

HARMONY BETWEEN TWO WORLDS: URHOBOLAMENTS AND COMMUNAL DEVELOPMENT.

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Abstract

Songs abound every facet of the activities of Urhobo people. The custom of wailing and singing for the dead is age-old and world-wide. The attendant beliefs and practices are similar in many cultures in Africa. Funeral dirges are performed for a departed loved one. The dirge is not just a formless cry of bereavement. The laments apart from expressing grief are found to be a high order of poetic and musical expression. They are a highly stylistic form of expression that is governed by specific recitative conventions used to express the feelings of the mourners in a determinate form and performance procedure. In addition the performances of the laments serve an effective tool for communal integration, unity and development. Some laments are individualized while others are general comments about diverse subjects especially those related to religio-philosophical matters. The songs under study reveal peculiar formal and structural patterns that reflect the traditional society from which they emanate. We have used the functionalist approach as the conceptual analytic framework. The paper presents the results of a field study on an aspect of the funeral dirges of the Urhobo people found in the Niger Delta Province of Nigeria. The study regards the Urhobo as a culturally homogenous people in spite of the different dialects of Urhobo spoken in different clans of Urhobo land.

Introduction

In Urhobo tradition like many cultures in Africa death *ughwu*, is one of the passages of life. Death is recognised as an inevitable end of man's sojourn here on earth, and a transition to the world beyond. Mbiti (1969) corroborates this view. 'Death is conceived as a departure and not a complete annihilation of a person. He moves on to join the company of the departed, and the only major change is the decay of the physical body'.

Burial rites function as an essential rite of passage, marking the transition of the deceased from life to an ancestor. When death occurs there is lamentation of various kinds and grief can be expressed in songs, chants and recitations. The patterns and processes of grieving among the Urhobo appear to be similar to those in other parts of Africa (Uchendu 1965, Uzochukwu 2001, Adeyemo 1979, Alembi 2002) The Urhobo people are found in mainly in the Delta State of Nigeria. They are spread over nine local government areas. The Urhobo lament is socio-culturally bound, being shaped in form texture and imagery by its socio-cultural and religious context.

The Urhobo are of the belief that death is a consequence of a variety of causes. 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 (1969) 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 the land of the living-dead *erivwin* and punished there.

Another cause of death is God. He uses his instrument of wrath such as thunder and lightning, stroke and small pox to punish the evil doers. Death is also caused in accordance with the person's predestination. If a person lives to old age and dies a normal death, the following expressions in accordance with Nabofa (in Otite 2003) are used to describe his passage. *Okpori* "he has gone home; *ovw'obo ch'uyovwi ghwu,ogwhu ughwu ren idebolo-o* he died peacefully on his bed, resting his head on his hand; he did not suffer dangerous and humiliating death *ovw' eghrobọ tehen ibi* "he has used his elbow to crack kernel; that is, he grew so old that the bone of his elbow became strong enough to crack kernels. In other words, he died in ripe old age. Such a person is bidden farewell and his funeral ceremony is greeted with various forms of dirges. An old person who dies is not only seen as an ancestor, he or she wields great power and acts as a mediator between the living and the dead. They are often called upon in matters of trouble or uncertainty to help influence a favourable outcome.

Performance of appropriate burial rites is important to the development as well as socialization in Urhobo communities. Funerals as well as other rites of passage 'create a social event out of a natural fact' (Malinowski 1954) and 'convert the obligatory into the desirable' (Turner 1967). In effect a burial rite can be a social event in which many members of the community can share emotionally, economically, socially and spiritually.

Laments

Death brings about grief. Lindeman (1963) defines grief as 'the state of pain, discomfort, and often physical or natural impairment that in most persons follows from the loss of loved ones. The cultural context of grief was emphasized by Hertz (1960) where he argues that the intensity of grief expended by any individual or group was

dependent on a socially constructed formula, rather than an innate or natural feeling. This implies that culture affects grief. The indications of normal grief include bodily distress, anxiety about the consequence of loss and alterations or forfeiture of normal patterns of conduct. The occurrence of the death of a relative or a friend inspires a variety of reactions ranging from despair; sorrow, to resignation and even courage. Grief induces lamentations. These laments are delivered in form of songs, chants and recitations to convey different sentiments. The laments express grief, loss, pain and social values. The lament in Urhobo is a distinctive type of the funeral dirge performed mostly by women as part of burial rites.

