STYLISTIC PATTERNS IN ORAL LITERATURE: 
THE FORM AND STRUCTURE OF 
BAKWERI DIRGES 
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ABSTRACT

This article examines and analyses the language of dirges among the Kpe (or Bakweri), a homogenous ethnic group of semi-Bantu stock in the Southwestern region of Cameroon. By so doing, it exposes the fascinating language variety of the Kpe dirge form as poetry. The article is of the view that the structure of the dirges, their chant and antiphonal form, the figurative language employed by the performers (that includes lyrical repetition, personification, symbolism, imagery, apt metaphors, and allusions) constitutes some of the essential components that are utilized in the realization of this funeral poetry. The article also highlights the use of a free rhythm (that is most often enhanced by the collaboration of a lead singer and chorus) in the performances of Kpe dirges. This rhythm is articulated by dance, the accompaniment of drumming, ringing of bells, and the playing of a host of assorted musical instruments. This employment of rhythm demonstrates how the individual performer has the flexibility to treat the themes in her own way and, in so doing, expressing her emotions in the words and melodies she chooses. The vivid pictures that are conjured from the performers’ imagination as they perform these funeral songs generate emotive feelings that suit the mournful atmosphere of Kpe funerals.

Keywords:

INTRODUCTION

Literature in indigenous African languages abounds in the oral and written form and is easily associated with, and recognised among, the more popular and well-known codified African languages like Swahili, Yoruba, Igbo, Hausa, or Kikuyu. While emphasis has been placed on the analysis of both the content and form of this literature in codified African languages, scholars and critics of African oral literature have, in addition, limited themselves to the exploration of
the content and context of this literature, neglecting (more appropriately de-emphasising), for the most part, the more significant elements of language in all its manifestations, particularly in orature. Quite arguably, the form of oral literature in codified African languages has widely been examined and explored by scholars of African oral literature in these languages. But the vast majority of African languages, particularly those of small or minority ethnic groups, still remain un-codified. Scholars and researchers in the domain of this literature will attest that they have not even begun scratching the surface of the enormous complexity and intricacy of both the form and content of the broad spectrum of what this article calls “minority African oral literature.”

It is in this regard that this article undertakes to examine and analyse the language of dirges among the Bakweri, a homogenous ethnic group of semi-Bantu stock who inhabit the south-western region of Cameroon at the foot of the Fako or Cameroon Mountain, approximately 4–7° north of the Equator and 8–11° east of the Greenwich meridian. They are part of the more than 230 ethnic groups that make up the modern state of Cameroon in Central Africa. With a total population of just over thirty-five thousand, the Bakweri occupy about eighty-five villages in the Fako division of the South West province of Cameroon.

This article, first of all intends to expose the fascinating language variety of the Bakweri dirge form as poetry. More significantly, it will reveal that a minority oral literature, properly so-called, is as rich, complex, intricate and absorbing as the oral literature of indigenous, codified languages. While written literature (at the instant of composition and publishing) is immediately fossilised in rigidity, oral literature, as this article demonstrates, is in a constant state of change. As the performance of these funeral songs reveals, African oral literature is dynamic in nature, vivid and vigorous, supple and subtle. Expectantly, like malleable clay in the hand of the experience potter, it constantly awaits transformation by the creative tongue and impulse of the verbal artist to re-shape it into even more fascinating forms.

1. PERFORMANCE OF BAKWERI DIRGES

The performance of dirges among the Bakweri actually begins during the all-night wake that lasts till dawn. When the deceased is laid in state, the tempo of the mourning rises, and the performances of the dirges heighten and enhance the mourning. Because of the influence of Christianity, particularly in the more urban towns, it is now fashionable for the deceased’s relatives to invite church choirs (velongi) to sing and dance during the wake. Traditional dance groups too, some of them with masquerades (vekale) playing assorted paraphernalia of musical instruments, show up at some wakes, especially the wakes of very

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1 The oral literature from minority African ethnic groups with as yet un-codified languages, for the purpose of this paper will be labelled “minority oral literature.”
important persons in the community. In the course of the night one can hear isolated wailing; otherwise, the wake is characterised by singing and dancing all night.

The performance of these dirges is mostly a women’s affair in the form of song and dance groups, although in recent years there has been a proliferation of mixed dance groups made up of both women and men, with the men playing musical instruments and constituting the background chorus of voices. Among these dance groups, there exist skilled and professional performers who are formally hired for a fee and, as Okpewho (1992: 156) puts it, “invited by the bereaved family to lend a certain grandeur or fullness to the occasion.” The other less skilled performers, in most cases, are not formally invited but are provided with food and drinks after their performances. Whether the performance is semi-skilled or professional, it usually involves dancing and drumming. In between the group performances, occasional soloists and dual performers also come forward, at times sobbing, sometimes weeping as they lament the departure of the deceased or express a variety of themes on the nature of death. Most of the dirges performed during funerals are well known by the audiences. Moved by the music, singing, and emotion of a performance, it is not unusual that many a member of the audience would leap forward and join the performers in their song and dance.

