
DOCUMENTATION OF DIRGE SONGS AMONG THE AMOKWE ORJI PEOPLE OF NIGERIA

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Introduction

Language documentation or documentary linguistics came into existence as a result of an urgent need to preserve endangered languages or endangered aspects of languages. Language documentation is an important tool for preserving languages especially endangered languages or endangered aspects of a language. It is this increasing phenomenon of language endangerment that has led to the emergence of documentary linguistics. Therefore if endangered languages are not adequately documented, there would be nothing to prove the existence of such a language. Himmelmann (2006) views language documentation as a subfield of linguistics concerned with the methods, tools and theoretical underpinnings for compiling a representative and lasting multi-purpose record of a natural language or one of its varieties. Similarly, Woodbury (2003) claims that language documentation is concerned with the making and keeping of records of the world's languages and the ways in which they are used. For Woodbury, language documentation came up alongside major changes in the technology of linguistic data representation and an increasing focus on the threats posed to languages by endangerment.

Language documentation is not what a researcher delves into without having a particular reason(s) in mind. There are basically three essential reasons for engaging in language documentation according to Himmelmann (2006). These reasons are: language endangerment, the economy of research resources, and accountability.

Today a substantial number of the languages spoken in the world are threatened by extinction and if they are not properly documented, there would be nothing to refer to such languages in the nearest future. Some languages are not endangered in the real sense but certain varieties of such languages could be endangered. Owners of endangered languages and endangered language varieties are aware of the phenomenon so, they readily welcome language documenters. Macri (2006), in affirmation of the above notion, says that those who really appreciate language documentation are those whose language or aspect of the language is endangered. It is in view of the objectives of documentary linguistics that this study sets out to document a cultural aspect of the people of Amokwe Orji - the dirge songs. Amokwe Orji is a community located at Udi Local Government Area of Enugu state, Nigeria. The phenomenon of dirge songs is an important cultural aspect of the Amokwe Orji community. Regrettably, these dirge songs are gradually going into extinction due to the advent of Christianity and civilization. The younger generation is no longer interested in the dirge songs. DJs, CDs, computers and other musical instruments are gradually over taking dirge songs.

Dirge songs in general are songs that express sorrow usually rendered at the funeral of the deceased. According to Ogene (2010:8), “a dirge is an oral poetry that is meant to be sung at the burial or funeral of a person. It is shorter than the elegy hence makes a direct remark and expression of feelings”. For Okorie (2005:39) “a dirge is understood to be a song that mourns the death of someone”. Dirge songs in Amokwe Orji are rendered at the funeral of a woman or a teenage girl only. This is to say that dirge songs are not sung for men in this speech community. Again, it is only women that perform dirge songs in this community. Muti (2003) points out that the performance of dirge songs is mostly a woman’s affair in the form of songs and dances sometimes. The most identifiable and outstanding literary quality of the dirge songs is repetition. These repetitions are not monotonous neither are they due to hindrance in thought rather a means of emphasizing salient point that mourners might wish to express.

Review of previous related literature

The issue of language endangerment has motivated some researchers and documenters into various practical works on language documentation. These works are mostly on languages that are already endangered. Urua (2012) in contributing her own quota to the preservation of endangered languages conducted a documentation project on dirge songs among the Uruan people of Nigeria. The documentation centered on the dirge which is a ritual funeral eulogy performed by elderly women and professionals at the demise of a family or community member and also performed during a terrible disaster. These dirges were traditionally used at funerals in this community but it is rarely practiced these days because of a shift to western funeral customs and has been a highly endangered cultural aspect of this language. In the same vein, Ajuwon (2010) conducted a documentary work entitled “the preservation of Yoruba tradition through hunter’s funeral dirges”. His documentation covered different cultural performances in Yoruba land. These cultural aspects of the Yoruba people are seriously threatened by extinction. The most endangered is the hunter’s dirge which celebrates the loss and fame of a particular hunter. His major aim was to preserve some of these cultures for the future generations.

Still on the issue of documenting endangered languages, Vallejos (2010) documented aspects of the Kokama language which is a deeply endangered language from the Peruvian Amazon. The research revealed that the few remaining fluent speakers of the language are mostly older than sixty years of age and use the language in very restrictive situations. Then again, children no longer learn the language. In this case, one can understand and appreciate the level of work done by Vallejos in trying to preserve the language of this particular speech community. Another interesting project in language documentation is that done by Kaddo (2013). The project involved a basic documentation of Migaama. Migaama is a Chadic language of the East branch spoken in the vicinity at the Centre of the Republic of Chad. This language is severely endangered. The speakers of the language migrated to other communities during their civil war. The young people, on the other hand, prefer to speak Arabic or French. These and other reasons caused a breach in the continuity of the language

thereby resulting in endangerment. Kaddo's major interest in this project is on the literary genres of the language.

