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The Socio-cultural Context of Dirges among the Akan People in the Ejisu Communities in the Ashanti Region of Ghana: Aesthetics and Intonation

Kwaku Owusu-Agyeman

Vice Principal, St. Monica's College of Education, Ghana

John Kofi Brewu

Vice Principal, Akrokerri College of Education, Ghana

Abstract:

This study analyses the aesthetics and intonations of dirges premised on the socio-cultural context of the Akan people in the Ejisu Communities in the Ashanti Region of Ghana. The study used ethnographic research case study design. Observation, video recording, interview guide and focus group discussion were used to glean data from five professional dirge performers. The findings were presented in quotations. The study found four major themes in the dirges performed among the Akan people in the study area. These include 'Agyaadwo', 'Benab', 'mmɔnbɔ' and 'Kwadwom'. The study further found that when the prosody of Akan dirges is considered, it is clear that there is no even beat in a piece as a whole, though there is a scattered use of prosodic patterns of various kinds throughout the dirge. Again, the study found the rhythm of Akan dirges to be free in the sense that there is no handclapping or percussion accompaniment to the singing, nor is it intended for dancing. The codification of indigenous Akan dirges is imperative as it sustains the socio-cultural identity of the Akan people. The economic potentials of dirge can also be harnessed as the study found performers who used it as their major source of livelihood.

Keywords: Dirge, Akan people, accompaniment, Ejisu Communities, Melodic contours

1. Introduction

Various explanations and interpretations have been given as to what a dirge means. A dirge is mournful poem or piece of music composed or performed as a memorial to a dead person (Alembi, 2002). It is a musical piece of music composed or performed as a memorial to a dead person (Alembi, 2008). Again, it has been defined as the musical piece that is performed as a part of the funeral service (Nketia, 1969; XIAO & WU, 2010). It is a hymn or song of mourning composed to dedicate in the memory of a dead person. The song laments and expresses grief for the lost one. The synonyms of the word dirge are threnody, requiem, and lament (Boadi, 2013; Cai-Hua, 2010). The tone of the song is somber and soulful. It is a slow, mournful musical composition. A dirge is again seen as a weeping song lamenting on the feeling of the performer based on the affection he or she has for the deceased. It is an unplanned or unprogrammed type of music which comes just out of shock and moved by the emotion of the singer who sings the weeping songs providing the lyrics both consciously and unconsciously (Nketia, 1969; Chun-Jing, 2006; Yahalom, 2010). It is worthy to note that its intensity depends to a large extent the relationship, affection and value or level of co-operation that existed between the singer and the deceased before the death.

In all these, a dirge is arranged in such a way that the name of the dead, his appellation, where he comes from, the family or clan, his good works, the pains the family is going through among others are mentioned (Enszer, 2002). There is for each clan and in particular for the lineages within it, a set of dirges, each of which may contain a reference to someone who might have been a common ancestress, patriarch, a leader, a ruler, or simply a lineage head (Hai-feng, 2006; Xiao-liang, 2007). Hence nearly every dirge would be found to contain some personal names. For example, when an Akan person dies, a portion of the dirge to be sung for him is predetermined by the clan or lineage to which he belongs.

In the performance of dirges, there are themes which throw light on features which might otherwise seem puzzling or banal (Hui-ling, 2012). The deceased is the focal point. He/she may be addressed, his individual qualities described, or he may be identified with one or several ancestors. To refer to him the mourner often uses a series of different names which vary the language as well as honouring the dead. Besides proper names the Akan also have corresponding 'by-names' and these often occur in dirge for effective reasons (Nketia, 1969). Beside these names, the deceased is also addressed by kinship terms and terms of endearment. Again, a name of reference may be used to associate him with his clan or group (Boadi, 2013). Qualities are often dwelt on benevolence in particular is frequently lauded in the dirges (Junli, 2014).

While the person of the deceased is the focus of attention, there are other themes. One of the most frequent is that of the ancestor. Among the Akan, ancestry is important, both through the mother and through the father who represents the spiritual side (Nketia, 1969; Boadi, 2013). In dirges both types of ancestry are commemorated, and the fact brought out