2. FORM

The performance aesthetics of Bakweri dirges is most often enhanced by the chant and antiphonal forms. Of equal importance is the structure of the dirges themselves, structure here referring to the lengths of the dirges and alternating stanzas created by the constant vocal interaction between the lead singer and the chorus. The language employed by the performers of Bakweri dirges constitutes the third useful element in the discussion and appreciation of the stylistic features of these funeral songs. It includes unique phonological and grammatical forms, lyrical repetition, and an elaborate utilisation of appropriate imagery, apt metaphors, allusions, and figurative language.

The most outstanding and identifiable literary quality of Bakweri dirges is repetition. Most often, like Dirge No.1 demonstrates, the lead singer repeats lines she has previously sang, while the chorus re-echoes the same lines:

L.S: \(\text{ya ajulene i ndutu ja anyu e} \) kaka mwema
L.S: Persevere with your sorrow, take heart
L.S: \(\text{ya ajulene i ndutu ja anyu e} \) kaka mwema
Persevere with your sorrow, take heart
L.S: \(\text{nunu ndi e hze ehweli} \)
That’s how the world is
(playing of various instruments)
(playing of various instruments)

Ch: \(\text{nunu ndi e hze ehweli} \)
That’s how the world is
Where the stanzas are longer, repetition occurs both within the individual lines of the lead singer’s stanzas and the stanza of the chorus which repeats lines already sung by the lead singer. As Isidore Okpewho (1992: 71) puts it:

Repetition is no doubt one of the most fundamental characteristic features of oral literature. It has both aesthetic and a utilitarian value: in other words, it is a device that not only gives a touch of beauty or attractiveness to a piece of oral expression (whether song or narrative or other kind of statement) but also serves certain practical purposes in the overall organization of the oral performance.

Indeed, as Nketia (1955: 104) also states, repetitions in dirges are not monotonous, neither are they due to barrenness of thought: “On the contrary, they may have a musical mode of meaning or they may be a means of emphasizing points that mourners might wish to make.” It is in the same mode of thinking that Okpewho (1992: 71) goes on to emphasise that:

It is necessary to grasp first the aesthetic value of repetition in a piece of oral performance. In a fundamental way, the repetition of a phrase, a line, or a passage does have a certain sing-song quality to it; if the repetition occurs between intervals in, say, a song or a tale, the audience is often delighted to identify with it and to accompany the performer in going over a passage that has now become familiar.

The refrain is another familiar pattern of poetic repetition in Bakweri dirges. Here, the lead singer sings the first verse of the dirge twice and the chorus takes up the repetition of the central thought of “be careful in life” over and over, in several lines, to emphasise its importance in the dirge:
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L.S: *ongelene te nwanyongo wowé waluteya e*

Ch: *longe la moto o (3x)*

   *waïwai waïwai waïwai longe la moto o waïwai a ngodo waïwai a mbëhza waïwai*

L.S: If you plan evil against your neighbour

Think twice

Ch: Be careful in life (3x)

Waiwai waïwai waïwai Be careful in life

Young women be careful

Young men be careful

Waiwai

( Dirge No. 2 )

The effect of the performance of this kind of dirge is that it cues the audience to sing along, repeating the familiar lines of the refrain with the chorus, thereby intensifying the mournful atmosphere in the funeral.

The end rhyme in the dirges is easily identified from the repetition of lines within stanzas by both lead singer and chorus in the dirges. One line can, in fact, be repeated several times. This trend in which dirge lines are repeated over and over is frequent in most Bakweri dirges. It is a popular technique that the lead singer and chorus employ very regularly in the rendition of the dirges. This is seen in Dirge No. 1 in which the lead singer’s lines “*ya ajulëne i ndutu ja anyu é*” (persevere with your sorrow) and “*kaka mwema*” (take heart) are repeated in the dirge and form an end rhyme:

L.S: *ya ajulëne i ndutu ja anyu é*

   *kaka mwema ya ajulëne i ndutu ja anyu é kaka mwema*

L.S: Persevere with your sorrow,

   *take heart Persevere with your sorrow, take heart*

The peculiarity about the chant form in Bakweri dirges is that it is performed by a single, individual performer, and, in most cases, has a sustained verse form with a minimum of repetitions. Of equal interest too is the fact that the performer acts as both lead singer and chorus. This is seen in the following dirge in which the lead singer in her solo performance sings the first verse of the two-verse dirge and then re-orders the lines of the first verse, literally singing them backwards in the second verse.

**Performers:**

*Performer: wango wa ndinge malingo mëndë jo janeli tate ivondë tombihzë maa o mo wowe mëndë ko na ihzë*

*Performer: The one you loved so much Is the one we have brought to you Father of creation Extend your hands and receive him For he no longer dwells with us*

*Performer: aku na ihzë tombihzë maa o mo wowe tate ivondë wango wa ndinge malingo mëndë ko na janeli*

*Performer: He no longer dwells with us Extend your hands and receive him Father of creation The one you loved so much Is the one we have brought to you*

( Dirge No. 3 )
This particular dirge-chant form provides the individual performer with greater flexibility to treat the subject of death in her own manner and to express her emotions in the words and melodies she chooses. It should be noted how the solo performer sings the dirge backwards, beginning from the last line that ends the first verse: “He no longer dwells with us/Extend your hands and receive him/Father of creation.”

