



A Socio-Stylistic Analysis of Some Selected Bette Dirges

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ABSTRACT

Bette constitutes a dominant ethnic group in Obudu Local Government Areas of Cross River State of Nigeria. The name "Bette" refers to both the people and their language. Bette is of the Bantu stock and a sub-group of the Ekoi. The Bette language has remained oral because its orthography has not yet been standardized. However, some skimpy investigation has shown that both the language and its literature are encapsulated in the socio-linguistic activities of the folk. A part of these activities which attracted the attention of the researcher during field work was the funeral dirges. The duty of the researcher in this paper is to do a socio-stylistic analysis of the dirges in order to unravel the dynamism of the language and to enkindle the interest of scholars in the study of the language. Although the language has remained in its oral form, the data that are analysed in this paper were collected with the aid of an electronic device and transcribed in order to facilitate a stylistic analysis.

INTRODUCTION

Bette Adie-Utim Nwandor originated from the South Central Africa and settled at the foot of the Cameroun Mountain, part of which is today Obudu plateau. There is a claim that the Bette language is of Bantu stock and a sub-group of Ekoi. There is an element of truth in this claim as it is evidenced from the similarities in some of the linguistic features and systems of Bette and the Bantu languages. According to Murdock (1976) Bette ethnic group is part of the eastern linguistic cluster of Bantu sub-family of the nigratic stock.

However, in the course of their migration, the Bette moved with their language and settled at the foot of the Cameroun Mountain, part of which is Obudu Plateau in Cross River State. E.B. Watters (2000), scholar in Bantoid, remarks that with the passage of time, the language assimilated the speech habits of their closest neighbours and has changed characteristically both in structure and intonation. The word "Bette" stands for both the name of the ethnic group and its language. There is dearth of literature on this language because the language has hardly been written hence its orthography has not been standardized. However, some skimpy scholarly research on the language has shown that both the language and its literature are encapsulated

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in the socio-linguistic activities of the folk. The data that would be analysed in this discussion were collected with aid of an electronic device, through interviews and personal observation of the natives as they sat in clusters interacting in their normal ways of life on occasions such as initiations, festivals and especially funerals ceremonies. It is characteristic of Bette to sing, dance and clap even during funeral ceremonies. The ingenuity in which the dirges were rendered during a funeral ceremony of a community leader attracted the attention of the researcher. Therefore, the researcher's duty in this discussion is to do a socio-stylistic analysis of some the dirges that were rendered during the occasion, the concern being to enkindle researchers' interest in the study of Bette language.

Theoretical Model

The concept of socio-stylistics is relatively a new area in the broad discipline of Linguistic Stylistics. Stylistics generally is text-centered and the concern of stylisticians is not simply to describe the formal features of texts for their own sake, but in order to show their functional significance for their interpretation of the text or in order to relate literary effects to linguistic causes where these are felt to be relevant within the context of rendition (Wales, 1989). Intuitions, social causes and interpretative skills are so important in socio-stylistics that stylisticians always avoid vague evaluation about the way formal linguistic features are manipulated (Bennett, 2000). Crystal and Davy (1969) further express the belief that the aim of socio-stylistics

...is to analyse language habits with the main purpose of identifying from the general mass of linguistic features which are common to English as used on every conceivable occasion, those of social context; to explain, where possible why such features have been used as opposed to other alternatives, and to classified these features into categories based upon a view of their function in the social context

Socio-stylistics therefore, may be used as a cover term to refer to the analysis of varieties of language (registers). Socio-stylistics examines critically the language of social groups in various social contexts. Our choice of language in this context is dirges. A dirge is a song of lamentation in poetic form of a mourner for a departed loved one (Akporobaro, 2006). In Bette traditional society a dirge is not just a formless cry of bereavement. It is highly stylistic form of expression that is governed by specific poetic recitative conventions used to express the feelings of the mourners in a determinate form and performance procedure (Ashipu, 2005).

