

**REMARKS ON J. H. NKETIA'S
FUNERAL DIRGES OF THE AKAN PEOPLE**

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Abstract

J. H. Kwabena Nketiah's Funeral Dirges of the Akan People (1955) is undoubtedly one of the classics among studies devoted to African oral poetry. However, it has received little comment and continues to be inaccessible to students and teachers of oral literature. The purpose of this essay is to introduce the monograph and its subject to college students and lecturers. For purposes of classification, we put the poems in the class of elegies and justify this in the first part of the essay. The second part explores some of the features of the verse form. The final part discusses the theme of life, growth and procreation in the family and the choice of imagery in expressing it.

The decision by the Ghana Academy of Arts and Sciences to reissue Nketia's *Funeral Dirges of the Akan People* (1955) and similar rare and out-of-print publications on the arts and cultures of Ghana is one of the boldest it has taken towards fulfilling two of its objectives, namely, (i) to promote the study, extension and dissemination of knowledge of the arts and sciences; and (ii) to recognize outstanding contributions to the advancement of the arts and sciences. Nketia's *Funeral Dirges* is, by any standard, the most detailed and comprehensive study of the dirge as a literary genre in oral expression in Africa to date; but although it was the first of its kind to be published in Africa it received little publicity and comment in the scholarly world of African studies for decades. For example, it is not mentioned at all by Bascom (1964) in his bibliographical survey of African literature (Finnegan, 1970, 45, fn2). This gap is all the more difficult to explain considering that Bascom's work appeared almost a whole decade after the *Funeral Dirges* was published.

Even now, the book continues to remain difficult, if not impossible, to lay hands on in Africa. This is a fact that anyone who has attempted to introduce or teach a course on oral literature in our universities would attest to. One probable reason for this is that until relatively recently there

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has been too little interest shown in the Ghanaian oral arts and indigenous literatures in the colleges and universities to demand subsequent reprints of the book and others in its class, although, admittedly, a number of signs of African Studies as a scholarly engagement were beginning to appear by the FIFTIES when the *Dirges* was published.

One of the main causes of the absence of scholarly interest in the oral arts in Africa, in the main, is incipient in nineteenth-century views and perceptions of Africa as a cultural and imaginative artistic area. Many of these persisted into the FIFTIES when the *Funeral Dirges* was being written. For several years after the turn of the century the idea of “oral” literature sounded bizarre and grotesque in the ears of some European and African educationists who exercised influence on the form and content of academic curricula. To such influential men and women creative literature consisted of objects which either appeared in print or whose authorship could be attributed to identifiable individuals. All other literary compositions expressed orally were artistically crude and, at best, simple, and were interesting only in so far as they were some of man’s mental creations designed to serve practical or specified social functions. Such pieces, it was held, were products of a communal psyche and had no authors. Their worth was to be judged in relation to the highly imaginative pieces of writing in European languages taught in our universities.

In spite of advances in African Studies as a scholarly sub-field in the humanities during the first quarter of the last century, oral literature continued to suffer some of the worst prejudices of Darwinist and other evolutionist theories of development. According to these perceptions, imaginative compositions which were realized orally were at primitive stages of development. These and similar ideas of the nineteenth century were, of course, speculative. Nevertheless, they were given scientific validation by the theory of evolution. Some of them persist today and continue to dog the arts and humanities in Africa in general. In a climate as neutral in support of the African arts as ours it must have taken some purposefulness on Nketia’s part to produce research work of the kind as deep and comprehensive in scope as found in the *Funeral Dirges*.

