

AFRREV IJAH

An International Journal of Arts and Humanities

Bahir Dar, Ethiopia

Vol. 2 (1), Serial 5, February, 2013:83-93

ISSN: 2225-8590 (Print)

ISSN 2227-5452 (Online)

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**The Sociological Essence of Music in Burial: An Analysis of Akwa Oke –Nwanyi in Umunikem Community in Imo State**

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**Abstract**

*Music in traditional African setting is the soul which is ultimately concerned with various customs and religious practices. The African is born, fortified, initiated and buried with music. Music is a powerful part in African burials; it goes a long way to expose the deeds of deceased when he/she was alive. In some cultures, death is a scary thing to think about. A lot of people fear death and are saddened by it. But the sociological content of music on the burial of deceased serves as a landmark in the minds of people he/she left behind to mourn. The type of research methodology to be used in this paper would involve interviews and critical analysis on Akwa Oke-Nwanyi songs on some selected burials. This paper therefore looked at the sociological essence of burial music by taking a critical analysis of Akwa-Oke Nwaanyi.*

**Key Word:** Music in Burials; Akwa Oke-Nwanyi; Sociological of Music

## Introduction

In traditional Africa, music is an integral part of life and is linked with worldview of the society in which it is produced. It has social, ritual and ceremonial functions as well as purely recreational purposes. Music as one of the performance arts performs an important role by using the didactic essence in folklore music in sustaining the culture of the people. It has in many ways helped to preserve, nurture and promote the norms, values and to conscientize the society and guide the people towards the right path of life. Barth Oshionebo is of the opinion that: "Music features so much in our daily lives. It is everywhere around us and the most accessible of all the performing arts because in all our activities music is played" [70]. Music occupies a very important place in the cultural life of any society. The place of music in African culture cannot be overemphasized. It carries the culture of the people through which it portrays people's attitudes, habits, activities and funerals. Akas Nicholas states that: "The mythology of some traditional African festival is hidden or portrayed in their indigenous music" [75].

Music is so closely associated with traditions. In the traditional African society, music is the key activity in every burial, ceremony and festival. It takes the form of mass participation, where everyone present in the arena participates freely. Frank Keys states that;

Music is learnt and carried onto later generations by performing it. It is not seen as fixed but rather is something that varies or built up on successive performance. The diversity of culture across Africa society reflects in its song, music instrument and techniques [47].

Traditional African music does not have a written tradition. It is difficult to notate the music using the western staff. Music transmits its message through the various dimensions. Such dimensions are the text, the music proper, the music instruments and their significance. Oluyemi Olaniyan is of the opinion that:

In vocal music, the message is conveyed to the audience or the participating audience through the text. In this case, the listener has to understand the language in which the song is rendered. The understanding of the language alone is not enough. The listener should be vast in understanding the

culture that embraces the belief and customs of the people [155].

In traditional Africa, music is an integral part of life and is linked with the worldview of the society in which it is produced. It has social, ritual and ceremonial functions as well as some purely recreational purposes. Komla Amoakua states that:

Traditional art forms including music are rooted in mythology, legends and folklore and are associated with gods, ancestors and heroes. Musical activities are ritualized and intended to link the visible world with the invisible [607].

The music of any community is a rallying point and a marshalling point for expression of solidarity.

### **Sociological Effects of Music on Human Expression**

African tradition is expressed through many different art forms such as music, dance, art, sculpture and bead work. Naturally, singing is very important to the African society because the melody and the music itself do not have a written tradition. The songs are often sung in call-and-response form, thereby compelling active audience participation. Music is a form of communication and it plays a functional role in African society. At times it is universally understood to often be the sum of more than its parts and causes emotional and physical reactions from simply being heard. It is used in many aspects of traditional African society to persuade, to sensitizes, to advertise, to heighten emotional tension, to increase harming skills, to identify several groups and to influence speed and muscle tension.

### **Types of Burial**

Burial can be defined as “the act or ceremony of burying a dead body”. This act is highly indispensable in existence of every human being and is always seen as the final transition into the world of the beyond.

