

THE DIRGE MUSIC OF OKE ILA ORANGUN: A PERSPECTIVE OF SOUL IMMORTALITY

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Abstract

A community situated in Ifedayo Local government of Osun State, Nigeria, Oke Ila Orangun is nuanced with cultural heritage exemplified by *orinòkú* (dirge music) that is solely performed for the dead. This study attempted samples of such songs with a view to analyzing their textual content and their implications in the instance of this aged long tradition. Premised on the theoretical frame work of human immortality propounded by Socrates and Plato, which consents to survival of human soul after death, interviews, observations, audio tape documentation alongside relevant scholarly writings were harnessed to amass information that is germane to this study. Inferences from this study endorsed intimacy of Oke Ila Orangun community with the cultural heritage of soul immortality which dirge music resonates regardless of the religious affiliation of the people. Premised on the song texts, the study indicated the acclaimed exulted realm of life accorded to the dead by the living, the latter being fortified with superior power; hence, they are capable of surmounting every life challenge. In addition, three states of immortality which consolidate the belief of Oke Ila people in soul eternalization were unraveled: physical (reincarnation), translocation, and spirit entities. Regardless of religious inclination and civilization among other factors, it could be concluded that the belief of Oke Ila people in soul immortality, underpinned by dirge music, is staunch, a stance that to a degree may survive for a wide space of time.

Keywords: Dirge Music, Immortality, Reincarnation, Translocation, Spirit Entities.

Introduction

In the aged long beliefs of the Yoruba lies the concept of soul immortality which holds that a deceased or the dead in the physical realm still live though in transition. This stance is apparent in traditional, religious and socio-cultural contexts in which the indigenous society operates. Of such instances, mention could be made of child naming system in which names of the departed souls are replicated in the grandchildren or great-grandchildren (reincarnation). Names spanning “*Babawálé*”(father has returned home), “*Ìyábò*”or “*Yétuúndé*” (Mother has returned), to mention few are severally heard. Another medium in which soul perpetuity is lunched resides in cultural festival of “masquerade” in which case the people astoundingly believe and repose confidence in ancestors/ ancestral spirit and reincarnation. The masquerades are considered as the effigies of the ancestors.

The headquarter of Ifedayo local government, Osun State, *Òkèlálà Òraṅguń* is a community bequeathed with a constellation of traditions and beliefs that are showcased through diverse media such as festival, rite of passage, child naming, child dedication, marriage, burial/funeral to mention a few. Despite the influx of external factors; Westernization, Judeo Christian and Arabic Islamic cultures, traditional festivals and rites are preserved by *Òkèlálà* Community till date. Roles of music in each of these activities cannot be undermined.

In the similitude of other Yoruba communities, *Òkèlálà Òraṅguń* to a certain degree reminisces soul immortality in its tradition and culture. Aside masquerading and child naming, burial ceremony constitutes one other vent for showcasing such cultural beliefs. Burial/ funeral ceremony, essentially for the aged, is exceedingly accorded dignity in *Òkèlálà Òraṅguń* community, simulating many other regions of Yorùbá land. Conventionally, certain traditional rites are mandatory to precede the actual burial ceremony. Such a stance does not obviate the Christian burial service for the deceased. This cultural observance usually commences before Church activities. Customarily, the deceased family in the company of other members of the community assumes a procession at the entrance of the town to welcome the deceased body. Thereafter, the corpse is flown to various strategic locations of his or her affiliations within the community before retracting to the home of residence of the dead. The role of music in this cultural context is credible. It is gratifying that a vast number of songs rendered, essentially by the aged family members usually conform to subject of discourse (soul immortality). One other medium for showcasing this heritage is contained in the feasting that is solely organized for the ladies and women (*Omo Osú*) of the deceased family. While in the high spirit in the course of dining, members often resign to music, among which are dirge songs that replicate soul immortality. It is the intention of this study to attempt a few of such song renditions to ascertain the degree to which their textual contents align with the concept of soul immortality, a staunch Yoruba cultural belief and their implications.

