
Oral Literary and Linguistic Norms as Styles in Ogba Funeral Songs

Dr. Ben-Fred Ohia

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

ORCID: 0000-0001-9288-4541

ABSTRACT

Literature has its unique features that distinguish it from other disciplines. This accounts for why literature is described as “a pleasurable use of words for knowledge, information and entertainment. It is pertinent that the choice of words in oral literature especially in the song genre is the prerogative of the artist (performer). For instance, the choice of refrain model which is dictated by the rhythm of the song in Ogba funeral song is purely the making of the lead singer. The refrain is chosen as part of the song, where there is not deviation in the song, it maintains the same refrain to the end as orchestrated by the performer – lead singer. This paper explores the oral literary and linguistic styles which the lead singer adopts in a corpus of sixteen Ogba funeral songs and how they function effectively during the rendition of the songs. It has been observed that syllables in the various lines (verse) of the various combination patterns are part of the styles of Ogba artists and are used to suit each particular song and some of them are songs without words, (mime) a mere harmony built on repeated vowel sounds. The paper concludes that the choice of words or pattern of rendition by the artist adds colour and spices up the funeral songs to a crescendo level. The refrain consists of repeated syllables for easy mastery by the audience. This paper recommends the use of this dual nature of songs because it adds aesthetics in the songs and the audience is highly enthused by the performance from the beginning to the end.

KEYWORDS: Exploration, Oral Literary Styles, Ogba Funeral Songs, Aesthetics, Ogba Artists.

ARTICLE DETAILS

Published On:
15 October 2025

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

INTRODUCTION

Nigerian literature/oral literature became a global sensational art due to its attribution with the existence of its own people as the people of a region are the ambassadors of their own cultures, arts and traditions. With works like *Things Fall Apart* by Chinua Achebe to Chimamanda Adichie's *Americanah*, Nigerian Literature has gained the significance in the worldwide literary landscape offering a wide variety of voices and viewpoints on Nigerian history, culture, and society. The primary themes of Nigerian literary works are societal issues, which include human experiences and interactions. For a society to be established, human interactions have to take place which in turn help to create and guide acceptable morality and ethics to which a society is formed. These practices created through this interaction are ingrained into an individual's culture as long as they are continually practised. Hence, in order to fully appreciate a work of literature, whether written or oral, it is essential to understand who wrote it and where it came from.

Culture, location, and history all influence the background of a literary work. In addition, it is of essence to comprehend the history of a society as it provides fundamental context for the historical background for the text such as this paper's main focus on “oral literary and linguistic styles in Ogba funeral songs”. Ogba funeral songs are a reflection of the culture, traditional history of the people and the place of the dead as is evident in their nature. Ogba is in the Niger Delta region that is heavily populous and immersed in natural and mineral resources like palm oil, gas and crude oil. Nigerian states comprising all six states from the South-South Geographical Zone (Rivers, Bayelsa, Delta, Akwa Ibom, Cross River and Edo), two states from the South-East Geographical Zone (Abia and Imo) and one state from the South-West Geographical Zone (Ondo).

The reason for enumerating Niger Delta region is to pinpoint the homogeneity in the culture of the Niger Delta region that allows for the resemblance in their song performance. Uche Osiki writes, “The Niger Delta was once a place of natural beauty filled with their own... unique cultures and traditions” (85). Distinguishing literature from other subjects, Karibi T. George observes that: “Literature is different from other subjects specifically because it has two unique modes of expression. First by a deliberate exploitation of the resources of language and second by its fictional and exaggerated rather than purely historical reference to

social reality” (82). It is important to note that works of art cannot be appreciated purely on the surface level; the appreciation is also hinged on the style of the artist/writer which accounts for the success or failure in the art. 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.

In the light of the above, literature especially poetry which is a genre in the song category, makes use of figurative expression to communicate meanings to its readers. In Ogba funeral songs, the expression is the construction of the artist (lead singer). Through these poetic devices, beauty is created and ideas are developed. These figurative language devices are literary devices employed by the artist and they include: personification, onomatopoeia, apostrophe, rhetorical question, ideophone, ideolect, repetition and allusion.