- a) **Natural Burial:** This is called green burial. It is the process by which a body is returned to the earth to decompose in soil.
- b) **Prevention of decay:** This is called Embalming. Embalming is a process of preserving a dead in a coffin against early decay. The use of coffin in embalming helps in slowing the decomposition process

by physically blocking decomposing bacteria and other organism from accessing the corpse. The sole aim of using the coffin is to hold the body, if the soil covering the corpse is washed away by a flood or some other natural process, the corpse will still not be exposed to open air.

- c) **Inclusion of Clothing and Personal Effects:** The body maybe dressed in fancy and ceremonial clothes. Personal objects such as a favourite piece of jewelry or photography of the deceased maybe included with the body. The reason for inclusion in some funeral at times is based on some cultural beliefs that in the afterlife, a person will wish to have with them what was important to them on earth.
- d) **Orientation:** Historically, Christian burials were made supine east-west, with the head at the western end of the grave. In many Christian traditions, ordained clergy are traditionally buried in the opposite orientation and their coffins carried likewise, with the believe that on the general resurrection they may rise facing up and ready to minister to their people.
- e) **Multiple Bodies Per Grave:** Some couples or groups of people may wish to be buried in the same plot. In some cases, the coffins may simply be buried side by side, while in others, one casket may be interred above another. But if this is planned for in advance, the first casket may be buried more deeply than its usual practice so that the second casket may be placed over it without disturbing the first.
- f) **Cremation:** In cremation, the body of the deceased is burned in a special oven. At times most of the body is burnt during the cremation process, leaving only a few founds of bones fragmented.
- g) **Burial at Cross-roads:** Burial at cross-roads was the method of disposing of executed criminals and persons who have committed suicide.
- h) **Secondary Burial:** Secondary burial is a burial, cremation or inhumation that is dug into a pre-existing barrow or grave anytime

after its initial construction. This is often associated with the belief that there is a liminal phase between the time that a person dies and finally decays.

## **An Analysis of Akwa-Oke Nwaanyi in Umuikem Community**

### **Brief Insight on Akwa-Oke Nwaanyi**

This name emerged through a woman called Mrs. Oge Uwa. She is popularly known as Akwa-Oke Nwaanyi as a result of her singing during funerals. She is a professional singer in burials to the extent that people pay in thousands and struggle to book her earlier before any burial. One thing is very unique about her type of songs during burial, she does not sing for singing sake rather she sings to reflect the deeds of the deceased when he/she was alive. The information she gathers during her cause of research on the deceased serves as a working metaphor in her singing. In her songs at times, she questions death, recounts the achievements of the deceased, she also consoles the siblings, friends, relatives and well wishers, whom the deceased left behind. It is based on the contextual effectiveness of her songs that got the nickname Akwa-Oke Nwaanyi. Her songs are tragic and touching, but her melodious voice makes the song entertaining, communicative and interesting. Akwa-Oke Nwaanyi does not appear in just any burial, for her to attend, she must be well paid, fed and lodged in a nice guest house or hotel. The reason for such treatments according to Akwa Oke-Nwanyi is because “it helps to put her in the right state of mind for business, because at that point she sees herself as any other business man/woman in his/her shop”. [6p.58] The sociological implication of her songs can be seen on the following:

1. Onwu Ntiike
2. Ikpe Mara Umunna
3. Onwu I bu onye

### **Onwu Ntiike {A stubborn death}**

The song is normally sung by Akwa Oke-Nwaanyi at the burial of children or youths who are not yet married. In this song, Oke-Nwaanyi questions death a lot;

- a. Why did “he” kill a child at such age?
- b. Why did “he” kill a child that has not had a taste of this sweet world?

- c. Why did “he” kill a child that has not completed his assignment with his/her own “chi”?

These questions are found in the song she called Onwu Ntiike. She does the singing in a creative and a lighter mood that the parents, friends and relatives of the deceased child all join Akwa Oke-Nwaanyi to call death all sorts of abusive names for allowing their child (son/daughter) not to complete his/her assignment on earth. Akwa-Oke Nwaanyi also in her song, always plead with the spirit of the deceased child not to return again to the world if he/she will not complete his/her assignment with his “chi”, rather let him/her return only if he/she will stay up to seventy-five years before going back. One peculiar thing in this burial is that people are not allowed to eat, drink or mourn the deceased after burial rather the chief soloist (Akwa Oke-Nwaanyi) will say:

*Akwa Oke-Nwaanyi:* Let a child better than this visit us again. And let a child that will stay longer and complete his/her assignment on earth console the mother immediately.