Distinctive Perspectives on Soul Immortality

Most religions and traditions subscribe that a soul within human departs after the death of the physical body and begins to exist eternally as a separate entity. Such a belief is advocated by Hindus, Buddhism, Judaism, Islam among others religions. While a stance advances soul's eternity in either heaven or hell (after life), another consents to soul's transition to other forms of life (reincarnation). It is needful to state that the belief/ concept of "soul immortality / after life began in the ancient time. James G (1992) opines that the Egyptian commoners imbibed the rigorous ritual ceremony advanced by "Isis", who resurrected the dead body of her husband; "Osiris". Meanwhile, it is worthwhile to attempt diverse views at the instance of soul immortality among religious groups and traditions.

Dualism

Dualism designates a belief system that does not only advocate soul immortality, but also admits the soul and the body as separate entities. A position of this nature vehemently corroborates soul perpetuity since it is independent of the entire human body. In other word, insensitivity attending the physical dead body is irrelevant to soul's existence.

After Life

The belief in this context holds that soul after death is translocated to another destination averse to its previous abode. Though this school of thought agrees with dualism, it precisely presents the destination of the departed soul which is conventionally and theologically delineated as a heaven or a hell.

Reincarnation

Contrary to soul transition, reincarnation as a form of immortality dwells on perpetuity through a cycle of birth, death and rebirth in which case a soul may reside in diverse bodies endlessly. Such a belief system is exemplified by Hinduism and Buddhism.

African Traditional Religious System

From the African perspective, the reality of soul immortality culminates in veneration of the ancestors as well as belief in the eternal existence of the spirit of the deceased. However, in the similitude of some other religions and traditions, Africans' belief system in reincarnation staunch. The foregoing is evident in quite a number of traditional rites conducted by the people which child naming ceremony typifies.

Samples of Songs that replicate the concept of soul immortality in Oke Ila Community

Quite a number of songs are rendered for the dead by the people of Oke Ila Orangun community. The dirge music is performed irrespective of the religious affiliation of the people. It should also be noted that this tradition does not obviate or diminish the Christian or Islamic burial rite. Textual contents of such songs reflect subjects that suggest desperate searching for the love ones believed to be alive. Some are performed to invoke the spirit of the departed soul for intervention in life challenging issues. At other times, dirge music is performed premised on the textual message which accords dignity to the deceased who is assumed to be in a higher realm of life than the living.

Song 1: À-ń-wá-a-a-ò ri

À-ń-wá-a-a-ò ri
A-ò-mo-I-lé-è-yó wò
A-ò-ri
Bó-yó-lo-ko-ni-a-ò-ri
Bó-yó-lo-dò-ni-a-ò-ri
A-ò-mo-I-lé-è-yó-wò
a-ò-ri

Lost, yet to be found

Oh, we are in search of her, yet to be found
We are unaware of her destination
Yet to be found
Perhaps, she has headed towards farm cite.
Perhaps she has headed towards the river side
We are unaware of her destination
Yet to be found

The above passage exemplifies the dirge music in Òkèllá Òràngún. By tradition, it is performed by women (of the deceased family (Orogún Ilé)). The textual lines of the song express the feelings, emotion and agitation that beclouded the women with regard to the departure of their colleague. This rendition and many others in the same category are often performed solely vocally. In desperate search of their love one, the women render this piece continuously even as they proceed from house to house. The advent of civilization and foreign religions has reduced the intensity in the observance of this musical rite by the women. In few decades ago which the researcher of this study could attest, whenever the women in their large number engaged in the prevailing tradition with this particular song, the entire community did experience stillness and serenity in high expectancy of the reappearance of the deceased. Premised on the lyrics of the song, which resonate the Yoruba belief of

state of the dead the deceased only transited to another realm of life. Besides, he/she is assumed to be sensitive to every situation around him/her in another realm of life as well as the home he or she left behind.