Since the publication of the *Funeral Dirges* (and, possibly, before then), Nketia has collected and published a large number of Akan texts of literary value. Some of these, notably *Apaee*, *Abɔfodwom* and *Anwensem*, bear Akan titles. Why the book under discussion bears an English title

may well be due to the fact that, at least in content and mood, the poems in it have a lot in common with one of the world's earliest and better-known literary genres, elegiac poetry. From a typological point of view, the dirge belongs to a tradition of songs and poems referred to as the elegy or lament. Admittedly, this is a crass and over-generalized classification. It is, nonetheless, a useful one. Nketia himself makes a subtle but valid distinction between the dirge and the lament in Akan. We shall, for purposes of this discussion, ignore this distinction.

The word *dirge* derives from the Latin imperative form, *dirige*, of the verb *dirigere*, meaning to “lead” or “direct”. The imperative *dirige* was the first word of an antiphon in the Office of the Dead adapted from Psalm 5:8: “**Lead me, O Lord, in your righteousness because of my enemies – make straight your way before me**”. It changed in form in the Middle English period to *dirge*.

The word “*dirge*” in present-day English refers to a class of poems which have come to be known as the elegy or lament. The elegy is a poem or song expressing sorrow, especially for a person who is dead. It was also sometimes used to refer to any reflective or pensive poetic composition expressing the poet's nostalgia or melancholy mood. Its denotation included certain types of love poem, especially those which expressed a mood of sentimental longing, anguish or forlornness of hope. In classical literature the elegy was simply any poem which was written in the elegiac metrical form, not necessarily restricted to subject matter. Since classical times the elegy has developed varying strands in Europe with different degrees of emphasis on metrical form and content. In English literary tradition, for example, two main strands may be isolated, represented by the pastoral elegy and the Grave Yard School. The best example of the former is Milton's *Lycidas* and of the latter, Thomas Gray's *An Elegy Written in a Country Church Yard*.

If one could extend the application of the word *elegy*, its most important instantiations in Africa are those songs and poems performed at funeral celebrations by professional and non-professional singers. They include Islamist songs sung by Hausa Mallams. In some traditions in Africa the singing may be accompanied by drumming, which recalls Greek times when the elegy was chanted to the accompaniment of the flute. The poems in the *Funeral Dirges* are elegiac in tone and, for classificatory purposes, are elegies, as all dirges are. The obvious link between the Akan Dirge

as represented in Nketia's volume and other traditions of elegiac poetry is the subject matter of Death. Each of the poems was composed and sung in mourning and expresses deep sorrow, melancholy and pain for the loss of a dear one. None of them, however, expresses nostalgia, or erotic love as some elegies do in the sentimental sense, or a mood of utter hopelessness associated with some categories of amorous love typical of elegies of some European traditions.

A distinctive feature of the Akan dirge which must be stressed is the way death is viewed and, perhaps more important, the manner of expression of grief resulting from the event. Restraint and control in the selection of images are features which cannot escape notice when reading these poems. Death causes pain but it is not presented as a frightful, gloomy and ghoulish event. Indeed, the word death is rarely mentioned in the poems. They contain none of the chilling imagery and horrifying pictures of death painted, for example, by Claudio in Shakespeare's *Measure for Measure* when he hears that his sister Isabella has to yield to Angelo's sexual pleasure in order for him to be freed:

Aye to die.....and go we know not where

To be *in cold obstruction and rot*

This sensible motion to become

A kneaded clod and the delighted spirit

To *bathe in fiery floods* or to reside

In thrilling regions of thick-ribbed ice.

(3, 1, 117-125)

(All italics are mine)

These are frightening images of death expressed in physical language, clear examples of which are in italics. By contrast, consider the following lines from the *Funeral Dirges of Akan* (p.56)

- a) *Nana Akuamoa*
- b) *Ntene wo nsa*
- c) *Na yemfa mma wo akyirikyiri a*
- d) *Na yede rema wo benkyee?*

- e) *Twum Akyaaboa Sɛntrɛ*
 - f) *Akuamoa koobi nan firi*
 - g) *Dwabɛn Asamannya*
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- a) Grand Sire Akuamoa
 - b) Do not stretch forth your hand
 - c) If they would not give it to you when far away
 - d) Would they give it to you when close at hand?
 - e) *Twum Akyaaboa Sɛntrɛ*
 - f) Grandchild of Akuamoa koobi hails from
 - g) Asamannya in Dwabɛn