Finnegan (2012) in her definition of laments points out that elegiac poetry ranges from 'funeral dirges' to 'simple laments'. She does not make a clear distinction between the dirge and the lament. Nketia (1955) makes this distinction:

An interesting feature of the lament...is its tendency to generalize- to see particular events of death in terms of fate or mortality in general, to state general truths, to use aphorisms...in our collected texts of dirges, such generalizations are not common. The emphasis is on particular events. There is a tendency to reflect individual deceased's persons, particular bereaved mourners, and particular situations rather than on mortality in general or particular situations. The dirge is more interested in saying something to the deceased person, in mentioning the fate of a particular person than in what death can do.

However, in Urhobo, the dirge and the lament often co-occur. The relations of a deceased mourn him for various reasons. Some of the reasons include the significant roles that the deceased had played in their lives. In such cases chants and laments are used to express their sense of loss and helplessness:

Inene mo rhi ni

1. *Inene mo rhi ni*
2. *Inene mo rhi n' obo wo jovwo kimọ*
3. *Kparho ma rhe, ọsho muvwe*

4. *Kparho ma re udu bruvwe*

5. *Inene mo rhi n' obo.*

6. *Wo jovwo kimọ*

Mother come back and behold

1. Mother come back and see

2. Mother come back and see what you left behind for me

3. Hurry up I am scared

4. Hurry up I am having palpitation

5. Mother come and see ,

6. What you left behind for your child.

In the lament the deceased is assumed to have left behind many responsibilities, which the children are afraid they may not be able to bear. She is called upon to resurrect and see the chaos her demise has caused. It underscores a mother who was a major source of confidence. On the other hand, children look for a deceased mother in a gathering of women but she is nowhere to be found. The dead has been cut off from life.

Agwon' Inene abe mrẹẹ

1. *Agwon' Inene abe mrẹẹ*

2. *Agwon' Inene abe mrẹẹ*

3. *Eghweya r'orere kokori*

4. *Agwone Titi abe mrẹẹ*

The Futile Search For Mother

1. We have looked for mother in vain

2. We have looked for mother in vain

3. Here is an assembly of women

4. We have looked for Titi in vain

In many Urhobo communities, the above lament is popular among women mourners who perform it during the wake of a deceased female who has been a prominent member of the *eghweya* (women assembly in a village). The content and form

of the dirges are not absolutely fixed. They are amenable to improvisory review in the course of performance.

The terms that describe the actual act of dying or death for the Urhobo are usually euphemistic. When a person dies in old age or peacefully people say he has gone "home" or "sailed away", but when a person dies prematurely he is said to have “abandoned others” or become part of a miscarriage. The deceased may also be referred to as light that has been extinguished. These terms find expression in “Urhukpe furun”:

Urhukpe furun

- 1.Oja reri
- 2.Urhukpe furun
- 3.Urhukpe fu dj’ emetẹ
- 4.Urhukpe furun
- 5.Urhukpe fu dj’ avware

Smothered light

- 1.The suffering is total
- 2.The light has been extinguished
- 3.Ladies have been thrown in darkness
- 4.The light has been extinguished
- 5.We are thrown in darkness

Death is envisaged as an expedition in “Okọ r’akpo”

Okọ r’akpo

1. Okọ ketee
2. Onan’ ibaba vwo kpo na
3. Okọ ketee
4. Onan’ ibaba vwo kpasa na
5. Okọ ketee
6. Okọ r’emọ phan
7. Kọyẹn arua
8. Okọ r’otọvwẹ v’ emu phan
9. Kọyẹn arua
10. Okọ r’ana bọ fa
11. Kọyẹn arua

12. *Oro ketee*

Voyage of life

1. He who makes the entry first
2. Now that father is home bound
3. He who makes the entry first
4. Now that father is embarking on a voyage
5. He who makes the entry first!
6. The boat laden with children
7. Is what one should sail in
8. The boat of longevity and prosperity
9. Is what one should sail in
10. The boat that is well loaded
11. Is what one should sail in
12. He who makes the entry first

In this lament death is conceived of as a journey, which inevitably entails physical separation. The imagery in this dirge relates to travelling by sea on a ferryboat. There are various food items to sustain the deceased in his journey to the world beyond. Money is also placed in the casket for the deceased's use in the after world. The central objective of the journey in this dirge is the achieving of communal expectations and individual self-actualization. It is a journey that unites the living and the dead. The river image of a deceased sailing away is a recurrent one in Urhobo dirges because of the riverine terrain.

