

## 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:*

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#### 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.<sup>1</sup> Scholars and researchers in the domain of this literature will attest that they have not even began 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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<sup>1</sup> 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: *ya ajulene ì ndutu ja anyu é*  
*kaka mwema*  
*ya ajulene ì ndutu ja anyu é*  
*kaka mwema*

L.S: Persevere with your sorrow,  
take heart  
Persevere with your sorrow,  
take heart

L.S: *nanu ndi e hze ehveli*  
(playing of various instruments)

That's how the world is  
(*playing of various instruments*)

Ch: *nanu ndi e hze ehveli*

Ch: That's how the world is

L.S: *nanu ndi e hze ehweli*

L.S: That's how the world is

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

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

L.S: *wenga kaka nmema*

L.S: So take heart

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:

L.S: *yangweya ehze*  
*ehze yondi mahfango e*  
*yangweya*  
(2x)

L.S: Be careful of the world  
The world is full of trickery  
Be careful  
(2x)

Ch: *longe la moto o* (3x)  
*waiwai waiwai waiwai*  
*longe la moto o*  
*waiwai a ngodo*  
*waiwai a mbehza*  
*wai wai*  
(musical instruments)

Ch: Be careful in life (3x)  
Waiwai waiwai waiwai  
Be careful in life  
Young women be careful  
Young men be careful  
Waiwai  
(*musical instruments*)

L.S:	<i>ongelene te nwanyongo wowé waluteya e</i>	L.S:	If you plan evil against your neighbour Think twice
Ch:	<i>longe la moto o (3x) waiwai waiwai waiwai longe la moto o waiwai a ngodo waiwai a mbehza waiwai</i>	Ch:	Be careful in life (3x) Waiwai waiwai waiwai 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 ajulene 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:	<i>ya ajulene i ndutu ja anyu é kaka mwema ya ajulene i ndutu ja anyu é kaka mwema</i>	L.S:	Persevere with your sorrow, take heart Persevere with your sorrow, take heart
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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.

Performer:	<i>wangɔ wa ndinge malingo mxndi jo janeli tatε iwonde tombihzεε maa o mo wowe mɔ a ku na ihzɔ</i>	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:	<i>aku na ihzɔ tombihzε maa o mo wowe tatε iwonde wangɔ wa ndinge malingo mɔ ndi jo janeli</i>	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:

1 <sup>st</sup> Performer:	<i>moto na moto wa a nuhze a weli ndi ndwendeli a hwia ma a wene litimba o mbowa yeni a muwεlele (2x)</i>	Every human being here on earth Should know that he is a stranger Should think about his return To his home of origin (2x)
2 <sup>nd</sup> Performer:	<i>nanu ndi e e e, nanu ndi e nanu ndi tate iwondε a ma tehze (2x)</i>	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.S <sup>2</sup> :	<i>o nanga e ngombe o tεmεnε elele owa ohzi hwiye mama eja o njia wenga i wεle ihfahzu (playing of instruments and marching)</i>	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 ( <i>playing of instruments and marching</i> )
Ch:	<i>ihfahzu o ihfahzu o ja o wεle tate inyɔhfε e jae e jo ongoane</i>	Ch:	We call on the Almighty We call on our ancestors To come and help us
L.S:	<i>wenga i wεle ihfahzu</i>	L.S:	So let's call on the Almighty
Ch:	<i>ihfahzu o ihfahzu o ja o wεle tate inyɔhfε e jae e jo ongoane</i>	Ch:	We call on the Almighty We call on our ancestors To come and help us (Dirge No. 5)

<sup>2</sup> 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:

<p>L.S: <i>hzuwelele hzuwelele hzuwelele</i>  <i>hzuwelele (2x)</i>  <i>mohfɛ aindi yɔndɔ</i>  <i>yɔndɔ ya molikɛ</i>  <i>a liya litumba e e e</i>  <i>mohfɛ aindi yɔndɔ</i>  <i>yɔndɔ ya molikɛ</i>  <i>a liya wana e e e</i>  <i>yɔndɔ ya molikɛ</i></p>	<p>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</p>
<p>Ch: <i>hzuwelele hzuwelele hzuwelele</i>  <i>hzuwelele (2x)</i>  <i>mohfɛ aindi yɔndɔ</i>  <i>yɔndɔ ya molikɛ</i>  <i>a liya litumba e e e</i>  <i>mohfɛ aindi yɔndɔ</i>  <i>yɔndɔ ya molikɛ</i>  <i>a liya wana e e e</i>  <i>yɔndɔ ya molikɛ</i></p>	<p>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)</p>