These lines are typical in mood of the poems in this volume. They neither mention death directly nor proclaim philosophical claims or beliefs about death. Yet the situation presented by them, including the names of departed ancestors, their ancestral homes of origin and the events associated with their lives evoke in the listener the desired emotional response. They are an objective way of expressing emotions. This attitude to death reflects a view of the Akan people of the universe and their belief in an abiding bond between the two worlds of the living and of the departed ancestors. Death causes pain and grief, it is true; but it also marks a hopeful transition from one abode to another of the same family and clan members. The dirge singer may be grief-stricken, but her temporal and spiritual life does not come to grief. On the contrary, she is confident in the hope of a similar transitional journey which will soon unite her, the deceased and the ancestral spirits beyond.

As explained by Nketia in the *Introduction*, there is a spiritual world built on the same pattern as the world inhabited by the mourners of the deceased, and to which the deceased proceeds to join his or her spiritual ancestors. The ancestors of the invisible world continue to maintain familial ties with the upper world of the living, and the living, for their part, are anxious to maintain good kinship relations with the dead, to identify themselves with them and to be seen to rely on them for favours (page 6). This belief in the existence of a world of ancestral spirits finds expression in a variety of day-to-day activities and rituals. But it also inspires the mood, content and style of the poetry, especially the selection of vocabulary and imagery. Every line alludes to this world view. The

chants are as much in celebration of lives of ancestral kin and invisible ties as of the world of the living and deceased in transition.

II

The generally accepted criterion for defining poetic form in both literature and preliterate cultures is the presence of meter in one form or another. In poetry one looks and listens for meter and rhythmic variation. It is mainly these that give poetry its form. Meter may be described as the recurrence in verse of regular or nearly regular units of pattern which establish the rhythm of poetry. Four main types of meter have been distinguished in discussions of the subject. (1) *Quantitative*, in which the resulting rhythm is realized through metrical units of successive bits of alternating short and long syllables, as in Greek and Latin poetry. (2) *Accentual* meter, which yields rhythmic patterns in which stressed syllables count as the basic units, as in Old English verse and the “sprung” rhythm of the poetry of Hopkins. (3) *Syllabic*, in which the resulting rhythm is characterized by a fixed number of syllables in a line, as in French poetry and the Japanese haiku. (4) *Accentual syllabic*, in which the rhythm of the verse is characterized by a fixed number of stressed syllables. It is worthy of note that all these metrical systems belong to traditions in which poetry is read aloud or silently from the printed page. Secondly, the typographical line is the maximum unit containing other smaller units like the foot, the syllable and the phonological segment.

It is natural for students of literature trained in these traditions to look for indications of metrical patterns found in written literature when they approach African oral compositions like the dirge. The absence of these indications sometimes leads to frustration. Many have, as a result, concluded that oral poetry has no meter. Lestrade (1937), for example, claims that “the borderline between [prose and poetry] is extremely difficult to ascertain and define while the verse technique, in so far as verse can be separated from prose, is extremely free and “unmechanical” (see Finnegan, *Ibid* 75). By “unmechanical” Lestrade implies that there is absence from verses of units like the foot and regular successions of quantitative and/or accentual syllables. It is clear, however, that no-one who looks for these features in the versification of the dirges in this book will find them. It must also be stressed that the dirge has its own metrical systems if one looks for them. Without mentioning the word meter,

Nketia describes it in clear terms as follows:

Linear units may be felt to contain one or more strong beats corresponding to the beat in the musical phrase. But the distribution of beats is not always even. As far as the dirge piece goes, the order of the syllables in linear units follows no restricted patterns for the piece as a whole in the particulars mentioned below. Syllabic stress is unimportant and is not utilized in the arrangement of syllables (p.77).