In another dirge, the mourner wishes not to be left alone, her expressions of sorrow for the loss and her anxiety for the future are expressed:

Ughwu r'Ovie davwe

1. *Uya ee, e uya e e*
2. *Eghwo Inene uya e e .*
3. *Ovie me ro ghwuru na*
4. *K'oyen davwe, uya e e*
5. *En'obo ri ru' ovie me, uya e e*
6. *Eghwo Inene, uya e e*
7. *Obo ri ru' ovie me, uya e e*
8. *K'oyen davwe, uya e e e*

Grieving the King

1. *Uya eee, uya e e e*
2. Oh mother
3. It is the death of my king
4. That has brought grief over me
5. See what has become of my king
6. Oh my mother
7. It is what has become of my king
8. That has brought grief over me

Death is viewed as a destructive agent over whom man has no control and the mourners remind the audience the inevitability of death, and the need to prepare for it:

Ch' oma

1. *Ehe Inene me cha oma*
2. *Me dẹ ukp' oyibo ch' oma*
3. *Ehe Ibaba me cha oma*
4. *Me dẹ ukp' oyibo ch' oma*
5. *Ono riẹn ẹde r'eghwẹ ?*
6. *Me dẹ ukp' oyibo ch' oma*

Be prepared.

1. Mother, I shall be prepared
2. I shall buy a shroud in readiness
3. Father I shall be prepared
4. I shall buy a shroud in readiness
5. Who knows when death will call ?
6. I shall buy a shroud in readiness

Since death visits the strong and weak, singers often mention names of people who in their lifetime distinguished themselves in various ways but they were all powerless when death came. Mourners related to the deceased express their loneliness and bereavement through words that express the nature of affection, which the chanter has for the deceased. The moment of death brings out the meaning of their relationship and accounts for the mourner's being overcome by grief at the thought of being physically without the deceased. Even though she may believe in the mystical presence of the dead, the mourner may be driven to say:

We nenuvwe viẹ

1. Emetẹ wa vi' Inene kẹvwẹ
2. Omo re yovw' urhuru
3. Owa viẹ Inene kẹvwẹ
4. Eee ọmọtẹ r'oyovw' urhuru
5. Wa vi' Inene kẹvwẹ

Mourn with me

1. Ladies help me mourn my mother
2. Progeny blessed with a golden voice
3. All of you, please, help me mourn my mother
4. Eh! the lass with a golden voice
5. Should help me mourn

Death brings punishment on people. Death is cruel; it 'cuts down' a person, even if he continues to exist in the hereafter. This cruelty of death is also depicted in some laments.

In a similar expression of grief in "Tebri Tosio" the mourner laments the fact that darkness has overtaken her:

Tebri Tosio

1. Ehee asọn vwa vwẹ vwídjede
2. Ekpayẹn r'ohwahwa
3. Omuvwe ọke oghwe

Double trouble

1. Oh darkness has enveloped my route
2. The frostiness of the harmattan
3. Has gripped in the middle of the rains

Her being overtaken by night connotes that she is bereaved; something odd and tragic has happened. The harmattan cold has joined forces with the mustiness of the rains to afflict her with double tragedy.

In another dirge "Ovie r'erheren" death is compared with the metamorphosis of a Queen termite that makes maturity the termination of life:

Ovie r'erheren

1. *Oviẹ r'aviẹ vweki*
2. *Omuvwẹ dje, muvwẹ dje*
3. *Agwọlọ ọgba na, abe mṛẹ*
4. *Agwọlọ ọlọkọ rọyẹn, abe mṛẹ*
5. *Ovie r'ẹrherẹn tanure*
6. *Okpore*

The Queen of the Anthill

1. The wailing in a market place
2. Has rendered me motionless, motionless
3. We searched for the strongman , to no avail
4. We sought for his rapier, but in vain
5. The Queen of the anthill has completed its task
6. It has taken its exit.

In “Ovie r’erheren” lament, the mourner uses the symbol of a lost staff “*oloko*” to convey the idea of a great loss when death takes its toll. *Oloko* is an expensive staff used during important or clan ceremonies. The possessor of an *oloko* is usually a man of means. The initiation ceremony of an *ọhọvwọrẹn* (titled man or chief) involves the use of an *oloko*. The cost and significance of an *oloko* makes it impossible for commoners to own it. In some communities the staff possesses more than a ritual essence as the owner is never buried without it. *Oloko* is therefore very significant and the disappearance or its loss amounts to great bereavement by its owner and relations.

Relations who live far away from the deceased and are yet to hear the news of his death will be informed of his demise when they visit the household of the departed and observe the absence of his staff. They may react by wailing. The wails may be so dramatic and the mourner may carry on her lamentation to a market place to proclaim grief. Here in this song the wails in a market place have stunned the hearers. The mourner had searched for the chief’s staff in vain.

