



## THE IMPERATIVES OF TIV ORAL POETRY AND PERFORMANCE

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### Abstract

*All pre-literate societies had no written literature but possessed one form of oral performance or the other as handed down to them by their forbears. These are transmitted or handed over by word of mouth through successive generations. The transmission is through stories or songs. The desire of writers of African oral literature to preserve, assert and showcase their rich cultural heritage to the outside world informed the transfer of oral traditions into the written form. African writers such as Niyi Osundare, Kofi Awonoor, Amos Tutuola, Chinua Achebe, Ngugi wa Thiong'o among others, skillfully infuse one form of oral tradition or the other into their literary works. This study is similarly an attempt at showcasing, promoting and preserving Tiv culture of death and burial. Three poems (dirges) by three oral poets among the Tiv of Central Nigeria are selected to demonstrate this. In analysing the thematic concerns of the poems, they are transcribed and translated into the English language.*

**Keywords:** Oral poetry, written poetry, culture, death, dirge

### Introduction

This study centres on the Tiv of North Central Nigeria. The Tiv are largely found in Benue State with a population of over two million people (1991 census). They are also found in Nasarawa, Taraba, Plateau, Adamawa and Cross River States. The Tiv are said to be the fourth largest ethnic group in Nigeria after the Hausa, Yoruba and Igbo (1991 Census). They also live in the Republic of Cameroon. The language spoken by the Tiv people is called Tiv. It is also the name of the father of Tiv, who is said to have had two sons: Ipusu and Ichongo. These two sons form the two main genealogies found in Tiv. The Tiv language displays very little dialectal variations and is largely

mutually intelligible among its numerous speakers. However, much of the differences noticed are phonological.

The Tiv are hospitable and egalitarian in behaviour who, in their worldview, upholds the principles of justice, equity and fair play. They are also well-known farmers, hunters and dancers. The Tiv do not attribute death to natural causes but to *Mbatsav*, the possessors of *Tsav* (witches/wizards). The *Mbatsav* are believed to have significant influence over the non-possessors of *Tsav*. They believe and strongly too, that one does not just die unless one's kinsmen permit it; that is usually through the combined consent of *Tyo* (patri-kins) and *Igba* (Matri-kins). Tiv also believe that death is not the end of human life. They perceive death as a compulsory levy placed upon man and *Mbatsav* accomplish it. On very rare occasions, a person is either killed unilaterally by only one side or without the consent of both parties. Where this happens, the oracle is consulted (*dza-ishor*). When they return from *Ishor* with some insight into a particular death; it will enable them, sometimes to propitiate certain *Akombo* (deity) in order to ensure better health for their communities. Sometimes those named as responsible are appropriately sanctioned. In the event where, especially the *Igba* does not consent to the killing, the remaining siblings and their mother are removed or withdrawn by the *Igba* from their paternal home to their maternal home for protection. Death is solemn and the burial of the dead or corpse is accompanied by grief, abstention from food, lamentation or wailing. The old or aged who die are said to have only changed realm. They merely pass to the world beyond as ancestors who would then keep an eye over their descendants who are still alive. It is also believed that young people who "die" resurface in other locations to live their lives to the ripe age when they will then transit to the world beyond and join other ancestors.

The Tiv have now both literary pieces and several traditional funeral dances which are performed on different occasions. Such oral traditional performances include: songs of war, hunting, praise, political songs, social commentary, abuse and rivalry, among others. However, the most popular themes in Tiv oral poetry or performance at any particular point in history tend to depend on the prevailing circumstances in Tiv society in particular and especially in Nigeria as a whole. Keil (1979), and Ker (2002), both agree that Tiv oral artists have great ability to instantaneously improvise songs and dances for any occasion. Generally, Tiv oral performances are lively and in dynamic form. It could be spoken, chanted or sung by individuals or groups

of persons. Flutes, drums, horns, trumpets, slit-log drums among others are used in rendering their performances. There is no escape for the oral artist from a face-to-face confrontation with his audience, and this is something which he can exploit as well as be influenced by. Sometimes, the poet chooses to involve his listeners directly, as in story-telling situations where it is common for the narrator to open with a formula which explicitly arouses his audience's attention. He also expects them to join in the choruses of songs which he introduces into the narrative.