that a member of two social groups has been lost (Alembi, 2008). Rather similar to the theme of ancestors is that of places. The identity of the deceased or his ancestors is clarified by adding the name of his home or place of origin (Wen-jin, 2005; Khanmohammadi & Dowlati, 2018). This convention often introduces historic evocations into a dirge. It also adds colour to the words, for it is common for a descriptive phrase to be added to the name itself. While the main focus of the dirge is on the deceased his nature and qualities, his ancestors, his historic home the mourner also makes certain reflections (Lifeng, 2012; Rafliis, & Zai, 2018). There are certain stock ways in which these are expressed. The dead man is often pictured as setting out on a journey, so that part of what the mourner is doing is bidding him farewell (Mark, 2008; Lishi, 2013; Unger, 2016). For instance, the sorrow of parting is brought out in stock phrases like 'I call him, but vain', 'I would weep blood if only that would make you come back', or with more passionate emphasis on the mourner's sense of loss, 'I am in flooded water, who will recue, me?' and 'There is no branch above which I could grasp'. The mourner's wishes for a continued friendship with the dead person even when he/she reaches the world of spirits, and speaks of wishing to go with him/her or to exchange gifts or messages (Nketia, 1969; Sanka, 2010; Su, 2016); and this is why the singer so often say: 'send me something when someone is coming'. This is an imagination rather than a literal request (Tsiwah, 2009; Boadi, 2013; Smith & Kouri, 2018).

It is imperative to note that the mourner expresses her sorrow and loss through particular concrete images rather than through general statements about death (Posner, 2003; Mu, 2011). For example, instead of speaking of death taken away her support, she sings 'The tree that gives shade and coolness has been hewn down' and when she alludes to the shortness of life, she uses the conventional metaphor in which the duration of life is compared to the time a market woman takes to sell her goods: 'What were your wares that they are sold out so quickly?' Among all these various motifs and conventions of content and expression the individual mourner can select her own. The use of many of the stock forms of expression does not necessarily mean a lack of sincerity on her part or that she creates little artistic impact (Saanchi, 2002; Qian-zhi, 2004; Yun-xiao, 2012). As Nketia (1969) puts it, 'the traditional forms of expression are still pregnant with emotion on the Akan expressions which are not considered outworn in spite of frequent use'.

Dirges known in Akan as 'Nsuie' is one of the oral traditions, described as elegiac poetry, is an exceedingly common form of expression in Africa. We hear of it from all areas and in many different forms. In Ghana, many tribes and communities do perform dirges and Akan communities are no exception. In trying to find out the socio-cultural context of dirges, the researchers restricted themselves to Ejisu communities. Ejisu is a town in the Ashanti Region of Ghana and it is the head of administration for the Ejisu Municipality. Ejisu is located in the South-Eastern part of Kumasi with different cultures (ethnic groups). Asante Twi is the common language spoken by almost everybody. These are the very people that the researchers want to talk about taking into consideration, the performance of dirges amongst them.

2. Materials and Methods

The research design is an ethnographic case study approach. This research is an investigation into dirges and how they are rendered among the Akans in Ejisu Municipality in the Ashanti Region. In the course of gathering information for this study, these researchers have had to rely on two main types of data. These are the primary data and the secondary data. The primary was collected during funerals among professional dirge performers in the study areas. To collect this data, the researchers had to interview five professional dirge performers from different communities. The choice of the five dirge performers was motivated by two factors: the level of popularity or the level of appreciation that listeners show for the performances of the bards, and the location of the bards such that they are fairly distributed in the different study areas. All the five professional dirge performers were women. Besides this, separate interviews were conducted with some elders in the study areas where the five professional dirge performers were observed. All the interviews were conducted on face-to-face, and on one-to-one bases (Saunders et al., 2007).

The researchers also visited funeral grounds at Ejisu and Akyawkrom where live performances of dirges were recorded on audio cassettes, and pictures at such funerals taken. The contextual meanings of dirges recorded were first explained to the researchers by some of the professional dirge performers themselves at the funerals. Such dirges were transcribed, translated, and presented in quotations. Apart from the recorded dirges and the pictures which were taken at the funeral grounds, information on interviews conducted with poet-cantors, elders, and other natives were presented in themes.

3. Results and Analysis

The study found the themes of dirges among the people in the study area. During the writers' interactions with the interviewees, they gathered that there were four main themes of dirges that are occasionally performed within the communities. The first one is called 'Agyaadwo' (screaming). With this theme, the performer performs the dirge as a result of an unexpected shock or pain she has received. In other words, when the performer hears or gets the news that somebody, she is not expecting him to die but she is unexpectedly told that such a person is dead. In that sense, the performer as a result of the shocking news gets up, shouts or screams, finding it difficult to stand at one place, weeps and wails to show the pains she is going through. Examples are shown below:

Bue, mawu oo!	Alas, I'm dead
Anyasa oo!	It's finished
Mawie oo!	I've finished
Adeɛ aye me oo!	I'm in pains
Mahunu amane oo!	I'm going through pains
Yaanom obi mmra o!	Somebody should come to my rescue

The performer repeats herself or repeats these short sentences over and over again to show the pains she is going through and how shocking the news is to her.

