

Eschatological Motifs and Socio-Spiritual Aspects of Urhobo Funeral Poetry

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Abstract

Dirges play an important role in the cultural life of Africans and many Africans feel man cannot approach God directly but through mediation. Dirges are songs, poems or dances performed on the death or dances performed on the death or during the funeral of someone with societal recognition. In form the Urhobo dirge may be eulogic, satiric, lamentative, condemnatory or incantatory. The Urhobo are a major ethnic group with a rich tradition in the Delta area of Southern Nigeria. Our consideration in this study is to highlight how the people respond to their spiritual world through the form of worship that is eternalised in different acts and sayings during a funeral. These acts may be formal or informal, regular or extempore, communal or individual, ritual or unceremonial through word or deed. The literary aspects of the recitations have also been examined.

Key Words: Urhobo, religious dirges, ancestral veneration, literary feature

Introduction

This paper examines the dirge in Urhobo as a context for expressing religious beliefs, myths and their artistic significance. A major feature of this dirge form is that its religious content consists of invocation and supplication and is sometimes eulogistic, using sacred and allusive imagery.

Urhobo people of the Delta State of Nigeria respond to their spiritual world in various ways. This response takes the form of worship that is eternalised in different acts and sayings during a funeral. These acts may be formal or informal, regular or extempore, communal or individual, ritual or unceremonial, through word or deed. (J.S. Mbiti 1969:58) It is a widespread feeling among many African peoples that man cannot approach God alone or directly but that he must do so through the mediation of special persons or other beings. (Mbiti, p.64)

Urhobo Objects of Worship

Religion is man's efforts to satisfy certain needs, including emotional and psychological ones, by establishing and maintaining cordial relations with the supernatural. (Y.Y. Nabofa in Otite 1980) The chief elements in Urhobo traditional religion are: the adoration of *Oghene* (Almighty God), and a recognition of *Edjo* and *Erhan* (divinities which they acknowledge as sons, daughters and messengers of *Oghene*. Some of these divinities could be regarded as personified attributes of *Oghene*. They act as intermediaries between God and man. The veneration of ancestors and belief in diverse spirits are other elements found in the structure of Urhobo traditional belief system. These elements are inter-related in one way or the other because they all draw their reality and power from the same source. It should be emphasised that their worship involves the performance of incantatory poetry. Incantatory poetry is poetry used to plead with a deity to accept a sacrifice so that the deity may favour the person offering the sacrifice. (Oladele Taiwo 1967:85) The Urhobo believe *Oghene* to be the *orovw'akpo*, the owner and the supreme controller of the whole universe. He is *Oghene* the supreme Deity, while *Edjo*, *Erhan* (divinities), ancestors and other spiritual forces, derive their existence and power from him only. They are all united under *Oghene*.

Oghene is called different names. These names are generic, attributive and praise-appellative. Whenever there is serious thunder and lightening, the Urhobo believe that *Oghene* is annoyed hence he is shouting down on all his creatures, including human beings. In order to calm his temper the Urhobo address Him, using his sacred names: *Oghene osonobruhwe*, *Oghene Ukpabe*, *Agbadagbru-ru biko* *Agbadagbru-ru*, *emọ wen he oto* (Your children are here below).

Also when an Urhobo is aggrieved, and wants to revenge with a charm, he solicits the assistance of *Oghene* by addressing him in the above sacred names and include *Edebere* which literally means 'the day is broken or torn into pieces'. The use of this name suggests the practice of sympathetic magic, because normally, a day is not something concrete, which could be broken into pieces. The name is used

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figuratively to mean that *Oghene* never sanctions evil practices, but when one is aggrieved, he is requested to set aside his mercy on that day in order that a wrong might be avenged. *Oghene* is also called *Ovwatan-ovware*, which means a being who could willingly give or bless without being questioned or challenged by any other power. (Onigu Otite 1980)