Song 2

Wẹ̀-yiń-wò-kó-o-wẹ̀-yiń-wò

Wẹ̀-yiń-wò-kó-o-wẹ̀-yiń-wò

Wẹ̀-yiń-wò-kó-o-wẹ̀-yiń-wò

A-dé-n-lé-ń-bè-rè-ẹ̀-kó-o-wẹ̀-yiń-wò

Gbo-gbo-o-mo-ń-bè-rè-e-kó-o-wẹ̀-yiń-wò

Gbo-gbo-ẹ̀-bí-ń-bè-rè-rẹ̀-kó-o-wẹ̀-yiń-wò

Remember home

Remember the home you left behind

Remember the home you left behind

Adenle (son) asks of you, remember

Children long for you, remember

Entire family longs for you

The allegorical phrase “wẹ̀yińwò” in the contextual usage, is a call to “remembrance” by the deceased of “all” that has been left behind. The Yoruba connotation of behind is “ẹ̀yiń” which could literally decipher a location in the standing or sitting position (opposite of the front). Metaphorically, the phrase wẹ̀yińwò is a strong appeal to the deceased for regular visitation to the family. Again, this scenario underscores the astounding belief of the Yoruba in the existence of the departed person. Meanwhile, it is needful to ascertain the essence of the physically dead individual visiting the living. The Yorubá believe that the dead in their present realm possess mystical/supernatural power that overrules that of the living. Such conception plays a vital role in the light of spiritual forces that hover within and beyond the cosmos. Severally, the spirit of the dead is evoked to intercede in times of adversity and spiritual warfare.

Corroboratively, it is believed that the dead are vested with distinct knowledge, wisdom and insight that could proffer solutions to every life challenges that becloud humanity. An instance of such allusion is conflict resolution among the members of the deceased family, spanning land dispute, marital crisis, indebtedness, candidate selection for chieftaincy to mention a few. Often, the interventions in this case always bind on very party or member involved; arising from undaunted confidence and trust reposed in the spirit of the dead. The inputs of the deceased in family matters step beyond the bound of corporate intervention. Enquiries are advanced from the children, wives or husbands of the dead to gain insight into personal thought-provoking issues. Interventions in the context of decision; spanning marriage, choice of business, carrier and place of abode among others are severally advanced by the deceased spirit.

Song 3

Gbí-gbé-la-ma-a-gbé-e

Gbí-gbé-la-ma-a-gbé-e

Gè-gè-la-má-a-gbé-e

A-dé-bí-sí-dì-yà-wó

a-é-gbe

We shall adore him

We shall adore him

We shall adore him

Adebisi like a bride

We shall adore

The textual lines of the song presented above evince the high premium placed on the dead. The word “gègè” could imply gently or honorably, depending on the contextual appropriation. The English translation of “Ìyàwó” could conform to “bride” or wife. However, from the perspective of usage, bride is more succinct. In the similitude of gègè, gbígbé is an allegorical short phrase which literally depicts “being lifted”. Within the frame work of its application, gbígbé also simulates gègè alluding to a process of dignifying. From the foregoing, it could be deduced, the amount of prestige that is accorded the dead. In summary, the song enjoins all and sundry to advance to the deceased dignity that befits the adored bride. Meanwhile, it is essential to consider the vowel “e” drawn from the phrase “làégbe”. This is a dialectic (tonal) inflection of the “Igbominan” ethnic group of the Yoruba. The Oyo representation of “làégbe” is “làógbe”. The distinction lies between the two vowels; “e” and “o”. However, in conformity with the conventional Oyo speech mode, the phrase will read “gbí-gbé-la-má-a-gbé-e”. In both cases, the English translation of the phrase is either we shall carry her (literal expression) or we shall honor/celebrate her (figurative expression of metaphor).

Song 4

Òk-ú-o-lọ-mọ-kì-mà-í-sun-gbó

Òk-ú-o-lọ-mọ-kì-mà-í-sun-gbó

O-fẹ-rẹ-gẹ-gẹ-ó-dì-lé-ò

Ò-kú-ọ-lọ-mọ-kì-ì-sun-gbó

O-O-fẹ-rẹ-gẹ-gẹ-ó-dì-tẹ

A corpse blessed with many children never sleep outside

A corpse blessed with many children never sleep outside

Oh, away home

A corpse blessed with many children never sleep outside

Oh, away home

The textual content of the above song affirms prestige that the deceased deserves from the perspective of burial rite and burial place/location. The phrase “ọferegege” integration of two words or entities “ofẹ” and “gẹgẹ”.