*Mourners:* Amen, let it be as you have said Akwa Oke-Nwaanyi.

This marks the end of mourning for the deceased child and nobody cries for him/her again, all hoping that one day his “chi” will replace him.

### **Ikpe Mara Umunna {Blame on the Kindred}**

This type of song by Akwa-Oke Nwaanyi depicts death of a young lady that is not allowed to marry whoever she wants to marry, because of one ageless battle between her Umunna and that of her husband to be, which led her to committing suicide. In this song, Akwa-Oke Nwaanyi accused the Umunna for contributing to the death of their daughter, because of a case she knows nothing about or was not there when it all started. It is in this song that Akwa-Oke Nwaanyi reminds the Umunna how many of their daughters who have done worst things in the past because they are not allowed to get married to men from that same community. Some of the ugly situations are;

- a. Some ran mad in the market
- b. Some drank poison
- c. Some ran out of their community with their rejected lover and has never returned back.
- d. Some ran into moving vehicle to kill them.
- e. Some got pregnant for the rejected husband to be.

These past experiences will be brought into the song of “Ikpe Mara Umunna”. Akwa-Oke Nwanyi makes it clear in her song that some of the issues raised by the Umunna based on the “Community” in question has really dragged for years and can be easily settled if they want. She also reminds them in some lines in her song that:

*Akwa-Oke Nwanyi:* A time will come when their daughters will be young-old ladies. A time will come when the spirit of your fore fathers will be against you Umunna and your families. A time will come when your daughters will be buried in twenties every day. A time will come when no young men will near this community again. (She shouts)

Resolve the issue on time and give your daughters freedom to marry whoever they love from the community or buy more coffins and prepare your farm lands to bury more and more.

Akwa-Oke Nwanyi’s song Ikpe Mara Umunna has remained a watchdog in any community she has been invited to sing during funeral that has to do with the death of any young lady, because she was not allowed to marry from a particular community due to ageless battle between the two Umunnas’ which led to her committing suicide.

### **Onwu I bu Onye (Death who are you?)**

This song is sung during the burial of one prominent man in any community, especially when the deceased stands as a role model to some people in that community. In this song “onwu I bu onye”, Akwa-Oke Nwanyi sees death as a fearless creature and an unrespectable monster. She also sees death as uninvited visitor that just came to kill, destroy and seal. This type of song is normally been sang by Akwa Oke- Nwanyi in burials of titled men and women like; Eze, Ozo, Lolo, Clergy, Chief and notable musicals, dancers, business men and women. The death of such of people to some is the end of their livelihood and while to some no other person can replace them .In umuikem community people buried with this type of song are always seen as straight forward, humble, open hearted and always ready to say the truth no matter the situation of the issue at hand. This can be witnessed in Akwa Oke-Nwanyi song of lamentation:

Akwa Oke-Nwanyi: Death you gave us darkness in the middle of day-light.

Death you have just silenced our tongue of truth (shouts) oh! Death who will replace him/her?

Death you have permanently shut down the stomach of millions of people in this community by killing their only hope. Mazi Death who do you want to feed them? Oh! Death you have really finished us. Oh! Death who will wipe our endless tears?

The death of such a prominent person through the song calls for a serious mourning and the immortalizing of the person so that people will always remember him/her.

**An interview with Barr. Chika Ikem on the reasons for invitating Akwa Oke-Nwanyi in Burials in Umuikem Community**

Interviewer: What is your name Sir?

Interviewee: My name is Barr Chika Ikem

Interviewer: What is the name of your village?

Interviewee: The name of my village is Umuikem Community in Imo state.

Interviewer: Who is Akwa Oke-Nwanyi

Interviewee: (laughs) I know the name might sound strange to you.