The basic metrical units of the dirge are what Nketia calls linear units. These are derived largely from syntactic structures bounded by a variety of junctural and non-junctural phenomena. At the speech level they are utterance chunks and are structurally related to one another in fairly definable ways. With the exception of the guidelines given by Nketia on “linear units” employed in the composition of the verses in this book, there has been no systematic study, to date, of Akan verse structures. This is difficult to explain, considering that a large enough body of Akan linguistic analysis has been produced within the last five decades to provide a basis for studies of speech rhythm. In view of my own disagreement with some of the strictures by various scholars on the structure of oral poetry and the claim of absence of any metrical system to be found in it, I shall attempt a preliminary analysis of the Akan dirge based on my knowledge of the structure of the language. The comments below are to be taken as tentative. I assume that ordinary conversation has its own rhythmic patterns but these are not completely divorced from those of verse. Verse differs from non-verse in having an underlying metre. I assume further that the units of metre correspond to chunks larger than the foot or syllable and are categorisable into a relatively small number of abstract units. The major syntactic units which occur in the dirge are the various kinds of subordinate clause of which the commonest are the result of relativization, topicalisation and focus-marking, clefting and pseudo-clefting, and verb serialization. In addition, some phrase-types receive prominence in the dirge, especially possessive constructions headed by semantic kinship nouns and address terms. The possessive constructions appear as recursive structures with cumulative rhythmic effect.

Examination of syntactic units shows that each has a characteristic speech rhythm, and when carried over into verse these syntax-tied rhythms have a heightened effect on the ear. The abstract level of syntactic units

and the concrete phonetic level of segments and rhythm are mediated by a level of metrical structures consisting of units of measure, a term I have borrowed from Leech (1969). Every measure is marked by one strong beat and is separated from the preceding and following one by a juncture or by one of the non-inflected, semantically-empty grammatical particles including *ee*, *oo*, *ε* and *ɔ*. The intervening segmental material between beats is interpreted by the ear as being in some sense of equal duration. It is this perception of “equal-timeness” between beats (Leech, *Ibid*) that gives the listener a sense of rhythmic movement. The notion of isochronism is not peculiar to Akan verse. All rhythms are the products of recurrence of periodic beats; but in Akan the utterance stretches which are split into segments of equal or near-equal duration are not always the syllable. They are much larger chunks and are mapped from syntactic units. We illustrate some of these points about the verse structure with poem Number 26 in the volume.

1. *Dee odi kan se: Manhyia Aduonimpem.*
2. *Dee odi mfinimfii se: Manhyia Aduonimpem, awira.*
3. *Dee ɔdo akyire se: Aduonimpem na ɔrekorɔ no.*
4. *Aduonimpem a ɔhyee atuo ne nsamanfoɔ koeɛ,*
5. *Kɔkɔten Pepra ne no.*

These lines may be rendered in English as follows:

1. The one who comes first says: I did not meet Aduonimpem;
2. The one who comes in the middle says: I did not meet Aduonimpem,
3. The one who comes last says: Aduonimpem it is who is going.
4. Aduonimpem who piled up arms and fought against ghosts.
5. Kɔkɔten Pepra is he.
(Translation is mine)

The verse structure is built roughly upon syntactic structures which need not be discussed here. They include various types of subordinate clause.

The following comments on the poem will discount performance factors and assume an ideal situation in which rhythm is regulated by the underlying metrical system, which mediates it and syntactic structures.

(i) A clause whose subject is a complex noun phrase and its verb *se* (= say)

(ii) An embedded clausal complement governed by the verb *se* (= say).

(The measures in a line are marked off by a slash (“/”). The beat in each measure is bold-faced).