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:

<p>L.S: <i>wonya gbami, mba na mɛndɛ</i>  <i>e liya n'ewoka, e liya n'eyolɛ</i>  <i>wonya gbami, mba na mɛndɛ</i>  <i>e liya n'eyelɛ, n'ewoka</i>  <i>ehza ne ya</i></p>	<p>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</p>
<p>Ch: <i>e e wonya gbami o</i>  <i>ehza ya, ehza ya</i></p>	<p>Ch: E e oh my brethren          Don't weep, don't weep for me</p>
<p>L.S: <i>wonya gbami, mba na mɛndɛ</i>  <i>e liya ne ndawo, n'eyolɛ</i>  <i>wonya gbami, mba na mɛndɛ</i>  <i>e liya n'eyolɛ, n'ewoka</i>  <i>ehza ne ya</i></p>	<p>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</p>
<p>Ch: <i>e e wonya gbami o</i>  <i>ehza ya, ehza ya</i></p>	<p>Ch: E e oh my brethren          Don't weep, don't weep for me          (Dirge No. 7)</p>

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:	<i>a ma nanga mohfɛ hzahfonga na litumba leni lahze mola a nanga e</i>	L.S:	He fell asleep and forgot his entire family Mola is asleep e
Ch:	<i>a nanga</i>	Ch:	He is asleep
L.S:	<i>mohfɛ a nanga e</i>	L.S:	He is also asleep
Ch:	<i>a nanga</i>	Ch:	He is asleep
L.S:	<i>mohfɛ a nanga e</i>	L.S:	He is also asleep
Ch:	<i>a nanga nanga nanga ijɔ imhwaza lahza, imhwaza  o ne mola a weli ee? imhwaza lahza, o ne mola a weli e</i>	Ch:	He is asleep, he is in deep sleep We are looking for him, searching for him Where is mola e? Ch: We are searching for him; where is he? (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:	<i>o ndutu na o wukumeli litumba li wukumeli wonya mohzongε na kamani ndɔɔɔijɔ e hzuhzu wenya ono tε na oh weya nε eni hzangɔ anyu mohzongε a liyai o liya la mome lamba tatε iwonde a lohwa (Pause)</i>	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:	<i>na hwε lilo lɔwε ema o kulε ewolo o wxngo ae o kokihze wenga liya anu na imba wa hziyole (Pause)</i>	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:	<i>mohzongε na ejɔkε hwε tεmi mohzongε a ma kulε ewolo o nangε ae ndi ndi o la hziyole</i>	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:	<i>e gbwe ya nɛ hweyahze a nu hzee</i>	Do all you can on earth
	<i>e gbwe ya nɛ hweyahzɛ a nu hzee</i>	Do all you can on earth
	<i>hwelingɛ hwianu hwelu njuma</i>	Remember, judgement waits your souls
	<i>hwelingɛ hwianu hwelu njuma</i>	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:	<i>mama eya hwa o e e e, eya hwa</i> <i>mama eya hwa o e e e, eya hwa</i>	L.S:	Mama respond o e e e, respond Mama respond o e e e, respond
Ch:	<i>mama eya hwa o e e e, eya hwa</i> <i>eya hwa e e e</i>	Ch:	Mama respond o e e e, respond Respond e e e
L.S:	<i>mama eya hwa e e e</i> <i>eya hwa e e e</i>	L.S:	Mama respond e e e Respond e e e
Ch:	<i>eya hwa e e e</i>	Ch:	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:	<i>wonya gbami, mba na mende</i> <i>e liya n’ewoka, e liya n’eyole</i> <i>wonya gbami, mba na mende</i>	L.S:	O my brethren, I am gone Take care of my home, live in peace My family members, I am gone
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*e liya n'eyele, n'ewoka*  
*ehza ne ya*