Among the Tiv, funeral dirges are mostly performed by women. This is because the songs often involve wailing and weeping; activities which among the Tiv are considered typically feminine. Sometimes men too have to be involved in dirges especially when the deceased is their close relative. It is also important to note that some Tiv dirges are topical and short lived because they are composed for use at funerals of particular individuals. There are however, songs that are generalized and can thus be sung at many other funerals; that is, most oral poetry becomes communal properties over time. Furthermore, it is worthy of note too that Christianity has influenced the Tiv perception of death to some extent. Through evangelization, education and other influences, God came to occupy the central stage in the causality of death which role was hitherto ascribed to *Mbatsav* and Akombo. Death being the necessary end for all mortals became better explained as an act both of God, with a universal application through which all must pass in this world including *Mbatsav* and Akombo initiates. Consequently, apart from the traditional Tiv songs of lament, other kinds of mourning songs in recent times feature prominently at Tiv funerals. These are basically Christian mourning songs that are performed at funerals of members of Christian groups. The group's songs are largely an affirmation of faith and commendation of the deceased's soul to God. In spite of modernization and social change in Nigeria, Tiv oral poetry still plays a very significant role in the society. Unfortunately, this variety of the Nigeria oral literature is seldom discussed. This paper therefore, highlights the features of funeral songs or dirges among the Tiv which can be useful in contemporary times for the people's identity, peace and progress.

### **Aim and Objectives of the Study**

The aim of this Study is to establish that elegiac poetry exists in Tiv and is widely practised among the oral poets.

The specific objectives of the Study are to:

- (i) find out what purposes, importance as well as functions of Tiv funeral dirges in the context of their use.
- (ii) portray the composition and performance aspects of the Tiv oral dirges.
- (iii) ascertain the authenticity and literariness or otherwise of African Oral Literature as postulated by Eurocentric scholars or critics.
- (iv) bring to light Tiv traditional concept of death and the hereafter which can be a ready source material for further study.

### **Scope of the Study**

One cannot study the entire body of Tiv oral poetry or dirges in one effort. Thus, this researcher selected three dirges that deserve scholarly attention from three Tiv artists or poets from North Central Nigeria to study. The paper gives an insight into the Tiv perception, conception and burial of the dead. He further contended that oral poetry in general and funeral dirges in particular are important aspects of the cultural wealth of the Tiv people. The paper submits that Tiv oral poetry is didactic as it aims at sustaining a disciplined and upright society ensuring peace, stability and development.

### **African Oral Poetry**

Poetry, whether written or oral, is a product and expression of culture. Put in another way, oral poetry or literature exists both in its composition and appreciation within a specific cultural context. African oral literature, like its written counterpart has both form and structure which rely on certain principles. These principles however, differ from one society to another. Given this situation therefore, it is difficult to generalize, for example, about the content of oral literature as a whole but easy within each genre of the oral poetry.

Oral poetry has many genres. These genres include: philosophical, heroic and elegiac. Philosophical poetry constitutes general reflections of life. They pass comments on events, happenings and contradictions of life. The heroic poetry depicts the heroic achievements of great men. Elegiac poetry deals with death and funeral songs known as dirges. There are also long narrative epics which are very common.

Ruth Finnegan (1992:16) states that, "Oral poetry essentially circulates by oral rather than written means. Its distribution, composition or performances

are by word of mouth and not through reliance on the written or printed word". Oral literature is native to Africa as its form of literary expression. Eurocentric scholars as well as other critics do not see any creativity or literariness about oral literature. Such scholars argue that poetry is a mark of advanced culture and that traditional African societies had not yet attained the level of achievement whereby men could indulge in the pursuit of poetic excellence. They also argue that their (African) languages were not yet developed to cope with the complex techniques of poetic expressions. Nevertheless, Olajudu (1981:71) argues that oral poetry possesses all the beauty of language, content and style associated with the best of written poetry. He maintains that, the place of orality remains central to the emergence of written literature in Africa because great writers like Chinua Achebe, Wole Soyinka, Amos Tutuola, Kofi Awonor, Isidore Okpewho, among several others borrowed heavily from the resources of orality, in their respective traditional societies. Achebe, for example is credited with large scale deployment of Igbo proverbs in *Things Fall Apart* (1958). Even with the overwhelming influence of the Western form of literature nonetheless, the place of oral performance remains central to the preservation of the cultures of many societies in Africa.

African Oral poetry constitutes a pragmatic discourse often phrased in cultural idioms--metaphors, personifications, repetition and other forms of representing traditional logic and wisdom. Tiv oral poets, do not like others from other tribes, say Yoruba, do not undergo a period of apprenticeship or tutelage when they learn how to perform, but simply begin to sing. Some attribute their artistic skills on Ityo (one's kins-men) that are believed to have the ability to make one sing.