ORAL LITERARY STYLES

The use of words in communicating sense is the unique form of the oral milieu and part of the oral aesthetics. In oral literature words are part of the expressive medium. It therefore follows that the oral style is verbalised in different ways and adapted for effect. In funeral songs, words are used to communicate the message of the songs to the audience. The Ogba funeral song’s artist adopts this pattern as seen in repetition of initial consonant/vowel sounds, vowel glides and nasalisation in two or more words as in “iwe, iwe”, “nwna nna, nwna nna”, etc.

Song 1: “Iye iya iye oko ama - o – Iye iya iye hurrah”

L: Iye iya iye oko ama – Iye iya iye hurrah! (vowel glide)

R: Iye iya iye oko ama – Iye iya iye hurrah!

L: Nwna nna nigra ugno – One whose father gave eagle

R: Iye iya iye oko ama – Iye iya iye hurrah! (nasalisation)

In song 2 “Go gom go gom go – sound of metal gong”, there is the mimicking of the metal gong (ukela), the sole musical instrument used without accompaniments for female funeral songs as present in “Go gom go gom go”. The leader after his recital punctuates the song with ideophonic sound. It is used to create metallic sound effect and to achieve a good rhythm.

L: Go gom go gom go – Sound of the metal gong mimicked by the leader

R: Go gom go gom go – Sound of the metal gong mimicked by the chorus

L: Amara sioje go gom go gom go – Paddle moves the canoe, go gom go gom go – Metal gong sound.

R: Amara sioje – Go gom go gom go – Paddle moves the canoe, go gom go gom go – Metal gong sound.

This song is not translatable; it is used when the performers are in frenzy during female funeral performance. The apostrophic style of the artist addressing the deceased as though he lives and is present at the occasion, dovetails into ideolectism because of the artist’s mastery of the indigenous language. The performer’s use of the mother tongue adds flavour to the performance. Lines one and two of song 3 “Isi la la la oweye-o – Head has gone alone” lend credence to this assertion.

L: Isi la la la oweye-o – Head has gone alone

R: La la la – Gone, gone, gone

L: Nwaogbuehni la la la oweye-o – The son of Ogbuehni has gone alone

R: La la la oweye-o – Gone, gone, gone alone; gone, gone, gone.

Similarly, onomatopoeic sounds are heard in song 2 already discussed in this paper. Onomatopoeic sounds are also heard in song 4 “Nwnadikne nwna isoma – The daughter of Dikne, the daughter of Isoma” where the metal gong sounds mimicked repeatedly to represent the object.

L: Nwna dikne nwna isoma – Daughter of Dikne, daughter of isoma

Oburu ibu ahnu iye – The wealthy daughter that recognises us

Iwe onuma iwe – Anger, sorrow, anger

Go gom go gom go amara sioje – The mimicked metal gong sound, the paddle moves the canoe

R: Go gom go gom go – Mimicked metal gong sound

Amara sioje – The paddle moves the canoe,

Go gom go gom go – Mimicked metal gong sound

Orality is very visible in the songs so far explicated in this paper. Helen Chukwuma (1994) identifies points in the analysis of the verbal aspect of the oral styles thus:

In an analysis of the verbal aspect of the oral style, two significant points come to focus: first is the presence of a live audience which is being addressed directly and whose interest and participation are vital to the sustained life of the tradition, and second is an awareness of the transcient nature of the spoken word and a consequent attempt at permanence seen partly in the choice and arrangement of words (p.150).