Live in peace, take care of yourself  
Don't weep for me

In this example, the order of words in the second line “*e liya n'ewoka, e liya n'eyole*” is reversed in the third line “*e liya n'eyele, 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 kpele o*  
*Meano meama kpele ya lowa*  
*Kpele ya lowa a hfehfele nyambe*  
(3x)

L.S: Stories of death  
Stories of God's death  
Grief of death can cause sickness  
(3x)

<p>L.S: <i>nyambe a ma nmai o</i> <i>imba na ma lembe</i> <i>mbahfe na hza hweme</i> (2x) (<i>playing of various musical instruments</i>)</p>	<p>L.S. When sickness sets in There is no relenting No looking back (2x) (<i>playing of various musical instruments</i>)</p>
<p>Ch: <i>i i wha tate, i i hwa tate</i> <i>hwa ma kuwa li ende</i></p>	<p>Ch: i i our ancestors, i i our ancestors who have all passed away</p>
<p>L.S: <i>njene hzi hwiye Njakai wa</i> <i>Nganje ya Kuhwe?</i></p>	<p>L.S: Who did not know of Njakai, Nganje, Kuve?</p>
<p>Ch: <i>i i wha tate, i i hwa tate</i> <i>hwa ma kuwa li ende</i> (3x)</p>	<p>Ch: i i our ancestors, i i our ancestors who have all passed away (3x)</p>

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:

<p>L.S: <i>ya ajulene i ndutu ja anyu e</i> <i>kaka mwema</i> <i>ya ajulene i ndutu ja anyu e</i> <i>kaka mwema</i></p>	<p>L.S: Persevere with your sorrow, take heart Persevere with your sorrow, take heart</p>
<p>L.S: <i>nanu ndi e hze ehveli</i> (<i>playing of various instruments</i>)</p>	<p>That's how the world is (<i>playing of various instruments</i>)</p>
<p>Ch: <i>nanu ndi e hze ehveli</i></p>	<p>Ch: That's how the world is</p>
<p>L.S: <i>nanu ndi e hze ehveli</i></p>	<p>L.S: That's how the world is</p>

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

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

L.S: *wenga kaka nmema*

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 yDhfε*” (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 mondεε 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 (“*yDndD ya molikε*”) 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:

L.S: *likeli e likeli lingi lina*  
*likeli e e*  
*likeli e likeli lingi lina*  
*likeli e e*  
(playing of musical instruments)  
*okalata walana*  
*okalata wunyana*

L.S: 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

Ch: *likeli e e*

Ch: It has been struck off

L.S: *o kalata hweohza e*

L.S: From the list of friends

Ch: *likeli e e*

Ch: It has been struck off

L.S: *o kalata litumba e*

L.S: From the family list

Ch: *likeli e e*

Ch: It has been struck off

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.”:

L.S: *ene kpeli ya lohwa*

L.S: God’s death

*kpeli a hzi hwene meende*

Death has no feet

*kpeli a jo kule a jo endene o hwelimo*

Yet it is taking us to the grave

L.S: *wenga anu hze gbinda wohzenjé*

L.S: So here on earth there is no eternal life

*wengalene anu hze gbinda wohzenjé*

So here on earth there is no eternal life

(playing of musical instruments)

(playing of musical instruments)

Ch: *gbinda wohzenjé e*

Ch: There is no everlasting life

*gbinda wohzenjé e*

There is no everlasting life

L.S: *wa akéle elele,*

L.S: When you go out in the morning

*otimba e ngombe*

You return in the evening

*wa akéle elele,*

When you go out in the morning

*anu hze gbinda wohzenjé e*

There is no everlasting life on earth

Ch: *anu hze gbinda wohzenjé e*

Ch: There is no everlasting life on earth

*anu hze gbinda wohzenjé e*

There is no everlasting life on earth

(Dirge No. 14)

In everyday speech, “*ekome*” means home/country, but in Dirge No. 20 when the chorus says, “*i mo lielele we ekome yeni*” (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:

<p>L.S: <i>o ekpeli</i>  <i>mame ndenga o hzahza lijoweme</i>  <i>hwana na membamba na wambaki</i>  <i>i ya o hfahfa</i>  <i>i kokihze o wowa</i>  <i>ekpeli, ekpeli, ekpeli o litumba</i>  <i>litumba la ndinge a molykó</i>  <i>nyuwé, nyuwé i liyeli</i></p>	<p>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)</p>
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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":