Direct worship of *Oghene* is expressed in at least, three different ways. When an Urhobo is confronted with an imminent danger he spontaneously cries to him for help with such an expression as *Oghene biko* that means O God I implore you. When he has been relieved of a serious danger he expresses his gratitude to *Oghene* by saying *akpevwe oghene* that is, thanks be to God. The people also worship God with *orhen* (white chalk). Every morning the head of the family or lineage takes a little quantity of *orhen*, keeps it in his left hand, and breaks it down into powder with the thumb and index finger and expresses his desires to God while looking up into the sky. He then blows the powdered chalk into the air. The person performs this ritual while standing at the entrance to his house. Kola nuts and drinks are also first offered to God before they are directed to the earth-goddess, divinities and ancestors and thereafter consumed by those present. If an Urhobo man feels that someone has oppressed him, he appeals to *Oghene* who is believed to be an impartial judge, to adjudicate between him and his opponent. Each Urhobo polity has its own divinities and it is believed that their powers are confined to the respective socio-political groups that acknowledge their reality. Although these divinities are known by different names in various parts of Urhobo land they perform identical functions. It is only their names and theogonies that differentiate them.

The Urhobo Concept of Man

Features of Urhobo traditional system include the doctrine of *Erhi* (man's spirit double) and predestination. The Urhobo believe in the duality of man, having both *Ugboma* (tangible body) and *Erhi* (spirit double). It is *Erhi* that declares man's destiny and pilots man toward the full realization of his destiny. It also ensures *Ufuoma* (total well-being) for man through its intercession with all the spiritual forces. According to (Y.Y. Nabofa 1980) man's destiny is ratified and sealed in *Eriwwin* (spiritual world) before *erhi* incarnates. As regards the final destiny of *erhi* after transition, the Urhobo believe that while the physical body decays *erhi* is indestructible and goes back to join other members of the family who are in the spiritual realm. The elaborate and symbolic burial rites are meant to prepare the departed *erhi* for a happy re-union with the ancestors and his other companions in the spiritual world.

Ancestral Veneration, Prayers and Sacrifices

There are four days in Urhobo week (*Okpo*): *Edewo*, *Ediruo*, *Eduhre* and *Edebi*. In Urhobo mythology, both *Edewo* and *Eduhre* are sacred days to the divinities, spirits and ancestors and most market business transactions are held on these days. Ancestors are venerated on *Edewo* while ancestresses are taken care of on *Eduhre*. Divinities, ancestors and spirits are believed to be to be very active in the forests and farmlands on these sacred days, therefore in order to avoid disturbing these subjects of worship people rarely go to their farms on these two sacred days.

In many African countries sacrifices and offerings are directed towards the living-dead as a symbol of fellowship and recognition that the departed are still members of their human families. (Idowu 1962:118) At funerals prayers are said and these are intended to secure peace for the living-dead. For example:

Nyovwe, Atotise
Osemo r'ode
Nyovwe Atotise
Wo j' ewevwen hwe vwee
Je me na bo to
J' ukpe she kevwe
J' emo avware vw' iroro
J' eya avware di' emiovwon
J' avware fe
J' oma fu' avware

Hear me, Atotise
 Great ancestor
 Hear me Atotise

Let me not be hungry
 Let me live till old age
 Let the year fall for my sake
 Let our children have wisdom
 Let our wives be productive
 Let us be wealthy
 Let us have peace

The image of the year falling in line 5, refers to a bumper harvest. When a farmer has bountiful yield, the year is said to have fallen for the sake of the farmer. In other words instead of losing to the year, which has been personified, the year has been conquered by the farmer's high yields. It should be noted there are no sacrifices without prayers. Sacrifices and offerings are the silent responses while prayers are the verbal responses. (Mbiti p.61)