For instance, song 5 “Eje nwnaagbor soagra – If a bad girl misbehaves (fornicates)” uses words to admonish girls against moral laxity, advises them to maintain their womanhood even in their husband’s home. The text reads:

L: Eje nwnaagbor soagra adika ya la ka ibnea mma – If a bad girl misbehaves (fornicates) she thinks herself more beautiful than other girls

R: Eyeh – Yes

Therefore, the oral literary style in Ogba funeral songs is subjected to the artistry of the performer, and is portrayed in his/her use of language, idioms, verbal repetition and other styles as is evident in the songs analysed above in this paper. Oral idiomatic phrase also features in Ogba funeral songs. Sometimes oral form of emphasis such as epizooties (immediate repetition) and cloche (intermittent repetition) are in the songs. Song 6 “Agala je agah je ahe iye – Hands, come together in the bailing of pond, ahe iye” aptly exemplifies this form. The text reads:

L: Agala je agala je ahe iye – Hands, come together in the bailing of pond, ahe iye

R: Agala je agala je ahe iye – Hands, come together in the bailing of pond, ahe iye

Ideophones in Ogba Funeral Songs

Another linguistic feature of oral language evident in Ogba funeral songs is ideophone (the adjuncts to words), which otherwise describes a word that places emphasis on the idea from the word’s sound. According to Ben-Fred Ohia (2017), “ideophones are echoes of natural sounds whose meaning may be distorted if translated in the English language” (p.133). Some of the funeral songs under review in this paper adopt ideophones, either by the lead singer’s inclusion of ‘O’ where it ought not to be or by deducing meaning from the sound of the word. For example “come-o”. In the songs, both humans and inanimate objects make ideophonic sounds, which are interpreted denotatively by humans. In songs 1, 2, 3, 4, 5 and 6 already discussed among others in this paper, the following words function as ideophones: “ogirigiriyo, ijoho oje ijoho, amara sioje, ebege siyele ojenye, ojenye, ize, go gom go gom go”. They are words which have no English equivalent and therefore cannot be translated.

Ogba funeral songs make use of ideophones as parallels of major category of the Ogba grammar such as verbs, adverbs or adjective and modifiers. The ideophones give an added dimension and flair to words in the songs. For instance, song 7 “Dede kuma, dede kuma oyiri eze – Father open, father open he resembles a king”, “dede kuma” in the song goes with “oyiri” (resembles) to make meaning in the song.

L: Dede kuma dedekuma – Father open, father open (talk)

Oyiri eze – He resembles a king

R: Dede kuma dede kuma – Father open, father open (talk)

Oyiri eze – He resembles a king.

The fact that the artists of Ogba funeral songs are grounded in the Ogba language creates a room for the influence of the Ogba language on English constructions (if the need arises). The difference between the phonological systems of the two languages is clear. Ogba language being tonal as against English which is intonational and stress-timed rhythm makes interference almost inevitable.

The artists in their competence in Ogba language; display remarkable proficiency in various Ogba dialects of Igburu, Egni and Usomini. They embellish the Ogba language; express English words that have no semantic equivalents in Ogba language and spice up the songs with contemporary flavour. The songs are therefore both meaningful and entertaining; these are two internal features of songs in oral literature. Ideolects also add to the cultural weight of Ogba funeral songs. The song-artist, aroused in the linguistic norms of his language, exhibits his understanding of death in Ogba lore and belief system; and drums up individual variations to further make the song compelling. Hence, the use of ideolects spices up words in the songs. Instances abound in songs 2 and 8 respectively, which are untranslatable because the words used have no English equivalents.

Song 9 “Ebege siyele” – untranslatable reads thus:

L: Ebege siyele

R: Ojenye, ojenye

The performers go into frenzy, gyrate, somersault and cartwheel during the performance. The ideolect portrays the artist at his best, and there is a total interference of the performer’s language on the language of the performance.

