. *Onè avware gbe phiyo, saibolo*
3. *Igbé yen, saibolo*

1. Ophidje kills her mothe
2. Then she invites us to dance,
3. There goes your dance, *saibolo*
4. Omo r' Inene, saibolo
5. Omo ri Ibaba, saibolo

Ophidje is a mythological youngster who killed his mother but found he could not bury her alone. He called on members of the community for assistance after his heinous crime. Children of a deceased are satirically called Ophidje since they require the backing of relations and friends to perform a befitting burial:

1. Apoi orare oto udo
2. Ibaba kporo
3. Gba mwo re hwosa re udo

Apoi is an endearing name for a last or favoured child. Such a person is noted for eating the remnants of a father’s meals. If he was a gluttonous type, he is satirised during the funeral ceremony of his father. He is urged in the above dirge to perform his responsibility towards his father since he benefited immensely from him. In a similar vein children of a deceased are called upon during a wake to repay any debt owed their father.

1. C: Wo cha hwa yen ke
2. S: Ede ri none
3. C: Wo cha hwa yen ke
4. S: Emi ri Ibaba wo rere
5. C: Wo cha hwa yen ke
6. S: Edi r'Ibaba re w0 sua
7. C: Wo cha hwa yen
8. S: Eghwro r'Ibaba r'owo reyore
9. C: Vwo cha hwa yen ke
1. C: You will pay him back
2. S: This very day
3. C: You will pay him back
4. S: Father’s food that you consumed
5. C: You will pay him back
6. S: Father’s palm fruits you harvested
7. C: You will pay him back
8. S: Father’s farm tools you took
9. C: You will pay him back

In performance, mourners can go on for a long time recounting various food items and ways the deceased was of benefit to his relations and dependents. Some members of the chorus often take leave of the monotonous utterance to add new ideas to the ones being sung by the soloist. In some performances children of a deceased who suffered neglect before passing away are ridiculed as shown in this dirge:

1. Oya fa nure
2. Oya fa nure, ye gbiku re oya
3. Oke re Inene vwo akpo
4. Emo ro ye se gbe muu
5. Oya fa nure
6. We ne nuvwe vie
7. Oya fa nure, ye gbiku re oya

1. The suffering is over
2. The party is over, yet it remains the talk of town
3. When mother was alive
4. Her children never appreciated her
5. The suffering is over
6. You wail, come and mourn with me
7. The pain has ended yet you talk about affliction
It is observed that a great deal of critical spirit is embodied in Urhobo dirges. This is all the spirit that the children of a deceased or those whose parents are still alive must be guided by certain standards of conduct. In some dirges children of a deceased are urged to place themselves in a position in the society where they can be in position to give their deceased parents befitting burial:

1. Emwa adjudju yoraan Urhobo 1. You do not pay homage in vain in Urhobo
2. Obone ghwe wo yoraan adjudju 2. One is bereaved here, you pay homage
3. Oboyn ghwe wo yoraan adjudju 3. One is bereaved there you pay homage
4. Ede ose we vwe re re 4. The day your father passes away
5. Kidie wo vwo tito 5. What will you do as a mark of respect
6. Adjudju obo me avwo niode 6. I will rather be known for my bounty

It should be noted that these songs are not meant to seek personal redress like the case of *Udje* satirical poetry. (G.G. Darah 1978) A proud warrior in a community can also be satirized when he passes away:

1. Elhe ogba rue igoni 1. Oh The warrior has been imprisoned
2. Ko nooo 2. Who else can escape?
3. Ose rava re ghwu gbe re oto 3. Death has floored our father
4. Ohwahwa rode muvwe okioghwe 4. The harmattan has gripped me with rains
5. Ogba mue igoni 5. The manacle has constrained the warrior
6. ko nooo 6. Who else can escape?
7. Baba opha re udje kpore 7. Father the bride of spectacle is gone
8. Eeeeeeeeee 8. Eeeeeeeeee
The manacle represents death, which exterminates the strong and the weak. There is the implication of helplessness. If a warrior can be constrained by a chain, it would require less effort to confine a weak person. Death levels the strong and the weak. There is also the sense of captivity or bondage. When that subject was alive, he was the cynosure of all eyes because of his majesty and opulence. He is compared to bride of udje dance who is usually a center of attraction in any udje performance. The experience of harmattan cold is far from agreeable. The predicament of death, which has exterminated the father of the bereaved, is extended to the harmattan cold which is usually unbearable.

Although there are more formal instruments of punishment such as fines, a large number of funeral lapses committed by children of the deceased are usually denounced by satirical dirges or lampoons, which are meant to bring shame on the culprits and so, discourage future misconduct.

The performance of dirges begins during the all-night wake that lasts till dawn. The performance of satirical dirges is mostly a women's affair. Dancing and playing of musical instruments unlike eulogic recitation and ancestral veneration accompany the performance of satirical dirges. Most of the satirical dirges performed are well known by the mourners and sympathizers. Most of the songs are short in length and the language relatively simple. However, beneath this simplicity are complex allusions and connotative implications. The imagery is drawn from nature, plants, animals and the worldview of the Urhobo people.

CONCLUSION

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. The performance of satirical dirges boosts the morale of children of a deceased especially those who are adjudged
good, patriotic and nationalistic in the society. It serves as records for the historical life and experiences of the deceased and for improvement on the social and cultural conduct of the children of the deceased. The budding generation is able to emulate good qualities demonstrated by some subjects of praise and shun those that are inimical to their growth and that of the society. It employs death as a metaphor of existence, which sensitizes people to know about the ephemeral nature of human existence. It thus orientates man towards didactic moral and ethical values for proper behaviour and modality of good living. Because it exposes some anomalies about a deceased, satirical dirges serve as a form of checks and balances to human behaviour.

REFERENCES