1. *Deε ɔdi / kan/ se*

the-one-who he-lead first say

2. *Deε ɔdi mfini/mfini se'*

the-one-who he-lead middle say

3. *Deε ɔdi akyire se/*

the-one-who he lead back say

Each of these three clauses is an utterance chunk, which can be said in one breath group. Within each utterance chunk are three metrical units or measures corresponding to three beats. The end of each utterance chunk (corresponding to a half-line) is marked by a pause.

The negative declarative clauses forming the second half of each of the second two lines are repetitions with a minor variation in the second.

1. *Manhyia / Aduonimpem/*

I-did-not-meet/ Aduonimpem

2. *Manhyia/Aduonim pem/awira/*

I-did-not-meet Aduonimpem, Sir

Line 1 has two beats corresponding to two measures. The second line has three beats, the final beat being separated from the preceding one by a pause and lengthened syllable contained in *awira*, which, in this context, is pronounced as [a:[wi]ra]. The third clause of line 3 (*Aduonimpem na/ ɔrekorɔ*) recalls the previous half lines with a repetition of the segment *Aduonimpem* and its metric patterns; but, here, the name *Aduonimpem* serves a different syntactic function: it is the focus head of a focus-marked

phrase. Focus-marked sentences have a special rhythmic pattern, special pitch features and segmental markers as well:

3. / Aduonimpem na/ɔrekorɔ no/

Aduonimpem it is that is going

This half line contains two measures; but here, the beat of the second measure falls unexpectedly on the personal pronoun Subject ɔ because it is in the environment of the focus-marker na in the preceding measure. Observe also that an extra syllable rɔ is added to the verb kɔ (pronounced in this context as [ku] instead of [kɔ]). This is a phonological realization of a semantically empty formative. It marks certain subordinate clauses as such, and introduces a secondary rhythmic pattern in the line.

The first four lines of the verse contain variable and constant syntactic units of different utterance-chunk sizes. Each of these contributes to the cumulative auditory impression of parallel rhythms. The next line after the triplet has the syntactic structure of a relative clause. Like the focus-marked clause with which it has a structural affinity, its final serialized verb (*ko* = fought) has an extra syllable *ɛ* marking the clause as structurally and rhythmically different from other regular ones (see line 3).

4. *Aduonimpem/a ɔ/hyɛɛ/atuo/ne nsamanfo)/koɛɛ/*

Syntactically, this line is a relativized noun phrase with *Aduonimpem* as head and should be read with a break after the third measure. In metrical structure and rhythm, the line contrasts with lines 1-3, each of which has an internal break with the rhythmic pattern of a subordinate clause followed by a direct quote.

Line 5 differs rhythmically and in syntactic structure from all the previous lines of the poem in its firmness of tone and metrical economy. It has two measures:

5. *Kɔkɔten / Pepra / ne no*

The final line

/Aduonimpem a/ Adɔtenfoɔ ba/ne no(ɔ)/

shares a number of linguistic ingredients – syntactic, metrical and rhythmic— with previous lines. Its first measure, *Aduonimpem a/*, recalls *Aduonimpem a/* of line 4 in exactly the same segmental sequence, rhythm and in syntactic and metrical structure. It also echoes the focus phrase *Aduonimpem na*, in rhythm.

Finally, line 6 has the syntactic structure of line 5. Both are equative sentences.

It will be seen that this is a poem with a closely-knit structure in which the various parts are related to others in syntax, metre and rhythm. The poem was chosen for analysis without any preconceptions in mind, but I believe all the poems in the volume will be found to be as coherently structured as this one if units of grammar and segmental chunks larger than the foot of written verse or the syllable are postulated as bases of metrical analysis. What these brief comments on poem number 26 of *Funeral Dirges* leads one to conclude is that it fulfils a fundamental criterion of poetry; namely, the possession of verse structures. The claim by Lestrade that the division between prose and oral poetry is thin needs reconsidering. This caution goes for similar claims, not excepting a comment on African poetry taken from Burton by Finnegan (Ibid p.27). Burton himself is reported to have criticized it:

“Poetry, there is none.There is no metre, no rhyme,,
nothing that interests or soothes the feelings,or arrests
the passions...”