The image of a queen termite, which dies upon reaching the adult stage, is spelt out. It brings to mind the metamorphosis of an insect from egg stage to the adult stage after which it dies. In like manner the natural human development moves from childhood to maturity before demise. The analogy of the queen termite is very appropriate as it is usually the most important insect in an anthill. Its death usually brings disarray to a colony of ants the way the death of the owner of an *oloko* would bring confusion to a family circle. These make the listeners see familiar things through their imagination. The theme of loss is dramatized in “Ophu mu’orere”

Ophu mu’ Orere

1. Ejaye ra ooo
2. Ejaye ra ooo
3. Ekeke ro hworigbe
4. abẹ no maa
5. E e ọna gbunu.
6. Ekeke de ke
7. Enaibe omi shọ ọghoghọ
8. Ejaye ra ooo
9. Ejaye ra ooo
10. Iyerin te ede k’ obọ ayẹ ria
11. Obi vwo ghwu na
12. Edjọ Ekeke, obi hwooro o o
13. Eee ughwu r’ ohwe Ekeke
14. Eberokpa mue ophu j’efi vwo
15. E ejaye ra o o
16. Ejaye ra ooo
17. Eee ughwu r’ ohwe Ekeke
18. Ineki mue ophu jeki vwo
19. Orere muo phu javwarẹn vwo
20. Eee ejaye ra o o o
21. Ejaye ra ooo

A town’s Anguish

1. Let them be gone
2. Let them be gone
3. Ekeke who stages a carnival
4. See what has befallen us
5. This is unspeakable

6. Each time Ekeke 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. Ekeke's festival too, is no more.
13. On account of Ekeke's death
14. The palm nut collector dumped his tools
15. Let them be gone
16. Let them be gone
17. On account of Ekeke'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 lament 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.

Ekeke, apart from being a chief priest was also a family man and a main source of income to Enaibe. 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 supplies of yams, plantain, vegetable oil and fish. The privileged position of the husband also used to make her rejoice anytime a carnival was to take place. The demise of Ekeke has changed all that. She is not mourning alone. Every member of the community in a way is also a loser as the role of the chief priest was very crucial. To express their grief they refused to go about their daily pursuits. There is pervading sadness and disappointment.

The language is simple and structurally we have soloists and chorus performing the dirge.

The chorus repeats

E ee ejaye ra ooo, which gives it rhythm and musical quality.

The act of burial is compared to that of cultivating the land in “Mav’ oto na pha?”:

Mav’ oto na pha?

1. *Mav’ oto na pha?*
2. *Oto n’oto, oto n’oto*
3. *Mav’ oto na pha?*
4. *Me ke raka, raka djere*
5. *Me k’ olo, olo djere*
6. *Me k’ idwẹbo, idwẹbo djere*
7. *Me k’ onime, obo dje ee*
8. *Mav’ oto na pha?*

How is this soil?

1. How is the soil?
2. There are soils, and there are soils.
3. How is the soil?
4. I sowed cassava, the cassava grew
5. I sowed yams, the yams grew
6. sow cocoyam, the cocoyam grew
7. I sowed my mother, but she did not grow
8. How is the soil?

In this poem we have rhetorical question about why a land is barren. The theme of husbandry and agricultural activities is prevalent in this lament. Death is compared to a soil that is unfruitful. The soloist claims to have planted crops like yam, cocoyam and cassava which germinated but the mother upon cultivation did not grow. A performer of this lament may list other crops especially those grown in the locality. The mention of crops shows the community is an agricultural one where most of the inhabitants are farmers. Only living things can grow. A non-living thing cannot be productive hence the image of the barren soil which is useless to a farmer. In like manner a dead person becomes useless to relations who used to rely on him for sustenance and general welfare. An acute pathos is evoked by the

nagging question repeated several times by the performer. Still, in “K’urhie ohwan” death is likened to a sea voyage:

K’urhi’ ohwan

1. *K’urhie ohwan*
2. *Kọ yon hwan*
3. *Ọsẹ mẹ r’ okwe dẹ kuvwe*
4. *Ibaba r’ ọmrevwe okw’ ode kuvwe*
5. *Ibaba r’ ọmrevwe ọghrẹghro vw’ ode*
6. *Ku urhie ohwan*

Sea Voyage

1. Down the river he goes
2. Down the river he travels
3. My father who showers praises on me
4. Father who welcomes me with showers of praises
5. Father welcomes me with exaltations
6. Down the river he travels

Using a riverine image, death is compared to a watercourse. The natural surge of a river cannot be overturned. Here the father’s good deeds are remembered and the mourner is nostalgic about how the father used to compliment her. The main thoughts that occupy the poet’s mind is the absence of a dear father whom she would have loved to be around to continue her adulation. The dominant symbol here is that of a flowing river, the mourner affirms and cherishes the goodness of her father that death has put an end to. A deeper implication is that death like the current of a river marks the unending rhythm of life over which man has no control. Direct similes start and end the song.

