

Semioticization in Egbá Funeral Poetry

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Abstract

The Yorùbá believe that death is a physical separation from loved ones. The soul of the deceased still relates with members of the family and has power to prevent calamities from befalling others. Some can return to this same family through reincarnation. The Yorùbá believe death is powerful and sacred. Funeral rites are performed throughout Yorùbáland though the rituals go by different names from place to place and based on the social status of the deceased. This work is therefore a study of the nonverbal elements in oral performances that project burial ceremonies among the Yorùbá, the Ègbá people in particular. Through elaborate discussion, the paper describes and analyzes the signs, symbols, and objects used in Ègbá funeral poetry. Using the semiotics theory framework in the textual interpretation, the study gives a clear perception of Yorùbá worldview on death through Ègbá funeral poetry.

Keywords: semiotics, Ègbá, funeral poetry, dirge, culture

Introduction

Death is an inevitable end of every living soul. It is well-established in Yorùbá culture, thoughts beliefs and oral tradition. It is a debt owed by every human. No matter how long a man stays on earth, he will eventually die. Death is no respecter of any human being, young or old, male or female, black or white. Hence the inevitability and certitude of death has always captured man's imagination (Fahm, 2015, p. 4). It is a sad reality which everybody will have a taste of and it will come at the appointed time. It is in view of this that the Yorùbá are not afraid of death. The Yorùbá are only uncomfortable with the death of children or youth dying at an early age (Oyèbámijí, Oyèrindé, Àlàgbé & Adégbòwálé, 1991, p. 14). It is a thing of joy when someone dies at an old or ripe age in Yoruba society. Similarly Gbádébò (2017) asserts that "death of an aged person who has finished his assignment on earth and has lived a worthwhile life is not absurd," that "in fact it attracts no sympathy or tragedy (p. 177).

Mourning in Yoruba society involves well-patterned words and rhythmic structures in meaning and thought and at the same time have social, ritual and cultural implications. Words are specially selected and coined by orators or folklorists to drive home their point. The Ègbá people are highly intellectual and artistic. Their artistic prowess is exhibited during social and religious ceremonies. Some of the indigenous Ègbá folklore include: *ègè*, *orin ògòdó*, *orin àrùngbè*, *orin obó* and *ìgbálá*. Of their numerous oral poetries, *ìgbálá* is the only

funeral dirge native to Ègbáland. It should be noted that the Òwu are not Ègbá they only domiciled among them and they also do not mourn with *ìgbálá*.¹

Ìgbálá is a dirge performed for the obsequies of any person, male or female who attained old age before their demise. In the performance of *ìgbálá*, the singers and mourners dance round a wooden mortar, turned upside down. A local clay lamp (*fitílà*) is placed on the mortar, while another one is placed on the burial-place of the deceased. This is done in the compound of the deceased. At the end of the performance the clay lamp is removed; its flame will be put off by a child of the deceased and the mortar will be turned face-up. At the beginning of the next performance the position of the mortar is reverted and the lamp (*fitílà*) is lit. This rite continues until the last performance is done. The scene where the performance takes place is dominated by the wives in the family of the deceased with their friends, children, members of the deceased's family and friends. The women dance round the mortar while men join in singing the chorus to the dirge. The participants take turns introducing an *ìgbálá* song, though not in any particular order. Each dirge is sung three times while dancing around the mortar goes on. At the end of a song another is introduced until all the participants have taken their turn or have exhausted the songs in their repertoire or are simply fatigued.

The sets of people restricted from participating in *ìgbálá* includes: the parents of the deceased, members of family older than the deceased, wives of the deceased and his friends. It should be noted that, for an aged person who is succeeded by his parents, the performance of *ìgbálá* will not take place in the vicinity of the surviving parents. The performance will also not take place in the event of the death of a young person, youth or young adult. Yorùbá refers to such death as *òfò* (tragedy). In such an instance, there will not be an *ìgbálá* performance. The performance commences after the burial of the deceased person. The session will hold for seven consecutive days. After this period, it becomes taboo to continue singing *ìgbálá* for the particular deceased.

