

Major Themes and Literary Styles of Performance in Ogba Funeral Songs

Dr. Ben-Fred Ohia

Department of English and Literary Studies, Rivers State University, Nkpolu-Oroworukwo, Port Haracourt, Nigeria.

ABSTRACT

Some major themes and styles in Ogba funeral song are discernible as the composers make use of conventional themes of the events in the society using unique features that mark them out as oral literature. Ogba funeral songs explore many thematic concerns and styles of rendition, which convey messages as prevalent forms of expression. They exist in various forms and are performed by both men and women respectively in an occasion of death and vigil night held in honour of the dead person. The themes encompass the aspects that eulogise the dead for their good attributes and achievements while alive and also for lamentation. The artist often may adopt two unique modes of expression: A deliberate exploitation of the resources of language and its functional and exaggerated rather than purely historical reference to social reality. The paper explores all these aspects in themes and styles of performance in Ogba funeral songs as sworn in the twelve songs rendered in this paper. The themes of Ogba funeral songs are categorised into five major groups namely anger/sorrow, bravery/heroism, praises/eulogies, expectation/endurance and motherhood/fatherhood. The paper discovers that death is condemned and the deceased is praised while the loss is wished away by the expectation of the deceased's family. Consequentially, the paper concludes that Ogba funeral songs performs some therapeutic functions to console and encourage the bereaved family to brace up with life's challenges orchestrated by the death of their family members and enjoined them to have their consolation in the fact that there is life thereafter as life itself is a continuum. The paper recommends the acceptance of the Ogba funeral song as a therapy for loss, anger, sorrow, and death, in its entire.

ARTICLE DETAILS

Published On:
16 September 2024

Available on:
<https://irijsh.com/>

INTRODUCTION

The death of a close relative, friend or even a distant colleague causes pain and sorrow as people burst into uncontrollable cries of despair. During the out-burst; pain and grief become the predominant features, with rhetorical questions about the dead and death. These give rise to the formulation of themes by the artist. The themes are drawn from three parts when death occurs in the family. One of these distinctions is observed at the pre-burial stages, while the other two occur at the burial-stage. The pre-burial occasion is the pronouncement of death in Ogba tradition, which begins at the point of a person's demise and themes for that particular occasion are developed. Usually, the death of an individual is announced with a bitter cry signifying that a great calamity has befallen the family and the community. The spontaneous weeping and wailing give rise to the themes of songs of deep emotional feeling. In Ogba, funeral performances from the time of death to the day of burial last between eight days for males and four days for females. These periods have their funeral dirge rendition with peculiar theme that suits each period in the burial process. The night preceding the burial of the deceased is usually marked by sporadic wailing and rendition of captivating funeral songs which highlight in theme of death and the dead (victim of death). At the graveside, another bitter cry roars up in the family as the grave is covered and this exercise thematises songs which are rendered to mark the covering of the grave. The themes of the songs at this stage are drawn primarily from work songs used for bailing ponds. They are adopted for use at burials because the covering of grave is energy-sapping and requires the song with high tempo and rhythm which would energise the young men who are covering the grave. The funeral songs used at this stage is not gendered, but apply to both male and female burials respectively. Ogba as a male dominated society has some basic dichotomy in the themes of funeral songs for burial ceremonies of male and female. The idea of separating the songs on gender lives is based on different levels of perception of individuals in the localised patriarchal society and technological independence as it affects the two sexes in Ogba society as a communal entity as it may be elsewhere. Oyegoke (1994) seems to corroborate this when he says: "it seems now also imperative to emphasise that the prospects and advancement of both

Major Themes and Literary Styles of Performance in Ogba Funeral Songs

morality and literary in culture depend as much on women and men, there is much evidence these days of what may be described as the constant enactment and re-enactment of cultural and technological interdependent” (p.131).

The gender segregation of themes of the songs of performances for burial occasions is on keeping with an age-long tradition of Ogba of male headship/dominance at all times. This seems to influence contemporary social activities. Ogba funeral songs as covered by the themes of male and female performances help people come to terms with the agony, sorrow and disruption caused by death. As the songs are rendered by the artist and danced by the people participating in the burial ceremony, they dance death away, and renew their own life after their painful loss. Through the songs as is evident in the themes, Ogba funeral songs are avenues to praise and abuse human and non-human subjects. The human objects could be long standing heroes, and accomplished professionals, and those worthy of emulation. The non-human subjects are deities, ancestors and the drums. In all, the style of the artist in conveying the message is very important. It is important to note that works of art cannot be appreciated purely on the surface level. Literature (written or oral) is more than mere speech, discourse or writing and its vehicle (language) is coated with deep connotative meaning that does not lend itself wholly to ordinary interpretations. George (1987) describes literature as “a pleasurable use of word for knowledge, information and entertainment (p.79).