Complementing the chant form is the simple form which is rendered by two performers, one chanting the first part of the dirge, the other responding:

1st Performer: moto na moto wa a nuhze
a weli ndi ndwendeli
a hwia ma a wene litimba
o mbowa yendi a muwelele (2x)

Every human being here on earth
Should know that he is a stranger
Should think about his return
To his home of origin (2x)

2nd Performer: nanu ndi e e e, nanu ndi e
nanu ndi tate iwonde a ma tehze (2x)

That is how e e e, that is how e
That is how the creator planned it (2x)

(Dirge No. 4)

This form consists of direct statements by the leader singer on the theme of death or an invocation of the ancestors with a second individual responding to, or echoing the theme that the lead singer chants in the first instance.

The most popular way of singing Bakweri dirges is the utilisation of the antiphonal form. This involves the collaboration of the lead singer and the chorus. This form involves the repetition of key phrases over and over. The lead singer begins the dirge by singing a single verse alone. The same verse is then repeated by the chorus; or the chorus takes up singing the dirge from where the lead singer ended:

L.S2: o nanga e ngombe
o remene elele
owa ohzi hwiye mama eja o njia
wenga i wele ihfahzu
(playing of instruments and marching)

L.S: When you go to sleep in the evening
You get up in the morning
You don’t know what will befall you
So let’s call on the Almighty
(playing of instruments and marching)

Ch: ihfahzu o ihfahzu o ja
o wele tate
inyehfe e jae e jo ongoane

Ch: We call on the Almighty
We call on our ancestors
To come and help us

L.S: wenga i wele ihfahzu

L.S: So let’s call on the Almighty

Ch: ihfahzu o ihfahzu o ja
o wele tate
inyehfe e jae e jo ongoane

Ch: We call on the Almighty
We call on our ancestors
To come and help us

(Dirge No. 5)

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2 Lead Singer, from now henceforth will be abbreviated “L.S” and Chorus “Ch.”
Quite obviously the alternation between the lead singer and chorus is not the same. The lead singer, in the first instance, begins singing the dirge and the chorus takes over from the line where she ends. In other dirges, however, the lead singer sings the entire verse of the dirge, right through once, and the verse is then repeated by the chorus:

L.S: hzuwelele hzuwelele hzuwelele
  hzuwelele (2x)
  mohfε aindi yondɛ
  yondɛ ya molike
  a liya litumba e e e
  mohfε aindi yondɛ
  yondɛ ya molike
  a liya wana e e e
  yondɛ ya molike

Ch: hzuwelele hzuwelele hzuwelele
    hzuwelele (2x)
    mohfε aindi yondɛ
    yondɛ ya molike
    a liya litumba e e e
    mohfε aindi yondɛ
    yondɛ ya molike
    a liya wana e e e
    yondɛ ya molike

L.S: Farewell, farewell, farewell
     Farewell (2x)
     You have embarked on a journey
     An everlasting journey
     You have left your family e e e
     You have gone on a journey
     An everlasting journey
     You have left your children e e e
     And gone on an everlasting journey

Ch: Farewell, farewell, farewell
    Farewell (2x)
    You have embarked on a journey
    An everlasting journey
    You have left your family e e e
    You have gone on a journey
    An everlasting journey
    You have left your children e e e
    And gone on an everlasting journey
    (Dirge No. 6)

Another type of antiphonal collaboration between the lead singer and chorus is the solo and chorused refrain. The lead singer usually uses the refrain to gain time to think of the next thematic statement to insert in the dirge. In this case, the refrain takes the form of a predominant image from a preceding line:

L.S: wonya gbami, mba na mɛndɛ
e liya n’ewoka, e liya n’eyolɛ
wonya gbami, mba na mɛndɛ
e liya n’eyele, n’ewoka
  ehza ne ya

Ch: e e wonya gbami o
    ehza ya, ehza ya

L.S: O my brethren, I am gone
     Take care of my home, live in peace
     My family members, I am gone
     Live in peace, take care of yourself
     Don’t weep for me

Ch: E e oh my brethren
    Don’t weep, don’t weep for me

L.S: wonya gbami, mba na mɛndɛ
e liya ne ndawo, n’eyolɛ
wonya gbami, mba na mɛndɛ
e liya n’eyolɛ, n’ewoka
  ehza ne ya

Ch: e e wonya gbami o
    ehza ya, ehza ya

L.S: O my brethren, I am gone
     Take care of my house, live in peace
     My family members, I am gone
     Live in peace, take care of yourself
     Don’t weep for me

Ch: E e oh my brethren
    Don’t weep, don’t weep for me
    (Dirge No. 7)
The improvising lead singer utilises the sensitivity of this device to introduce moods of sorrow through intimate personal asides as she chants the dirge. Such asides transform impersonal words into intimate verbal expressions, making them emotionally charged with connotative meaning, and by so doing bringing both performer and audience to reflect on the implicit meaning of the words.