The inevitability of death has been a subject of research for so long and more work deserves to be done to have more illuminating insight into this universal phenomenon. This study is intended to examine and analyze the use of symbols and nonlinguistic elements in Egbá funeral poetry, *ìgbálá*. This will enable us explore some hidden information about nonlinguistic elements used in the poetry and translate them to comprehensible usage. Belief, myth, legend and taboos as expressed in the folk songs. This paper bases its structure on the semiotic theory due to the capabilities of the theory to account for the cultural elements and additional properties expressed through signs, colours, materials and prosodic elements. Data for this study were collected from primary sources through direct interview of Ègbá native speakers and practioners of oral poetry in Ègbáland.

A Brief Review of Yorùbá Funeral Poetry

Since the pioneering efforts of Beier and Gbàdàmósí (1959), many lovers and scholars of Yorùbá oral poetry have come into limelight. Some of these scholars include: Babalólá (1966, 1967, 1968), Abímbólá (1968), Ọlájubù (1970, 1974), Ọlátúnjí (1970, 1973, 1984), Olúkojú (1978), Ilésanmí (1985, 2004), Fánílólá (1991), Akínyemí (1997), Orímódògùnǵé (2004), Oyèşakin (2010). There are numerous articles and publications on Yorùbá oral poetry. Efforts have been made to classify Yorùbá oral poetry into different categories. One classification is funeral poetry. Funeral poetry is a dirge or elegy performed as rites of passage to usher in a deceased soul into the ancestral world.

Funeral rite is a custom practiced across the world but the ritual patterns differ. Yorùbá society at large has a way of mourning their dead: they maintain an unbroken relationship between the dead and the living. According to Bello (2016) the Yorùbá universe is a numinous composite of the tripartite worlds of the living, the dead, and the unborn (200). Funeral rite is an important aspect of culture in every society (Nyamadi, Aberinga & Nyamadi, 2015, p. 313). The course of mourning is an opportunity to talk about the deceased, focusing on their good qualities and characters in their lifetime. Friends and relations will come around to console and sympathize with the bereaved. During this period, people will offer help and comfort to the deceased family. This begins immediately after the person has passed on. This extends to carrying out domestic chore for the bereaved family, such as cooking meals, caring for children and most importantly helping with the funeral arrangements.

The analysis of Àjùwòṅ (1977) is a pioneering attempt at examining Yorùbá funeral poetry. The study examines *ìrèmòǵé* as a traditional poetry of aesthetic merit. The study reveals that *ìrèmòǵé* transmits unwritten moral laws which promote a peaceful, orderly state as well as strengthen human spiritual power in traditional Yorùbá society. The study covers Yorùbá towns like Ọyó, Ifẹ, Ọfà, Şakí, Iloràá, Şabẹẹ and Dahomey. He observes that since the deceased are believed to possess superhuman powers and can visit the living, to bless and protect them, the Yorùbá sing dirges to honour, praise and remind them not to forget to visit and bless their offspring. His contribution centers on the hunters' dirge, making general statements that *ìrèmòǵé* is the Yorùbá word for the hunters' funeral elegy. This is not so, as some Yorùbá communities have a separate name for it.² Furthermore, his assertion that there is no stipulated time and place of performance in other dirges is erroneous as that is not peculiar to *ìrèmòǵé* alone.

Another scholar who renders a scholarly account of Yorùbá funeral poetry is Ọlášǵí (1983), who concentrates on three types of poetry in Ègbáland. His focus is on *ìgbálá*, *orin àrùngbè* and *ègè*. His concern is on the prospect of the survival of the oral poetry and he also identifies some problems in the preservation of the poetries. To the best of our knowledge, he is the first scholar to dis-

cuss the performance of *ìgbálá*, but he does not analyze the symbolic elements used in *ìgbálá*. His work is subjected to stylistics analyses. Besides, the culture of society changes over time, otherwise the societal development will be static. It is therefore, necessary, to explore the nonlinguistic elements used in the performance of *ìgbálá*.