It must be stressed that applications of traditional European techniques of scansion with their heavy reliance on segmentation of lines into feet of regularly alternating long and short or stressed and unstressed syllables will not lead to a discovery of order and creativity in the dirges and other forms of oral poetry in general.

The tentative approach outlined in the foregoing to rhythm, metrical structure and verse form based on the unit of *measure* and Nketia’s linear

unit is remotely reminiscent of the work of Millman Parry and Albert Lord. Parry, in particular, came to the conclusion after studies of Homer's epics (originally oral) that certain phrasal expressions in his poetry (originally described as cliché and poetic stock-in-trade) belonged to a vast array of abstract formulas. He argued that several poetic formulas could be categorized under a single abstract schema. The formulas belonging to the same schema shared the same metrical patterns and bore resemblance to each other in content and linguistic expression. The formula, it must be emphasized, is not a simple repetition, but an abstract linguistic representation. If applied to the *Funeral Dirges*, it is an abstract conceptual schema of a segmental chunk much larger than the foot, syllable and sometimes even a line in written European poetry. In the words of one critic, it is a "rhythmical-syntactical" mould which is "filled in" with lexical items.

It is not being suggested that the metrical patterns of Akan dirges are Homeric. That would be pushing the comparison too far. I have not seen any comparative study of Homeric and Akan metrical patterns. But some of the comments by Millman Parry and Albert Lord on Homer's verse would suggest that the different oral poetic traditions of the world share common features. Some of the verse structures of the Akan dirge can be characterized in terms of "rhythmic-syntactic moulds" marked by junctures at different levels of linguistic structure. This description is reminiscent of some of Lord's conclusions about Homeric verse structures.

A study by Jakobson (1961) of the verse forms of traditional oral poetry of Russian has a lot to teach students of Akan oral verse structure. Some aspects of Jakobson's detailed analysis of parallelism in traditional Russian poetry may be applicable to similar metrical and rhythmic patterns in the dirges.

III

In the rest of the paper, I shall comment on, and discuss, one of the recurrent themes of the Akan Dirges and how they are treated. The verses are sung and intoned by women soloists. Through them, the women express their feelings of pain and grief for the loss of a dear one at a public gathering. Deep personal pain on such occasions is expressed not through wailing and shrill cries but in formal language in which emotions are expressed in highly concrete vocabulary. The lexical items denote

objects of symbolic value to the clan and family to which the deceased belongs. They include names of ancestral homes, their associated springs and rivers, trees and nutritional plants as well as geographical landmarks of symbolic significance. Included in this list of concrete referents are names of historical icons known to have influenced the course of history of the clan.

The poetic function of the concrete objects denoted in the poems is to externalize the deep sorrow of the mourner. The mourner, as it were, suppresses her personal feelings of pain and loss by projecting them onto concrete objects of symbolic meaning.

The main theme of the poems is Death; but it has other related subthemes. One of these is the antithesis of Death – forces that make for life, growth, procreation and continuity of the clan. Below, I illustrate this subtheme with two poems. Attention is drawn to the use of concrete images, which are the external projections of pain and sorrow.

a) *Eno Nkrumakese a ne yam abaduasa*

b) *Na zmmao.*

Mother, the Great Okro Fruit in whose womb are secured thirty babies

The womb that never shrinks.

These two lines contain, in a compressed form, images which emphasize the theme of life and growth. The term *Eno* is used in Akan solely to address the oldest and most highly respected woman in the clan still alive. She has seen generations of clan members in her time and shared their experiences of pain and joy. She may continue to live to see more babies born into the clan. She, thus, symbolizes the link between the ancestors of old, the present generation and the generations to come. She is also the symbol of the clan's life and permanence.