The study further found the second theme of a dirge the researchers gathered from Ejisu community is called 'Benabɔ'. The study found two main types of this theme. The first type is the one that they use to cast insinuations. It is believed in the Akan culture that when a young person dies or a rich man dies unexpectedly or even when he is having litigation with somebody and dies, they suspect that his death might have been caused by someone, who could be his opponent or a witch. For instance, if his death is suspected to be as a result of his having litigation with the other person, some of the texts in the dirge can go like this;

Atamfo afere oo !! My enemies have been put to shame!
 ɛboɔ adwo oo !! You've got what you wanted

The other type of 'Benabɔ' is used to send a message or inform the townsfolk about what is happening to the performer. It normally has something to do with happenings in the bush or the forest (somebody dying as a result of bush fires, felling of trees) or somebody traveled somewhere but the unexpected happened to him or her and will want to inform the community.

The study found the third type of a dirge among the Ejisu communities called 'mmɔnbɔ'. The Akan believe that death is a journey. So, in the olden days when someone is at a point of death, they believed that he is embarking on a journey. Therefore, the soul leaves the body and sets off for that journey. In this regard, some of the family members get to the outskirts of the village or town and shout to call his soul which they believed was running away from the person. With this type of dirge, the performer does not shed any tears but just calls the person's name, for instance;

Ama ee!

Ama Seewaa eei!.....

The fourth theme the study discovered of dirge is called 'Kwadwom'. Like 'mmɔnbɔ' the performer of 'kwadwom' does not normally shed tears but the texts in the dirge show grief and sorrow. The tone of the song is somber and soulful which sends grief into the spine of audience who may shed tears.

4. Examples of Dirges

Twi	English
Eno Atwemaa Mansa	Mother Atwemaa Mansa
Aduana dehye- preko a woda asaa soɔ	Royal of Aduana clan who sleeps on rich cotton fabric
□nowaa, wote wo din a te w'ani	Mother respond I am calling you
Ɔheneba, woduru kurotia a	Princess, when you reach the outskirts of the town,
Bɔ wo din ma abranee mma wo so	Mention your name so that strong men might carry you shoulder high
Na wodi amantire mu	For you rule two worlds
Atwemaa Mansa	Atwemaa Mansa
Aduana ba – Atwea Yaa nana a wofiri Atwea	Daughter of Aduana and grandchild of Atwea Yaa who hails from Atwea
Gyampɔn Mmosea soɔ	Gyampɔn Mmoseaso
Ɔheneba a wofiri Asumagya Gyankobaa	Princess who comes from Asumagya
Daamere Kwadu reso borɔfere	where the pawpaw fruits grow on the banana tree
Aponkyerene nana a ɔma nsuo	Grandchild of the frog that produces water
Asumagya Santemanso	Asumagya Santemanso
Gyebiri Amanfo nana Asumegyani a	One who hails from Asumegya and grandchild of Gyebiri Amanfo
Wobɔɔ bidie a anka obi awuo	Someone would die if you smeared yourself with charcoal dust
Busumurun banyansafoɔ	Wise woman of Busumuru clan
Eno, aden na wada nahɔɔ sei	Mother, why have you slept so deep today
Eno, nyane na adeɛ akye	Mother wake up it is a bright morning
□nowaa Atwemaa te ase a	If mother Atwemaaa were to be alive
Anka madidi dadaada	I would have eaten already
Meranya obi akɔse Amoako Ata, Gyambibi ne	Can I get somebody to send message
Afrane se, □nowaa tuo akabea na mahunu amane sei ee	to Amoako Ata, Gyambibi and Afrane that Mother has left her gun some where for me to fight/struggle in vain!
Maame, obi reba a mane yen	Mother, send us something when someone is coming this way.
Na se woremane yen a	If you would send us something
Mane yen denkyembreboɔ	I would like parched corn
Na se yeanya gya a	So that if we could not find fire to cook it
Yeawe no amono	We could eat it raw.