Àjùwọ̀n (1989) gives a succinct account of the performance of *ògbèrè* among the Ọ̀yọ́ people and the Ìgbómìnà of Kwara. *Ògbèrè* is a chant of lament for a deceased old man or woman. The performance of this dirge is the exclusive responsibility of women. It is used to show love to the departed, they praise the deceased and emphasis pathos of the loss as it affects the family. This lasts seven days, from nightfall till daybreak. He notes that dirge in Odò-Ọ̀tìn is referred to as *ọ̀fún*; it is *ìgbálá* in Abẹ̀òkúta, *erírí* or *orírí* in Èkítì, and *ohùnegúngún* in Òndó town. He goes further to compare *ohùnegúngún* with *ògbèrè*. He also account for nonverbal elements in the performance of *Ògbèrè* but he does not subject them to any rigorous analysis. To bring out the hidden meanings of the items identified, he mentions *ìgbálá*, the focus of this paper, as funeral poetry in Abẹ̀òkúta. This is also an erroneous statement. Abẹ̀òkúta is the city that hosts three major Yorùbá ethnic groups: the Ègbás, Ọ̀wu and Yewa (Ìbaràá). *Ìgbálá* is a funeral poetry exclusive to the Ègbá people.

In his own contribution to the study of Yorùbá funeral poetry, Ọ̀jọ́ (2002), examines the final rite performed to mourn a herbalist, emphasizing the fact that *Ìlẹ̀kú Àwo* is a way of invoking the spirit of a deceased *babaláwo* to come and witness the rites performed for him by his co-*babaláwo* and his children. The funeral rite is a must and it is performed for the highly respectable, responsible, honest, famous and well-behaved *babaláwo* that died in Yorùbá society. He examines the content and performance of the poetry, using semiotics and formalism theories to analyze Ifá corpus relevant to the study. He enumerates six taboos that are attached to the performance. He claims that casting out the soul of the deceased *babaláwo* will enable him join his mates in the same faith in heaven, while his children and family deceased can rest assured that their progenitor is at peace and they can seek his help when the need arises.

Àşáwálé's (2012) analysis is based on the elegy among the Kaba people. It delves into the people's worldview about death and also looks at the relationship between the dead and the living. He identifies four types of elegy among the Kaba—*erin ọ̀mọ́wá*, *erin ẹ̀bọ̀ra*, *erin ọ̀gún* and *erin eringbo*. He subjects his analysis to sociological framework and establishes social stratification in the types of funeral rite of passage given to the deceased in the community.

Semiotics in Egbá Funeral Poetry

This study adopts semiotics theory in analyzing the nonverbal elements in the performance of Ègbá funeral poetry – *ìgbálá*. Seebeok (2001) defines semiotics as the instinctive capacity of all living organism to produce and understand

signs (p. 15). Semiotics is a communication/signification theory that investigates sign systems that human beings and animal use to convey feelings, emotions, thoughts, ideas and ideologies (Adésànyà, 2014:48). It examines the ways the linguistic and nonlinguistic objects and behavior operate symbolically to “tell” us something (Tyson, 2006, p. 216). Semiotics entails the study of signs process. It is a field of study concerned with sound generated in human society and human behavior. Semiotic practice delves into the study of signs and symbols as a significant part of communications. It applies structuralist insights to the study of what it calls sign system. Semiotics is concerned with everything that can be taken as sign (Eco, 1976, p. 7). Semiotics studies signs with respect to their functioning in sign process within sign system (Posner, 2004, p. 56). Also, semiotics refers to anything which can significantly substitute for something else. It deals with meaning-making, the study of sign process and meaningful communication. Each sign is made up of a “signifier,” a sound-image or its graphic equivalent, and a “signified,” the concept of meaning (Eagleton 1996, p. 83).