The address term, *Eno*, also underscores her capacity to procreate. The idea of fertility is here symbolized by the image of *Nkrumakesee*. The word may be glossed in English as “The Great Okro Plant”. This plant is known in Akan culture for its deep-green colour and fleshy leafiness. These properties suggest strength, consistent growth and resistance to disease. The singer depicts the plant as being endowed with a womb (*yam*), the cradle of human life. Enclosed in this womb are thirty growing babies (*abaduasa*).

The Akan expression, *abaduasa*, is a fixed idiom which may be paraphrased in English as “an infinite number of children”. In traditional prayers the lead spokesperson of the group prays that the women be blessed with *abaduasa*, and the children of the *abaduasa* in turn be blessed with *abaduasa*. The intent of such a prayer is that the clan may be blessed with a multiplicity of lives.

Eno, who is the link between the present and the past, does not shrink (*ɔmmaoa*). Neither does her womb. The verb *moa* (shrink) literally denotes physical contraction. But it also suggests a withering process and atrophy. In addition, it connotes processes of diminution, degeneracy and a diseased-state leading to death. None of these is a possibility with *Eno*. She does not shrink or die. Neither does the clan nor the family which she embodies.

The next poem emphasizes the same theme: the forces of life and regeneration. It employs different but related images.

- a) *Me na nufo kɛsɛ a mbofra num ano, Aba.*
- b) *Me na Koroposie a*
- c) *Mbofra hyia ho, Aba.*
- d) *Me na, wo ara nyim dɛ*
- e) *Adankyir adwen*
- f) *Wɔdwen no yafun ba.*

- a) My mother, the Great Breast that suckles babies, Aba.
- b) My mother, the Wooden Bowl that
- c) Children gather around, Aba.
- d) My mother, you yourself know that
- e) Thoughts resulting from being-left-behind
- f) It is children of a common womb that think them.

The images of the Great Breast (*Nufo kɛsɛ*), the Great Round Wooden Food Bowl (*Koroposie*) and the Womb (*yafun*) are all facets of an overarching symbolic representation of life. Mother is the Great Breast, the basic source of life’s nutrients from which babies (*mba*) suckle (*num*). She is also the *Great Round Wooden Food Bowl*, the provider of food for members of the family. The symbolic function of the Bowl is to pull members of the family to itself. The mourner expresses her pain and sorrow by projecting them onto concrete objects which symbolize her

mother, who, in turn, symbolizes growth and continuity in the family.

It is not fortuitous that many of the symbols claiming attention in the poems just examined (and many others which occur elsewhere in the dirges) relate to objects that are round and oval in shape: the okro seeds, the okro husk, the Great Breast, the Great Round Wooden Bowl, the Womb, all these are round and oval objects; and they subtly suggest the shape of a growing foetus and a growing womb, or the shape of the body of a pregnant woman about to bring a new life into being.

Summary

The primary aim of this paper has been to introduce J.H.K. Nketiah's *Funeral Dirges of the Akan People* to students of oral literature. For purposes of typological classification we have put the poems in the category of elegiac poetry to which Milton's *Lycidas* and Gray's *Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard* also belong.

The second part of the paper is an attempt at discovering the abstract metrical patterns which give the poems their organic form. We posit the measure as the minimal unit of prosody made up of chunks of linguistic material larger than the foot and syllable, and within which periodic rhythmic beats occur. We think that these metrical units relate to units at all linguistic levels including syntactic structure. The nature of the mapping relationship between metrical and linguistic units is a subject which calls for research.

We also believe that the insights of the work of scholars like Jakobson, Parry and Lord into other traditions should be useful to our study of the verse structure of the Akan Dirge.

The final section discusses one of the recurrent death-related themes; namely, forces making for life, procreation and sustenance of the clan and family. We emphasize the poetic function of concrete images which give meaning to the theme. The function of concreteness, as has been stressed, is to externalize the personal emotions of the poet-singer.

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