Textual Analysis

The Bette funeral dirges have peculiar linguistic forms and techniques of composition which have not been influenced by those introduced through formal education. The mourners raise the normal speech forms into a style of

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artistic merit with the use of various stylistic devices which would be examined under structure, language, technique and figures of speech. The Bette funeral dirge has the characteristics of a typical folk song and so a conscious rhythmic and metrical construction in the sense of classical and modern European verification is foreign to the Bette funeral dirges. The dirges may be distinguished from ordinary speech by its rhythmic construction which gives it the quality of singing and chanting. Instead of the metrical foot akin to the English poem, Nketia (1957) asserts that there is a rhythmical distribution of recurring main beats or tones on syllables separated from each other by one or more syllables. This constitutes the metrical pattern of the Bette funeral dirges.

The dirges are made up of units of utterances which are delimited from each other by a pause or an occasional end patterning. At times, the mourner conveys a sense of division through her intonation or emphasis. The length and meaning of a line depend on the melody established by the mourner for the entire dirge is created when the mourner utters many lines under one breath and pause for a rest. When there is a change in the main idea, the mourner makes a break before she continues. Each stanza, so to say, may be separated from the other by the use of chorus or refrain. The refrain sometimes occurs in a nonsense form as a mere carrier of the melodic line. The most important pattern of demarcating the stanza is by repetition of key sentences at the beginning or end of each stanza. For example “*wo kong na mi ha shi*” meaning “Tell me what I will do” is repeated almost after every stanza. Repetition is therefore a very important element in Bette dirges. Apart from its function of stanza division, repetition serves various other purposes of stylistic interest. There is aesthetic repetition where selected words, phrase or sentences are repeated while additional ones are added to advance the rendition. This creates suspense and makes for sustained curiosity through the expectation of a new or surprise element. It also makes chain-linking of ideas as in the following example;

Eng-e-e-e-nge-e-e-ng
Wo kong na mi ha shi
Unwa gyi nwa O
Unwa minde liti
Enge-e-e-ng-e-e-e-ng
Unwagyi nwa, unwa ken
Kapelpel kangyi kagbe kate
Unwa gyi nwa, unwa ken ugyi
Wo kong na mi ha shi
Afel kibi ketete le maida
Tell me what I will do
My daughter
My only daughter
My only daughter has gone to the farm
O my own daughter, my only daughter
Tell me what I will do

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My kapelpel has gone to the market

In the first line of each of these three groups of sentences we have “*unwa gyi nwa*” in the second sentence, “*unwa ken*” is added and the third sentence is further expanded with *ugyi*. In each case, the succeeding sentence changes. This is very much like incremental repetition of the Scottish ballads (Vail, 2000). Repetition can also be for the purpose of emphasis. The mourner hammers away at the ideas she seeks to emphasize either in the words,

Ukyieb, Ukyieb, Ukyieb
Ukem ashi bendi unwa iye e-e-e-e—e-ng
Ukem ashi bendi unwa iye.....
Ukyieb, Ukyieb, Ukyieb
Ukem ashi bendi unwa iye

Or in different words of the same meaning, as in

Ufaale ugiang unwa Agim O
Uyile undi ye unwa Agim O

“*Ufaale ugiang*” and “*undi*” have the same meaning “One who has nobody”. The device introduces variety within repetition to break the monotony of the repetition. Also, one key word or sentence may be repeated after each line. For instance, *ukyieb* meaning *O Husband* or a variant form *ukye gyi* meaning “my husband” are repeated after every line. *Unwa ken* meaning “the only child” is also repeated after every unit of meaning. The purpose of this is emphasizing the motif of the dirge. Most significant of all, repetition functions as delaying tactic to enable the mourner compose a new sentence. Repetition may occur in a single phonological terms; syllables, words and whole sentence. There is also occasional cross repetition with words in the end position of a line appearing again at the beginning of the following line;

Unwa abu ukobode
Abu ubode beke be le kung

This is linking device because it links the idea of one sentence to the next.