The smallest unit of analysis in Saussure’s semiology is the sign, made up of a signifier or sensory pattern and a signified, the concept elicited in the mind by the signifier. Saussure emphasizes that the signifier does not constitute a sign until it is interpreted. He proposes a dyadic semiotic (sign/syntax, sign/semantics); it is conceived as philosophical logic studied in terms of signs that are not always linguistic or artificial. A symbol is a sign in which the relationship between the signifier and signified is neither natural nor necessary but arbitrary; that is, decided on by the agreement of some group (Tyson, 2006, p. 218).

The field of semiotics covers a wide range of fields; the subfield of semiotics includes biosemiotics, cognitive semiotics, computational semiotics, social semiotics, zoosemiotics, and cultural semiotics. Culture being the totality of belief of a society, includes thought, art, music and other symbolic products. Ilésanmí (2004) asserts that “culture is life in all its totality; it is all-embracing since it includes all the ramified aspects of human endeavours (p14). Posner (2004) traces the use of cultural semiotics to Ernst Cassirer (1923-29), who claims that certain kinds of sign system can be described in “symbolic forms,” while the symbolic forms of a society constitute its culture (p56). Orímòdògùnjé (2014) affirms that “the Yorùbá have symbolized all their activities in all human endeavours (p76).

Cultural Semiotics is research field with semiotics that attempts to define culture from a semiotic perspective and as a type of symbolic activity, creation of signs and a way of giving meaning to everything. The context of usage of any given object determines the meaning in Yorùbá tradition. Considering culture as a system of symbols or meaning, Òkékándé (2017) opines that “cultural semiotics is concerned with all that is understood about different objects, symbols and signs in a given culture. He argues further that “different meanings

are associated with all that is embedded in a culture” (p. 14). This study adopts cultural semiotics framework, it is evident that signs and symbols are products of the culture of a given society: the concern of cultural semiotics is to translate the symbols within the context of the society.

Mortar (*odó*) as a nonverbal object in Ègbá funeral poetry

The origin of mortar and pestle is as old as human existence, forming the first implements of production of the early ages. Its art of carving is not specific to a tribe but cuts across the nation, and, however, negligible differences are only noted on the pestle which is a complement of the main mortar. Beside the mortar used for food production, there are others used in the shrine—“Sango’s mortar” (Odó Şàngó). Mortar is considered a deity among the Ègbá³ and there are a number of myth and taboos attached to the use of mortars generally. This taboo is different from culture to culture. The use of mortar is symbolic in Ègbá funeral poetry. It depicts the Yorùbá worldview about the soul. It is believed that the deceased is in their midst while performance is on. The mortar is placed at the center for him to sit comfortably and observe the performance. The mortar signifies different meanings in the performance of *ìgbálá*; it is believed that the ghost of the deceased will witness how members of the family perform the burial ceremony. His presence is also to assess their likely behavior after his departure and, more importantly, to listen to their comments and observe their general disposition towards his friends, colleagues and neighbors. This establishes the Yorùbá belief that the soul of the deceased does not leave his people. Special respect is accorded the soul based on the personality, status and the social status of the person being mourned. Furthermore, for a deceased who is an initiate, it is the same mortar used during his initiation into the cult while he was alive that is used during the performance of *ìgbálá*.⁴ This signifies separation between him and members of his cult, it also serves as a reminder that their turn to take leave of this material world will eventually come.

Lamp (*àtùpà/fitílà*) as a nonverbal object

Clay lamps are another item used in the performance of *ìgbálá*. It is an important item in traditional worship in Nigeria. Oil lamp as well as its light is also an important ritualistic article across religions and different cultures of the world. References to lamp also abound in Islam, Judaism, Hindu and Christianity religions (Qur’an 24:35; Psalms 119:105). All the above verses signify the relevance and importance of lamp in religions and spiritual settings. Oil lamps are commonly used in Hindu temples as well as in home shrines. There is at least one lamp in each shrine, and the main shrine may contain several.⁵