Style of the Opening and Closing Formulas in the Performance

The oral style of the performer is viewed from the opening and closing formulas in the performance/rendition of Ogba funeral songs. By this, the artist draws the attention of the drummers and the audience and through this process the harmony of the music of the song is effected through the rhythms of the drums, clapping of hands and the histrionics of the artist and the performers. The opening formula is used to awaken the audience at the performance. The leader makes a passionate appeal to the performers and audience to rise up to the occasion. He also uses the formula to punctuate the songs where he wants to make a change or embellish the songs with some of his personal additives. It is expedient to note that the opening formula for Ogba funeral songs is

gendered as separate formulas are used for the male and female funeral songs respectively. Below is an opening formula for male funeral songs:

L: Kwo – Shout

R: Ho – A shout of the audience

L: Edeni – Here

R: Nye diahni – We are present

L: Ekaani – There

R: Nye diahni – We are there.

The lead performer uses this opening formula to inform the audience to pay attention because the burial ceremony has started. He stretches his hands to the four cardinal points: East, West, North and South. This signifies the commencement of the occasion. When the leader wants to change lyrics, songs, or move into another song, he also, uses this interceptive formula to draw attention and communicate his intentions to the performers. Nkem Okoh's comment that "any text of oral literature is replete with traits of literariness" (p.419) aptly captures this development. The funeral performance of the female has its formula in a different style. For instance, to begin any funeral performance, the following formula could be employed in the song:

L: Egbla hima-a – Audience, stand up and come together

R: Hima – Together

L: Egbla hima-a – Audience, stand up and come together

R: Hima – Together.

This formula like that for males, declares the female funeral performance open and solicits for full participation of all in the performance. The leader appeals to the audience to rise up to the occasion. It is also used to punctuate the songs, indicate song change/choice, etc. Repetition prevails in Ogba funeral songs, starting from the opening to the closing. This conforms to Helen Chukwuma's comment on repetition that:

It is important to note that repetition, as a form of emphasis is a direct carry-over from speech norms, where the number of repetitions enhances importance, enormity, seriousness of fact complemented by the tone of articulation. Repetition also is used for stylistic effects as in the proverb where attention is drawn not only to the semantic but also to the phonological aspects of the words (p.159).

These songs are characterised by repeated phrases or lines. This emphasises the bitter reality of death and sorrow, thereby arousing emotional feelings. Since the songs are musical, rhythmical, they also have mnemonic value. They enhance memorability, one of the goals of the "morality" performance. In some songs, the entire stanza or verse and refrain are repeated several times throughout the duration of the song. Song 10 "Eleje agwu la obii – Let us visit the tiger at his residence" has this feature:

L: Eleje agwu la obii – Let us visit the tiger at his residence

R: Eleje agwu – Visit the tiger

L: Eleje agwu la obii – Let us visit the tiger at his residence

R: Eleje agwu – Visit the tiger

This song refers to the deceased as a tiger to portray his invincibility to human plans and his invulnerability to premature or accidental death. In essence, it means the deceased died naturally in old age. Beside this pattern of repetition, there is also repetition of words in the same line of verse as is evident in song 3 "Isi la la la oweyei-o – Head has gone alone" earlier discussed. The word "la" (gone) is repeated throughout the fourth line to establish the grim truth that the deceased is actually dead.

Rhetorical question features prominently as a style that features frequently in Ogba funeral songs. Song 11 "Ndala nwnane kiye? – Where is our brother? Clearly demonstrates this point.

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

Ndala nwnane kiya? – Where is our brother?

R: Anye nwnane kiye – Yes, our brother

Anye nwnane kiye – Yes, our brother

Ola la la udno – He has gone in peace.

This question is not addressed to anyone, thus elicits no direct response. This is because the answer is obvious. It is used to establish the impeccable truth that the deceased is dead and gone forever, thereby arousing sympathy. Similarly in song 12 "Oburu la awhnurnu mu chuku eyina – if it were possible for me to see God", the artist questions the rationale for yam to sprout back to life when planted in the soil, whereas humans remain in the soil eternally when buried. An excerpt of the text reads thus:

L: Oburu la mu hnurnu chuku eyina – If it were possible for me to see God.

Abia ajuma nwnatnawna aju – I would have asked Him a little question?

Ndala kpo omre ka iji jire ali lo? Why does yam sprout back to life when planted?