Similarly, Finnegan (1970) notes that: “a distinguishing feature of literature is that it is in some way “set apart” from common speech writing. This assertion is mostly peculiar to poetry where style and structure signified to the audience. The type of communication intended (p.29) through the literary poetic devices used by the artist, beauty is created and ideas are developed.

Major Themes in Ogba Funeral Songs

A lot of themes are crested in Ogba funeral songs and they include but not limited to the themes of: anger/sorrow, bravery/heroism, praises/eulogies, expectation/endurance and motherhood/fatherhood.

a. **Theme of Anger/Sorrow:** Under theme/sorrow, emotions of grief or sorrow are clearly expressed in the songs.

Song 1 – “Ariri ownu nio sey” aptly buttresses this theme of anger/sorrow.

L: Ariri ownu nio sey – Death is anger and sorrow sey

Ow̄nu am̄rn̄a oyn̄e egbu – Death does not know how to kill

Āriri ow̄nu nio sey – Death is anger and sorrow sey

Ow̄nu b̄uru irn̄i la erima – If death is food I will not eat it

R: Ariri ow̄nu nio sey – Death is anger and sorrow sey

Ow̄nu am̄rn̄a oyn̄e egbu – Death does not know how to kill

Āriri ow̄nu nio sey – Death is anger and sorrow sey

Ow̄nu buru irni la erima – If death is food I will not eat it

The song above expresses anger and sorrow in the minds of the mourners to the extent they accuse death of killing the good and innocent people. Hence, if death is food, it will be rejected by the mourners.

Song 2 “Iye ye, ariri bu ownu – Yes death is sorrow”

L: Iye ye ariri bu ownu – Yes death is sorrow

Madu wnuma aghuro ejna – When a person dies he becomes sand.

Ariri bu ownu – Death is sorrow

R: Iye ye ariri bu ownu – Yes death is sorrow

Madu wnuma aghuro ejna – When a person he becomes sad.

Ariri bu ownu – Death is sorrow

In this song, death is metaphorically referred to as sorrow. This is because the death of an individual brings about untold hardships and sorrow to the living relatives, more so when the deceased is a parent. When these songs are rendered, they arouse pity and bring about instantaneous wailing and elicit pathos. Other songs in Ogba funeral songs also examine the same theme of anger/sorrow. The songs include: “ori di akwna di – the lavisher of her husband’s wealth”, “ewu o ewu, nnakiye ariri – oh; oh; mother, sorrow”, “ownu gbalaga la Ogba iwe – Death flee from Ogba, anger and many others in the corpus. It is true that anger/sorrow is a pervasive theme in Ogba funeral songs. Some of the songs depict the anger in the minds of the family of the departed person as seen in the songs: Iwe iwe – anger, anger” and “kwe la alawhe iwe mba – shout away, shout away, clan anger

In this song, the artist expresses anger not of the deceased’s family only but of the town and clan, on prominent men and women who succumbed to (merciless) death. In a way, it explains the communal nature of the Ogba kingdom, as a person belongs to the clan and not to his parents or family alone. Also references are made to yam and cassava, which when planted in the earth sprout back to life, but when once man is buried in the earth, he stays there eternally. The song points to death as “permanent separation between the deceased (victim of death) therefore, the death of the deceased is a great loss to the whole clan hence the song commands death to flee from the town. It is on this note that Gunner (2020) refers to the earth as a deadly monster, as in her words: “earth which is like a rapacious monster, is seen to consume all living things” (p.88).

Song 3 – “Alawhe! Alawhe! Iwe mba – Shout away! Shout away! clan anger”

L: Alawhe! Alawhe! Iwe mba – Shout away! Shout away! clan anger

R: Alawhe! Alawhe! Iwe mba – Shout away! Shout away! clan anger

Major Themes and Literary Styles of Performance in Ogba Funeral Songs

L: Iji je la ali lo, iwe mba – Yam has gone to earth and come back, clan anger

R: Alawhe! Alawhe! Iwe mba – Shout away! Shout away! clan anger

L: Echa je ali lo, iw mba – Cassava has gone to earth and came back, clan anger

R: Alawhe! Alawhe! Iwe mba – Shout away! Shout away! clan anger

L: Madu je la ali tasi, iwe mba – Humans have gone to earth and did not come back

R: Alawhe! Alawhe! Iwe mba – Shout away! Shout away! clan anger

Similarly, song 4 “Achola mu, iwe – I have searched” clearly explains the theme of anger.