Lamp is an important instrument in traditional Yorùbá society. Like every other cultural setting, the lamp has domestic and spiritual usages. In the spiritual context, it is used as one of the instrument during induction into traditional religious society. Hence, the saying *Kò sí awo tá à ñ şe lókùnkùn* (“An ini-

tiatè is not inducted in the dark”).⁶ This axiom signifies that cultic activities are done in an illuminated environment and the lamp plays a significant role since most rituals are conducted late in the evening. These lamps are fuelled using either palm oil or shea butter. It is part of traditional practice that the hair on the head of a fresh inductee into an esoteric cult is shorn clean; this is done at night while oil lamp is lit. The use of this item during *ìgbálá* performance is to symbolize the ancestral position assumed by the deceased. Also, it is used to illuminate the venue of the performance, so that the participant can see each other clearly and for the deceased to be able to have a full glimpse of the event as it unfolds. The clay lamp is of different sizes and shapes,⁶ with the size used dependent on the numbers of cults the deceased is affiliated and associated with while alive.

Liquor (*otí*) as a nonverbal object in *ìgbálá*

Alcohol is used to invoke the ancestral spirits, so that the divinity/deity can give them the necessary support during the performance. It is used in all social ceremonies among the Yorùbá. In rites of passage, alcohol is an important item, it is very important in all social ceremonies—namings, marriages, chieftaincy and funeral. It serves to energize for the *ìgbálá* singers, stabilize the performers and aid the memory (Òjò, 2002, p. 78). Alcohol symbolizes unity and cohesion among the *ìgbálá* singers. They drink from the same cup—an oath of unity and trust. More so, alcohol is also used to reduce the effects of the spirit being invoked in order to shield the noninitiate witnessing the performance. Ancestors, spirits and deities play an active role in the daily lives of the living. Alcohol helps link the physical and spiritual worlds, ensuring the natural progression of the spirit of the deceased.

Cotton wool (*òwú òtùtù/akese*) in *ìgbálá*

The local cotton wool is another important item used in Ègbá funeral poetry. The plant is native to Yorùbáland and is grown in modern-day Abèòkúta, cultivated to produce cotton fiber for clothing. The root bark, the inner bark, the cotton and the seeds are used as herbal remedies in Yorùbá society; the root bark is used for numerous domestic and medical conditions. That is why, apart from planting it for commercial purpose on farmlands, it is also planted at home to meet urgent medical needs. Cotton wool is used with oil or shea butter to illuminate the venue of the performance. It serves as a fueling wick that lights the lamp. The use of cotton is deliberate; it is an object of command in Yorùbá traditional belief. Whatever is said during the performance shall come to pass. This cotton signifies the charge of their spiritual power and empowers them with authority; it must therefore be readily available before *ìgbálá* performance can take place.

Money (owó) in ìgbálá

This is another important item used in the performance of Ègbá funeral poetry. Money is a nonnegotiable, indispensable commodity in every person's life. It is celebrated, respected and yearned for. In Yorùbá worldview, money is an important resource everybody must possess, which is why it is one of the items used as supplicant during naming ceremonies in traditional Yorùbá society. Money is used to depict the social status of the deceased. Death and burial receive important attention. The burial given to a corpse is a function of the social and economic status of the children of the deceased, who believe their father has attained an elevated spiritual position, and will be with them always, even though they cannot see him. They spend money during *ìgbálá* performance to reinforce the reality of their father's death and express the love they have for their father. It is also a means of appreciation of the performers; the performance will spur the children into a spending/money-spraying spree at intervals, which motivates the performers to do more. The children do this to show their love for their father whom they feel is witnessing all they are doing, and spare them ancestral wrath. These activities invoke prayers and eulogies from friends and families present at the event.

Grave (sàrèè) in Ègbá funeral poetry

Yorùbá bury their dead in graves. The graveyard is usually within the compound of the family or inside the room of the deceased. It is not in Yorùbá traditional practice to bury at the cemetery. It is common among Ifá priests to say thus:

Báwobá kú, á sunlé / Bímòlè kú, á sùnta / Ìgbàgbò ò rìbìsùn, ó dígbó réré.