Ede je ali lo – Cocoyam sprouts back to life when planted

Madu je ali tasi – Humans remain in the soil eternally when buried.

R: Go gom go gom go – Mimicked sound of metal gong

Amara sioje go gom gogom go – Paddle moves canoe – Go gom go gom go – mimicked sound of metal gong.

The questions are asked to elicit the bitter experience of death and whip up emotional involvement of performers and audience. In the style of the artist, death is personified as a thief, trapper, hunter, alongside other negative attributes. In Ogba funeral songs, the artist extends the attributes of life and the understanding of death. In song 13, death is personified as a thief and murderer who steals and runs away.

L: Oownu bu oyne osni – Death is a thief

Oownu ni gburu papa bu oyne osni – Death that killed papa is a thief

Ogbula gbala ga – He has killed and ran away.

R: Oownu bu oyne osni – Death is a thief

Oownu ni gburu papa bu oyne osni – Death that killed papa is a thief

Ogbula gbala ga – He has killed and ran away.

To create a literary style and linguistic norm, the artist apostrophises the song by addressing the deceased as a living being. In it, irony and pathos are created because the deceased in effect cannot answer the call: song 14 aptly explains the literary features of apostrophe, irony and pathos.

L: Zamu okwu, zamu okwu – Answer my call, answer my call

R: Ehni, zamu okwu – Yes, answer my call

L: Nwaogbowu, zamu okwu – Son of Ogbowu, answer my call

R: Ehni, zamu okwu – Yes, answer my call

Finally, in song 15, death is hyperbolically created by the artist as humans are said to be totally extinguished by death. In the third line of the song, the artist categorically states that death should stop its murderous act because humans are going extinct in Ogba by the power of death.

L: Oownu egbula la madu gula – Death, do not kill because humans are extinguished

Oownu nwna je ogwu uchay gbula nne-a

R: Ojentye, ojentye – Mimicked step of woman dancers.

CONCLUSION

Ogba funeral songs have been explicated in this paper with a total of sixteen (16) songs analysed by exploring the literary styles and linguistic norms in them. As oral texts, the songs are sung and heard showing their close connections as features of oral literature. To buttress the importance of oral literature as seen in the features of the Ogba funeral songs, the paper asserts that oral literature especially the oral songs is a universal phenomenon. In this regard Brownoski. W. Andrzejewski's phrase *The Ubiquity of Oral Literature* becomes significant; on his comments on such supposed absence of literature in some societies, and with characteristic lucidity: "it is noteworthy that even western societies that claim to be highly technologised has as their artistic beginnings the phenomenon called oral literature where importantly, the oral medium remains important in such societies" (p.98). In Ogba, funeral song as a category is important to the people and the society; the artistry of the artist helps to define concepts that prevalent in the society concern death and its victim (the deceased). In the songs exemplified, most words in the songs are ideophonic and onomatopoeic as some of them mimic the metal gong (ukela). Similarly, the leader after his recital punctuates the songs with the sounds and the chorus responds with the same sound. It is used to create metallic and stylistic effects in order to achieve effective rhythm.

Interjectory sounds are used by the artist to achieve rhythm. Rhythm occurs in Ogba funeral songs and is also used by the chorus as a response. The repetition of sounds is also used to complete a line. In this way, they break the monotony of extensive use of content words and allow the audience to participate effortlessly. As observed in the songs analysed in this paper, some words are apostrophised by the artist in his idiosyncrasy, to make the deceased appear to be living and present on the occasion of the performance. In other instances, the deceased is metaphorically (compared) to an elephant because of his majestic gait and deeds when living as is evident in song 16 "Eyni bu eyni – Elephant is elephant".

L: Eyni bu eyni – Elephant is elephant

R: Ngnagna bu eyni – Elephant is proud

L: Nwaogbowu bu eyni – The son of Ogbowu is an elephant

R: Nwaogbowu bu eyni – The son of Ogbowu is an elephant.