L: Achola mu – I have searched

R: Iwe – Anger

L: Achola mu la ihni – I have searched in front

R: Iwe – Anger

L: Achola mu la aznu – I have searched at the back

R: Iwe – Anger

b. Theme of Bravery/Heroism

Bravery/heroism is another thematic thrust of Ogba funeral songs. The songs are used to commemorate the death of a hero or a member of the families that participated actively in the Ogba/Aboh war and members of Igbo (killer or hunter) society. Funeral songs are performed for all persons who lived life worthy of emulation and who performed and achieved feats in wrestling, sports, farming, fishing, hunting and some other activities. The songs show that a great calamity has befallen the family and community by the death of the deceased and a vacuum difficult to fill has been created. Song 5 “Oyne la oyne? – Who and who? praises the bravery and heroism of the deceased.

L: Oyne la oyne? – Who and who?

R: Iyoho oje iyoho – Iyoho oje iyoho

L: Ownu bu ownu – Death is death

R: iyoho oje iyoho – Iyoho oje iyoho

L: Oyne mrne kure – Whoever did it should accept

R: Iyoho oje iyoho – Iyoho oje iyoho

It is necessary to state categorically that this song is rendered only when the deceased was a member of the families, which fought the war. Song 6 “Olende agha? – who are they?” also examines the same heroic theme.

L: Olende agha? – Who are they?

R: Agha – war

L: Nde iye chupuru – The people we chased away

R: Agha – War

L: Okposi buru bia – Okposi marched and came

R: Agha – War

L: Obrikno buru bia – Obrikno marched and came

R: Agha – War

The song captures the dexterity of Okposi and Obrikno warriors that assisted the Omoku warriors to resist the Aboh invaders. It is pertinent to note that these songs are performed for dead warriors only, but in the absence of war in the present time, they are now sung for the dead members of the Igbo (killers or hunters) society. The heroic theme resonates in many songs in Ogba.

Theme of Praise/Eulogy

The praise/eulogy motif is most frequently used in Ogba funeral songs as the deceased is specifically addressed, with the personal feelings and experience of the mourner (lead singer) expressed. The deceased therefore becomes the focal point. The deceased may be addressed, his individual qualities described, or he may be identified with one or several ancestors. To refer to him, the lead singer often uses a series of different names which vary in the language in honouring him. The praise appellations include, “tiger, elephant, small ant that destroys big edifice, king, mother of all, father of all, warrior who fought the white man, the slender finger, etc. Sometimes the praises may associate the deceased with ancestors or family – child of Ogbwu. Indeed, the person of the deceased is focus of attention in the encomiums showered on him in the funeral songs.

Praise is a pervasive theme in Ogba funeral songs. Discussing the praise theme in Ikwerre funeral songs Onuchukwu (2018) notes that:

Praise is recurrent in Ikwerre funeral songs; sometimes the songs are merely panegyrics. In other words, they sing praise either of the dead, his ancestor or dead relative. The mourner uses several names of the deceased to praise him while singing and even describing his personality and qualities (27).

Similarly, praises are the hallmark of female and male funeral performances in Ogba. The deceased’s industriousness in trade and farming is extolled. For the woman, her feminine fecundity is deified during the wake-keeping, each of the songs is punctuated with

Major Themes and Literary Styles of Performance in Ogba Funeral Songs

“Ebege siyele” while the audience responds with “ojenye, ojenye”, “Gogom, sioje, go gom go gom go”. Song 7 shares this characteristic of female song thus:

L: Ebege siyele

R: Ojenye ojenye

L: Ebege siyele

R: Ojenye ojenye

This song has no English translations or equivalent. It is untranslatable as it is full of nonsense words that are used purely for excitement and ecstasy during female funeral performance.

In Ogba, funeral songs centre on the mourners’ personal feelings and experiences as they concern the dead person. Ohia (2017) captures the mourner’s use of praise names to address the deceased thus:

In Ogba, the mourner uses various names of the deceased to address him/her during the funeral rendition. He/she describes the deceased’s personality (fatherhood/motherhood) and showers encomiums on his/her good qualities.

Consequently, Ogba funeral songs have their thematic thrust on ancestorhood, motherhood, fatherhood, search for the dead, anger, loss, happiness, heroism, journey, hopelessness, and other themes just to mention a few (p.38).

Commenting on Zulu Praise poetry of South Africa, Gunner (2020) writes: “it is addressed to rulers and leaders; it is often elaborately structured and highly metaphorical... features on his exploits, his character and ancestry. He himself is often personified in a series of striking images (p.55). In Ogba funeral songs, encomiums are showered on the deceased; even the dress pattern of the deceased is praised. Song 8 “Eze iyoho – King iyoho” exemplifies this assertion.