It is quite important to underscore the fact that performers of Bakweri dirges have the flexibility to determine which dirge type they would use during their performances. From time to time the performers alternate between “the solo and chorused refrain” shown above, and “the statement and response structure” demonstrated below:

L.S: \textit{a ma nanga mohfe hzahfonga na litumba leni lahze mola a nanga e}  
Ch: \textit{a nanga}  
L.S: He fell asleep and forgot his entire family  
Mola is asleep e

Ch: He is asleep  
L.S: \textit{mohfe a nanga e}  
Ch: He is asleep  
L.S: He is also asleep  
Ch: He is asleep  
L.S: He is also asleep  
Ch: He is asleep, he is in deep sleep  
We are looking for him, searching for him  
Where is mola e?  
We are searching for him; where is he?  
\textit{(Dirge No. 8)}

The constant repetition of the adverb “asleep” by both the lead singer and chorus reveals the aesthetic features of this particular dirge. The lead singer does not just introduce the song; she is allowed the flexibility for originality during its performance, while deciding how to end the song. It is important to emphasise that this statement/response form involving the lead singer and chorus is characterised by simplicity of words and expressions that are hardly changed during the performance of the entire dirge. From all indications then, it is obvious, as Ruth Finnegan (1978: 262) states, that:

... the antiphonal form provides scope for far more flexibility, rich elaboration, and varied interpretation than is immediately apparent from the bald statement that this is the characteristic structure of African songs. It is also a most suitable form for the purposes to which it is put. It makes possible both the exploitation of an expert and creative leader, and popular participation by all those who wish or are expected to join in. The repetition and lack of demand on the chorus also makes it particularly appropriate for dancing. Finally the balanced antiphony both gives the poem a clear structure and adds to its musical attractiveness.
It is quite obvious in this discussion that Bakweri dirges, like other varieties of African poetry, cannot be analysed following the rules of English verse that are based on the measured effect of stressed and unstressed syllables. The musical accompaniment to the dirges, the rhythm of the dance as the dirges are performed, and the energy, emotion, and passion with which the performers give vent to their inner feelings—all these elements provide a unique perspective in the appreciation of Bakweri dirges.

3. STRUCTURE

The length of Bakweri dirges varies, with the number of performers determining the length of each dirge. Although some dirges performed by single performers are relatively short, the rule, rather than the exception, is that dirges performed by a single performer (like Dirge No. 8) tend to be longer. Quite remarkable is the fact that the performance of these dirges is usually, though not always, executed by individual artists who sing and perform alone without musicians or a chorus. Such artists are sometimes commissioned to compose tailor-made dirges for particular funerals. These kind of tailor-made dirges, like the following, are usually long, constituting not more than three stanzas:

Performer:  
\begin{align*}
& o \text{n} d\text{ut} u \text{n} a \text{o} \ w\text{uk} u\text{m}e\text{l} i \\
& \text{l} i\text{t}\text{u} \text{mb} a \ l i \ w\text{u} \text{k} u\text{m}e\text{l} i \\
& w\text{on} y\text{a} \ m\text{oh}\text{z} o\text{n}e \\
& n a \ k a\text{m} a\text{n} i \ n d\text{d} \text{i} \text{j} \text{d} \\
& e \ h\text{z} u\text{h} z u \ w\text{e} \text{n} y\text{a} \ o\text{n} o \ t\text{e} \ n a \ o h \ w\text{e} \text{y} a \\
& n e \ e \text{n} i \ h\text{z} a \text{n} g o \ a\text{n} u y\text{a} \ m\text{oh}\text{z} o\text{n}e \\
& a \ li\text{y} a \ o \ li\text{y} a \ l a \ m\text{o} \text{m} e \\
& l\text{a} m b a \ t a\text{t} \text{e} \ i\text{w} o\text{n} d e \ a \ l o h\text{w} a \\
& (P\text{ause})
\end{align*}

In grief and lamentation  
The bereaved family in lamentation  
Descendants of Mosonge  
I had a dream  
Come closer let me reveal it to you  
I saw your father, Mosonge  
Sitting by the right hand  
Of the Almighty God  
(Pause)

Performer:  
\begin{align*}
& n a \ h\text{w} e \ l i\text{lo} \ l \text{w}\text{e}\text{e} \ e\text{m} a \\
& o \ k\text{u}\text{l} e \ e\text{w} o\text{o} \\
& o \ w\text{x} n\text{g} o \ a\text{e} \ o \ k\text{o}\text{k} i\text{hzh} \text{e} \\
& w\text{e}\text{n} g a \ l i\text{y} a \ a\text{n} u \ n a \ i\text{m} b a \ w a \ h\text{z} i\text{y} o\text{l} e \\
& (P\text{ause})
\end{align*}

I heard a voice saying  
You have accomplished your work  
You have raised your children  
So stay with me and have eternal rest  
(Pause)

Performer:  
\begin{align*}
& m\text{oh}\text{z} o\text{n} e \ n a \ e\text{j} \text{s} \text{k} e \ h\text{w} e \ t\text{e} \text{m} i \\
& m\text{oh}\text{z} o\text{n} e \ a \ m a \ k\text{u}\text{l} e \ e\text{w} o\text{o} \\
& o \ n\text{a} n\text{g} e \ a\text{e} \ n\text{d} \text{i} \ n\text{d} i \ o \ l a \ h\text{z} i\text{y} o\text{l} e
\end{align*}