From the foregoing exposition, words in Ogba funeral songs are oral literary styles and linguistic norms adopted by the artist and they are topical and ephemeral, yet exhume the beauty of arts analogous with Ferdinand Carritt's view of the beauty of arts as he states: "Plato makes it edification. So long as people go to artists for their politics, their science or their religions because the artists' work is beautiful or witty... (p.xxiv).

RECOMMENDATIONS

We open the discussion, then, by emphasising that like literature in general, oral literature has enormous didactic dimensions, which can be channelled to the benefit of Ogba society as it is in other societies. In addition to being an art, oral literature obviously constitutes a pleasurable mode of learning. This paper therefore recommends that literary writers should emulate the oral literary styles and linguistic norms created by oral literary artists to replicate same in written literature. Since oral literature is a pleasurable form of communication communally owned and orally transmitted in a face-to-face contact, to curb the ephemerality and fluidity of the art, artists have to be encouraged and their renditions preserved for posterity. This will also serve for commemoration of events in Ogba communities and the larger societies.

In fact, there are other possibilities, beyond this element of enjoyment; thus oral literature (especially funeral song) deals with certain serious issues about life, death, man, his relationships with his environment, and with other humans, all of which are questions that are highly pertinent in African society today. Since Ogba funeral song is a story-telling event, which presents the myth of death and the dead with some historical data as is in other societies, the paper recommends the adaptation of this art in the education curricula for its expansion. The renditions of the songs serve for the purgation of pent-up emotions and therefore should be encouraged by individuals and governments. Finally the paper recommends that both cultural organisations and government agencies should collect and preserve these songs for posterity.

REFERENCES

Secondary Source: Books and Journals

- 1) Andrzejewski, B. W. (1964). "Emotional Bias in the Translation and Presentation of African Oral Art". Sierra-Leone Language Review 1, Pp.95-102.
- 2) Carrit, E. F. ed. (1931). "Introduction". *Philosophies of Beauty: From Socrates to Robert Bridges*. Oxford: The Clarendon Press.
- 3) Chukwuma, H. (1994). "Introduction". *Igbo Oral Literature: Theory and Tradition*. Abak: Belpot.
- 4) Chukwuma, H. (1994). *Introduction to African Oral Literature*. Port Harcourt; Pearl Publishers Ltd.
- 5) George, K. T. (1985). "True Sensitivity in the Collection and Exposition of "Original" Texts of Oral Literature". M A Thesis of the University of Ibadan.
- 6) Ohia, B.F. (2017). *Content, Styles and Aesthetics of Ogba Funeral Songs*. Ibadan: Abbey-Tech Printing Press Serv.
- 7) Okoh, N. (2000). *Preface to Oral Literature (Revised Edition)*. Port Harcourt: Lamison Publishers.

Primary Sources: Interview of Informants

Name: Mr. Nwabriegwu Blacky Omordi

Age: 90 Years

Occupation: Farming

Items Collected: Funeral Songs 1, 3 and 5

Date/Place of Collection: 21st May, 2020/Omoku

Form of Collection: By Tape/Interview

Name: Chief Ejechi Fineboy Ohia

Age: 75 Years

Occupation: Retired Civil Servant

Items Collected: Funeral Songs 6 – 8

Date/Place of Collection: 30th May, 2022/Omoku

Form of Collection: Oral Interview

Name: Mr. Onyema Georgewill

Age: 70 Years

Occupation: Trading

Items Collected: Funeral Songs 10 – 13

Date/Place of Collection: 26th February, 2023/Obrikom

Form of Collection: Participation in Funeral Performance

Name: Mrs. Matilda Dibia

Age: 60 Years

Occupation: Professional Artist/Performer

Oral Literary and Linguistic Norms as Styles in Ogba Funeral Songs

Items Collected: Funeral Songs 2, 4 and 9

Date/Place of Collection: 29th March, 2023/Omoku

Form of Collection: Participation in Funeral Performance