<p>L.S: <i>mokahze, wa ndi o hweli nguma</i>  <i>hfenda anana e kpeli ihzohfe jengó</i>          (2x)  <i>e kpeli ndi e hweli linalenie</i>          (playing of musical instruments)</p>	<p>L.S: Satan, you are Mister know all          Fight against death, let's see          (2x)          Death is his name          (playing of musical instruments)</p>
<p>Ch: <i>nganda mehfendà</i></p>	<p>Ch: Death clutches firmly and never lets go</p>
<p>L.S: <i>e kpeli ndi e hweli linalenie</i></p>	<p>L.S: Death is his name</p>
<p>Ch: <i>nganda mehfendà</i></p>	<p>Ch: Death clutches firmly and never lets go</p>

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*

*waiwai a ngondo,  
waiwai a mbehza, wai wai*

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 oné e* (2x)  
(interjection)  
*naumene hzi wa o wa?*

Ch: Where can we get him (2x)  
(interjection)  
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**

<p>L.S: <i>yookaneya na oma whelinge hwemba</i>  <i>monyingihzεε o hfako</i>  <i>na mwanja</i>  <i>maló ma wu, na njolo ja maεngu</i></p> <p><i>elinge yami yɔhfe ya tɔnde</i>  <i>i hwelimo hwe Wokoko e wuhze</i>  <i>e je embane</i>  <i>na oma e hfonda e ma hwe</i>  <i>Jondo a Njie, Nafike</i>  <i>na Enanga Kulu</i>  <i>wukeli anu ya wono</i>  <i>ehza εbene</i>  <i>i hwelimo hwe Wokoko e wuhze</i>  <i>e je embane</i>  <i>na oma ehfonda e ma hwe</i>  <i>Enjema Mɔngɔ na Ndumbe Mome</i>  <i>hwanε hwa ja ya wono</i>  <i>ehza embene</i></p>	<p>Listen to the spirits singing          Shaking the Fako mountain          and the sea          Their voices like rattles from the deep          sea          And my soul thrills          Come forth oh you Wokoko spirits          Join us in our song          Like you did in your days          Jondo Njie, Nafike          And Enanga Kulu          They are all among us today          It will be exciting          Come forth oh you Wokoko spirits          Join us in our song          Like you did in your days          Enjema Mɔngɔ and Ndumbe Mome          They will be here today          It will be exciting</p>
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Dirge No. 18

L.S:	<i>ja hza le oweya ja hza le oweya ja hza le oweya ja hza le oweyá</i>	We want to tell you We want to tell you We want to tell you We want to tell you
L.S:	<i>ja hza le oweya hwea hfema e kpeli ya molikε ja hza le oweya ja hza le oweyá (longo)</i>	We want to tell you Things about everlasting death We want to tell you We want to tell you (something)
Ch:	<i>longo hwa ma tana te te te  longo mwindo me mbamba e  longo hwakala hwa mbongo ae ae i ma hwa hwiya Motombi mo Woletε</i>	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:	<i>longo Monyonge mo Kale longo Mbella Lifafε (repeat chorus) longo Kinge a Molonga Mwaka Monyongε, Emilia MwikXmε  ae ae i ma hwa hwiya</i>	It took Monyonge Kale It took Mbella Lifafε (repeat chorus) It took Kinge Molonga Mwaka Monyongε, Emilia MwikXmε  Ae ae we knew them all

Dirge No. 19

L.S:	<i>iyaka e ekpeli nmanja mɔndεnε e ekpeli nmanja mɔndεnε e e kpeli (e kpeli ya lohwa) (2x)</i>	Oh mother, death is a fathomless sea Death is a fathomless sea Death (God's death) (2x)
L.S:	<i>iyaka e i hwεni mohzio mondεnε e e e (2x)</i>	Oh mother, what a terrible pain we suffer e e e (2x)
L.S:	<i>i wheli hi ɔngɔ longε la ekome ya hze na oma e kpeli yɔɔjεae jo woma nanù i hwεni mohziyó (4x)</i>	We are mere observers of life on earth As death strikes in our midst What a terrible pain we suffer (4x)
Ch:	<i>e kpeli o ekpeli, jo gbe na e kpeli o ekpeli o e kpeli ya molikε jo gbe na  e kpeli ya molike (playing of musical instruments)</i>	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)