Semantically, *ofe* is a mystical power which the acclaimed Yoruba heroes such as the kings and warriors employed to mystically transport themselves from a location in time space to another, essentially their abodes. This becomes expedient particularly during war when defeat imminent from the other warring party. In other word, the leader of the subjugated warriors often retreated to “*ofe*”. A unique attribute of *ofe* is contained in its quickness of action. Paradoxically, “*ofe*” is juxtaposed with *gègè* which implies honor. However, such phrase should not be suggestive of ambiguity, stemming from its contextual usage. Reflecting on the mode of operation, “*ofe*” which intones a state of horridness, corroborates its pair “*gègè*” (honor). In other word, the dead body of the deceased should not tarry in its present location. Meanwhile it is necessary to probe the two designations allotted to the corpse in the song piece; “*ilé*” (home) and “*itè*” (burial ground). The word “*ìgbó*” which literally translate as “bush” is metaphorically appropriated by song passage to portend “outside”. The expression *òkú olómọ̀ kì mǎi sun gbó* implies that the dead body of the deceased must not be buried outside, rather must be conveyed to the permanent home of residence (*ilé*). Such a tradition exemplified by Oke Ila Orangun community is supremely extolled by the Yorùbá. Families, corporate bodies or individuals that defile this custom are stigmatized and addressed as vagabond. Again, a stance of this nature underscores the place of the dead in Yorùbá tradition and culture. The second designation: *itè*(burial ground) advanced by the song is construed as the final resting place of the deceased which must be adequately cared for. The reality of mutilation of the physical dead body and supreme honor accorded the dead prompt underlay in interment of the corpse. As much as the Yoruba believe in the perpetual existence of the dead in transitory domain, either in reincarnation or in the spirit world, they do not feign the actuality of the physical death as well as the corpse remain of the dead. Hence the need arises for quick disposal of the remains of individuals involved to avert environmental pollution and other health hazards. Culturally, the Yoruba do not tarry in burial rite and procedure. Aside from showcasing the degree of love towards the deceased by the family members, conception holds that the more the dead are referenced at their burial, the stronger their bond with their family and close relation in their spirit world. Therefore, earnest efforts are expedited to appease the deceased since their consciousness is still intact in the spirit world.

Deduction from the Dirge Music of ÒkèlláÒrànguń

The belief of the Yoruba in soul immortality is not concealed in the light of pastiche of scenario in which such concept is showcased. Child naming, masquerading and burial rites among other traditions are templates in this context. Each of these media advocates perpetuity of humanity. The name “*Babáwálé*” implies the reincarnation of the progenitor (male) in the posterity (son). Severally, as a fool proof, allusions are made to features including bodily signs that are reminiscence of such progenitors in the posterity which transcend mere hereditary phenomenon.

Eguńguń (masquerades) festival constitutes another vent by which immortality is launched among the Yoruba. The masquerades are deciphered as the departed (dead) council of elders or aged (*aráṣun*) that are engaging in relationship with the earth dwellers (*arááyé*). “Masking”, a primary symbol of secrecy and superior status ascribed to the masquerades, in a sense implies that the heaven dwellers; masquerades (*aráṣun*) while unmasked, cannot safely relate to the earth dwellers (*arááyé*). He must unmasked to ensure safety of the earth dwellers. Conventionally, traditional rites are performed at the inception and close of every masquerade festival, which according to the belief of the Yorùbá is construed respectively as the welcoming and farewell services in honour of the heaven dwellers (*aráṣun*).

Evident from the textual content of songs contrived for this study, the affinity of the Yorùbá belief exemplified Oke Ila community towards soul immortality of the dead from the perspective of burial rite is astounding. A phrase such as “*wẹyinwo*” (consider what you left behind) is deemed probed. This position contrasts with theological ideology that only the living are aptly sensitive to the past. The phrase entreats the deceased to be unreservedly engaged in the welfare of the family he had parted with. This text suggests diverse connotations which could be interpreted as the dead’s sensitivity to the peace of the family. It could also delineate the dead’s assiduous efforts towards the family’s security and finances. “*À-ń-wá-a-a-òrì*” is another phrase for interrogation from one of songs appropriated. Simulating *wẹyinwò*, this expression denotes a state of living. Again, it is illogical to initiate searching for the dead from a Christian theological perspective.