Stages in Urhobo Burial Rites

Among the Urhobo, there are basically two stages in the burial rites of the deceased. The first consists of merely interring the remains, while the second, which is usually known as *erhuere* is the preparation of the deceased for acceptance by the ancestors. Significantly rites prepare the *erhi(soul)* of the deceased for presentation to his kin and fellow companions or family in the world beyond (*erivwin*). Before the interment, the *owaran* (eldest son of a deceased) prays and pleads on behalf of all other children. Special requests are made to the deceased especially those, who are believed to ensure peace and prosperity for all those left behind. Sometimes we have a tone of complaint and the ancestor is approached directly but the poetic effectiveness is created through the use of concrete and visual images from the everyday world. The speaker addresses the ancestor in whose honour the incantation is made. By the time the grave is ready all other side rituals performed during the wake must have been completed. The in-laws at this juncture come out for a ritual known as *oghwa eghorie* that is rolling the load or coffin. The belief is that the deceased would be carrying a lot of things home, therefore the in-laws must come forward to assist him in his job by helping to roll it from the spot and thus symbolically make it lighter. The in-laws fire guns while dancing. The coffin is lowered into the grave where it is received by two gravediggers. The gravediggers open it up and a complete maize cob is placed in the right hand of the deceased before it is finally sealed. The maize symbolises fullness of life. The deceased is urged that in his next incarnation he should be predestined in such a manner that his life should be accomplished or as full as the full cob of the maize he carried away. A bottle of gin is given to the two gravediggers for cleansing themselves before coming out of the grave. The in-laws and all other people present finally cover up the coffin with earth while highly poetic songs are sung or chanted:

Ukeke muke
E ukeke muke
Omote r' ovie r' erivwin
Okpore ehe
E ukeke muke

Ukeke muke
 Oh here is the indicator
 The daughter of the spiritual world
 She is now going home
 Here is the indicator

It should be noted that men perform the above dirge during interment, as they are the only ones culturally allowed to inter the dead.

Through dirges we are given an insight into Urhobo myth of how death came about. According to N.Y. Nabofa, the Urhobo traditional belief is that God *Oghene* created death as an impersonal force. It was not created purposely for man, but God's creatures brought it upon themselves, and various myths are narrated to explain its origin and purpose. The most popular one concerns the toad *oghwokpo* referred to in line 3 of the dirge below. From the myth, it is believed that originally *oghene* created man to live forever. His aim was that when a man grew old, he would regenerate by sloughing off his old skin like a snake, and assume the skin and vigour of a young man. This process was to be repeated, and so man was to live forever. As time went on, the population of human beings increased and the earth became overpopulated. There arose a controversy among the men and animals on earth on what should be done to control the teeming population. The dog argued strongly that man should live forever and suggested that *Oghene* should be implored to extend the frontiers of the earth to accommodate the increasing population. His intimate association with man prompted dog's stand. Consequently it never supported the final death of man, as that would deprive him of man's care.

After the dog, the toad arose and argued that “*oghwu okpo*” that is anyone who dies should go home finally. It gave its own reasons against man’s continued existence perpetually on earth. When there was a stalemate on the matter, both animals were designated to take their views to *Oghene* in heaven. It was agreed that the views of the one who arrived there first would be accepted, as *Oghene* has ratified the natural law about death after it. They started on their race to *Oghene* and Dog convinced that it would get to heaven before the toad, relaxed to feed itself.

It overfed itself and fell into a deep slumber. While still sleeping, the toad continued its race and got there first and said *ghwokpo* (he who dies should go home finally). Dog woke up later only to find that Toad had already arrived, delivered the message and that its opinion had been accepted as binding on all creatures. Thus death came to the world and in Urhobo language toad takes its name *oghwokpo* from this myth:

Dẹ dẹ dẹ
Dẹdẹ dẹ
Uho ho r’erivwin
Oghwu okpo
Uhun, uhun, dẹ dẹ dẹ

Travel Home Gently
 Travel home gently with dignity
 You ethereal body
 Any one who dies should go home finally
 Hmm hmm, gently, gently with dignity

There is the belief that until a person is accorded the full burial rites his spirit would not be admitted into the group of the ancestor or any other group it might want to belong in the "after world". Such *erhi* has its abode in *erhurhu*. (refuse dump)

What has been discussed so far is the general situation when an aged person dies a normal death. However, certain deaths are regarded as accursed hence victims of such deaths are not accorded full rites, because the victims' are not wished back into the family in their next incarnation. When people who suffer accursed deaths are treated with disdain, their souls would decide to go away from the family in their future incarnation.