L: Eze – King

R: Iyoho – Iyoho

L: Eze-o – King-o

R: Eze eka la bu – Wealthy King

R: Iyoho – Iyoho

L: Eze ekwueme – Accomplished King

R: Iyoho – Iyoho

L: Eze Ododo – King with royal regalia

R: Iyoho – Iyoho

Song 9 – “Owure ichabo kne la isi-o – He took headtie and tied his head” also praises the dress pattern of the deceased. This song makes references to the deceased. This song makes reference to the deceased while lying in state and a headgear is that is tied round his head with an eagle feather inserted on it. The eagle feather is a symbol of greatness that signifies that the deceased has accomplished his task in this planet earth, before embarking on the eternal journey to the beyond.

Theme of Expectation/ Endurance

The theme of ancestorhood is subsumed under expectation/endurance as highlighted in Ogba funeral songs. There is a supplication to the deceased and the expectation for the deceased to protect his living relatives. This is clearly manifested in song 10 “Ewu di ewu nnakiye – Oh! husband, oh! My mother”

L: Ewu di ewu nnakiye – Oh! husband, oh! My mother umu didi ewu- oh! My kindred

Adamma la la ngbona je zuruikne – Adamma has travelled to the beyond to rest

Nkwoma biko ijela ilesi ndeki eya – Nkwoma please as you go please protect your people

Ebege siele – Ebege siele

In this song above, the deceased (woman) is deified and elevated to an ancestor. As an ancestor she is expected to guide and protect her children in times of difficulties. Awoonor (2018) also captures this theme of ancestorhood or protection or expectation in his “song of sorrow I and II”. The text reads: “Agosu if you go tell them, tell Nyidevu, Kpoti and Kove that they have done us evil, tell them their house is falling and trees in the fence have been eaten by termites... while we suffer and eat sand...” (p.73).

Theme of Death as a Merciless Killer

Death as a merciless killer is another theme present in the idea of death in the content of Ogba funeral songs. Death is seen as a natural phenomenon and must occur when necessary. Commenting on the inevitability of death, Shakespeare in Julius Caesar remarks:

Cowards die many times before their death. The valiant never taste of death but once, of all the wonders that I yet have heard. It seems to me most strange that men should fear, seeing that death, a necessary end will come when it will come (Act 2, scene 2:135). Song 11 “Ndala nwnane kiye ola la la udno – Where is our brother, he has gone in peace” lends credence to this theme of death as a merciless killer.

L: Ndala nwnane kiye? – Where in our brother?

Ndala nwnane kiye? – Where is our brother?

Ola la la udno – He has gone in peace

Major Themes and Literary Styles of Performance in Ogba Funeral Songs

R: Anye nwnane kiye – Yes our brother

Anye nwnane kiye – Yes our brother

Ola la la udno – He has gone in peace

L: Ownu chi gbu la ko nwnane kiye – Natural death that kills without mercy has killed our brother.

R: Anye nwnane kiye – Yes our brother

Ola la la udno – He has gone in peace

Theme of Motherhood/Fatherhood

The importance of motherhood and fatherhood are also noticeable in the thematic thrust of Ogba funeral songs. There are new creations in the songs that buttress this theme; the costuming of the dancers/performers is unique in these songs. They adorn themselves with clothes and materials that are associated with the songs rendered, so as to project the desired meaning. In many instances, the performer and the audience participating in the song are decked out with leaves, cutlasses, bowls, and other implements in response to the demand of the songs. Some of the songs under this category are normally used for processions in the morning after interment of the deceased or after vigil night. All men and women in the procession deck out with leaves, and wield cutlasses, clubs, gongs, and various sizes of drums. These activities are present in song 12 – “Ona bia – My mother come”.

L: Ona bia, ayni ti ugba wa – My mother come, when the sun shines, oil been seed explodes

Owñu nne sirì ikne – Mother's death is difficult

Owñu sî irni erima – If death cooks food, I will not eat it. Ebege siye le

R: Ojenye, ojenye

From this song, the importance of motherhood is extolled. In the song, the difficulty encountered in the burial of mothers and the burden on the children are very much emphasised. The absence of the mother in the home is felt in the songs with theme of motherhood as the artist laments the loss of the woman in the family.