The Tiv oral poetry is usually sung, chanted, read or recited by the poet in front of an audience. Okpewho (1942) states that" it is in the study of performance that we are able to see the essential character of oral literature as distinct from literature that is an art form created in the presence of an audience. An examination of Tiv oral poetry reveals vast traditions, concerns and styles of performance which employ stylistic devices. Below are the three selected dirges and their thematic concerns. A sound grounding of the Tiv people and other members of the society in African oral literature will therefore, help them in no small measure to becoming useful to the society.

## **Theoretical Framework**

The Theoretical Framework adopted for this Study is Jerome Bruner's Structural-Functionalist theory. This theory holds that culture and context are important in understanding what goes on in the society and in constructing knowledge based on this understanding. Using the theory, the researcher draws attention to the richness of Tiv culture and worldview as contained in their Oral poetry and concludes that oral poetry in Africa in general and in Tiv in particular deals with social life and day-to-day issues and problems, and has all the features noticeable in a written literary work, be it drama, poetry or prose.

## **Methodology**

Three funeral dirges based on thematic affinity with the focus of this study were carefully selected from renowned Tiv Oral artists and carefully analyzed employing the Structural Functional Theory. The themes of the poems or songs as well as their functions were also analyzed.

### **Dirge I Se Na Tsav Ga....Pevikyaa Zegyi.**

Tiv:

Mnder:

Iliam salem a David Abelega

Chief Abelega ngu Sha

Ihugh me mo za

Kpa m fetyo mayanga

5 Kwagh ne ka Kuhemba

Ukum ngu wegh wase ne oo (2x)

Mlumun:

Kwagh u Ter agbe ku me vihi juu.

Uduu Wankaa Ugande

10 Aondo Ter yem a na Sha

Mza ya Kuhemba Ukologberle Hembe

Kangen nyagba tile ngor mliam

Kpiligh mo yol juu m vaan ye (2x).

M vaa myila

15 Iorkyaa Aver Nyam or ken Kende ve  
Wan Tyav Mama ngom  
Mama se na tsav ga.  
Se fa er Aondo Ter gba tsav ga (2x)  
Uduu wan Kar yem undu Dominic

20 Orhemba Chia Ken Mbaterem  
Wan Manger Mbatinyam  
Mama mem mliam  
Ter u sha yila ya a hemen se ee.

English Translation:

**We Won't Give it to Witchcraft**

Antiphon  
I desire to cry with David Abelega  
Chief Abelega is at Ihugh said  
that I should go but will not be able..  
This time it's Kuhumba Ukum

5 that has hands on the cheeks oo(2x).

Chorus:

This thing that the Lord has created death is very bad  
Uduu Wankaa Ugande  
God took the father  
took him away.

10 I went home Kuhemba  
Ukologberle tied a cloth round his waist and wept.  
I was very surprised that is why I am crying (2x).  
I cried and called Iorkyaa Ayer Nyam  
a man from Kendev

15 Daughter of Tyor Mama my mother  
Mama we will not give it to witchcraft at all.  
We know that God the Father created death...

Dirge ii: **Ku Vaan u Baba Mza. -Nyam Ver B**

Mnder:

Honobul Richard Uma wam  
tema komitii u ku u Baba Mza ya me kuha kwagh  
Mlumun:No mzughul ga wan u  
wan me Uma wan ne.  
Baba wase ngu ga

5 Tashaku Mza de mliam  
Tor Garba we kpa de mliam  
kpwn van Useni wamngu je kpa  
Kpemshin wam vane ne oo  
Baba wase undu se

10 Shima Ortese wam m va mer me kumbur ne  
De vaan Kwagh tserem doo ga  
m va me kumbur ne  
Baba Mza yem undu ne kpa ka Aondo  
Asarga Asarga Tyo Kpemshin

15 kwagh tserem Doo ga  
Jacob Yua wam me oo Kwaghembam  
Mza undu me a we oo.

#### English Translation

Lamentations Over the Death of Baba Mza  
Antiphon  
Honourable Richard Uma served as a committee member  
For the burial of Baba Mza  
I am not confused  
Wan Tashaku Mza stop crying  
5 Our father is no more.  
Garba you too should stop crying  
Where is my Useni?  
My Kpemshin come oo  
Our father has left us.  
10 Shima Ortese  
I have come to condole you.