[Initiates are buried in their house / While Muslims are buried outside their house / A Christian believer is buried at the cemetery.]

The above excerpt is usually sung by Ifá practitioners and it is apt in this regard. Yorùbá maintain a strong relationship and reverence for the departed and ancestors. That is why they bury the body of their corpse where they will be easily accessible whenever there is need for them to invoke their spirit. The grave is usually a spot for indigenous cultural rites like prayer, rituals and oath-taking. The grave is given a sacred status because the ancestors are believed to have their own sphere of influence and the living go there for solutions to their problems. The grave is also important in the performance of *ìgbálá*, which takes place close to the deceased's grave, symbolizing the physical place of rest of the deceased.

Seating arrangement at ìgbálá

Mat is also used in the performance of *ìgbálá* to accommodate the audience. The performance of *ìgbálá* brings together people from different walks of life related to the deceased. This activity is a uniting force, as people swallow their

ego to honour the deceased by offering support to the family. The mat spread round the venue of the performance is a symbol of unity and also provides the required comfort for the participant throughout the performance. In traditional Ègbá society all the participants sit on raffia mat close to the grave of the deceased. More so, the sitting arrangement is cyclic, while the mortar turned upside-down at the center of the performance signifies the presence of the spirit of the deceased.

Conclusion

Ègbá funeral poetry—*ìgbálá*—is a dirge rendered as part of rites of passage to usher dead people into the ancestral world. We have noted that nonlinguistic elements in the poetry connote meaning which can aid our understanding of Ègbá worldview on death. The concrete objects used in the performance of the oral poetry convey a huge message which requires explicit explanation to elicit the information therein. We have been able to decode the implied meanings in relation to the belief and tradition of the Ègbá using them. A symbol does not stand on its own, all the identified objects signify the presence of an ancestral object, by creating linkages between what is seen and unseen during the performance. Those objects are therefore transcendental. This goes along with the assertion of Tyson (2006) that “. . . the world consists of two fundamental levels—one visible, the other invisible (p10). It is in this regards that the study differs from the previous studies. This dirge constitutes a rich verbal art, deserving of scholarship attention. The major contribution of this study is the symbolic analyses of objects used in Ègbá funeral elegy.

NOTES

1. Alàgbà Oládípò Yémiítàn explained that the Òwu people are different from the Ègbá, although they live together in Abẹ̀òkúta. He stated further that *ègè* is the poetry of the Òwu people; they chant *ègè* in all of their social ceremonies including funerals. Interview conducted Dec. 20, 2016.
2. Chief Omówùnmi Adésànyà, the Ajagùnà of Odòràgùnsìn land, said that hunters' funeral dirge is known as *àgèrè* among the Ìjẹ̀bú of Odòràgùnsìn. Interviewed Sept. 6, 2018.
3. Ìyá Òdṣà Olúmọ mentioned that the mortar is not just an item but is considered a deity in Ègbáland, an important instrument used by all esoteric cults in Ègbáland. Interviewed on March 10, 2018.
4. Chief Moruf Àjàní Dípẹ̀lú, the Olúwo-Ìfá, Òkè-Sarí, Abẹ̀òkúta, explained how important the clay is, and how its usefulness cuts across all religions.
5. Chief Moruf Àjàní Dípẹ̀lú, the Olúwo-Ìfá of Òkè-Sarí rendered the Òwònrìn Ológbón corpus as thus:

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Òwònrín gbangba / Ìwòrì gbangba / A díá fún Ológèrègbé / Tó ti ní
şawo è ní gbangba / Kí logèdèrègbé ní şawo / Gbangba lògèdèrègbé
ní şawo.

6. Chief Dípèolú explained that the sizes and eyes of the clay lamp varies ranging from one face lamp to 21. The 21-face lamp (*şòrìşàpé*) is for those who are initiated into all esoteric cults.

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