Let judgement and truthfulness prevail  
Mosonge has accomplished his work  
Now he sleeps in everlasting rest  
(Dirge No. 9)

This three-stanza structure makes it possible for the message in the dirge to be delivered by a lone performer who resorts to improvisation in the course of the performance.
Nonetheless, some dirges performed by a single performer could also be relatively short, closely mimicking the regular and irregular musical phrases in the song. The following dirge, performed by a single performer, for example, is just four lines:

**Performer:**

\[
e \text{gbwe ya n} \text{ɛ hweyahze a nu hzee} \\
e \text{gbwe ya n} \text{ɛ hweyahze a nu hzee} \\
hwelingɛ hwianu hwelu njuma \\
hwelingɛ hwianu hwelu njuma
\]

Do all you can on earth
Do all you can on earth
Remember, judgement waits your souls
Remember, judgement waits your souls

(Dirge No. 10)

These short dirges are also characterised by lyrical repetition. In the following dirge, the /o/ and /e/ sounds in the lines of both lead singer and chorus echo the sense of loss and sadness of the mourner:

**L.S.**

\[
mama eya hwa o e e e, eya hwa \\
mama eya hwa o e e e, eya hwa
\]

Mama respond o e e e, respond
Mama respond o e e e, respond

**Ch.**

\[
mama eya hwa o e e e, eya hwa \\
eya hwa e e e
\]

Mama respond o e e e, respond
Respond e e e

**L.S.**

\[
eya hwa e e e \\
eya hwa e e e
\]

Respond e e e

**Ch.**

\[
eya hwa e e e
\]

Respond e e e

(Dirge No. 11)

The lyrical repetition is not just limited to sounds; it also extends to words in the song. The constant repetition of the words “respond” and “mama” emphasises the reality that although the performers wish the dead woman to answer back, she is, in fact, dead and will never respond. The chorus in the dirges seems to have limited opportunities for verbal improvisation in contrast to the lead singer who has more flexibility to improvise in the course of performing the dirge. In like manner, dirges performed by the chorus tend to have a relatively stable structure. Since most choruses of the dirges are short and repetitive, they are easy to memorise and master.

The occurrence of parallelism in these dirges also enhances their structure. In this regard, Bakweri dirges reveal a remarkable sense of balance in the form of semantic parallelism “in which various images within a chant are developed independently and the relationship between them is not apparent on the surface” (Okpewho 1992: 81). This parallelism is demonstrated in the relationship between the second and third lines of the lead singer’s first stanza in Dirge No. 7:

**L.S.**

\[
wo nya gbami, mba na mɛnde \\
e liya n’ewoka, e liya n’eyole \\
wo nya gbami, mba na mɛnde
\]

O my brethren, I am gone
Take care of my home, live in peace
My family members, I am gone

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In this example, the order of words in the second line “e liya n’ewoka, e liya n’eyolɛ” is reversed in the third line “e liya n’eyeleɛ, n’ewoka.” Although the central idea in the dirge is “taking care of the home” (in Line 2) it is substituted with another idea of “taking care of yourself” in Line 4, thereby creating a balance in music and rhythm.

4. RHYTHM

Bakweri dirges, like most African songs have a free rhythm and no rigid metrical scheme. It is in this regard that Ruth Finnegan (1978: 265) observes that:

The fundamental importance of rhythm in vocal as in other African music is widely accepted, but there is little agreement as to its exact structure. One helpful distinction is between songs in “free,” and those in relatively ‘strict’ rhythm. In the former songs (or portion of songs) the singing is not co-ordinated with any bodily rhythmic activity such as work or dancing. The very common songs to strict time, however, have a beat that is articulated with dancing, rhythmic movement, percussion by instruments, or hand-clapping, all of which contribute to the form and attractiveness of the song. These rhythms are worked out in many different ways in various types of song, but one commonly recurring musical feature seems to be the simultaneous use of more than one metre at a time, as a way of heightening the rhythmic tension.

The corpus of dirges in this study reveals a free rhythm like the rhythm in Yoruba Ijala which

Babalola says has “a poetic language organised so as to create impressions and fulfil functions of poetic rhythm” (Babalola 1966: 344). In this regard, dirges performed and sung by one lead singer (like Dirge No. 9) tend to have a free rhythm. The dirge demonstrates how the individual performer has the flexibility to treat the themes in her own way, and by so doing, expresses her emotions in the words and melodies she chooses. Dirges performed in collaboration with a chorus, on the other hand, have a beat that is articulated by dance, the accompaniment of drumming, ringing of bells, and the playing of a host of assorted musical instruments. All these contribute to the form and beauty of the dirge and bring out its poetic style. This can be illustrated in Dirge No. 12:

L.S: meano meama kpeli o
Meano meama kpeli ya lowa
Kpeli ya lowa a ḥfēhfele nyambɛ
(3x)
L.S: Stories of death
Stories of God’s death
Grief of death can cause sickness
(3x)
The musical instruments that accompany the singing of the dirge determine the tempo of the rhythm. Hence Nalova Lyonga’s (1979: 240) observation that:

... the drum principally dictates the tempo of certain kinds of performance. For its rhythm slows down or quickens according to the moments of the dance, or more predominantly; its patterns may indicate change in action.