Interviewer: (laughs) yes, it is oooo.

Interviewee: Akwa Oke-Nwanyi is a one woman we all respect in this community because of her talent in singing.

Interviewer: why such respect and how did the name emerge.

Interviewee: The name Akwa Oke-Nwanyi has been in existence right from our forefathers till date. This is a woman that appears only on burials that she was duely invited.

Interviewer: Sir, Duely invited as how?

Interviewee: inviting Akwa Oke-Nwanyi is very expensive because one needs to take good care of her both in feeding, accommodation and transportation. The name Akwa Oke-Nwanyi emerge through her songs (she simply talks about the good or bad deed of the deceased when he/she was alive), while singing she does not hide anything. So that is why we call her Akwa Oke-Nwanyi even though some people are afraid to invite her.

Interviewer: Why are they afraid to invite her?

Interviewee: Akwa Oke-Nwanyi songs are highly uncensored, so she says everything the way they are. Some people whom their deceased ones are not of good character are always afraid to call her because she will say everything in black and white.

Interviewer: Thank you sir for answering my questions.

Interviewee: You are always welcome to our beautiful community.

### **An interview with Mr. Joe on the effect of Akwa Oke-Nwanyi Songs during Burials**

Interviewer: What is your name?

Interviewee: my name na Mr. Joe Akamere. I be strong business man. I no go school, abeg make you forget English make we use pidgin.

Interviewer: ok, which village you come from?

Interviewee: (laughs) na this village Umuikem we you dey now na where I come from.

Interviewer: This song Akwa Oke-Nwanyi how you take see am?

Interviewee: The song e good well well, at least when you listen to this woman you go no wetin the person wey die do when e dey alive, from there you go no whether to pity am or not.

Interviewer: Wetin you mean by this Sir?

Interviewee: This song go tell you the kind person wey the dead person be. This song no dey hide anything oooo, for instance if e be thief, 419, wicked or good person we go all know.

Interviewer: If you dey hear the song how the thing take they do you for body?

Interviewee: If na bad person die and I hear the song e go make me know say to do bad no good. But if na better person and they sing good for am. I go dey wish make they sing that kind song for me on my own burial.

Interviewer: but the song they teach anything to you for burial.

Interviewee: simple and short, is good to be good (bye-bye)

### **Research Findings**

Based on the research findings on Akwa Oke-Nwanyi in Umuikem community in Imo State, it is believed that whenever a person dies nobody is allowed to question God Almighty because he is the giver and taker of life. The only thing that tells more about the deceased person is his/her lifestyle while he/she was alive. It is the type of life style of the deceased that tells whether he/she will see God on the last Day of Judgment. The duty of Akwa Oke-Nwanyi is to research on the life style of the deceased when he/she was alive and present it inform of a song before the people during the burial. Based on her findings, if the good deeds of the deceased are much in the song that means the people at the burial would not cry much (simply means he/she will see God on the last day). But in a situation whereby the bad deeds are much in the song those at the burial would conclude that there is no hope for the deceased to see God on the last day rather those who are still alive would be warned not to follow the deceased life style when he/she was alive. Secondly, the song also serves as a watchdog in the minds of everybody in Umuikem community thereby reminding them that what counts more when one is dead is his/her good deeds and that same good deeds would give the deceased the opportunity to see God Almighty on the judgment day.

### **Conclusion**

Burial in Africa has never been a mere act of interment marked by rite of passage, but an important performance on the social stage conditioned by the incident and social perception of death. A burial is viewed as a creative exercise that complements the incidence of death and mediates the physical

and spiritual realms. So music in burials mirrors the life style and deeds of the deceased when he/she was alive and situations surrounding his/her death. It is believed that some songs during burials tell the mourners more about the deceased. Here music seizes to be a tool for entertainment only rather it transforms into a reflective pointer to those who are still alive for them to change from bad to good or have a rethink on some of their daily life style based on the circumstances that lead to the death of the deceased. Conclusively, the sociological essence of the influence of music using Akwa-Oke Nwaanyi as a paradigm stands as a watchdog in the minds of those who are still alive in umuikem community in Imo state

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