One of these categories of death is that of a young person. This is regarded as a tragedy; consequently no elaborate burial rites accompany it. The body is merely interred without a coffin. In most cases a diviner is consulted to find the cause. In this case when the corpse is lowered into the grave, other things are included; a dog, dane-gun, a cutlass and a firebrand. Many other prayers and incantations are recited by the mourners at the graveside. Sometimes curses are issued against whoever must have been responsible for the untimely death. The incantations rendered are believed to be magically effective in manipulating culprits into confession.

Reincarnation and the Hereafter

According to Dr. Y. Nabofa the spiritual qualities of a deceased are believed to reincarnate but not his *erhi*, which remains in *erivwin* as an ancestor. In this following dirge this belief is spelt out:

Akpo vw’obaa
J’ adia akpo r’ ekpo
Otarhe r’ akpo fa oyovwi vre ona
Akpo na vw’ obaa

Life is without an end
 Let us live in this incarnation and go home
 To predestine better in the next life
 The world has no end

Great care is taken of a corpse because of the belief that if anything happens to it he would reincarnate in an ugly form and no family wants such a disfigured person.

There is a general consensus among the Urhobo that after death, the *erhi* passes into another world, which is known as *erivwin*. This view about the final destiny of the dead is not peculiar to the Urhobo, for it is also found among other African communities. There is the concept of a three-tier world, which has it that heaven, is up above and it is the abode of God while *erivwin*, the abode of the dead is under the earth. When the dead is buried, he goes there with both his physical body and *erhi*. The surface

of the earth is believed to be the abode of mortal men, nature spirits and the divinities. This may explain why libations are poured on the ground for the departed. Those who were accorded full burial rites are happily received into the folds of the ancestors. The Urhobo philosophy of life has it that when a person dies he joins the other members of his family in *erivwin*. All the elaborate funeral rites accorded the dead by the living members of the family are meant to demonstrate to the ancestors that the newly dead was a good person among them and as such they should accept him into their fold. The funeral rites could be likened to both passports and letters of recommendation.

Two separate interviews with Chief F.Ukuta of Okpe-Olomu and Chief A. Omoze of Afiesere in Ughelli, produce an insight into what really obtains in the ancestral world this cult. The major concern here is to examine the literary and sociological roles that the ancestors play in Urhobo dirges. To the Urhobo what happens to a person at death is a separation of the *erhi* from *ugboma*, which is buried. *Erhi* and the symbol of his personal achievement “*obo*” are never buried with *ugboma*, which remains under the earth. For the Urhobos therefore, *erivwin* is geographically here but separated from this visible sphere by a mystical cloud hence it is invisible to human beings. Between this sphere and *erivwin* is a gate known as *urhoro* (world of the dead through which the dead must pass after judgement). Unless the keeper of this gate opens it, one would not be admitted into the land of the dead. *Urhoro* thus plays a dual role in human life: through it *erhi* must pass and have scheme of life sealed while coming to life, and it must also pass through it to enjoy bliss with those who had gone before it, if it is adjudged to be worthy of it.

In Urhobo belief, man faces judgement before the ancestors both while still alive and in the hereafter. The general belief is that the ancestors and other spiritual beings put one on trial at *Urhoro*. Those who suffered bad death and died prematurely and consequently were not accorded proper burials are not allowed to pass through *Urhoro* while those who died normal deaths but have not been incorporated into the group of ancestors through full burial rites pass through *Urhoro* but do not immediately link up with any group but stay in *ogbo* (refuse dump).