It is this rhythm which Lyonga refers to that contributes to the aesthetics of the dirges, especially when, as we have seen, they are accompanied by musical instruments which stimulate other mourners in the audience to sing and dance with the performers.

5. FIGURATIVE LANGUAGE

The language used by performers of Bakweri dirges is relatively ordinary and straightforward. Dirge No. 1 again demonstrates the direct nature of the vocabulary of these dirges:

L.S:

nyambē a ma nmai o
imba na ma āmbē
mbahē na hza hwēmē
(2x)
(playing of various musical instruments)

Ch:
i i wha tate, i i hwa tate
hwa ma kuwa li ēndē
(3x)

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Ch:  *nanu ndi e hze ehweli*  
(marching and drumming)  

L.S:  *wenga kaka nmema*  

Ch: That’s how the world is  
(marching and drumming)  

L.S: So take heart

However, beneath this apparent ordinary straightforward use of language, there are complex allusions, hidden meanings, and connotative implications concealed within the sub-text of the songs, which may not be evident to the casual onlooker in these funeral occasions.

A good number of these dirges draw their imagery from nature, principally from animals and plants. They utilise apt metaphors and vivid similes that reflect the social and spiritual experiences of the Bakweri people. The literary significance of the dirges is made manifest in the elegance of the words used by the performers, their appropriateness, and their perceptiveness with which they are chanted within the context of grief and mourning. The similes are of two kinds—those that modify verbs like in Dirge No. 17: “*malo ma wu, na njola ja maengu/elinge yami yCHfe*” (their voices like rattles/from the deep sea and my soul thrills), and those that modify adjectives like in Dirge No. 18: “*longo hwakala hwa mbongo*” (it [death] has taken those who were like whites).

In some dirges comparison is evoked by the use of metaphors. It is not unusual that a comment is made about human life and action through reference to non-human activities. Most of the metaphors employed by the performers of these dirges centre on death because the nature and purpose of death is still a mystery to the Bakweri people. Hence, in Dirge No. 19 the performer compares death to an endless sea “*iyaka e, ekpeli nmanja mondene e*” (oh mother, death is an endless sea), implying that the nature of death, like the sea, cannot be fathomed by human beings. At other times, the lead singer uses metaphors with euphemism. In other words the mourner avoids using the name “death.” This is the case in Dirge No. 6 in which the mourner says the deceased has gone on an everlasting journey (“*yND ya molike*”) instead of saying the man is dead. Similarly, in Dirge No. 13, instead of the performer saying that “Papa is dead,” she instead says his “name has been struck off” the list of men and women:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>L.S:</th>
<th>likeli e likeli lingi lina likeli e e likeli e likeli lingi lina likeli e e (playing of musical instruments) okalata walana okalata wunyana</th>
<th>L.S:</th>
<th>That name has been struck off It has been struck off That name has been struck off It has been struck off (playing of musical instruments) From the list of women From the list of men</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ch:</td>
<td>likeli e e</td>
<td>Ch:</td>
<td>It has been struck off</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>L.S:</td>
<td>o kalata hweohza e</td>
<td>L.S:</td>
<td>From the list of friends</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ch:</td>
<td>likeli e e</td>
<td>Ch:</td>
<td>It has been struck off</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Another commonly used stylistic device which can be identified in Bakweri dirges is symbolism. This ability to use words whose meanings cannot be perceived from their face value is usually associated with the symbols associated with death that the mourners use during their performances. Again in Dirge No. 6, “yɔndɔ” (journey) symbolises a permanent separation. It is in this regard that Agbor Wilson Emoh (1989: 90) observes that:

...when one leaves for a journey he leaves behind the others, then turns his face to look forward to arrival at his destination. But when this destination is unknown the journey becomes infinite and the separation permanent.

Death itself is referred to as “e kpeli ya molike” which can be translated as “everlasting,” “omnipresent,” or “ubiquitous.” In other words, there is no way that anybody can avoid death. This idea that we are born only to die is a realistic characteristic of the Bakweri worldview in which “kpeli” (death) is seen as an inevitable reality ... a journey to the land of the ancestors (Mokenge 1999: 37). This inevitability of death is again presented in metaphorical language in the following dirge in which life is symbolised as a journey with the beginning of life represented as “morning” and the end depicted as “evening.”:

In everyday speech, “ekome” means home/country, but in Dirge No. 20 when the chorus says, “i mo liele we ekome yen” (let us escort him back to his home), “ekome” (home) here symbolises the tomb which represents the world beyond the physical, mortal realm in which the dead man’s abode exists.
Personification, in which human attributes are ascribed to abstract or non-human entities, seems to be a regular feature used by performers of Bakweri dirges. It is in this vein that the lead singer in this single-stanza dirge accuses death of snatching her entire family away:

**L.S:** o ekpeli
mamɛ ndenga o hzahza ljowemɛ
hwana na membamba na wambaki
i ya o hʃahʃa
i kokihze o wowa
ekpeli, ekpeli, ekpeli o litumba
litumba la ndingɛ a molykó
nyuwɛ, nyuwɛ i liyeli