With regard to the form of the laments, two types are discernible namely, the chant form and the antiphonal form. The chants are mostly solo performances with or without prompters while the antiphonal form is in the usual solo-chorus pattern as indicated here:

Uvun Rọvọ

1. *C: Ghwo o o o oghwo o o o*
2. *S: Okpẹ obuvun rọyẹn re*
3. *C ghwo o o o oghwo o o o*

- 4.S: *Ob'uvun ko ma royen ovo*
5. C *ghwo o o o oghwo o o o*
6. S: *Oru' evuroyen j' avware otafe*
7. C: *ghwo o o o oghwo o o o*
8. S: *Oyaran, ovue avware ree*
9. C *ghwo o o o oghwo o o o*
10. S: *Olerhe oyan na da avware gagan*
11. C *ghwo o o o oghwo o o o*

The Solitary Chamber

- 1.C: *Ghwo o o o oghwo o o o*
- 2.S: To her resting chamber has she gone
- 3.C: *ghwo o o o oghwo o o o*
- 4.S: For herself alone has she built a chamber
- 5.C: *ghwo o o o oghwo o o o*
- 6.S: She has gone in leaving us outside
- 7.C: *ghwo o o o oghwo o o o*
- 8.S: She is gone, without notifying us
- 9.C: *ghwo o o o oghwo o o o*
- 10.S: *This has made it all the more painful*
11. C: *ghwo o o o oghwo o o o*

The chamber the dead woman has built and occupied alone is her grave that is situated in the compound where she was living.

Methodology

This paper is based on information derived from a synthesis of studies and data gathered from participant observation and interviews for my doctoral thesis defended in 2004.

Multiparty Performance

There are different categories of performers including the chronicler (eldest daughter of a deceased/eulogist), soloists or cantor, chorus, audience, burial officials and specialists. As observed by Ohwovoriole (2004) mourners perform the lament in various styles. Lamentation can be sung, recited or chanted. Laments are performed by women for the duration of the wake and by men during the interment. Concerning the

communicational aspects, lament covers addressing both the deceased and the living. Chanting hardly promotes audience participation unlike song performance.

Modern development and the lament

Profound social changes are taking place in Urhobo communities as in other societies in Africa and dirge performances and funeral rites have not been immune to these changes, but have come to reflect a new meaning of death. Christian interpretations of death have come to supersede traditional ones for Urhobo Christians. Respect for the dead and the bereaved is now partially conferred by the quantity and quality of material trappings. These changes are themselves a reflection of processes of modernization and westernization, which purportedly foster the ascendancy of new beliefs and commercialism over tradition. This is indicated in entertainment, food catering methods, gorgeous dressings, publicity through adverts and banners, asoebi funded by rich relations abroad, cash and gift items, hiring expensive bands and funeral undertakers etc. The creeping commercialization is transforming bereavement into a largely monetized venture. Within the context of contemporary ceremonies, non kin relations like market women's and church groups have become significant mourners in Urhobo funerals. In accordance with Akpankpan (1987) 'Most economists and social scientists in general now see development as having economic, social, political and other dimensions. They define it qualitatively as a process of 'improvements' in the general welfare of the entire society usually manifested in the various aspects of the life of the society'. As Giddens (1991) points out, while the changes taking place may produce anxieties for many, those

changes may also help mobilize more adaptive responses and novel initiatives to death and grief

Conclusion

Despite the fact that death is welcomed in old age and the Urhobo accept it as an inevitable destiny, grief attends most deaths. Despite the fact that death is universal, there are different cultural ways to deal with it. Our study has examined Urhobo laments dealing with loss, despair in a traditional funeral setting. Though death may be viewed as a form of social disruption, it nonetheless offers opportunities for self and group development and future happiness. The competition for status is rendering the need for observing many of the death rituals less significant. Mourners lamenting are given the opportunity to influence the community by their words of criticism, eulogy and satire. Performances of mourners have also psychological function-to support the bereaved. There is usually individual adjustment to the reality of death-grief and mourning and the reintegration of the bereaved into normal life. The cultural harmony depicted during such performances creates peace in Urhobo communities. The youth can learn a lesson, that to be an ancestor, you must live a worthy life. In effect the traditional mode of literary expression lends authenticity to integration and universality

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