Those who were accorded burial rites are happily received into the fold of the ancestors. The Urhobo philosophy of life has it that when a person dies he joins the other members of his family in *erivwin*. Therefore anyone who died and was received by the advanced party of the family is believed to be in a happy place in *erivwin* but for the door of *Urhoro* to be barred against a deceased is to be in perpetual hell. Mbiti (1969) also makes a similar observation in most parts of traditional Africa.

The Urhobo use the word *ega* "to serve" when they give offerings to pour libations for their ancestors. *Ega* also refers to a servant's service to his master in return for protection and payments. The filial services that the Urhobo is expected to render to his parents, whether still living or not are known as *ega* and it is quite different from the attitude of worship men assume when they go before God or the divinities. The position in Urhobo could be summed up in the general observation that J.A Driberg (1976:56) made about the Africans when he says:

No African prays to his dead grandfather anymore than he "prays" to his living father In both cases the words employed are the same: He asks as of right, or he beseeches, or he expostulates with or reprimands but he never uses in this context the words for "prayer" and "worship" which are strictly reserved for his religious dealings with the absolute power and the divinities. The Latin word *Pietas* probably best describes the attitude of Africans to their dead ancestors as to their living elders.

The ancestors are made up of the *Irhi* of the departed. They are looked upon as active members of the family, which is extended to *erivwin*. In Urhobo belief they are not far away and are in fact believed to be keenly watching over the affairs of the members of the families who are still living on the earth. Ancestral veneration features prominently in Urhobo dirges. Before an Urhobo takes a sip of gin, he will first of all pour out of it to his ancestors while offering spontaneous prayers and asking for guidance and blessing:

Iruo wɛn lo
Ose r' avware nyo vwe
Oke wo vw' akpo
Iruo we lori asa ne je
Wo vwo kpo ra
Iruo we j'ilo
Urukpe we ka sa vw' avware aboo
Urukpe na ka la vw' emeshare

Urukpe na ka la vw' emete

Your deeds shine

Our father hear us
When you were on earth
Your deeds shone everywhere
Now in the land of the dead
Your deeds still shine
Your light will not diminish in our time
We shall keep it alive with sons
We shall keep it alive with daughters

There is no marriage in Urhobo that is regarded as properly contracted without offering prayers to the ancestors. Children are specially requested of the ancestors. The ancestors are also propitiated on many other occasions such as sickness and constant communication is maintained with the dead:

Ogbaeki

1. *Or' ovwe owe r' Ughene*
2. *Nye arodovwe me*
3. *Wo j' ehun me je vwe fiaa*
4. *Wo j' ota ru nu me hwe vwee*
5. *Okpọlẹ*
6. *Ogbaeki odafe*
7. *Obo r' oma fu we*
8. *J' oma ji fu vwe*
9. *Mi n' erovwo r' otovwe*
10. *Wo j' ekwe ame r'obevwen kwe uwevwin mee*

Ogbaeki

1. Owner of fishing pond in Ughelli
2. Have mercy on me
3. Let not my waist disappoint me
4. Do not let the words of my mouth be my ruin
5. Okpole it is to you that I pray
6. Ogbaeki the wealthy one 7. As you rest in peace
8. Let me have a peaceful time
9. I pray let me live till old age
10. Make sure they do not throw the water of poverty into my house

In Urhobo land, the newborn is often treated with great reverence because it has only just come from the other sphere where it was in contact with the revered ancestors, where in a sense it was an ancestor. According to Chief T. Maduku of Ephron-Otor; (in an interview on December 23rd December 2002) so conscious is the Urhobo man of this perpetual cycle of life and death that some-times a very old man is referred to as a child who speaks *erivwin* (the incomprehensible). It is also because of this belief in the great cycle of birth, death, and rebirth that the idea of death holds no horror. Death is familiar because every one talks of the country from which he has come and has to return.