**L.S:** O death
Why don’t you want to leave us alone
Children, grandchildren, the elders
You strike them down at birth
You let them grow then take them
Death, death, death has struck this family.
The Ndinge Molykó family
Orphans, we have been left orphans

(Dirge No. 15)

Death here is personified as a human monster that can snatch people away, or nurture and then kill them in the prime of their life when they least expect it. This act of snatching people portrays the unpredictability of death. The same notion is expressed in Dirge No. 16 in which the performer says: “Death clutches firmly and never lets go”:

**L.S:** mokahzɛ, wa ndi o hweli nguma
hfɛnda anana e kpeli ihɔʃhɛ jɛŋɡo
(2x)
e kpeli ndi e hweli linalenie
(playing of musical instruments)

**L.S:** Satan, you are Mister know all
Fight against death, let’s see
(2x)
Death is his name
(playing of musical instruments)

**Ch:** nganda mehfendà

**Ch:** Death clutches firmly and never lets go

**L.S:** e kpeli ndi e hweli linalenie

**L.S:** Death is his name

**Ch:** nganda mehfendà

**Ch:** Death clutches firmly and never lets go

Death in this dirge is referred to as having a name and clutching firmly, never letting go. The dirge bestows upon death human attributes which are, by no means, pleasant, positive, or favourable.

Alliteration, assonance, and ideophones abound in these dirges. The repetition of the first consonant sounds in individual lines occurs in most of the dirges. In Dirge No. 21, for instance, the sound /j/ is repeated several times in the same line: “jahwea ja ma monye na moto/jahwea jolo, jahwea jolo.” In the same vein, the /a/ and /o/ sounds in the same lines are repeated, creating rhythmic, musical assonance that is complemented by musical instruments, singing, and dancing, all of which enhance the beauty of the performance. Similarly, the /w/ and /l/ sounds re-occur in the refrain of Dirge No. 2:

longe la moto o
waiwai waiwai waiwai
longe la moto o
Like alliteration and assonance, ideophones, which literally mean “ideas-in-sound” are actually sounds in these dirges that convey vivid pictures, images, and impressions to the audience for the purpose of achieving lyrical effect. In Dirge No. 22 “kololo” describes the squeal made by rabbits while the sound “hwie hwie” in Dirge No. 23, is used to convey the compassionate sound produced by chicks searching for their hen-mother.

Despite the mournful and sorrowful atmosphere of these funeral occasions, the performers attempt to inject occasional humour to relief the burden of sorrow that pervades both the audiences and the relatives of the deceased. The humour emerges in the deliberate alteration of particular lines in some dirges. These alterations are not due to any exigencies of dirge singing techniques, but to the performers’ desire to amuse the audience. This kind of humorous diversion is to funeral performances what comic relief is to the stage performance of tragedy. This is seen in dirge No. 24 in which the chorus introduces an interjection that is out of place with the regular lines of the song:

    Ch:  imo luwa onè e (2x)    Ch:  Where can we get him (2x)
       (interjection)             (interjection)
    naumene hzi wa o wa?    Is that something to talk about?

The humour here arises with the interjection of the line “Is that something to talk about?” within the context of the first line that laments the absence of the dead father who cannot be replaced (“From where can we get him again”). Sometimes performers deliberately sing off tune or march out of the beat and rhythm of the music. At times too, some performers make obscene gestures while dancing, thereby moving the audience to laughter.

6. CONCLUSION

To all intents and purposes, performances of Bakweri dirges reveal an impressive array of descriptive passages in which persons and objects are described in vivid language coloured by the performers’ emotions. These vivid pictures are conjured from the performers’ imagination, reproducing fine shades of feelings and making the audience perceive familiar images through their imagination as though they were seeing them for the first time. The performers use different symbols in association with variegated images in the dirges to convey different moods that arouse various emotions in the audience. It is in this sense that the performers portray their innate creative abilities to enhance their art, thereby giving their particular genre of funeral poetry much of its beauty.
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Appendix. Dirges cited but not included in their entirety in the body of the article.

Dirge No. 17

L.S.:  

- yookaneya na oma whelinge hwemba 
- monyingihzë n o hfako
- na mwanja
- maló ma wu, na njolo ja maëngu

_eliinge yami yće ye òndé_  
_i hwelimo hwe Wokoko e wuhze_  
e je embane  
_na oma e hfonda e ma hwè_  
_Jondo a Njie, Nafike_  
_na Enanga Kulu_  
_wukeli anu ya wono_  
_ehza ëmbëne_

Listen to the spirits singing 
And my soul thrills 
Shaking the Fako mountain 
Come forth oh you Wokoko spirits 
Join us in our song 
Like you did in your days 
Like you did in your days 
Enjema Môngo na Ndumbe Mome 
They will be here today

_Abbia_
Dirge No. 18

L.S:  
\textit{ja hza le oweya  
ja hza le oweya  
ja hza le oweya  
ja hza le oweyá}  
\textit{ja hza le oweya}  
\textit{ja hza le oweyá (longo)}

We want to tell you  
We want to tell you  
We want to tell you  
We want to tell you  
We want to tell you (something)