L.S:	<i>jo owa, jo owa hzahzε</i> <i>jo owa hzahzε</i> (2x)	We plead, we plead with you We plead with you (2x)
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**Dirge No. 20**

L.S:	<i>nweni a hza anjiana linɔngɔ</i>  <i>matumba yo ongolε jε endε</i> <i>i mo liεε</i> (2x)	A guest does not leave with his host's bed Mourners, let's get ready to go And escort him (2x)
L.S:	<i>i mo liεε</i>	To escort him
Ch:	<i>i mo liεε we ekome yeni</i> (2x)	To escort him back home (2x)
L.S:	<i>i hzɔhfε i moneya</i>	We are going to plant
Ch:	<i>i moneya manyεngi ma mbonji</i> <i>we ekome yeni</i>	We are going to plant flowers On his tomb

**Dirge No. 21**

L.S:	<i>jahwea ja ma monje na moto</i> <i>jahwea jolo e, jahwea jolo</i> (2x)  <i>ema wowa Mokosso mo Nwaka</i> <i>na Mola Njumbe</i> <i>jahwea jolo e, jahwea jolo</i>	The pact between earth and man The pact is overwhelming e, it is overwhelming (2x) It has taken Mokosso Nwaka And Mola Njumbe The pact is overwhelming e, it is overwhelming
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**Dirge No. 22**

L.S:	<i>o ngo musongi inoni</i> <i>i ae ngowo malo</i> <i>a tonga hfe tute</i> <i>a hfeli o likomba e</i> (2x) (playing of musical instruments)	That bird which is bearer of bad news It changes its voice It hoots It lives in the forest (2x) ( <i>playing of musical instruments</i> )
L.S:	<i>loka kololo</i>	The rabbit squeals
Ch:	<i>ya ya loka kololo</i>	Ya ya, the rabbit squeals
L.S:	<i>kololo</i>	It squeals
Ch:	<i>ya ya loka kololo</i>	Ya ya, the rabbit squeals

**Dirge No. 23**

L.S:	(imitating the sound of a chick) <i>hwie o hwie o (2x)</i>	(imitating the sound of a chick) Hwie o hwie o
Ch:	(imitating the sound of a hen and clapping) <i>wawa</i>	(imitating the sound of a hen and clapping) Wawa
L.S:	<i>hwie mɔ a nanga o woka</i>	So you are sleeping outside
Ch:	(clapping) <i>wawa</i>	(clapping) Wawa
L.S:	<i>mbahfe na nanga o ndawo</i>	I am sleeping in the house
Ch:	(clapping) <i>wawa</i>	(clapping) Wawa
L.S:	<i>hwie hwehzu hwe mole</i>	Foxes will eat the dead man
Ch:	(clapping) <i>wawa</i>	(clapping) Wawa
L.S:	<i>mbahfe hweto hwe mo le</i>	I shall also be eaten by rats.
Ch:	(clapping) <i>wawa</i>	(clapping) Wawa

**Dirge No. 24**

L.S:	<i>a ma hwe ndi hzangwa a hzú hwa ndingε</i> <i>a ma hwe ndi hzangwa a hzú</i> <i>hwa e ndingε malingo</i>	He was such a loving father He was a loving father
Ch:	<i>imo luwa oné e (Mola Ngolo)</i> (2x) (playing of musical instruments)	Where can we get him again (Mola Ngolo) (2x) (playing of musical instruments)
L.S:	<i>a ma hwe ndi hzangwa a hzu hwe eyole</i> <i>a ma hwe ndi hzangwa a hzu hwa ndingε</i>	He was our peace-loving father He was such a loving father
Ch:	<i>imo luwa oné e (2x)</i>	Where can we get him again (2x)
L.S:	<i>njɔngo lelu, njɔngo benge</i>	We have searched up north, We have searched down south
Ch:	<i>imo luwa oné e</i> (interjection) <i>naumεnε hzi wa o wa?</i> <i>imo luwa oné e?</i> (3x) (playing of musical instruments)	Where can we get him again (interjection) Is that something to talk about? Where can we get him? (3x) (playing of musical instruments)