In summary, *erhi* came from *erivwin* to be born in the flesh; it must go back to *erivwin* at demise. While the body decomposes in the grave, the *erhi* leaves it there for *erivwin*. Where it goes and the group it joins depends upon how it comported itself while it was on earth. If it were incorporated in a body, which lived well, died well and was accorded funeral rites, the gates of *urhoro* would be thrown open for it to join other *irhi* who form the nucleus of the extended family in the world beyond. There they all act as ancestors to take care of the living.

Literary Features of Urhobo Religios Dirges

One of the words that occur most frequently in the dirge is the word *Ibaba* for father or grandfather and *Inene* for an old woman. Many lineages (*orua*) have a set of dirges that contain a reference to someone who might have been a common ancestor, a patriarch, a leader, a ruler or simply a lineage head. When an Urhobo person dies, a portion of the dirges to be sung for him is predetermined by the clan or lineage that he belongs like the Akan. (J.H.Nketia 1955:6) The lineage like roots grow covering a wide area in the soil (*awo tan*) as a person's legs spread like roots. The inclination of a mourner or dirge singer is to associate as many of the prominent members with the deceased as possible. In general, any ancestor or prominent member of a clan could be associated with a deceased no matter where he lived or died, for the ancestor is a unifying force integrating the descendants over Urhobo land. Usually a deceased has patrilineage and matrilineage and he is associated with ancestors in the dirge by

kinship terms from both sides. One reason for this is for the deceased to find his way to the ancestors in the underworld. An example is a dirge performed during a funeral ceremony in the Mamarho family of Ughelli on the 8th of May 1999:

Qmo re Mamarho

1. *Omo re Mamarho me re we*
2. *Omo r' Oko me re we*
3. *Omo re Zanugwa me re we*
3. Offspring of Zanugwa
4. *Obo r' ohwe adjalakpo me re we*
5. *Uvu n' egbedi me re we*
6. *Or' enieda dj' obo tee*
7. *Me re we*
8. *Wo j' avware vwoo me re we*
9. *Wo gho vwe avware me re we*

Offspring of Mamarho

1. Offspring of Mamarho we beseech you
2. Offspring of Oko, I beseech you
4. Hand that killed a lion I beseech you
5. My stomach is a drum I beseech you
6. Whom the witches could not touch
7. I beseech you
8. Do not abandon us I beseech you
9. Forgive us I beseech you

It is said that Zanugwa performed an incredible feat by killing a lion with bare hands. In the same vein, the liberal qualities of an ancestor, his wisdom, and wealth or in the case of women fertility are not overlooked. Idiosyncrasies of ancestors may be exposed, though not for the purpose of degrading them. Some dirges are not poetical but just state history or the genealogy of a family. Communication with the dead takes the form of conversational monologues patterned but not stereotyped and often consists of repetition. The structure of this may be in two parts; introducing the deceased and addressing the deceased:

- | | |
|----------------------------------|-----------------------------|
| 1. <i>Titi or Ibaba or Inene</i> | Introducing the deceased |
| 2. <i>Ose re avware</i> | ... Addressing the deceased |

Nketia observed a major characteristic of this type of dirge, which is applicable also to the Urhobo dirge. It is its unity of subject, for it usually refers to one deceased ancestor, particular attributes or accomplishment of the ancestors belonging to the deceased.¹³ Many dirges could be recited involving the same ancestor or the same deceased, but incorporating a different attribute or accomplishment in each one. A reciter speaks the way he would speak to living people:

Kpokere

1. *We*
2. *Kpokere gare re*
3. *Avware ni' obo re so roo*
4. *Avware ni' ohwo re oso roo*
5. *Oda die owe*
6. *Ophu de mu we*
7. *Wo gho vw' avware*
8. *Avware de ru cho vwo gho vw' avware*
9. *Wo j' oghẹ.*

Kpokere

1. You (such and such).
2. Kpokere is ill.
3. We do not know why;
4. We do not know whom is responsible.
5. If it is you.
6. If you are angry,
7. We ask for forgiveness.
8. If we have done wrong, pardon us.
9. Do not let him die.