In Bette funeral dirges as in the Akan dirges according to Nketia (1957) language material of every day speech is used in a more elaborate form. The language of the dirge has additional expressions and repetition not common in every day speech. These additional elements occur in sentence pattern, sound and diction.

A stylistic analysis of the structure of the sentence of a Bette dirge takes the same form as in normal speech. For the purposes of stylistic effectiveness, there is the use of elision, repetition and to achieve smooth glide in voice from one word to another, elision occur on the obstructing vowels or consonants. In vowels any one of the two adjacent similar vowels belonging to two separate words is dropped. The consonant “k” and “h” are often dropped if they occur at the beginning of a word following another word terminating in a vowel as in the following example “*ukong ma kimbe*”

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becomes “*ukong ma imbe*”. Also certain long syllables of normal speech are shortened to fit the particular line into the rhythm of the dirge “*utso le he kukwo*” becomes “*utso i`okwo*” *wo gye le mi`kebuo*” becomes “*wo gye le mi`ubuo*” this has the usual poetic effect of compression in the sentence. Repetition of certain words and phrase for musical effect sometimes alters the normal arrangement of the sentence. For example, we have the following sentence in normal speech;

Ukong ma kimbe
Ata unwa uhwuole, we yi le uyie O
Ngwu unwa o ye
Utso le he kukwo
Wo gye le mi ubuo

Ata, son of *Uhwuole*, you have neither a wife nor a child. In poetic arrangement, it becomes;

Ukong ma kimbe
Ata unwa Uhwushe
Wo ha yi le ungie ye
Ata unwa Uwhushe
Wo ha yi le unwa ye
Utso le he kukwo
Wo gye le mi ubuo

This second arrangement has rhythm, as does all dirges. Occasional, there is inversion of the normal word-order. For example *mi ha shi ibang* in normal speech becomes *bang mi shi*. The mourner makes use of various sentence structures to introduce variety to the dirges which are usually very long and highly repetitive. She employs at will straight-forward statements, questions, admonitions, exhortations, entreaties and commands to convey her feelings. This variety reduces monotony.

The mourner may also throw in direct speech to give the language the dramatic quality of dialogue and there by sustain interest as in the following example;

Unwa gyi kung mi
Unwa gyi asuan le ukung mi ye
Atiagyi be li gyi
Unwa gyi amog mi
Child, take me along
My child says she does not like me
Papa, come let us go together
My child has denied me

Direct speech is given to the deceased daughter. This conveys the short lapse of time between the death of the child and that of the father. We also have the impression that father and the child conspired to die together, leaving the mother to suffer the loss and loneliness.

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The mourner consciously or unconsciously makes use of sound effect which gives beauty to the language and to intensify emotion and thought. The alliteration and assonance are the most commonly used devices. There are many alliteration but they are seldom contrived. They arise from the nature of the Bette grammatical structure. In the sentence, NP + Verb + Adjective, the prefix of the NP becomes the prefix of the verb and adjective, with the result that the same consonant or vowel may recur in the initial position of three or four word in a sentence. This structure used in the dirge gives alliteration and assonance as in the following example;

Kapelpel kangyi kate
Beshi besham le unwa gyi na
Kukpana kugyi kungio he kwo ubuo
Kubei ken kubyya kukwuo ye

Assonance that have been identified are

Ungie ukam ushu kyieb unwa iye
Umbuo ukwuo kding kinyong ngwuo
Unwa ngie mi whuo abuo whuo abei

Though the Bette dirges make use largely of the vocabulary of every social communication, there is sustained artistic purpose in the poetic usage. Familiar sentence assume deeper meaning. A woman with children may be addressed as *ungie-ukwuom* meaning “barren mother”. This does not mean that she has no children as the word “barren” may suggest, but that she has lost many children. The mourner may also use phonoaesthetic and other sound denoting words to embellish and adorn the language. Phonoaesthetic words are words which are untranslatable but whose sounds suggest their meaning as in the example *Tim so kpel kim*. This is a descriptive sound produced as an amputee, who is the subject of the attack in the dirge, walks painfully with clutches. The amputee may be such a subject of attack because the mourner may have suspected him or her for having bewitched the deceased. Onomatopoeia is used sparingly. One example of it here is *hwuo* in *kilya ndo ngwu hwuo*. The word *hwuo* mean “wide open”. When pronounced the sound and the articulation of the mouth indicate openness