Stop crying.  
I am devastated.  
15 Baba Mza has left you but is God's doing  
Asarga Asarga,Tyo Bem  
I am devastated.  
Oo Jacob Yua my son  
We are helpless as Mza has left you with me

**Dirge iii.Ku Vaan u Ter man Ngo Na-Terfa Orgbateman(Osaze)**

Mnder:

Heembam vee o o  
Kwagh ne hemba o o  
Gbatemam Baba wam kange kyav  
nav too u yemen shin alugbem oo(2x)  
kwaghembra mo vaan ye oo.  
Ngom kpa ku too kendem a aan her tar ne  
Gbateman kpa zan tso ortser ze oo  
Me vaa me kegh u wam ku u a va me  
Za ee.

English Translation:

Antiphon:

I am defeated oo.  
This thing has traumatized me oo.  
Gbateman has gathered his property to leave for "alugbem".  
Iam helpless that is why I am crying oo.  
Death has snatched my mother and left me with whom in this world?  
Gbateman just go.  
No human is immortal.  
I shall continue to cry and wait for my death to come  
So that I too shall go

Tiv dirges are repository of Tiv culture and tradition. The analysis of these dirges therefore, involves the context and identification of some of the Tiv social cultural aspects that will enable an understanding of this study.

Thematic Explication of the Themes

Dirge i titled "We Won't Give it to Witchcraft", the poet hints on the superstitious aspects of Tiv perceptions of death. According to them, death

does not just occur; and that those who die are killed for certain reasons by the Mbatsav This belief is hereby attacked. The poet says:

Mama, se na tsav ga.(We will not give it to witchcraft).

We know that God the Father created death (Se fa er Aondo Ter gba tsav) (Lines 16 and 17).

Dirge II, The poet opens his song with an announcement of the disappearance of his mother. He mourns the mother, blames death and expresses the helplessness of the bereaved. This dirge shows or indicates how painful the loss is to the bereaved. The poet goes further to suggest that the loss will ever remain fresh in the memories of the bereaved. The poem also contains the theme of sympathy of those left behind by the deceased. It shows that death is a matter of who goes first. Everyone must go when death is ready for him. This dirge is used for consoling the bereaved.

In Dirge III, the poet directly expresses sorrow and grief on the deaths of his parents. The belief that ancestors still make contact with the descendants living on earth is portrayed. The dirge is characterized by sincerity and intensity of emotion. From the expression of personal grief, the poet goes on to reflect on the sorry fate of humanity and on the futility of human life. He therefore, urges man to see life as transitory and should thus prepare for it. Furthermore, the poem demonstrates an acceptance of the fact that death is inevitable to all mortals. It is therefore, necessary for man to prepare his mind for it (death)..

### **Conclusion and Recommendations**

This study highlights the features of African traditional oral poetry in general and Tiv in particular. It exposes what constitutes African oral poetry, its features, classifications and the theories informing it. The researcher drew attention to the richness of knowledge's contained in it. He argued that African oral literature has not received the desired6 attention it deserves especially when compared with other disciplines in institutions of higher learning in Nigeria. and other African countries. He observes that African Oral Literature is more deeply rooted in the remote part of Africa and that the over reliance of Nigeria tertiary institutions on Western education is the major reason for its lack of attention since African literary writers emerged from the colonial educational experience or background.

From the foregoing discourse, the following recommendations are offered:

- (i) There is need to document and preserve the rich cultural performances of Tiv. This will serve as a reliable reservoir of Tiv culture for future generations.
- (ii) There should be inclusion of Nigerian Cultural Studies in the school curriculum beginning from primary to secondary schools and the establishment of the Department of Oral Literature Studies in Nigeria universities. This will serve to promote and preserve the development of Tiv oral literature as well as other indigenous Nigerian oral performances.
- (iii) More researches on Tiv oral poetry and by extension African oral literature should be carried out by Tiv scholars to inspire more scholars to study and research further on African Oral Poetry against the overt refusal or denial of some Western critics notably, Koelle, Burton and Dobne, Linger, who in their ignorance fail to acknowledge the fact that both oral literature and its written counterpart are works of creativity in the service of human society.
- (iv) Orature and writing should work together to complement each other because modernity rooted in the values of the people is likely to stand the test of time than the artificial super-imposition of the Westernization.
- (v) African literary critics should focus more on the criticism of Africa oral forms. Government, individuals and organisations should collect, translate and store these cultural and literary artifacts to protect them from extinction as some of the oral poets are still performing while others are already dead.

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