CONCLUSION

Ogba funeral songs are rendered on the occasion of death of a man or woman. The activities in the performance of the songs are steered by two groups of people: “lead singer and audience”. The songs derive from cultural practices and traditional rituals, but are artistic creations of the artist usually in collaboration with his audience. As such, each performance is in a sense, a new creative experience and derived from major themes of the events in the environment. The literary activities of the artist and the audience explain what is being done and what is desirable in burial ceremonies. The songs are occasional and cannot be performed outside the event of death – except in strict secrecy. They are sung by both man and woman artists in Ogba.

Funeral songs are sung by the artist to the audience, with the view to telling them the history of the deceased and the nature, perception of death by the people. Going by the features in the songs such as theme, characterisation and incidents, the songs may sound like imaginary compositions even though they reflect factuality. Therefore, this oral poetry as an item of oral literature of the Ogba people explains death in details as explicated in the themes discussed in this paper. The different instruments used in the rendition of male and female funeral songs are very symbolic. Ogba funeral songs can be reorganised. There is a sociological and psychological disorientation from the old cultural practices to a modern and more useful activity in order to create room for the continuity of the songs and their relevance to oral literature in the present order.

Ogba funeral songs as oral poetry tell stories of a dead person and his deeds when alive. They also incorporate culture/tradition because they are rooted in ritual. In this way, the social significance of the songs is that the songs are not performed for people below the age of sixty years as explained in the themes and contents of the songs used in this paper. The songs aid in the recall of family history. Through the songs a historical datum is brought to the fore concerning the families which participated actively in famous Ogba wars, festivals and masquerade ceremonies. The songs also advice people on the need for a peaceful co-existence. The themes of the songs reveal various images such as: beauty, nobility, bravery, heroism, valour, death as a merciless kill and beautiful attributes, which create the aesthetics in the songs.

RECOMMENDATION

It is unfortunate that out of misinformation and fear, purely cultural and symbolic practices are said to be fetish. This paper, we believe, must have helped in correcting such an erroneous impression that has resulted in a substitution of some of the songs with Christian songs or mix-up of both, rendered in almost the same content but differently christened. Therefore, this paper recommends the use of the songs in purely traditional burials as the mixture of two distinct cultures creates an unholy wedding or cross-culture conflict of African and Western cultures.

This paper recommends the protection of the Ogba cultural heritage through the rendition of the songs in burial ceremonies. The intrusion of Christian influences into a purely traditional institution such as funeral has led to a gradual decline in the number of practitioners. The use of Christian hymns should be abolished in a pure traditional burial because they affect the composition of funeral songs. Similarly, the use of electrical and electronic appliances should be highly discouraged as they affect the performance

Major Themes and Literary Styles of Performance in Ogba Funeral Songs

of traditional funeral songs in communities. Therefore, we recommend that Ogba funeral songs should be reconstructed and also a revitalisation of Ogba cultural heritage to conform to the formal rules of traditional poetry.

If these recommendations are followed, Ogba funeral songs would be fully appreciated as a piece of oral literature, which is a conscious artistic effort and sustained means of history, socialisation and entertainment in burial ceremonies.

REFERENCES

- 1) Alembi, E. (2002). *The Construction of the Aboyle Perceptions on Death through Oral Funeral Poetry*: Nairobi: Datacom.Helsinki
- 2) Awoonor, K. (2018). *The Breath of the Earth: A Survey of the History, Culture and Literature of Africa South of the Sahara (Revised Edition)*. New York: NOK Publishers International.
- 3) Ellah, F.J. (1995). *A History of Ogba People (Ali-Ogba)*. Enugu: Fourth Dimension.
- 4) Finnegan, R. (1970). *Oral Literature in Africa*. Oxford: The Clarendon Press.
- 5) George, K. T. (2017). "Towards True Sensitivity in the Collection and Exposition of "Original" Texts of Oral Literature". *Journal of Pedagogy and Development* 1 (1).
- 6) Gunner, B. (2020). *Oral Literature and Its Development in Africa*. Oxford: Cambridge University Press.
- 7) Ohia, B.F. (2017). *Content, Style and Aesthetics of Ogba Funeral Songs*. Ibadan: Abbey-Tech Printing Press Service.
- 8) Okombo, O. and Nandwa, J. (2022). *Reflection on the Theories and Methods in Oral Literature*. Revised Edition. Nairobi: Heinemann.
- 9) Onuchukwu, C. (2018). "Ikwerre Funeral Songs". (Unpublished) M.A. Thesis, University of Port Harcourt, Port Harcourt.
- 10) Oyegoke, L. (1994). "Sade's Testimony" A New Genre of Autobiography in African Folklore". Ogundipe-Leslie, Molar and Carole Boyce Davis eds. *Research in African Literatures* 25(3). Bloomington: Indiana University Press.