Ideophone is another variant of this group of words that depends from their meaning on the sound. Finnegan(1970) describes ideophone as “a special word which conveys a kind of idea-in-sound and is commonly used...to add emotion and vividness to a description or a recitation”. This is used profusely in Bette dirges as in the following example “*kitan fong fong fong*” meaning it walks “*fong fong fong*”. The term *fong fong fong* describes a type of walk by one whose thighs are too fat and he is described impersonally as “it” as an attack on him for his perceived involvement in the death of the deceased. Ideophones are introduced to add an element of drama and to heighten the description. The mourner also exploits various sources of vocabulary to enlarge the language of the dirge she uses archaic words. For instance *Ukwa ato* and *utm ato* which shows that the Bette language still

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retains its Bantu ancestry. The modern Bette phrase would be “*utye ushuom*” for “one who erects a house” and *Kikpulpul* for modern *lishi* which means “door”. Sometimes loan words are used to eulogise the deceased as in *ute bu utoto* which means a generous and loving man. *Agbalbgal unam enyiam ebo* is a Tiv expression for *Ugwu inyia ibibi*(in Bette expression) for one who kills a fierce animal. Other examples are;

ayuho-uma –muscle of meat

Akpahay—ukib--- bone

Akuoushu akugwel --- in normal Bette language this means *kima mgbeb, kitem ban* meaning “things were once alright but they are now bad”. It is important to note that there many Tiv (and Hausa) words and expressions in Bette language because as Ashipu (2005) points out the Tiv in the Northern part of Nigeria are the closest neighbours of the Bette and they were their earliest trade partners. In the course of trade relations the Bette traders borrowed some of the Tiv (and Hausa) words....These words have become permanent components of the Bette lexicon. The examples are not exhaustive but they show the range which the mourner explores various expressions to enrich the dirge for the purposes of emphasis and eulogy of the deceased or blame of the perceived killer.

Symbols, metaphors, similes and imagery are used to enrich the Bette dirges through suggestions and implication and to render the texture of the language dense with potential emotive and sensory response by creating simultaneously several levels of meaning. Ashipu(2007) points out that the Bette language is highly metaphorical and idiomatic, and hence, the mourner uses appropriate images and metaphors drawn from various aspects and objects of the life of the people to intensify their feelings. This makes the language and the meaning vivid. Most of the metaphors in Bette dirges are extended metaphors. For example;

Unwa iye mingio uwel kinde`inim

Kung abe utia begyia

meaning: My brother, I remained at home but the fire has gone out
Where will the farm-goers call to get fire

The image of the fire being put out points at once to the indispensability of the deceased in the life of the people. The mourner is saying that she rejected marriage to stay with her brother who is every thing to her and now he is dead. The loss is not hers alone but also of others in the community who depend on the deceased for sustenance as indicated in the expression—“call to get fire”. The mourner also uses gnomic, proverbs and maxims as indicated in the following excerpt;

E-e-e-n-g nde mimbo kusi kinding nyin manda?

Behold I have done the climbing of a lizard

The mourner has no issue and her niece who has been living with her has just died. So, like a lizard which climbs trees and walls only to descend empty, hands, she has had lived an unfruitful life. Her life’s journey is aimless and

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unfulfilled. Metaphors also occur in the eulogy of the deceased. The mourner calls her smart, dutiful daughter “My *Kapelpel*”; *kapelpel* is a bird that is highly reputed for swiftness and cleverness. To portray the influence of her deceased husband among his people, the mourner addresses him with names and praise-names of the most powerful and important animals thus,

Utagia, ugyi, kugaba ingyia ugyio
Adiagamnyilibi ugyi ukyieb nwa
Utou utem kubei ngi libel libel...

meaning: *My Tiger, My Lion*

“Adiagamnyilibi” my own husband

Elephant who creates a hole with a foot print

The husband makes lasting impressions wherever he goes, like the elephant which makes a hole with a foot print. Referring to his elegance, beauty and gracefulness, she calls him “*Iwali*”—a type of dance which has all these characteristics.