Kabisch-Lindenlaub (2011) tried to document the Golpa language. Her project called "the analysis of the Golpa stories", aimed at producing an annotated and illustrated Golpa story book about the people, their land and culture. Golpa is a severely endangered Yolnga language spoken in Elcho Island, Northern Territory, Australia. Most of the stories in the book are part of a huge collection of audio recordings made back in the 1960s by B. Schebeck. These texts were never analysed until the onset of this project. There are only few Golpans left who still speak and understand the language to a considerable extent. Language documentation is an important tool in preserving endangered languages. A great number of the world's languages are threatened by endangerment; hence language documentation came into existence as a way of salvaging this problem. Language documentation involves the preservation of language materials for use by future generation. This present study attempts to preserve a genre of Igbo oral tradition – dirge songs.

Methodology

The performance of dirge songs in Amokwe Orji is restricted to elderly women, therefore, data were obtained from elderly women who are between the ages of 60 and above. This selection is made just to ensure that the data are obtained from those who have a direct involvement in the dirge songs. The dirge songs were recorded as the women performed at different places in the speech community. The data collected for this research work were analyzed by the use of simple descriptive method. Each of the songs was transcribed phonologically and translated into English after which a little commentary was made about the songs.

Data presentation and analysis

The first section handles the data presentation which involves the phonological transcription and translation of the dirge songs. It is worthy of mention that the transcription is dialectal that is, it involves the rendition of the dirge songs as the dialect speakers will say and not standard Igbo. The second section presents a discussion of the data.

Dirge Song 1

/ɔwu ee o me.ɛ oje/

'oh death it has occurred to someone'

/mu na oje ga eβi/

'whom shall I live with?'

/ɔwu gbulu nwa mmadu/

'death killed someone's child'

/ɔwu mu na oje ga eβi/

'whom shall I live with?'

/ɔwu ee o me.ɛ oje/

‘oh death it has occurred to someone’

/mʊ na oje ga eβi/

‘whom shall I live with?’

Dirge Song 2

/na mbʊ ka ɔwʊ bido.lo/

‘death has been in existence from the beginning’

/na mbʊ na mbʊ ko bido.lo/

‘in the beginning, in the beginning death has been in existence’

Dirge Song 3

/ugegbe a kuwala ɔ kuwala/

‘a mirror has broken, it has broken’

/ezigbo ugegbe a kuwala ɔ kuwala/

‘a good mirror has broken, it has broken’

/ɔ kuwala niwe/

‘it broke in anger’

Dirge Song 4

/jekwana ηwane gi ife ko .lie/

‘give your brother something to eat’

/gwakwanʊ ηwane gi oku kɔ nʊ.lʊ/

‘speak to your brother let him listen’

/ʊbɔʃi ɔ gabʊ ɔ bʊ ηwane gi ga akʊ nisi/

‘The day of your death, your brother is the first point of call’

/ndi ɔzɔ ga aβia mgbe o dɔli.sɔ fia/

‘others would come at their own convenient time’

/ma fia ηwe efe βia mgbalu/

‘if they are less busy to come for condolence’

Dirge Song 5

/ɔwʊ lee lee lee/

‘oh death’

/ɔwʊ ka aɲi ike/

‘death is stronger than us’

/ɔwʊ e we.le ηgaga si na windo/

‘death has playfully through the window’

/magbulu oje ɔma/

‘snatched a good person’

/ɔwʊ na abani ole ηke ka mma/

‘death and night which is better’

/ɔwʊ emeligo/

‘death has won’

/umunne m unu afugonu ife ɔwu me.le aji/
'my brothers you have seen what death has done to us'
/ɔwu e we.le ɲgaga si na windo/
'death has arrogantly through the window'
/magbulu oje ɔma/
'snatched a good person'
/ɔwu na abani ole ɲke ka mma/
'death and night which is better'
/ɔwu emeligo/
'death has won'

Dirge Song 6

/ɲwane aji ɲdo/
'our brother sorry'
/ɲwane aji ɲdo/
'our brother sorry'
/ɲwane aji dibe na obi adi.la aji mma/
'our brother take heart for we are not happy'
/aku tʃa.la atʃa ke egbe βia.la bulu/
'a ripe palm-nut has been taken by the hawk'
/egbe bulu ja oβi adi.la aji mma/
'the hawk took it and we are not happy'

Dirge Song 7

/dibe dibe dibe/
'endure, endure endure'
/ndidi ka mma/
'endurance is better'
/oje o me.le ja dibe/
'whoever it befalls, let him endure'
/ndidi ka mma/
'endurance is better'

Dirge Song 8

/εbe.le mu akwa/
'I cried'
/eti.li m mkpu/
'I screamed'
/alo mu na ɲwane m galikpa/
'The discussion that I would have had with my brother'
/ɔwu we.le dɔkasia ja/
'death disrupted it'