Table 1

Twi	English
Nana Kwaagyei Hwedeemuni nana a ɔnom Abono,	Grandchild of grandsire Kwaagyei of Hwedeemu that drinks the water of Abono
Kyeame ba kyeamewaa, Eno, ɛsɛ ɛnhia me, na mereko	Daughter of a spokesman, who is her self a spokesman, Mother, it may appear all is well with me, but I am struggling.
Ɔsafo Agyeman nana Nyaakowaa Anteadeni	Nyaakowaa of Antead and grand child of Ɔsafo Agyeman
Eno, ɛsɛ ɛnhia me, na mereko.	O, mother I am struggling all is not as well as it appears.
Eno, woremane me a, mane me boa ne sɛnkɛsɛɛ - gye-ahɔhɔɔ	Mother, if you would send me some gye-ahɔhɔɔ thing, I would like a parcel and a big cooking pot that entertains strangers.
Ɔpem adi ngo; asumanpakyiwa adi hyire	The god Ɔpem has failed, the gourd of charms has won
Eno, ahunu mu nni me dua bi na masɔ mu	O mother, there is no branch above which I could grasp.
Eno, woremane mea, mane me ɔɛnkyɛmbreboɔ	Mother, if you would send me some thing, I would like parched corn,
Na mannya gya a, mawe no mono not find fire to cook it.	So that I could eat it raw if I could
Eno, nkoko de boro bɛkum ako	Mother, the parrot will catch a skin disease from the fowls and die.
Nana Kwaagyei Hwedeemuni nana nom- Abono	Grandchild of grandsire Kwaagyei of Hwedeemu that drinks Abono
Nana sɛnkɛsɛɛ - gye-ahɔhɔɔ	Grandsire, the mighty pot, savior of strangers
Eno asɛ ɛnhia me oo, na mereko oo	O, mother I am struggling all is not as well with me as it appears
Eno manemanefoɔ, obi reba a mane me oo	Mother, who sends gifts, send me something when someone is coming this way.
Eno afituo mu nni gya oo na masɔ bioo	Mother, there is no fire in the deserted dwelling from which I could take a brand to light my fire
Mete kyirekyire-amo- yi-me- nkyɛn-sodoɔ	My helpful wicker basket that comes to my aid with lumps of stored- up salt.
Eno, otire ba nsu, anka masu wo nkra	O, mother, I would weep blood for you, if only Otire's child would be allowed to.
Nana nwaanwaakɔto a onim sika dabere	Grandsire, the crab that knows the hiding place of alluvial gold,
Too deɛben ni oo, kyeame ba?	What is the matter, child of the spokesman?
Eno ama owuo yi afu yen mu	Mother has allowed this death to take me by surprise
Asɛ ɛnhia me oo, na mereko oo	O, mother, I am struggling, all is not as well with me as it appears

Table 2

5. Discussion of Results

The study focused on aesthetic and intonations of dirges of the Akan people in the Ejisu Municipality. Four major themes were found among the Akan dirges in the Ejisu communities. The study found that when the prosody of Akan dirges is considered, it is clear that there is no even beat in a piece as a whole, though there is a scattered use of prosodic patterns of various kinds throughout the dirge. Stress is not significant and there is not systematic use of tones or syllables. There is however, a diffused occurrence of tonal and phonological patterns. These depend on the nature of the line or linear units in dirges. These findings confirm that of Nketia (1969) that tones of dirges among other Akans do not follow

any particular systematic order. The study found repetition of tones patterns to occur within lines. In each preceded by a low tone, and the repetition of the low-high sequence is noticeable. This finding corroborates Boadi (2013).

The study found two different ways of singing dirges. The first is to adopt a type of wailing voice in which the words of the dirge are 'spoken' and the contours of the melody reflect the speech contours of the performer, sometimes accompanied by a few tuneful fragments. The other form is more purely musical. A fairly normal singing voice is used, with melodic contours resembling those of songs. However, this study found a general tendency for dirge melodies to begin high and move down to a low resting point at the close. It is revealing to note that some traditional tunes associated with fragments of dirges, but in the main which ever musical mode she employs, the singer makes up her own tunes as she goes along. This is not different from Boadi (2013), Alembi (2008), Nketia (1969) and Saanchi (2002) who found that traditional tunes are associated with fragments of dirges in their respective studies.

The study further found that unlike many other types of songs, the rhythm of Akan dirges is free in the sense that there is no handclapping or percussion accompaniment to the singing, nor is it intended for dancing. This in conjunction with the fact that the mourner herself acts as both soloist and chorus, gives the individual mourner greater scope to treat the subject in her own manner without reference to others, and to express her own feelings in the words and melodies she chooses. Again, the study found that during the performance the women who sing the dirges pace about among those attending the funeral, pausing before the corpse or the chief mourners. Though there is no dancing to dirges the singer makes gestures and gracefully rocks her head to add to the pathos of what she sings.

6. Conclusion and Policy Implications

The study found four major themes of dirge among the Akan people in the Ejisu municipality. It has also revealed that dirges are not normally on organized performance, so the individual can draw her own resources and originality to express and evoke the emotion she is expected to feel.

Like in other Akan communalities and other ethnic groups, dirges are performed traditionally in a disorganized chorus. Every singer sings her dirge without listening to the other. There is therefore no coherence – no definite start and no definite end. However, the study identified some people who are trained to sing dirges which they do and are paid for. This draws attention to the economic potentials of dirge as funerals are major traditional activities observed among the Akans. Again, the codification of indigenous Akan dirges is implied to be significant as it sustains the socio-cultural identity of the Akan people.

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