L.S:  
\textit{hwea hfema e kpeli ya moliké  
ja hza le oweya  
ja hza le oweyá}  
\textit{ja hza le oweya}  
\textit{ja hza le oweyá (longo)}

Things about everlasting death  
We want to tell you  
We want to tell you (something)

Ch:  
\textit{longo hwa ma tana te te  
longo mwindo me mbamba e  
longo hwakala hwa mbongo  
ae ae i ma hwa hwiya}  
\textit{Motombi mo Woletè}

It has taken people of very fair complexion  
It has taken people of very dark complexion  
It has taken those who were like whites  
Ae ae we knew them all  
We knew Motombi Wolete

L.S:  
\textit{longo Monyonge mo Kalè  
longo Mbella Lifafe}  
\textit{(repeat chorus)  
longo Kinge a Molonga  
Mwaka Monyongé, Emilia MwikXmè}

It took Monyonge Kalè  
It took Mbella Lifafe  
(repeat chorus)  
It took Kinge Molonga  
Mwaka Monyongé, Emilia MwikXmè

\textit{ae ae i ma hwa hwiya}  
\textit{Ae ae we knew them all}

Dirge No. 19

L.S:  
\textit{iyaka e ekpeli nmanja mɔndɛnɛ e  
ekpeli nmanja mɔndɛnɛ e e  
kpeli (e kpeli ya lohwa) (2x)}

Oh mother, death is a fathomless sea  
Death is a fathomless sea  
Death (God’s death)  
(2x)

L.S:  
\textit{iyaka e i hwɛni mohziyo mɔndɛnɛ e e e}  
\textit{(2x)}

Oh mother, what a terrible pain we suffer e e e (2x)

L.S:  
\textit{i wheli hi ṭɔŋɔ longɛ la ekome ya hze  
na oma e kpeli yɛɛjae jo woma nani  
i hwɛni mohziyò}  
\textit{(4x)}

We are mere observers of life on earth  
As death strikes in our midst  
What a terrible pain we suffer  
(4x)

Ch:  
\textit{e kpeli o ekpeli, jo gbe na  
e kpeli o ekpeli o  
e kpeli ya molikɛ jo gbe na}  
\textit{e kpeli ya molikɛ}  
\textit{(playing of musical instruments)}

Death oh death, what can we do to you?  
Death or death  
Everlasting death, what can we do to you?  
Everlasting death  
(playing of musical instruments)
Dirge No. 20

L.S: jo owa, jo owa hzahzę
jo owa hzahzę
(2x)  We plead, we plead with you
We plead with you
(2x)

Ch: ...

Dirge No. 21

L.S: nwẹni a hza anjiına linǹngɔ
matumba yo ongołe je ěnde
i mo liék
(2x)  A guest does not leave with his host’s bed
Mourners, let’s get ready to go
And escort him
(2x)

Ch: ...

Dirge No. 22

L.S: o ngo musongi inoni
i ae ngowo malo
a tonga hfe tute
a hfeli o likomba e
(2x)  That bird which is bearer of bad news
It changes its voice
It hoots
It lives in the forest
(2x)  (playing of musical instruments)

L.S: loka kololo  The rabbit squeals

Ch: ya ya loka kololo  Ya ya, the rabbit squeals

L.S: kololo  It squeals

Ch: ya ya loka kololo  Ya ya, the rabbit squeals
Dirge No. 23

L.S:  (imitating the sound of a chick)  (imitating the sound of a chick)  hwie o hwie o (2x) Hwie o hwie o

Ch:  (imitating the sound of a hen and clapping) wawa (imitating the sound of a hen and clapping) Wawa

L.S:  hwie mɔ a nanga o woka So you are sleeping outside

Ch:  (clapping) wawa (clapping) Wawa

L.S:  mbahfe na nanga o ndawo I am sleeping in the house

Ch:  (clapping) wawa (clapping) Wawa

L.S:  hwie hwehzu hwe mole Foxes will eat the dead man

Ch:  (clapping) wawa (clapping) Wawa

L.S:  mbahfe hweto hwe mo le I shall also be eaten by rats.

Ch:  (clapping) wawa (clapping) Wawa

Dirge No. 24

L.S:  a ma hwe ndi hzangwa a hzú hwa ndinge He was such a loving father
     a ma hwe ndi hzangwa a hzú He was a loving father
     hwa e ndinge malingo

Ch:  i mo luwa oné e (Mola Ngolo) Where can we get him again (Mola Ngolo) (2x)
    (playing of musical instruments) (playing of musical instruments)

L.S:  a ma hwe ndi hzangwa a hzu hwe eyole He was our peace-loving father
     a ma hwe ndi hzangwa a hzu hwa ndinge He was such a loving father

Ch:  imo luwa oné e (2x) Where can we get him again (2x)

L.S:  njɔŋo lelu, njɔŋo benge We have searched up north, We have searched down south

Ch:  imo luwa oné e Where can we get him again (interjection) naumë njzi wa o wa? (interjection) Is that something to talk about?
    (interjection) naumë njzi wa o wa? Where can we get him?
    (3x) (playing of musical instruments) (playing of musical instruments)