In another dirge we have words that combine complaints, scolding, anger and at the same time appeals for forgiveness:

Esemọ

1. *Esemọ*
2. *Orua r' efa fe*
3. *J' aware ghwe*
4. *Die wo ruo na?*
5. *Die wo j' aware eno?*
6. *Avware re we wo ch' avwar' uko*

Esemo

1. Our ancestors
2. Other lineages are prospering
3. And our people are dying
4. Why are you doing this?
5. Why do you not look after us properly?
6. We appeal for your help

Another type of structure is the flexible one incorporating spontaneous creations of the individual mourner, her reflections and statements about the deceased. This may include also conventional features of allusions to ancestry and accomplishments, kinship terms, epithets and terms of endearment. Its flexible nature allows it to dwell at length on the qualities of the deceased.

As has been mentioned, repetition that is a general feature of Urhobo dirges, also abounds in the religious recitations. Lexico-structural repetition, partial or full repetition is the most widely used in this poetic form. In full repetition, all the words in the sentences are repeated; this in effect means the same idea is repeated as often as the sentences are repeated:

Emarẹ

1. *Esemo ne kpe r' emaren*
2. *Esemo ne kp' ewe r' ehun*
3. *Esemo ne kpe r' iye*
4. *Wo de k' avwar' ole*
5. *Avware kew' emaren*
6. *Wo de k' avwar' ewwe*
7. *Avware ke w' ewwe r' ehun*

Yam for the gods

1. Our ancestors asked for mashed yam
2. Our ancestors that asked for ritual goat
3. It is our ancestors that asked for sacrifice
4. If you provide us with yam
5. We will give you mashed yam
6. If you provide us with goat
7. We will give you waist goat

The need for the children of the deceased to get yam and goat to sacrifice to their ancestors is emphasized. A similar emphasis is shown in another recitation.

Ega

1. *Esemo*
2. *Avw' ewewwen hw' esemo kufia*
3. *Vwo ka ye aghe obaraa*
4. *Vwo ka ye aghe obaraa*
5. *Ej' aye egaa*
6. *Ej' ye egaa*

Veneration

1. Our dear ancestors
2. No one starves his ancestors and goes free
3. No one forbids them blood
4. No one forbids them blood
5. No one forbids them veneration
6. No one forbids them veneration

The fact that no one offends the ancestors is emphasised by semantic repetition. In partial repetition, all the words except a few are repeated:

Vw'aro t'emọ me

1. *Esemọ vw' arọ t' emọ me*
2. *Esemo vw' aro t' aye uvo*

3. *Esemo vw' aro t' ayẹ ason*
4. *Esemo vw' aro t' ayẹ ugbenu*
5. *Esemo vw' aro t' ayẹ ame*
6. *Esemo vw' aro t' ayẹ uwevwin*
7. *Esemo vw' aro t' ayẹ urhie*

Protect my children

1. My ancestors protect my children
2. My ancestors protect them by day
3. My ancestors protect them by night
4. My ancestors protect them on the land
5. My ancestors protect them on the sea
6. My ancestors protect them at home
7. My ancestors protect them

K'eghwichwe

1. *Esemo ide wo j' ivwreghen mre vwee*
2. *Esemo ide ru vwe k' udju*
3. *Esemo ide ji me ghworie k' ishawo*
4. *Esemo ide ji me vwo ma b' odi k' eghwichwe*
5. *Esemo ide ji mi gbrighi k' oriri*

Like a chameleon

1. Father of our fathers make me unseen to my enemies
2. Father of our fathers, make me like air
3. Father of our fathers make me slippery like *okro*
4. Father of our fathers make me blend with grass like chameleon
5. Our forefathers make me difficult to hold like *oriri*

The varied items constitute the various things the *ohwaran* (eldest son) wants the ancestors to protect his children against but the idea of protection is repeated. In “*K'eghwichwe*” the mourner prays his ancestors to make him invisible to the enemy and untouchable like the electric fish in a pond. The idea of invisibility is repeated in the form of similes. The effect of partial repetition can therefore be said to be two-fold, emphasis is created through an ideational re-iteration, and listing can be done at the same time.