Dirge Song 9

/ɔ gabago dʒe.luselem/
'she has gone to Jerusalem'
/ɔ gabago dʒe.luselem/
'she has gone to Jerusalem'
/ebe ndi ma.la mma nedʒe dʒe.luselem/
'where the beautiful ones go, Jerusalem'
/obodo bu sɔ mma/
'a beautiful city'
/mama agabago dʒe.luselem/
'mama has gone to Jerusalem'
/ɔ gabago dʒe.luselem/
'she has gone to Jerusalem'
/ebe ndi ma.la mma nedʒe dʒe.luselem/
'where the beautiful ones go, Jerusalem'
/obodo bu sɔ mma/
'a beautiful city'

Dirge Song 10

/abiakwana m I ɔ.ɔ.ɔ ɔwɔ ɛgu/
'I have come to sing for death'
/ɔwɔ ee/
'oh death'
/abiakwanam iɔ.ɔ.ɔ ɔwɔ ɛgu/
'I have come to sing for death'
/ɔwɔ ebe.le emeyu gu/
'death you are heartless'
/abiakwana m ibe.le ɔwɔ akwa/
'I have come to cry for death'
/ɔwɔee/
'oh death'
/a biakwanam ibe.le ɔwɔ akwa/
'I have come to cry for death'
/ɔwɔ ebe.le emeyu gu/
'death you are heartless'

Dirge Song 11

/ɔwɔ ike faa aji ka aji melu ɲgaga/
'sudden death allow us to enjoy ourselves'
/aji nekpe.le ɔwɔ ike faa aji/
'we are pleading with sudden death to allow us';
/ka aji melu ɲgaga/
'let us enjoy ourselves'

/a malu m etfi/

‘I cannot predict tomorrow’.

Discussion of findings

In dirge song 1, the performers make a direct remark to death by a way of rhetorical question. The mourners go on to inquire from death who they will live with since death has taken away someone dear to them. Dirge song 2 tries to express the notion that death is a part and parcel of man since it has been in existence from the beginning of the world. In dirge song 3, the deceased is compared directly to a mirror. The verb ‘break’ in the dirge is repeated severally to emphasize the destructive nature of death. As we know, when a mirror is broken, it is always difficult to assemble the pieces. The mourners see the dead as a broken mirror because once a person dies, he never returns to life. Dirge song 4 has a central message of brotherhood and unity. The performers try to admonish the living to always show love and care to their brothers while they are still alive. This is important because on the day of a person’s death, the brother(s) will be the first point of call. Others are secondary participants. In the same vein, the performers in dirge song 5 point to the fact that death is stronger than humans. Also observe that the word ‘death’ was repeated in virtually all the lines. In dirge songs 6 & 7, the singers sympathize with the deceased’s relatives. In dirge song 6 in particular, the mourners again compared the dead to a palm-nut and ‘death’ to hawk. This comparison exemplifies the use of metaphor. Dirge number 8 depicts a mourner who wanted to have a good time with his brother but was interrupted by death. In situations like this, the affected person is left with no other choice than to wail as the dirge song expresses.

On the contrary, dirge 9 does not in any way express grief rather it is a reassurance that the dead has gone to a place of rest which the performers refer to as Jerusalem (since dirge songs are performed only at the funeral of a woman in this speech community, the singers used the word ‘mama’ in line 5 to demonstrate this fact). Also, the word ‘Jerusalem’ as in the dirge indicates a kind of influence from Christianity which is now gradually dominating the performance of dirge songs in Amokwe Orji speech community. Again one can say that dirge 9 is rendered only at the demise of a very old person example someone that lived a fulfilled life. Dirge 10 expresses the heartless nature of death. Again, the word ‘death’ was repeated to emphasize the seriousness of death. Finally, dirge 11 expresses a plea by the mourners. The singers use the figure of speech ‘personification’ to assign the quality of a human being that is, the capacity to grant a plea, a verbal action done by humans alone, to death. The last line in dirge song 11 expresses the notion of uncertainty.

Summary and conclusion

The data presented above reveal that all the dirge songs in one way or another express grief over the loss of someone except dirge song 9 which does not express sorrow in the strict sense of a dirge. It rather gives comforting and reassuring expressions. It also demonstrates a fulfilled life. Again, it was observed from the data presented, that the performers of the dirge

songs employ certain literary devices such as repetition, rhetorical questions, metaphor, personification, apostrophe etc. while expressing their feelings through the dirge songs. The frequent occurrence of repetition was not as a result of hindrance in thought but as a way of emphasizing salient points which the mourners may wish to express.

From the findings so far, one can conclude that all the dirge songs documented in this research in one way or another express sorrow and mourn over the demise of a person. Also only elderly women perform the dirge songs in Amokwe Orji speech community. The non interest indicated by the young generation in the dirge songs due to the advent of Christianity and civilization, shows clearly that the dirge songs are endangered. Also the very few old women who have knowledge of the dirge songs will soon die and this implies the death of dirge songs.

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