Textual lines of such songs that are dedicated to the Yoruba traditional burial intone two beliefs of soul immortality from the Yorùbá contextual/medium perspective. A belief subscribes that though death (loss of consciousness) is a reality as applicable to the physical entity of a person, the spirit of such an individual is intact. This belief underscores the concept of “spiritism,” in which case the dead could still commune with the living. Premised on this realization, the textual line, “*wẹyinwò*”, does not necessarily imply the physical presence of the dead as long as spirit is intact. Instances have been sighted in which the spirit of the dead was entreated for diverse interventions, spanning counseling services, life security, personal and corporate economic

prospects, among others. Averse to spiritism, another form by which soul immortality is made manifest in the phenomenon of reincarnation. This is the belief that the soul enters into another human body after death. Thus, contrasting the transition of the dead solely to the spirit, reincarnation defines the bodily existence of the dead. This position is avidly extolled by the Yoruba, which essentially reflects in child naming and dedication rites. It has been established in diverse occurrences in which accidental marks sustained in the progenitors are overtly reproduced in their posterity. Hence, there is a general concession that the old body is reincarnated in the new body as the baby. In the light of this, names such as Ìyábò, Babatunde, Babáwálé, Yétuúndé to mention a few are often presented at the naming ceremony. Meanwhile, a form of soul perpetuity is entrenched in soul relocation. In this scenario, the deceased, rather than reincarnating, relocates to a far-distant abode that is concealed from close relations and every other familiar individual. A vast number of instances have been sighted to ascertain the foregoing. In a few cases, the deceased have engaged in dialogue with close relations who were not yet acquainted with the demise of the dead in discourse. Again, within the ambit of soul relocation, allusions have been made to several incidents of the dead individuals who procreated with a large family size, even after several years of their exit.

Implication of the dirge Music

Cultural sustainability

Notwithstanding the influx of external influences, especially from Judeo-Western European and Arabic-Islamic cultures, African traditions have to a higher degree been preserved by successive generations. This is portended by quite a number of indices, namely, festival, social bonding via marriage, burial/funeral, to mention a few. Dirge music plays a significant role in recurring age-old events. It excels among other traditional music that has survived the intrusion of foreign cultures. Whenever songs of this nature are presented, members of the community are nostalgically engulfed. It is gratifying that the forms, structures and styles of performance of such music are still intact since time immemorial.

A Reflection of close affinity and reverence to the Dead

Citing the song collection for this study as a template, succinctly, music could be designated as a carrier of human feelings, emotions, and most importantly, their beliefs. Reiteratively, the close bond between the living and the dead arises from two perspectives: the belief in the existence of the deceased regardless of forms of such existence (physical or in the spirit) and the supernature of this existence. Though the dead are capable of continuous living from the Yoruba cultural framework, their new form of existence is quite distinct from humanity. Endowed with mystical power which places them above human beings, the dead are considered as super beings having translocated to a higher realm of life: “òrun” (heaven). This conception immeasurably foregrounds the depth of reverence that the dead are accorded by the living. Severally, the spirits of the dead are consulted for innumerable life interventions and challenges that plague our world. The textual contents of such songs avidly endorse this position.

Citing the variants interrogated as a case study, another inherent implication of the dirge music lies in the sustainability of the existing belief of the Yoruba in the state of the dead. On the ascendancy, the validity/reliability of Yoruba belief of soul immortality is interfered with diverse quarters, particularly the Christian and Islamic faiths. However, forceful this factor portrays, the Yoruba belief in soul immortality is still staunch. Justification for this stance could be alluded to assiduous efforts of the custodians/ carriers of traditions and cultures. Within the ambit of music, dirge songs are candor in this context. Being a veritable tool for message propagation and dissemination, the role of music could not be undermined in entrenching cultural traditions and beliefs such as the state of the dead. Performance of such music aptly arouses the sensitivity of the community members once again to the ancient belief of soul immortality.

Conclusion

Orinòkú (dirge music) of Oke Ila as a portrayer of the people’s affinity towards their dead has been interrogated by this study. Attested by the sample songs, the great esteem accorded to the deceased emanates essentially from the conceptual framework of soul immortality and life security. Sensitivity of the living toward perpetual existence of the dead regardless of forms, underpinned by their potentiality to intervene in all life challenges that becloud man, spanning poverty, infirmity, and death among others, constitute impetuses in this context. The embrace of this music by women, including Christian religious adherents, has stood the test of time, portending its future sustainability.

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