Dirges to the ancestors are very personal unlike other types of dirges. The implication is that the mourner has to utter personal pronoun, the poetry he, for it is he who calls on the powers of his ancestors and directs them for his own ends. When he desires something for himself and his children, he appeals to the ancestors for his own benefit and often this includes his name and that of his children. . For example he associates good things he has with ancestral provision:

Esemo r'Ojakovo

1. *Esemo*
2. *Ose r' Ese avware*
3. *R' onie Ojakovo, Mudiaga, v' Akpodiete*
4. *Eki vwie aye*
5. *Re wo vwie n' ehun re*
6. *Re in' ehun we re*
7. *Or' ocha j' oro ma kpo*
8. *Me ga we*

Ojakovo's ancestors

1. My Ancestors
2. Father of our fathers
3. Who knew Ojakovo, Mudiaga, and Akpodiete
4. Ever before they were born
5. From whose bounty they were born
6. From whose bounty these children came
7. One who comes in and goes out. I worship you

In Urhobo as earlier stated the manner of addressing the living elder is the same as the one used in addressing the dead. A single set of principles regulates the relationship between junior and elder. Every one owes honour to his seniors be they elders or ancestors.

Oghifo

1. *Eh oghifo*
2. *J' ode r' omo vw' ogho*
3. *Emwuen ogho k' ohwo r' ofori*
4. *Ade k' avware udi avware reyo*
5. *Ade ta n' avware gbeha avware ji gbe*

6. *Ee oghifo***Oghifo**

1. Oh respect begets respect
2. A child's name should connote respect
3. Give honour to whom it is due
4. If offered drinks we will accept
5. If told to dance we will abide
6. Oh respect begets respect

Supplications to the ancestors may be in the form of prayer. In the direct prayer the reciter calls on the ancestors either in a preceding utterance, before saying the prayer next, or by beginning with the prayer and ending the utterance with the ancestor's name, for example:

Okpòle

1. *Okpòle*
2. *Wo ya ra na*
3. *Je mi vw' igho obo me guono re*
4. *Ago we kukpe kukpe*
5. *Avw' evwe ka ro vw' owe*
6. *Avw' evwe ka aro vw' owe*
7. *Avw' udi karo vw' owe*

Okpòle

1. Great yam
2. Now that you are gone
3. Let me have as much money as I want
4. You need yearly sacrifices
5. You need to be remembered with goat
6. You need to be remembered with cola
7. You need to be remembered with gin

Here the reciter first addresses the ancestor, then he follows it up with his prayer giving a good reason why the ancestor should grant his request. The same reciter piles up all his other requests by reciting prayers for addition to his family and protection against present and prospective enemies. The mourners of religious dirges use metaphorical language and apostrophise the ancestor in their petitions.

To sum up, ancestor worship and veneration loom large in Urhobo burial ceremonies. Ancestors are vested with mystical powers and authority. They retain a functional role in the world of the living, specifically in the life of living kinsmen. The relation of ancestors to their living kinsmen has been described as ambivalent, as being both punitive and benevolent. In general ancestral benevolence is assured through propitiation and sacrifice, neglect is believed to bring about punishment. Communication with the ancestor is in form of solo-recitation. Despite the advent of Christianity, the use of religious utterances during traditional funeral ceremonies has not diminished, especially among non-literate communities.

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