Smiles are rarely used for the mourner always prefers implicit comparison because the attention of the audience is engaged more seriously in trying to discover the implied ideas or subject of comparison. Also, similes waste more words than metaphors. Similes are however, used a great deal in satirical songs of memorial ceremonies, where the language is mostly invective. The aim is to evoke laughter and ridicule not to convey serious thoughts, so the comparison can be explicit. Thus, someone whose teeth have decayed may be described as in;

Unde ishang na abung ikwo
His teeth are like the excrement of fowls

Both the colour and bad odour of the excrement come to mind immediately and vividly.

The mourner describes the man with bad teeth who is also an amputee as in;

Inyeabei Adeshi afel ugbei na ututub una libul
“Inyeabei Adeshi” has a leg like ututub growing in the bush

“*Ututub*” is a species of mushroom. When the man stands on his only leg, he is like the mushroom growing on a single stem-heavy on top and tiny below.

Thus, with the use of metaphors and similes, the mourner compresses ideas into a few words often the images are piled to emphasise a point as in the following short excerpt;

Kubei ken ku kubia kukwuo ye
Kigbounng ken ki sha kutoo ye
Kubuo ken kutib like ye
Keshua ke kgi ka nim

meaning:

One foot cannot form a path

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*One shoulder cannot carry a roof
One hand cannot make a pad
My tapping knife is lost*

In all these images, the mourner is expressing the single idea that her only sister is dead and she is left alone. She cannot achieve any success in her endeavour. The skill of a professional mourner is revealed in the suitability of the vehicle of metaphor to its tenor. The terms “tenor” and “vehicle” are borrowed from Cockleas(1971) who explains that “tenor” in an extended metaphor is the idea being expressed or the subject of comparison. The vehicle is the image by which the idea is conveyed.

The Bette mourners are excellent at matching of the “vehicle” to the “tenor”. For example, in the various excerpt cited in this paper, the mourners express the loss of their companions- the former, of a daughter, the latter of a sister. The images they use must reflect these different levels of relationship and degree of intimacy. Often times the mourner uses the images of things one can possess- the bird and the precious beads. The child belongs to her by maternal right. In the excerpt cited above, the mourner uses shoulder, hand and the foot which various parts of the same body to show the equal basis of their relationship. One shoulder is equal to the other and both belong to the same body just as the two sisters belong to the same parents. Each relies on the other for success in any endeavour. In this ability to choose and use images aptly lies the ingenuity of the mourner of the Bette dirges.

The mourner makes her experience concrete and realistic by imbuing objects and abstract ideas with human qualities. Death being the subject matter of the dirge is the idea most often personified. In the following excerpt, the mourner who apparently has lost her parents, husband, brothers, sisters accuses death on this occasion of having grated her;

Liwlu ligbli mi igali ooo
Death has grated me into garri

Death assumes a human form and uses the most horrible torture on her. In the next excerpt, the mourner expresses her own plight of ceaseless loss of relations and friends in a very poignant image of death;

Manda na liwlu linu shuob mi ho`ubi
Liwlu lingye ubi ugi `epi mi gbe ooo
Behold death has smelt out my trails
Death knows every path I tread

Life is also personified as an image of one who treats a human being like a child would play with toy;

Igye wo ndo ha mi kigo
Life, you have tossed me a lot

In the next excerpt, the mourner sees her grief in human form. It has inflicted a wound in her heart and she begs it in vain to take her life thus,

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Mande kuto kukung mi gwu
Ktsuan le kugwa undi iye
Behold, let Grief kill me
It has refused to kill anybody

In this way the audience is made more aware of the mourner's feelings and is drawn into an unconscious participation in the mourner's loss.

In the Bette society, certain animals, plants, tools and objects are recognized as symbols of objects and ideas. The symbolic words and objects used exist in their own right and in addition evoke images which in turn suggest further meanings. The symbols must be interpreted in context. They are private symbols in the sense that they are recognized and understood only within the Bette society (Ashipu, 2007). The mourner therefore exploits pre-existing and widely shared associations with an object or actions to signify something else. The vehicles of metaphor are drawn from this rich store house of symbols. Thus, the audience can assess the extensiveness and aptness of the image evoked. For instance, the mourner says,

Kupana kugyi kwo ubo
Utsi litan ugi atang he kwo ubo
My "kukpana" has remained on the high way
My string of "litan" has cut in the middle of the high way

Both *kukpana* and "*litan*" are names of beads held to by the Bette society to be exceedingly precious and valuable. Building on this association, the mourner conveys succinctly, the position of her daughter in her life and the consequent depth of her loss. The hoe is a symbol of farming and manual work. When the mourner says "*Abuo huo ubia*" meaning "Hands on the hoe", she is addressing her daughter as a hard and tireless worker. When the mourner also says;

Ukong ugi
Kugaba ugi
Too ugi
Ma nde ukwauan uka ndi abmu,
Inim ipa ha buo
My Tiger
My lion
My Elephant
Behold the cotton tree has fallen, the gods have scattered"

She is drawing on the cotton tree as a symbol of sacredness and influence among the family trees. In the same way, the deceased was the mainstay of the family and custodian of all the family values and beliefs. The "Tiger", "Lion" and "Elephant" as appellations used to address the deceased are the animal equivalent of the cotton tree. The tapping knife and the pillar symbolize indispensable companion and a symbol of support and defence respectively.

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In overall rating of Bette dirges in general like the “Rara” chants of the Yoruba, much greater weight is given to extensiveness and accuracy of repertoire than to mellifluousness of voice (Babalola, 1973). The mourner is so tensed with emotion of grief that she is more interested in expressing this in the most appropriate language and images in evolving a sweet voice. She can go from one theme to another and back to the previous one at will. This fluctuation in the development stems from her anguished unorganized state of mind. This however, is not judged on her as a failure in composition and performance. What the audience expects of the performer is “to show expertise in the variety of expression.... exposition of imaginative wealth (Nwoga, 1971). Mellifluousness of voice is not completely unimportant. When delivered, the dirges should sound more like singing than recitation. Disjointed phrasing and halting delivery are disapproved. The mourner has therefore, to evolve a good melody and fit that she has to say into the music melody. She then achieves fluency of performance which is highly praised. The professional mourner then is one who is able to combine in a single dirge a variety of themes put across in language concretized with apt images and a good melodious voice.

CONCLUSION

When we listen to the production of Bette funeral dirge in its proper contexts- performed at the same time with drumming, firing of guns, singing, wailing and talking from everybody around- we have the impression of incoherent and meaningless emotional outbursts of grief-possessed persons. A closer look into the utterances, as we have done, reveals that they possess form and substance of great stylistic magnitude. The dirge is established by the people to praise honour and mourn the dead. Because of the method of its rendition, it helps to relieve the heavily-charged emotions and makes it easy to adjust to the shock of the news. The dirge becomes a means of conserving and transmitting the culture of the people. In addition to its social functions, it contains highly-developed and well organized stylistic qualities.

The themes and imagery are based on and drawn from the locality. As result, the full meaning and impact of some of the pieces cannot be understood and expressed except by reference to the sociolinguistic activities of the people. It is also necessary to keep in mind the actual contexts of the production of the dirge-at public mourning, wake keeping or memorial ceremonies-for style, form, subject and meaning are governed by these occasions. The Bette funeral dirge has its own complex and sophisticated conventions, a stylistic tradition at the service of the individual composer.

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